Lauren Knust in conversation with Philip Biggs

PB Hello Lauren, welcome to The Brass Herald.

LK Greetings Philip - thank you for having me.

PB The last time I saw you was in December. You were performing in TubaChristmas at the Palmer House in Chicago. Can you tell me a little about TubaChristmas?

LK TubaChristmas is an event held every year throughout the United States. It was started in 1974 by Harvey Phillips as a tribute to his teacher and mentor William J. Bell, born on Christmas Day, 1902. It started with just one site, but each year it grows - there are now hundreds of sites. To me the best part of TubaChristmas is the fellowship that is shared with tuba and other valved low brass. I look forward to it every year; in fact for the past ten years I have met up to play the event and have dinner at the Bergoff with my friend Mitch who I met at the Chicago TubaChristmas.

PB Is the Chicago TubaChristmas the only one you are involved with?

LK No! I travel around to participate in others. I helped start the event in Valparaiso. I've done events in Homewood/Flossmoor, Indianapolis and the first was in Munster which is no longer hosting. The biggest TubaChristmas adventure I've attended was last year when I flew out for the weekend to participate in the Baltimore TubaChristmas. The host, Ed Goldstein, is a dear friend of mine.

PB Please could you tell me about your work as a free-lance tuba player.

LK Playing tuba is my release from my every day life. I'm a choir teacher by day and the instrumental music world is my escape. I play in several paid groups and in brass quintets for weddings, but to be totally honest I have no issues playing for free. I just want to play and keep growing as a musician and to do that one must be willing to play in groups for free if taking lessons is not an option. It keeps my sight reading skills up and exposes me to many different conductors. Yes I LOVE getting those paid gigs, but as long as I'm playing I'm happy.

PB You were born and raised in the Chicago area.

LK I was born and raised in Northwest Indiana, which is part of the greater Chicagoland area. I did do a five year stint in Terre Haute for college, but came back to teach and perform in "Da Region" (that's what many people call that part of Indiana).

PB How did your career in music start?

LK I came from a musical family. My great grandmother was a very accomplish ragtime piano player and the family would sit around and listen when I was a child. We would also have sing alongs where she would play and everyone would sing along. This also happened at camp fires as well - music was always a part of my life. When I was in 4th grade I joined a children's choir and in 5th grade I started band. When they had the instrument petting zoo I was instantly drawn to the big beautiful shiny baritone, being rather a tall child and a bit of a tomboy. Much to my parents' dismay, that's the instrument I picked. I later found out that my grandfather and two of my dad's cousins played the baritone as well and my great grandpa played the trombone, so low brass runs in the blood. When the school could finally afford a tuba I started to play that and never turned back.

PB Please could you tell readers about your music education.

LK I started band at Catholic schools till 8th grade where band and choir were after school activities, so those in the performing groups were very committed to what they were doing. Once I got into public high school I had many more musical options and some might say I was over involved in the music groups at school. I was in symphonic band, marching band, pep band, jazz band, orchestra, concert choir, show choir and musical theatre. I had great teachers and knew that I wanted to be like them, so after high school I pursued music education in college.

PB You went straight into music education following college.

LK Yes. I originally went to Indiana State University wanting to teach band, but the moment I was in front of my first choir I knew my true calling was to teach choir. I always loved playing in band and orchestra more than I enjoyed singing in choir (sorry, former and current directors). There is something magical about teaching students how to create music with their own voices. I taught for a few years and decided to get my master in music education from Vandercook College of Music.
PB Can you now tell us about your work in education up to the present.

LK I have been an urban music teacher for all nine years of my teaching career. I started in Hammond, IN and I'm now at River Forest Community Schools in Hobart, IN. I have taught choir at the high school and middle school levels, high school music history, middle school general music, elementary music and for the first time this year I'm team teaching beginning band with my wonderful co-worker Bridget Fine. I love that I've gotten to teach so many aspects of music throughout my career. I feel as if it has made me a well rounded and strong teacher.

PB You hold a number of honorary positions including being a board member of the Alumni association of the Vandercook College of Music.

LK Yes, this past winter I was elected to the board for the Alumni association for Vandercook College of Music. I'm very excited to see what I can do to help such a prestigious and wonderful college. I'm also a member of Sigma Alpha Iota International Music Fraternity for Women and a member of the Lake County alumni chapter where I serve as the vice president of membership and part of the scholarship committee. Every year we award a scholarship to a young lady in SAI at Valparaiso University.

PB Please could you tell me about your future plans in the world of music.

LK I play to make music my life long passion; this is something I try to foster in my students. Music isn't something we just do when we are young, it's something we can be a part of for the rest of our lives. In one German band I joined when I was 29, I was at that time the youngest member of the group, while the oldest member of the group was the other tuba player who was at the time 92. He still plays with the group now at age 95. How many hobbies can you do for that long? I was a varsity athlete in two sports in high school and I know I can't compete at that level again, yet as a musician I have kept going and getting better every year. I can promise you my tuba Norma and I will be going strong well into my golden years!

PB Lauren, thanks so much for this interview.

LK A pleasure Philip. Looking forward to seeing you in Chicago again soon.

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Lauren taking time out from rehearsal.

Lauren ballooning around.