

The Boston Globe

He conducts with a touch and a unique command

By Matthew Erikson, Globe Correspondent | December 5, 2007

Venezuelan wunderkind Gustavo Dudamel might well be the world's most talked-about conductor. But he's not the only gifted young maestro from South America gaining admirers.

Consider Peruvian-born conductor Miguel Harth-Bedoya. Among his fans are cellist Yo-Yo Ma, Boston-area composer Osvaldo Golijov, and soprano Dawn Upshaw. The 39-year-old Harth-Bedoya is regularly sought-after by premier orchestras such as the Chicago Symphony and Philadelphia Orchestra for guest conducting. He makes his Boston Symphony subscription series debut tomorrow, conducting Ma and the BSO in two works by Golijov, followed by Dvorák's Eighth Symphony.

While his career rise hasn't been as meteoric as Dudamel's, Harth-Bedoya has been credited with transforming the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra, of which he has been music director since 2000, into a top-tier ensemble. (Prior to coming to Texas, he was associate conductor at the Los Angeles Philharmonic under Esa-Pekka Salonen.) At a time when the classical music world is doing a lot of hand-wringing in the search for new audiences, Harth-Bedoya's down-to-earth perspective and embrace of a diverse repertoire seem a step in a positive direction.

"I call Miguel the perfect man because he actually has so many abilities," says Ma. "I love the way he's not only thinking about the orchestra but how he is thinking about music and open to things."

Ma and Harth-Bedoya began their friendship after performing together in Denver a few years back. More recently, the two have collaborated on Ma's Silk Road Project, which brings together musicians of various nationalities and idioms. In July, Sony Classical released the top-selling CD "New Impossibilities," featuring Ma, the Silk Road Ensemble, and the Chicago Symphony, conducted by Harth-Bedoya.

"I think a lot of people have great physical talent, which Miguel certainly possesses, but what makes him interesting is his mind," Ma says. "He's not looking at music, thinking I must only study the score. I think he understands it from larger contexts. He's not a music nerd in that sense. So his ability to engage in all of the different aspects of society makes him a far better musician."

Accompanist to mom

Harth-Bedoya grew up in Lima, introduced to music by his mother, a local choral director and single parent. As a child, he would accompany her on the piano and perform for the funerals and weddings that helped earn the family a steady middle-class income.

"Musically, we didn't have a sound system at home. But I had a lot of influences of live music from singing and folk dancing," says Harth-Bedoya by phone from his home in Fort Worth. "My mother's main line of music was Latin American and Spanish. That's what I grew up listening to."

Another influence was the great Peruvian tenor Luigi Alva. While attending German-language high school (English is his third language), Harth-Bedoya worked backstage in the Municipal

Theater in Lima, assisting Alva during the opera season. There he caught the conducting bug, and eventually the nerve to apply to the elite Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia.

According to Otto-Werner Mueller, Harth-Bedoya's teacher at both Curtis and later the Juilliard School, the young Peruvian was a natural conductor and one of his best students.

"He has a certain incredibly rhythmic energy," says Mueller, who has also taught New York Philharmonic music director-designate Alan Gilbert and Cincinnati Symphony music director Paavo Järvi. "It is never dull. Not that he changes the music, but when he stands in front of the orchestra, you get the feeling he's standing in the particular sound. . . . He makes the music alive."

Also in Mueller's conducting class at Curtis was the young Argentine composer and University of Pennsylvania doctoral student Osvaldo Golijov. He had arrived in this country just a month before Harth-Bedoya did and was auditing the class.

In Harth-Bedoya, Golijov saw a kindred spirit. "As a selfish composer, I remember that the moment that I saw Miguel conducting in Curtis, I realized that this is great; I never have to worry anymore," says Golijov. "His intuition was so far above anyone else's. . . . He always understands the essence of every piece."

Harth-Bedoya conducted many of Golijov's early works in Philadelphia and hasn't stopped. At Santa Fe, he conducted the revised version of Golijov's first opera, "Ainadamar," in 2005. The cello concerto "Azul," which Boston audiences will hear this week, was performed by Ma under Harth-Bedoya's baton last year in Chicago. (The work received its premiere at Tanglewood in 2006.) The other Golijov work on this weekend's BSO program, "Ausencia" for cello and strings, is a so-called "re-imagining" of Golijov's string orchestra piece "Last Round," which Harth-Bedoya first conducted during his student days in Philadelphia.

Likening the Peruvian conductor to a "younger brother," Golijov says that his working relationship with Harth-Bedoya is not so different from Shostakovich's partnership with the Beethoven Quartet or Elliott Carter's association with the Juilliard Quartet.

"First there is the cultural thing," explains Golijov. "A lot of my music comes from a ground he knows inside and out; both in the kind of lyricism and the rhythmic language he is fluent. . . . Miguel conducts my music because we evolve and grow together."

Golijov cites soprano Dawn Upshaw, who once told him that "Miguel lets me breathe" - an indication of his early vocal background and, Golijov says, an expression of the joy and generosity that others experience making music with him.

Homeland melodies

The music of his native region figures prominently in Harth-Bedoya's broad musical repertoire. Last year, the conductor collaborated on the Decca CD "Sentimiento Latino," featuring popular Latin-American songs performed by Peruvian tenor Juan Diego Florez and the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra. Along the same lines as Ma's Silk Road Project, Harth-Bedoya is also initiating his "Inca Trail" programs at Fort Worth and elsewhere, delving into the music of Peru and the Andes Mountain region.

"I suppose there's a bit of a selfish interest here," the conductor says. "Being a performer, I'm always looking for new things." Ma sees future cooperation between their projects. The musical "Showboat," a variety of pops programs (including dressing up as Darth Vader for a recent John Williams concert), and video-game music are among the other varied repertoire Harth-Bedoya

has conducted with the Fort Worth Symphony. He is contracted with the orchestra through 2011 - a date that will come too soon for many of the musicians, who have responded enthusiastically to his tenure.

Perhaps that's in part because of what Ma calls the conductor's self-effacing, "non-hierarchical" approach to music-making. And with the filling of vacant positions at the orchestra with recent top conservatory graduates, the quality of playing at the Fort Worth Symphony has grown dramatically since his arrival. In January, the orchestra is scheduled to perform two programs at New York's Carnegie Hall, including a world premiere of "Mariel" by Golijov and a bilingual version of "Peter and the Wolf."

Whether it is Prokofiev or his own music, Golijov marvels at Harth-Bedoya's ability to let the score speak, and he draws a distinction with that other South American conductor he admires.

"I think that Dudamel is absolute fire," says Golijov. "With Miguel, the four elements are balanced."

Miguel Harth-Bedoya conducts the BSO in works by Golijov and Dvorák tomorrow through Saturday at Symphony Hall. Tickets: \$29 to \$114. 617-266-1200, bso.org

Matthew Erikson is the classical music critic at the Fort Worth Star-Telegram. –