

A Baton for the Youth of the Americas



KATE GLICKSBERG FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Alondra de la Parra conducting the Philharmonic Orchestra of the Americas, with a solo by Maria Fernanda Castillo.

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As a child in Mexico City, Alondra de la Parra felt mixed emotions when she attended symphonic concerts with her parents, both ardent music lovers. “It was frustrating to be sitting in the audience,” she said recently in New York, where she lives now. “I wanted to be onstage, with the sound.”

One day her father, Manelick de la Parra, a writer and editor, asked whether she knew what the conductor did. “My answer was ‘Basically nothing,’” Ms. de la Parra said. “‘No,’ my father explained, ‘the conductor is the one who has to know everything about the score, who brings everyone together and guides them through the piece.’ That challenge attracted me.”

At 27, she has not been waiting for opportunity to knock. In 2004, as an undergraduate in piano performance at the Manhattan School of Music, she founded

the Philharmonic Orchestra of the Americas. A classmate, Alex Regazzi, the principal trombonist, says it all started casually: “Alondra came up to me in a hallway and said: ‘I’m putting an orchestra together. Do you want to play?’ I said, ‘Awesome.’ And now we’re full-force professionals, playing for a higher cause.”

Ms. de la Parra’s vision was threefold: to explore the largely virgin territory of symphonic music from the New World, to draw a popular audience and to open doors for performers on the threshold of their careers.

For the first concert, at Town Hall, she raised \$50,000. Today her budget is \$1.3 million. Once a one-woman operation, Ms. de la Parra now has an executive director and an international, blue-ribbon board to lean on. The orchestra holds a competition for young composers and has set up an ambitious education program with New York public schools. Yet throughout this period of explosive growth she continued her studies

in orchestral conducting at the Manhattan School, from which she just received a master’s degree.

It was really too much, she conceded the day after her last class. But her mother, Graciela Borja, a sociologist and educator, had taught her never to abandon a project midway.

Ms. de la Parra’s first corporate supporter — the very first person she approached about financing that concert at Town Hall — was Emilio Azcárraga Jean, the chief executive of the broadcasting giant Grupo Televisa and now a member of her board.

“Televisa is a factory of dreams,” Mr. Azcárraga said recently. “We identified with Alondra immediately. Her dream was very clear, and she has achieved it very fast. We expect to see her become one of the best of the best, one of these days.”

Last year, supported by Televisa and Deutsche Bank, the orchestra undertook its first No Borders

tour. In Mexico City a joint concert with the Children’s Symphony Orchestra of Mexico (players 15 and younger) was televised nationally. In Washington, Laura Bush attended the orchestra’s performance at the Kennedy Center and received the musicians in the White House, joined by President Bush.

Addressing an audience, as she often does, Ms. de la Parra projects an aura of respectful understatement. After raising the roof at Town Hall with a Brazilian-theme concert in April, she chatted up the orchestra’s debut at Avery Fisher Hall, to be held Friday: a gala featuring the gung-ho percussion ensemble Tambuco in the “Garbage Concerto” of Jan Jarvlepp, a Canadian composer. “If you think this was loud,” she told the capacity crowd at Town Hall, “just wait.”

Her Latin constituency is large, and no one shushes when a baby starts crying in the balcony. She doesn’t mind applause between movements. “We shouldn’t be

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uptight about music," she said. "Often people at concerts are made to feel they don't know how to behave."

She packs the hall with young professionals; many support the orchestra with services and in-kind donations or sell tickets to friends. And while their prior knowledge of symphonic music may be slight, they are getting curious.

In April, after some Villa-Lobos, with ideas from Bach wrapped in exotic Brazilian splendor, a young scientist who works at Columbia University wondered aloud if the piece was boring. No, though the string sections lacked focus and swagger. Sharing notes later on, Ms. de la Parra cited greater turnover in the string sections than in the more confident woodwinds and brasses. "I definitely want more strength there," she said. "The less the personnel varies, the more we can cultivate the sound."

As a Latina in her field, Ms. de la Parra brings to mind two colleagues much in the news: the meteoric Gustavo Dudamel, the 27-year-old music director of the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela, named to succeed Esa-Pekka Salonen as music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic; and Marin Alsop, 51, the biggest fish in the sea among women who conduct. Like Ms. Alsop, who in 1984 founded Concordia, an orchestra specializing in 20th-century American music, Ms. de la Parra has pulled herself up by the bootstraps. In contrast Mr. Dudamel clambered to the top of an existing pyramid with a very broad base: Venezuela's vast state-sponsored music-training program known as El Sistema.

Even so, Henry Fogel, president of the League of American Orchestras, a service organization, sees an affinity between Ms. de la Parra and Mr. Dudamel that is also artistic. "What sets Alondra apart," he said recently, "is the total emotional immersion in the music that emanates from her, which also describes him." Mr. Fogel

first heard Ms. de la Parra conduct her orchestra last summer at the Museo del Barrio in New York in a program including Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, the only major non-American work they have performed.

"Alondra led the orchestra, but she gave them freedom," Mr. Fogel said. "She conducted phrases, not bars and beats. That's a treat, particularly in a young conductor."

Ms. de la Parra has honed skills and received encouragement from maestros like Charles Dutoit, Simon Rattle, Kurt Masur and Ms. Alsop. But her longtime mentor in chief is Kenneth Kiesler, the founder and director of the Conductors Retreat at Medomak, in Maine.

"Conducting isn't about giving signals," Mr. Kiesler said. "There's a bodily, physical sensation as well as a mental and emotional sensation that comes from the music through the conductor. The real visceral response happens when a conductor is a conduit, not the source of something but the joyful servant of the process. Alondra has an immediate, palpable, visible resonance with the music, which mixes with a love for the experience of conducting, of connecting with the music and the players and the audience."

Joshua Feltman — violist, pianist and Ms. de la Parra's assistant conductor — has seen those qualities too. "When a piece is unfamiliar to many of us," he said, "Alondra demonstrates by singing, by dancing, never by playing a record. She's very creative in this regard. It might take longer than if she picked problems apart technically: 'The trumpets are late on the eighth note.' But she gets a more organic result. She appeals to the instinct."

Even back in 2001, while fetching and carrying as a brand-new, unpaid apprentice conductor at the New Amsterdam Symphony Orchestra, a community ensemble, Ms. de la Parra attended every

rehearsal prepared to conduct. Yet in rehearsal she may say from the podium that she is learning too.

"The fact is that as conductors we're completely irrelevant without the orchestra," she said. "We're there to be team players. Our job has been done at its best when every single person in the orchestra has been moved and inspired to do their best. Conducting is about the human connection. The music is the first priority. It's not about you."

In May, Ms. de la Parra became the youngest member ever on the board of trustees for the Latin Grammy Awards. This month, at its national conference in Denver, the League of American Orchestras will present her with its Helen M. Thompson Award for emerging music directors, which recognizes not only musical excellence but also administrative and managerial talent.

"It's true I've had to deal with things many conductors don't," she said. "Fund-raising, writing letters, doing budgets, renting music, hiring personnel, dealing with recordings, with performing rights. Wherever I may go, I have skills that will be needed. I can relate to the executive director, the stagehands, the development director. Every little aspect of orchestral work I've done it."

Champion of neglected Americans though she remains, the list of Ms. de la Parra's favorite composers begins with Mahler, closely followed by Stravinsky, Shostakovich, Mozart and Bartok. This spring, when she took over two programs of the Russian National Orchestra on short notice in Boca Raton, Fla., Joshua Bell, the soloist in one of them, is said to have expressed astonishment on learning that it had been her first go at the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto.

Such engagements are multiplying, and Ms. de la Parra may soon have to disengage from day-to-day responsibilities with the

Philharmonic Orchestra of the Americas. Mr. Fogel said it will continue to flourish when she moves on.

"Based on the talent I think Alondra will have an important national and international career," he said. "But the orchestra is also building a strong organization under her. I think they're likely to make it succeed."

As Ms. de la Parra said, it's not about her.