



AMERICAN ORCHESTRA FORUM PODCASTS: TALKING ABOUT ORCHESTRAS

Chapter Two: Personal Stories

Transcript

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Music: *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* by John Adams, recorded by the San Francisco Symphony,
Michael Tilson Thomas conducting. Recording available on SFS Media.
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CHAPTER 2: PERSONAL STORIES

Welcome to this podcast of the American Orchestra Forum, a program of the San Francisco Symphony. In celebration of the Symphony's centennial, six leading American orchestras – from Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles, New York and Philadelphia – visited San Francisco during the 2011-2012 season.

In conjunction with these concerts, the American Orchestra Forum presented a series of wide-ranging conversations about the state of the orchestra, an institution with roots in the 19th century, now adapting to life in the fast-changing 21st. Musicians, scholars, composers, executives, critics and technologists gathered throughout the year to discuss three key topics: Community, Creativity, and Audiences. Each chapter in this podcast series presents highlights from public and behind-the-scenes conversations by these experts, and explores the themes that emerge.

I'm Steven Winn, American Orchestra Forum moderator and your podcast host.

This chapter, drawn from the October 2011 public Forum with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, is about personal stories, those intimate connections between a student and a teacher that, like a pebble in a pond, send waves radiating outward. Those waves, expanding and intersecting with many others, create an ocean of musical connections around the world.

None of this happens without the right environment, whether it's the nurturing atmosphere of a music school, the horizon-expanding realm of a youth orchestra or a globe-spanning program like the celebrated El Sistema.

Few stories are more compelling or influential than that of Gustavo Dudamel, the Venezuelan-born conductor who found his own pebble-in-the-pond experience in

his home country's visionary music education and social program, El Sistema.

Today, as music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Maestro Dudamel and the orchestra are expanding the El Sistema concept, which fuses youth orchestras to powerful social programs for disadvantaged youth, in the United States. In a recently announced partnership with Bard College in New York and the Longy School of Music in Massachusetts, the LA Phil will help establish a network of Sistema-like nucleos, or teaching centers, around the country.

Gustavo Dudamel recalls his own experience as a beginner in El Sistema:

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.

When he recalls one of his early teachers, El Sistema founder Jose Antonio Abreu, his sense of connection to where he came from – and where it can lead – is unmistakable.

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....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 of things about how to build a better future for the children.

For Amos Yang, assistant principal cellist of the San Francisco Symphony, finding that love was at once pre-ordained and a happy, right-pebble-at-the-right-time accident. Raised in a San Francisco family that valued music, 4-year-old Amos was on his way to a first violin lesson at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music when he and his mother ran into a family friend, who had a spur-of-the-moment idea. Maybe Amos should consider another instrument, she said.

She looked at me and as the story goes she said do you want to study the cello and I just shrugged my shoulders, as any 4 and a half year old would probably do, and that was that. And my audition then consisted of putting my arms around the cello, giving it a bear hug, which is the way that my old teacher Irene Sharp used to start us and still begins her students, and that was the audition. But, literally, without

that 10-second interval, I probably would've signed up for violin lessons. And, although the violin is my second favorite musical instrument in the world, it's a distant second to the cello, so I have a theory that I would not have become a musician, frankly, had I not started on the cello, because I'm so fond of the cello.

Fast forward seven years and Yang arrives in the place, as a member of the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra, that will later become his musical home. It wasn't a promising beginning. Then his teacher made her essential presence known once more:

In fact, when I was 11 years old -- it's funny -- I just did the math -- and it was 30 years ago that I first stepped on the stage of Davies Symphony Hall. And I would've been the very last cellist sharing a stand, ... and we were goofing off pretty much the entire first season of the Youth Orchestra here, and I was actually, at the end, asked to re-audition. And basically that meant I was kicked out of the Youth Orchestra. And I was the happiest 11-year-old ever at that point because I really wanted to be playing sports and outside. But I went to my next lesson with Irene Sharp, and she said, "No, I'm sorry, you're re-auditioning for the Youth Orchestra," and that was it. And I'm so glad she did because I stayed with the Youth Orchestra another four years, and it was a really remarkable experience.

Like Gustavo Dudamel, who has spread the inspiration of Jose Antonio Abreu, Yang traces the waves of influence from his first cello teacher:

Actually, it's funny, in this visiting orchestra series that's happening this year, you'll see the Philadelphia Orchestra when they come in, the principle cellist of that, Hian Ni, is an ex-student of Irene Sharp's. The second chair of the New York Philharmonic is an ex-student of Irene Sharp's. I, of course, studied with her for many years. So she's filled the ranks of many orchestras, both professional and amateur, with many players.

Not all budding musicians are fortunate enough to have a teacher such as Irene Sharp or ready access to institutions like the San Francisco Conservatory of Music or the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra to nourish them. The Detroit-based Sphinx Organization is trying to create currents in communities that have been traditionally under-served and under-represented in classical music. While the numbers have increased, still only 4.2 percent of American orchestras are comprised of black and Latino players. Dedicated to increasing the participation of these groups in music schools, as professional musicians and as classical music audiences, Sphinx has been active in some 200 schools nationwide, granted nearly \$2 million in scholarships and mounted hundreds of orchestra and chamber performances heard live and on PBS. Afa Sadykhly Dworkin, vice president and

artistic director, explains how Sphinx builds from the ground up, starting with the teacher- student connections that proved so powerful for Dudamel and Yang:

The vast majority of the young people that we encounter and work with directly through our educational programming really come from a situation where music is not a commodity. It's not really a value. So in many cases -- particularly -- so the [year-round] programming in Detroit, we work with communities where survival skills perhaps are more key to the development of these young people. Music is definitely considered a luxury and a foreign value. ... And it takes a lot of kind of out-of-the-box kind of thinking, really honing in on the approach, how to speak to the family, how to convince them that staying in music is worth it. It does not necessarily guarantee you're going to become a -- it likely doesn't guarantee that you're going to become a concert violinist, but it does make you exposed to a discipline that's really essential to your personal development.

For the students who stick with the program and join a Sphinx ensemble of other black and Latino musicians, the sense of belonging, the sense of purpose and long-term rewards can run deep.

Afa Dworkin:

And I think the threading line, the common sort of sentiment from everyone, was that they came in and they recognized there are people like them, that look like them, that are their age and have common values. And what they have in common, regardless of background, is really music. I think developing that peer network and sense of community is probably one of the most essential, long-lasting values and factors for these young people getting involved.

With the El Sistema movement growing – 14 American orchestras now have programs based on its principles – and the Sphinx Organization and other groups expanding their influence, music itself is becoming its own good-sized pebble in the much larger pond of American life.

How can the sounds we make together and hear together in school auditoriums and concert halls build and expand our sense of connection and possibility? How does music keep us together, once the performance ends? Recent MacArthur genius grant recipient Francisco Nuñez, founder and director of the Young People's Chorus in New York, puts the case for music's power to change the world directly: "I want to fight poverty through music. I know that sounds romantic, but I've seen it happen. Music," he says, "brought me out of the barrio."

While the idea of music and social justice working together is a relatively new one for orchestras, says Jesse Rosen, president and CEO of the League of American Orchestras, more and more ensembles are embracing the idea.

The LA Phil under Gustavo Dudamel has made it a core principle. Rosen recalls a community meeting of arts organizations, public schools, after-school programs and the mayor of Los Angeles. The topic was the Philharmonic's plan to form its Youth Orchestra LA – YOLA:

And the L. A. Phil kind of threw out a challenge, and they said that they thought that it would be a good thing if every kid in L. A. played an instrument. And they said, we don't know how to accomplish this goal, but we think we need all of you to help us sort this out, and to begin this conversation. And so, you saw a shift in the role that the orchestra was playing, from that as primarily a deliverer of symphony concerts, to a catalyst to bring the community together around a shared set of community goals.

Gustavo Dudamel had his own transformative experience in Venezuela and knows what impact a tiny pebble, that crucial connection between student and teacher, can have. Just as Amos Yang hugged that cello so many years ago, here a young musician feels the pulse that will move him in a new direction. Like many kids, Both Yang and this young YOLA musician were drawn to the basketball court. Thanks to a signal moment with a teacher, they felt the life-long pull of music more powerfully.

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.

Things are happening and changing across the country, in YOLA, the Sphinx Orchestra and chamber groups, in schools and college campuses.

Mark Clague, professor of music at the University of Michigan underscores the point:

And for so many students I deal with, music is their life. It's the thing that makes them feel like it's worth getting up in the morning. It's worth earning money so they can not only buy a recording, but buy an instrument, or technology allows them to put their own voice on YouTube, or to create their home studio recording now is so incredible. A lot of students are creating their own music. And that's a really exciting possibility.

None of this is magic, of course. It requires the long-term commitment and hard work of orchestras, community organizations, schools, parents and children at a time when the arts remain under steady pressure. Mark Clague sounds this cautionary but finally optimistic note:

And one of the fears I have, and it came up in that education discussion, was that with No Child Left Behind, so much of the effort about education is, are our schools getting our test scores that justify our funding? And with the arts, it's really hard to test. I mean, maybe it's easy to test. You can give them all an audition for the San Francisco Symphony. But that's not what we're expecting, right? Because it's difficult to measure this impact, it's also easy that we can lose track of it. And that, I think, is the real danger, and why it's so important to have these conversations like we had with Afa and Amos about what music has meant to them. And really for us to talk about it, too.

May the conversations continue and the musical waves roll on and outward in ever widening circles.

We invite you to join the conversation with American's leading orchestras, by visiting the American Orchestra Forum website at www.symphonyforum.org. There, you will find blog posts, videos, transcripts, and more. Please add your voice to the ongoing discussion.

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I'm Steven Winn. Thanks for listening.

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