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http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-ca-youth21oct21_0_7290687_story?coll=la-headlines-calendar

From the Los Angeles Times

CLASSICAL MUSIC

L.A. Philharmonic looks to the next generation

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By Karen Wada
Special to The Times

October 21, 2007

EVER the rebel, Esa-Pekka Salonen balked at his mother's request that he take piano lessons when he was a boy. Ultimately, though, he learned to play the French horn and then studied conducting and composing at Finland's Sibelius Academy, where he enjoyed the freedom to pursue his passion for the avant-garde.

Gustavo Dudamel was 4 when he joined El Sistema (the System), the Venezuelan orchestral training program that has transformed the lives of hundreds of thousands of children. Through its classes and concerts, he received his first violin and conductor's baton, what he has described as "my gifts from heaven."

Now, spurred in part by the crucial role that education played in the careers of its current music director and his designated successor, the Los Angeles Philharmonic is embarking on an ambitious multiyear mission to develop aspiring performers and composers. Another impetus: a desire to use what Philharmonic President Deborah Borda calls "the great bully pulpit" created by the orchestra's surging popularity since Walt Disney Concert Hall opened in 2003.

"We asked, 'How can we leverage our new civic platform to make a difference?' " Borda says. "We decided we could help bring music to the children of L.A. But we knew no one institution could do this alone, so we also decided we had to be a community organizer and a convener."

The result is the Young Musicians Initiative, a series of partnerships and fellowships designed to, as Borda puts it, "connect the dots" in the sprawling local music education scene. The initiative's centerpiece will be Youth Orchestra L.A., a campaign to start orchestras in underserved areas. Eventually, by working with dozens of schools, public and private agencies and arts organizations, the Philharmonic hopes to give every child in the county the opportunity to play an instrument.

More immediately, to kick off the initiative -- and offer proof of its potential -- the Philharmonic is preparing to host its first International Youth Orchestra Festival. The three-week event, beginning Tuesday, will feature Disney Hall appearances by some of the world's finest young orchestras and several local orchestras, as well as free community concerts.

An international lineup

ON opening night, Salonen will lead musicians from his alma mater in a program that illustrates the prominence of Finland's only music university. The Sibelius Academy Symphony Orchestra will play Chorale by Magnus Lindberg, a classmate of Salonen's; Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 5 with Juho Pohjonen, a master's student at the academy; and "Lemminkainen" Suite by Jean Sibelius, who attended the 125-year-old school before it was renamed for him in 1939. Salonen will also take part in a preconcert discussion with one of his mentors, conducting teacher Jorma Panula, and the two will give master classes at the Colburn School later in the week.

The 26-year-old Dudamel, scheduled to succeed Salonen in 2009, is already music director of the Simn Bolvar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela -- the crown jewel of the National System of Youth and Children's Orchestras, which has spawned more than 200 ensembles in three decades. Known for enchanting audiences with their exuberance and musicianship, Dudamel and his colleagues will perform Bernstein's Symphonic Dances

from "West Side Story" and Mahler's Symphony No. 5 on Nov. 1 and Beethoven's Symphony No. 5, Bernstein's "Mambo" and selections from Latin American composers on Nov. 2.

Rounding out the list of visitors will be the Swiss-based UBS Verbier Festival Orchestra. Each year, elite musicians from more than 30 countries visit the alpine town of Verbier to work with conductors such as James Levine and Kurt Masur before beginning an international tour. Led by Charles Dutoit, the UBS Verbier will present a Nov. 8 concert consisting of Berlioz's "Symphonie Fantastique" and Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 3 with Martha Argerich.

In addition, members of the Sibelius Academy and Colburn Conservatory orchestras will perform in Santa Monica on Thursday and Long Beach on Friday, and the Simn Bolvar musicians will give three shows around L.A. on Oct. 30. The festival will close with a Nov. 11 showcase that includes the Glendale Youth Orchestra, the Junior Philharmonic Orchestra of California, the Los Angeles Youth Orchestra and the Verdugo Youth Orchestra.

"There's a little something for everybody," Borda says. "You can see these great orchestras and some of our own orchestras, all of which are younger, plus you get two of our greatest conductors conducting their hometown bands."

Also on display will be a sampling of the world's most successful music education programs, and an Oct. 29 public symposium at Disney Hall will explore ways that ideas from some of these programs can be applied in Los Angeles. Theater artist Peter Sellars will be the keynote speaker; panelists will include Dudamel and Jos Antonio Abreu, the Venezuelan economist and musician who founded El Sistema to address inequities in his oil-rich, poverty-plagued nation.

Two good examples

"PROBABLY in the past 20 years, the most dynamic countries for producing musicians are Finland and Venezuela," says Chad Smith, the Philharmonic's vice president of artistic planning. "The Finnish model is very in-school-based and tries to expose as many kids as possible. The Venezuelan model is the opposite. It's outside of school. There's a social side to it, getting kids off the streets and getting instruments into their hands. We want to see how we can take elements of those two systems and adapt them to what's happening in Los Angeles."

In fact, city orchestras across America have been trying in recent years to bolster local music programs that have suffered from funding cuts and the lack of comprehensive national policies. "But what Los Angeles plans to do is unique," says Polly Kahn, vice president of learning and leadership development at the American Symphony Orchestra League. "I'm not aware of another orchestra that is partnering with so many organizations or that has the ambition to actually create orchestras."

Plans for Youth Orchestra L.A., which will be unveiled in more detail at the Oct. 29 symposium, call for the first ensemble to be formed at the Expo Center, a community center in Exposition Park. Initially, the Philharmonic will cover the costs, but it hopes to bring in funders as activities expand. **Its main Expo collaborators include the Harmony Project, a music outreach program for low-income children, and the Los Angeles Unified School District.**

"We have already gone to 10 schools, mostly within walking distance," Borda says. "These schools have no music programs. We recruited to see if there were kids interested in learning to play an instrument. We are providing instruments, training, personal lessons and exposure and inviting kids to concerts. After eight months, we'll have the first rehearsal. We'll take what we learn and spin off four more orchestras, then go from there."

El Sistema was a major inspiration, says Borda, who visited Venezuela with a Philharmonic delegation last fall. "Even so, we knew we had to make this an L.A. program. It will be slightly more democratic. We will not run this out of a central office. We recognize the importance of community partnerships."

The Philharmonic has long offered introductory concerts and other events aimed at kids in the elementary grades. But with the Young Musicians Initiative, the orchestra -- taking advantage of efforts by the LAUSD and Los Angeles County to revitalize school music and arts programs -- is also reaching out to older students who have expressed an interest in music. In addition, it has been forging partnerships with middle and high school ensembles and with some of the more than 30 independent youth orchestras in the county, inviting them to attend master classes, concerts and rehearsals. Four of these eight independent partners are the groups scheduled to play at Disney Hall on Nov. 11. The other four -- the Claremont Young Musicians Orchestra, the CSUN Youth Orchestra, the Olympia Youth Orchestra and the Pasadena Young Musicians Orchestra -- will get their chance next season.

Composers welcome

INSPIRED by its penchant for programming new music, the Philharmonic has also started a two-year fellowship program for high school composers. (Training for conductors is under discussion.)

Four students are taking classes with Pulitzer Prize winner Steven Stucky, the orchestra's consulting composer for new music. They will write chamber and orchestral works that will be played and critiqued by Philharmonic musicians; they also will meet with visiting composers and Hollywood film and television composers.

"We want them to be on the inside of the process," says Stucky, "whether it's being close to the creation of something new like 'Radical Light' [his own piece, which premiered here last week] or the revival of something great like Britten's 'War Requiem.' "

"This L.A. Phil thing is a dream come true," says Anderson Alden, one of the fellows. The Harvard-Westlake School junior has had trouble finding a teacher or other resources that would help him learn his craft.

"Now," he says, "I'm going to have regular lessons, and I'll be going to concerts and meeting different professional composers and working with some of the best musicians in the area. I couldn't ask for more."