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The Remarkable Accomplishments Of Alondra De La Parra

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Not yet 29, conductor Alondra de la Parra made history as the first woman from Mexico to conduct in New York City. In her short career, she has presented more than 20 world premieres by such composers as Clarice Assad, Enrico Chapela, Paul Brantley, Paul Desenne, and Eugenio Toussaint.

In 2000, de la Parra moved to New York City where she received her B.A. in piano performance from the Manhattan School of

Music, and her master's in conducting. She has since made the city her home, where she resides with her husband.

De la Parra founded the New York-based Philharmonic Orchestra of the Americas (POA), composed of young professional musicians. Its mission is to promote the work of young soloists and composers of the American continent. Since its founding, the orchestra has initiated a Young Composers' Competition, established an arts and education program, and performed at New

York's Lincoln Center and at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. It has also undertaken two international tours.

This month, the conductor and her orchestra will journey to Napa to perform at Festival del Sole. In addition to a July 19 concert at Lincoln Theater that includes Sarah Chang performing Mendelssohn's great Violin Concerto, and another on July 21 in the glorious open-air courtyard of Castello di Amorosa that features Robert Redford narrating Vivaldi's perennial Four Seasons, Alondra de la Parra and the POA present a "Two Bs" program at the Castle on July 22 consisting of Beethoven's Symphony No. 2 and Nikolai Znaider playing Brahms' Violin Concerto. You can catch her again in November in an appearance with the San Francisco Symphony.

You're the first woman from Mexico to conduct in New York City. That makes you a female conductor in a field where there are not many women, and the first Mexican woman conductor in New York, to boot. I assume there are people who tend to put you in such boxes, and discuss your career from that perspective. To what extent do you think of yourself as those categories?

I guess some people may have the tendency to put me in a box. I usually don't pay much attention to questions along those lines, because, to be honest, the answer has always been that conducting is difficult enough on its own, and has been difficult for me as it has been for many women and male conductors. That's the key. Has it been difficult? Yes, because there's a lot of studying you have to do, and challenging work. But I've never felt that I'm a woman on the podium. I've never been aware of that. I've never cared, to be honest.

Music doesn't have a gender, and isn't gender-oriented. Every time I'm on the podium, I'm thinking of music — how I'm going to make this work better, how I'm going to make this sound cohesive, and how I'm going to communicate with the musicians — but I'm never thinking about how people will perceive me as a woman. All those things have come from press. They're from people who talk about what I'm doing from the outside, and need to put a title on it. It's part of who I am, but it's just one aspect of who I am. And that's it.

Mexican? I do feel Mexican, because I grew up there. I'm who I am because of my culture, and that's important. However, my entire career has been outside Mexico. I didn't conduct in Mexico until I had already conducted professional

orchestras abroad. All my career has been in New York and based in New York with my teacher, Ken Kiesler. So these two things are part of me, but they're not the center of who I am.

What is the composition of the orchestra that you founded in New York City? Is it all young people, or intentionally multiracial and/or multinational?

I founded the orchestra five years ago. Its mission is to promote the works of composers of the American continent, and young soloists of the Americas. It's the idea of America as a whole, and promoting the music of the musicians of the continent. However, the musicians of the orchestra have always been simply young professional musicians living in New York.

I say "professionals" because it's not at all a youth orchestra. These are Juilliard and Manhattan School of Music graduates. They're from all over the world. I think we have 22 countries represented in the orchestra, last time we counted. It's a really multicultural, multinational orchestral with the common factor performance quality.

Do you have many African-Americans or Africans by birth in your orchestra in New York? How about Latino involvement?

I think we have two African-Americans. As for the lack of involvement among Latinos, I think it has to do with levels of education among people who have spent most of their lives working. To play in an orchestra you have to spend a lot of time studying.

Did you intentionally try to get people from multiple countries?

No. My parameter for the orchestra is simply artistic excellence. Whoever plays best and has the best chemistry for the group is chosen. Something we've preserved pretty well since the beginning is self-camaraderie and real team playing. Sometimes there are really great players that don't understand that. I try to find both things: excellence and respect, love for music, and the ability to work in a team and understand that orchestral music is just the most amazing thing that can happen to all of us, including the conductor, who is one part of the team.

I think this is the only way of seeing orchestral playing nowadays. I think the old school of the conductor on one side, and players on the other, is little by little dying ...

Why is orchestral playing the most wonderful thing you can do?

There's probably nowhere else in the world where you can share with 100 people something so precious and harmless and noble at the same time, with everyone. I don't think there's another activity where there are so many people engaged in something so pure and good. Simply good. I don't think there's any way that anyone can do wrong with good music. It's the concept of let's all get together and do something beautiful together. It's already a human statement that I think is unparalleled.

That's the first part. The second is that anyone who knows how to play in an orchestra, and has been part of one, gets tools for life. Teamwork. Giving part of yourself for the other. Listening. Opening your ear and soul to take in everybody else's sound and ideas. Creating one unified idea. All those things are principles that, if everyone practiced orchestral music in this way, a lot of our problems would be solved.

As someone who has gone to the Cabrillo Festival for a number of years, it's hard to miss the fact that the majority of the players are women who want to work with a conductor who's a woman, and who want to be in that energy. Because you're a woman and Mexican, do you find that you attract a lot of women and people from Mexico?

I've been to Cabrillo. I think if people want to play there for Marin [Alsop, Cabrillo's director], I think it's because she's a really good conductor. I don't think it's because she's a woman. I really don't. I've seen her work, and I think it's because they like the way she makes music. I believe that's the same with me.

Mostly, I think people want to work with POA because of the repertory we do. It's very interesting for our players to work on pieces they wouldn't otherwise work on, and meet new composers and soloists. That's very attractive and gratifying.

While the POA focuses on music of the Americas, you're doing something very different when you come to Festival del Sole. Here, it's Mozart, Mendelssohn, and Vivaldi's Four Seasons. So we're back to core, popular European classics.

At Festival del Sole, we are part of something that has a different line than our own. It's a great opportunity for us to play standard works, because we're upside down from other orchestras. Our special concerts are where we play classical repertoire.

When you were giving your description of what is wonderful about classical music, it sounded like the rationale for El Sistema. To what extent have you been able to work with young people? What hope do you see for any kind of El Sistema-type program in the United States, other than in Los Angeles, where El Sistema success story Gustavo Dudamel is already situated as music director of the LA Philharmonic?

First, I've worked with young people a lot. It's a big part of what I do. I have a very close and intimate relationship with El Sistema with José Antonio Abreu [its founder] and Gustavo, and I've been several times to Venezuela to conduct the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra. José Antonio says I'm Mexican by birth, but really Venezuelan, because he's adopted me. That's why you hear similar things.

In New York, we've developed an arts and education program with children ages 8 and 9 in three public schools in Harlem and Washington Heights where we teach them in the classroom about orchestral music and composition. It's a long story that would take a whole interview. It ends where the kids actually compose a whole piece for orchestra, even kids who don't know how to read and write music. They do it by instinct, by singing and drawing and clapping. It's great. That's our initiative in New York. It is unique and has been going quite well.

On two tours that we've done to Mexico, we've worked [with] similar initiatives with youth orchestras in very underprivileged neighborhoods of Mexico City. We've worked with about 400 kids in a workshop setting for three or four days,

mixing our orchestra (the Philharmonic Orchestra of the Americas) and the kids. It has worked really well. I've also conducted youth orchestras in Mexico.

For me, working with kids is the best. Now that I'm here, one of the things that everyone is asking me to do is start El Sistema in Mexico. We're getting close to that here.

As for the U.S., as far as Abreu has expressed on many occasions when I've been translating for him, it's completely possible. It would actually be easier than in other countries that don't have the infrastructure, the money, and the other resources that the U.S. has. I think it's just a matter of uniting ideas — uniting forces — and networks, where all different initiatives that are already in place communicate with one another, share programs, do collaborations, and expand. I think there needs to be a matrix center for the entire country, like a web, that would connect with one focus, place, or pilot.

I think it's completely possible to start El Sistema here. There's a lot of curiosity and desire from a lot of people. Everybody knows now what El Sistema is. In that sense, the U.S. has an advantage over what it must have been like for Abreu in Venezuela 30 years ago.

Jason Victor Serinus writes about music for Opera News, Opera Now, American Record Guide, Stereophile, San Francisco Magazine, Muso, Carnegie Hall Playbill, East Bay Express, East Bay Monthly, San Francisco Examiner, Bay Area Reporter, hometheaterhifi.com, and other publications.