



TALKING ABOUT COMMUNITY

Keynote Conversation Transcript

Gustavo Dudamel, Music Director
Deborah Borda, President
Los Angeles Philharmonic

October 23, 2011
Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco

The American Orchestra Forum is a project of the San Francisco Symphony,
generously supported by a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

© 2011 San Francisco Symphony. All rights reserved.

[Start of recorded material]

Brent Assink: Welcome back. In a few short hours, this stage will be occupied by our dear friends from the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and we're really excited to kick off the concert part of the American Orchestra Series with a performance at 7 o'clock tonight by the Los Angeles Philharmonic. It seems particularly fitting that we begin this series with our friends from the south, and it is a great pleasure to introduce to you today Gustavo Dudamel, Music Director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and Deborah Borda, the President and CEO of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, to continue the discussion today on orchestras and community. Please join me in welcoming Maestro Dudamel and Deborah Borda. Thank you.

Deborah Borda: Welcome to San Francisco.

Gustavo Dudamel: Welcome to San Francisco!

Deborah Borda: Good. We've just arrived on this beautiful afternoon. And we're delighted to be a part of the San Francisco Symphony's celebration of their centennial. Centennial is a big amount of time, and especially out here in California. And it's just wonderful to be the first orchestra and terrific to be here. We're excited about the concert. But we're going to start with a little talk about community. And returning to the theme of community, as I was listening to some of the speakers earlier, I was thinking about the fact of community. I mean, for example, San Francisco is a community. It has ethnic communities, economic communities. It has communities of audience -- people like you who love music, who support education. And that is one kind of community.

This orchestra forum actually talks to us also about a community of great American orchestras -- the orchestras who are coming here to play, orchestras who share all sorts of ideas and thoughts and ambitions and aspirations with each other. And I have to say that of the great orchestras in this country, the orchestras of San Francisco and Los Angeles have a very special relationship, and I think are really standard bearers of what is unique and innovative and very healthy in American orchestral life today.

But there's another kind of community, and that's the community that's created within an orchestra -- the players, the people. And you'll see where we're going to come to with this. So I'm going to take the liberty of what looks like I'm moving off the story about community to something a little bit different. And it was an experience in my life that really taught me a very mighty lesson about community, about responsibility, and what is our responsibility, what should we do.

In 2005, a singular talent emerged into the world, and it was this fellow, Gustavo. And I'll never forget, I got a call one afternoon from Esa-Pekka Salonen, who had just been a judge at the Mahler competition where Gustavo had been victorious. And you know, Esa-Pekka is generally very sort of cool and Nordic. He's great. He's a great friend. But that's his persona. He was given to hyperbole in this moment. He was absolutely thrilled and excited. And he really urged me to investigate this young conductor, who

didn't even have a manager at that point. But we did, and we found out about him.

And so after I saw him conduct, I knew that this was something very special, and potentially a unique moment in music, when we find people who have this communicative power. So I formed a plan. And my plan was that I would follow Gustavo all over the world where he was conducting. And I would just show up, and I would get to know him, and I would hear him conduct under different circumstances. So we went to some very nice places where I met you, some not so nice places.

But eventually it came to me that really I needed to go to Caracas because to really understand a person, you need to see where they are from and what their roots are. And I went to Caracas, and I will say that that trip really changed my life for a number of reasons. The first was just having a chance to observe El Sistema -- and we'll talk more about El Sistema later on -- to see what it means in the life of the people who are involved and in the country, and to meet the visionary who founded El Sistema -- Jose Antonio Abreu -- and to really see Gustavo in that milieu was a time, as I said, that changed my life.

And when I left Caracas after that ten days or whatever it was, there was one thing I was sure of and one I wasn't. I wasn't sure that we could bring Gustavo back to be our Music Director in Los Angeles. I knew we wanted to, but you never know what will happen. But

one thing I was sure of was that we had to bring El Sistema, the concept of it, back to Los Angeles, that that was our responsibility.

So I start the story there, and now I turn to you. Because really I think what people are interested, Gustavo, in hearing about is sharing some of your story -- what it meant to you growing up, at least at the start, in the small town of Barquisimeto, going to the Nucleo there, and telling people a little bit about your life, and how the philosophies of Maestro Abreu affected you and the outcome of your life. And of course now, you're sort of the symbol of El Sistema.

Gustavo Dudamel: The first thing is I was thinking she was a stalker. And really I was like, you know, having terrible dreams -- Deborah coming out from the food or from the fridge. "Hi, I'm here." So I was like, "You know, this is really crazy." But then I found which was the reason. And now I know, and I still have that dream. No.

Deborah Borda: I'm like a kangaroo, always hopping into his presence.

Gustavo Dudamel: No, but really, this has been something very special to be part of El Sistema, as a member. And of course, when you think in a program like that, you thinking like, wow, how you will deal with all the musicians that graduated El Sistema. But you know, one important thing is that El Sistema is not a musical factory. It's something more. It's something deep. It's something about society. It's about

community. It's about how to help to address the life of our children in the best way, with arts -- that is something very important.

Because art is related directly with creativity. And that is something that we're missing sometimes a lot in our regular education -- creativity. We work a lot in different kinds of elements of our education. But when we get to the creativity and the chance to understand sensibility, because to be sensible you have to understand why and how. And this is what El Sistema does. El Sistema is bringing beauty to the children. And people ask me, "But this work in Venezuela because it's a very special social condition." And it's not like that, you know. I think every community has their own needs. Necessities? I don't know how to say needs of things about how to build a better future for the children.

And I get to the Sistema because my father is part of El Sistema. And I went to the concerts, and I was really like, "Wow. This is great. This is amazing." I'm coming from a beautiful family. My family is middle class. Position is something in the middle. Less than middle class, but it's okay. The most important thing was what the values they were giving to me. And this balance between what my family was giving me and the music, how was important for me to be part of this family, how I was developing how to say ideas, developing citizenship -- I don't know. Because also it's amazing.

When you play in an orchestra, something happens. Especially when you are a kid, 7 years, 8 years old, that you don't understand

anything. You understand little some things. But at the beginning, what you love is to play. The word play is something great because it was like a game for us to play in an orchestra. And this got me -- I don't know -- to arrive here with no pressure. You know, it was something very natural. When I think in my life, I wasn't a wunderkind, you know, studying all day, and my family pushing me to be a genius. No, I'm not a genius. Even if somebody can push me until the end of my life, I will not arrive there. Because I have to study a lot. But it was something natural.

This amazing man, Jose Antonio Abreu, created this way, and this way really works. Really works for the children. Because it's an opportunity, again, to have access to beauty. And we don't talk about that because maybe it's romantic. But to have access to beauty is something really important. Because we are here listening to a concert and we feel a lot. And that is why it's important because before you feel, we feel here. And we create that -- I don't know if the word is an interaction. An interaction of feelings and ideas. And then, you know, you arrive to a point that you are happy and proud of what you have [to live in]. It's simple. I'm not telling anything new.

Deborah Borda: So it would be fair to say that, at least in Venezuela, that El Sistema is not simply a musical movement but a social movement as well. Well, maybe we can talk a little bit, I think people would be interested to hear how you formed a different kind of El Sistema, because it's an El Sistema that you think can work in the United

States in Los Angeles. We call it YOLA -- Youth Orchestra LA. And that's something that has been very close to your heart, and we started it actually before you came. You work regularly with the orchestras. Maybe you could tell people a little bit about that. I was talking to some people at intermission, and people said, "Oh, we hear Gustavo's trying to start an El Sistema in Los Angeles." And we are. But I think they'd like to hear from you about it.

Gustavo Dudamel: This is a dream come true, you know. Because again, we arrive to the point that every society and every community has, in a way, the same needs but in a different way. So when we started the program, I have seen the develop of these children. And what is amazing is what you see in their eyes. People ask me, "Okay, you conduct a lot by memory, by heart. Which is the reason?" And it's because I connect a lot, you know, visually. And when I arrived the first day to YOLA, I saw the children -- they are now teenagers -- and they were full of hope. They have these eyes of question. What is this about? Why do I have this instrument here? What I will do with this? Can I build a life through this? Can this give me something important for my future?

Then the second visit, I made a question. I was explaining something to the timpani player -- that he's an amazing kid. And he wanted to be a basketball player. And I was talking to him that I love NBA. You know, I was playing basketball when I was at my school. And then he said, "But Gustavo" -- because he calls me Gustavo -- "Gustavo, my dream is to become the timpani player of

Los Angeles Philharmonic." In the second visit I was like, "Okay, how this can be in such a short time?" Because my second visit that we did was two months or three months later. And I said, "Wow, something is happening. Something is changing." Because this child has ambition about his life, in a very clear, and he plays very well. And like others that they don't want to be maybe musicians but they have music in their life.

What happened in El Sistema? A lot of my friends, let's say 20 percent of my friends that were playing with me at the national children's orchestra, they have a different profession now. But they go to the concerts, and they have the knowledge of what is happening before and during a performance and after. And that is amazing because that is a very deep culture. That is a very deep kind of sensibility.

And when we get to see these eyes, the feeling of how their life changed, and how they play, and how they believe -- because also what we mean is what to believe to create a better future. Can you imagine it for an adult? It's difficult for a child. It is not a question, but at the same time is a question, especially when you don't have access to many things. So this is the thing in YOLA, so it's so deep. It's more about the music. It's about their own communities, and how the community feels proud of them.

Deborah Borda: Yeah. First of all, just technically how we do it, we form Nucleos -- little music schools. We find partnering with community centers has

been very successful for us. So these are after school programs. We get instruments for the young people. We get them group lessons. We get them individual lessons. They come after school. And I want to come back and talk about the first time they played in public. But this was the second time they played in public. It was their first solo concert. And it was given at a place called Santee Junior High School in Los Angeles, in a pretty tough neighborhood.

And I was going to this concert, and I got there sort of late because I thought, "Well, I'll be able to get in. Maybe they'll even save me a seat, but there will be plenty of seats." I got in, the entire auditorium was packed. Packed. And it was filled with people and their families. So it was like dropping a stone in a pond and watching the circles just move out. So there is a commitment. There's an excitement. And it is already changing people's lives.

Gustavo Dudamel: And that called the attention of the other young power of the community. I love what [Manny Mehta] say. I was talking to the doctor of the orchestra this morning, and he said how to call the attention of young people to classical music. And the way is to see other young people playing. And it's true. You know, they feel connected because they see young people enjoying and playing music, playing an instrument, playing classical music.

Deborah Borda: Well, when you were introduced and we had your inaugural concert as Music Director, you made some very different choices from what most people do when they start as Music Director. You chose not to

have the concert at Walt Disney Concert Hall, but to have it at the Hollywood Bowl. You chose to have all free prices. It was a concert that was free and open to the public. You chose to have a concert that led up to the evening's concert, which was a day of youth orchestras and mentorship, so that there were hundreds of young people participating.

And the very first notes you conducted as our official Music Director, you didn't conduct the Los Angeles Philharmonic, you conducted the YOLA orchestra. And they did an arrangement of Beethoven 9, Ode to Joy. And then later in the evening, the whole orchestra came together -- Los Angeles Philharmonic, Community Chorus -- and played it. From my point of view, I remember when we put it up on the Internet, it was like a Rolling Stones concert. I mean the Internet almost crashed. It was gone in a moment, 18,000 seats out the window. But beyond that -- that was great -- but you had a message. You were trying to send a very strong message with that gesture. What was it?

Gustavo Dudamel: That music is for everybody. And, you know, that everybody has access to music and to arts as a human right. And that is important. I love it also in that concert that we have -- I still remember -- the pool area that is the most expensive tickets, they were for the children and for the families of the children. And that was so beautiful because they were sitting I think for the first time, listening Beethoven 9, that very long symphony. That, if you don't know music, for 40 minutes you listen -- oh, I know that. But really

after, you know, very slow music and long phrase in music. It was so great.

Look. It's something very important. It's something very important to give this opportunity to the people that don't have the chance to be close to arts and to music. Especially to classical music. Because for us, still it's very classic. We come to concerts. You know, it's alive. That it something different with pop music, that everybody have access to that because you turn on your television and you have a concert there of a singer or a player. In classical music, it's different. When you see a program in the television of classical music, sometimes at 11 o'clock on Sunday, where we are all sleeping. Can you imagine if we are sleeping? Our child has to go to school the next day. So it's different.

So the important thing is what to do, in which way, how to do. And the way is to bring [the day], giving the best, and in the easy way. The easy way for them is to build their -- how to say -- their ambition about music, and especially about classical music. Because now they have concerts, and they are full. So all the time, you know, all the family and the friend of the families, and maybe people in the community listen. Wow. And they became proud, they became power, they are new audience. So it's an interaction. That is what happened in Venezuela.

Deborah Borda: And it is the new face of Los Angeles as well. Do you mind if we talk about music for a minute? Is that okay? I mean the concert. I

was thinking today that here we are. You're bringing for the centennial these two programs to San Francisco, and they're sort of unusual. First, two nights ago, we had the world premiere of a concerto for electric cello and orchestra by Enrico Chapela, *MAGNETAR*, which you will hear later tonight. That's preceded by a piece by John Adams, *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*. And then we'll do the Prokofiev 5.

The other concert, just two weeks ago, we had a big and wonderful piece, *Rituales*, by Esteban Benzecry, also preceded by a John Adams piece. You know, John Adams is our creative chair, so we have John in different places. And then *Symphonie fantastique*. But it seems to me that that's a little unusual. That's not the standard kind of fare. How did you come to that? Why is that so comfortable for you? What community does that form for you?

Gustavo Dudamel: I think they are two beautiful programs. First because we have John Adams as one of the most important American composers. And I was thinking what to have between John Adams and a very important piece of the repertoire, like *Symphonie fantastique* and Prokofiev Fifth Symphony are. And wow, I thought, "Look. This will be beautiful to give the opportunity to a young Latin composer to write a piece for the orchestra, and to play that music." It's like to have the players of Adams, Prokofiev, and Berlioz, and of course, with Los Angeles Philharmonic.

And Esteban Benzecry wrote this piece for me like two years ago. I made a premiere in Gothenburg. And it was amazing. I always have admired Esteban about his taste about colors. And it's amazing with this piece, *Rituales Amerindios*, that he's inspired by our Hispanic culture, how you can feel the echo of the Cuzco or Machu Picchu. And then you arrive to Teotihuacan, and you feel the monumental feeling that it's something great.

For me, Esteban is like the new Revueltas. Silvestre Revueltas was like, together with Carlos Chavez, Ginastera, Villa-Lobos, [Juliano Rabon], Estevez in Venezuela, and I think at that time was Aaron Copland. They were the main composers of that time of our America. And Esteban has become like the new Revueltas. He's keeping this Hispanic inspiration with this amazing feeling for symphonic colors. You will feel, you know, a bird making a sound, and we'll receive this echo like the condor in Machu Picchu, in these valleys, and this echo of these amazing sounds. Something like that.

Then Enrico Chapela, that is a Mexican composer, they are different. They are both Latin, but completely different. Enrico is more, I have to say, like heavy metal composer. Electric cello. Strange, you will see. Looks like an organ with thousands of pedals, where he has to make all these effects for the cello. And it's a heavy metal piece. It's really amazing how also colors are very important in the piece, but also how heavy metal can connect with classic metal. It's symphonic metal? I don't know how to say. So it's great

that we have the opportunity, and also to be here for this anniversary, to bring all of this repertoire. It's crazy, you know?

Deborah Borda: I think it's a little more than crazy. I think you maybe thought about it a little bit. Well, believe it or not, pretty soon we're going to have to wrap up because they have to clear the stage, and we have just a very brief rehearsal, and all sorts of pieces that have to be balanced. We're very pleased to be here. You know, I think about two things that you say all the time, Gustavo, that inspire me. And I hope you heard them. He said one today, which is that music is a fundamental human right. We have to believe in that and carry that forward, because this is a message we are challenged with and about constantly and today. Because we can't run American orchestras or any orchestras the way we did even five or ten years ago. Things are changing.

And the other thing which you didn't say, but you demonstrated in your program, and which I loved it at the press conference when we announced Gustavo, that I was not the stalker but I was President of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Gustavo Dudamel: What a stalker, no? Cool.

Deborah Borda: He said something which just touched my heart because it was so true, and that is that our tradition is the new. And I think that's what you'll do tonight. It's a wonderful combination. So we thank you so much for having us here. You're our partners.

Gustavo Dudamel: Thank you.

Brent Assink: Deborah and Gustavo, thank you so very, very much. Thank you all for being here today. I want to remind you that there will be two more American Orchestra Forum events this season on March 17, with Michael Tilson Thomas talking about creativity, May 13 with Alan Gilbert of the New York Philharmonic talking about audiences. Video of today's proceedings will be available online at symphonyforum.org. And please share your comments with us and with your friends. And I'd like to thank all of the panelists who participated today, and thank you again for spending the afternoon with us. Thank you very much.

[End of recorded material]