



ofunam

Music Lives in the University

Interview with Alejandro Guzmán Rojas¹

The National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) is more than just Mexico's main institution of higher learning. It also houses the most diverse kinds of cultural and sport activities, and everything it does involves Mexican society in general. Music is no exception: the university has a philharmonic orchestra, whose home base, the Nezahualcóyotl Hall in the University Cultural Center, is a point of pride, not only for people in the university but for the entire nation. Alejandro Guzmán Rojas, the assistant executive director of the UNAM Philharmonic Orchestra, or OFUNAM, as it is better known, tells *Voices of Mexico* a little about its history and current projects.

Alejandro Guzmán: The orchestra's history dates back to 1929 when the push for autonomy was in full swing. At that time, the National Conservatory of Music was part of the university, but when the latter became autonomous, the conservatory split off. But, some of the conservatory's teachers decided to stay on. With the idea of doing cultural work, they would get together with some students and play at a ceremony or other. Then they'd split up again, and "the orchestra would disappear." This went on for several years, until 1936, when it began to come together formally (next year will be its seventy-fifth anniversary).

Two people, both teachers, were decisive in this: José Rocabrana and José Vázquez. They loaned their materials out, they didn't charge for conducting, and the musicians were the students themselves and a few teachers. That was the first kernel. The orchestra began with a few more or less regular seasons. The performances were free, and it was all very oriented to serving the public. The university was in downtown Mexico City, and they performed in the Theater of the People and rehearsed in the Simón Bolívar Amphitheater, which was in the National Preparatory School.

So its beginnings were very humble, but very enthusiastic. From the start, it was conceived of in close relation with what the university should be: a place to offer education and culture for everyone. It was a small orchestra and it

◀ Performance at the Aragón Faculty of Higher Studies (FES).



Juan Antonio López/Coceta UNAM

The Nezahualcōyotl Hall, home to the OFUNAM.

worked miracles. They didn't have any contracts or money: it was "you play, we pay." The musicians loaned their own instruments; Maestros Rocabruna and Vázquez loaned the sheet music, wrote arrangements, composed, conducted; they did everything. Little by little the symphony orchestra took shape, and that's how it was until the 1960s.

Then came Maestro Icilio Bredo, an Italian musician who came to Mexico to teach at the conservatory. One of his contributions was to request a more formal situation for the orchestra because, even at that time, they would meet, play and then get paid. But there was no security to speak of. That was when their home base changed to the Justo Sierra Auditorium in the School of Philosophy and Letters in University City.

Next, there was "an earthquake," Maestro Eduardo Mata. He took the reins very young and gave the orchestra new impetus. I think he was about 25 when they called him in to work in the office for musical activities—I can't remember its exact name.

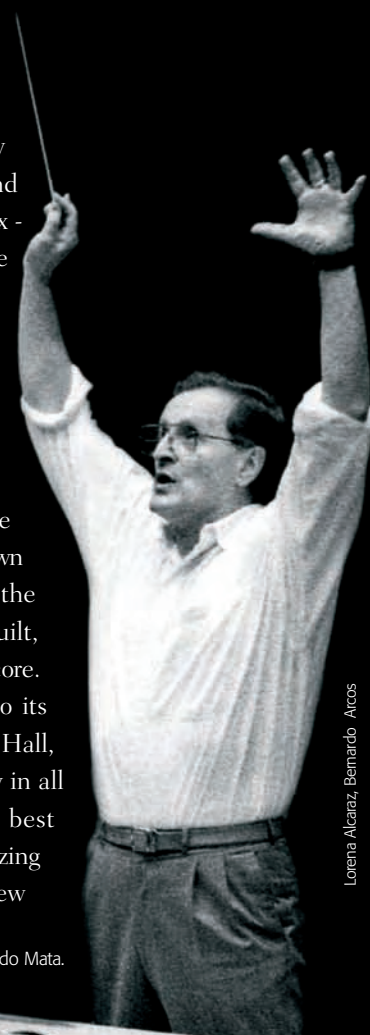
Mata did everything, and I think he was the one who started to create the audience we now have, a more adult audience. At that time we didn't have our own venue; the orchestra rehearsed and gave concerts at the Justo Sierra Auditorium and occasionally at San Ildefonso and in the Schools of Architecture or Medicine. That is, they moved around. Of course, it was still a small orchestra and so it fit in certain halls that can't be used now. Appointing Eduardo Mata as artistic director marked the beginning of a new and brilliant stage in its development, a period that lasted nine years. It was during that time that the University Symphony

Orchestra became the UNAM Philharmonic Orchestra, the name and character it retains until today.

Voices of Mexico: What's the difference between a symphony orchestra and a philharmonic orchestra?

AG: Well, I would say that today, the difference is only in the name; the number of musicians is very similar. Practically, they could play the same work on the same day, and it wouldn't be any different. The explanation I'm familiar with is that the musicians were hired for a symphony orchestra after an audition, and for a philharmonic orchestra by invitation, but now, to get into either, you have to audition.

So, to get back to Mata....He was one of the main promoters of the idea that the orchestra needed its own hall. That was one of the reasons the University Cultural Center was built, with the Nezahualcōyotl Hall at its core. In 1976, the orchestra moved into its current home, the Nezahualcōyotl Hall, which has the best acoustics of any in all of Latin America and among the best in the world. Naturally, I'm summarizing a lot of the orchestra's history in a few



Lorena Alcaraz, Bernardo Arcos

Maestro Eduardo Mata.

minutes. After Mata came other maestros: Héctor Quintanar, from 1975 to 1980; from 1981 to 1984, two co-conductors, Enrique Diemecke and Eduardo Diazmuñoz; followed by Jorge Velazco, Jesús Medina, Ronald Zollman, Zuohuang Chen and Alun Francis, who is about to finish his work this year. Two years ago, Rodrigo Macías was appointed assistant conductor.

VM: How are orchestra members picked?

AG: The musicians are hired as university workers with tenured positions. Besides the audition, they have to go through a trial period, because auditioning is one thing, and working is another. If they pass the trial period, then they're accepted in the orchestra. Picking the artistic director falls to the UNAM's general director of music, but he or she always listens to the orchestra's opinion; they make suggestions. Those up for consideration are invited to come as guest conductors so the orchestra can get to know them, because that's who they're going to be working with; after that there's an evaluation, a decision is made, and finally, the university rector makes the appointment.

Big stars are impossible for us, but quite a few foreign and Mexican conductors are interested in heading up this orchestra, because it's good and open to working hard; the hall is marvelous and the audiences are excellent. We are also a hothouse for developing future first-rank conductors.

"Music Lives in the University"
aims at breaking the paradigm
that says that the artists are on one side
and the audience on the other.

There are very good conductors who are just starting out, and in the future are going to be top notch. I think that in Latin America there is no other university with an orchestra and a hall like ours. In terms of pay, perhaps compared to other orchestras we're not the best, but it's quite decent.

VM: One interesting aspect of how the orchestra works is how its members are renewed. In the UNAM, this involves something that we don't often pay attention to: the human factor.

AG: Renovating the orchestra is a human problem. Once they have been confirmed in their post, they are, let's say, irremovable, unless they do something silly. All musicians have a period in which they're at the top of their game, and then they start to decline. There are those who accept that their time has passed and they retire; others continue thinking they can give more and they do; and there are some whose time has passed, but they can't be forced to retire because they're musicians and what they want to do is to play. So, we

The Nezahualcóyotl Hall reopening concert in April 2010.



Juan Antonio López/Gaceta UNAM

try to get the musician himself or herself to recognize what's going on. In this orchestra there are a lot of young people who have just come on board together with musicians who have been in it for 30 years. There's nothing wrong with that: we are nurtured by the experience of the latter and we take advantage of the impetus of the former.

OFUNAM at Preparatory High School 9.



Lorenza Alcaraz

VM: For anyone who goes to a performance for the first time, the ritual of the concert, a custom that exists in all the world's concert halls, can go completely unnoticed. How would you summarize that ritual?

AG: It's very simple. After the conductor, the second ranking person artistically is the concert master. The concert master is always the first violin, the person who comes into the hall when all the other musicians are seated and there's only one empty chair left. The audience claps for him, and he invites the orchestra to rise and acknowledge the applause. Then he takes his place and leads the orchestra in tuning up. Once that's finished, the conductor enters and the audience applauds again. The conductor asks the orchestra to stand up again to receive the applause and then he goes to the podium and begins the concert. That's how it's done the world over.

VM: Another thing that goes unnoticed, and that's important given that this is a university with limited resources, is the cost of having an orchestra of this caliber.

AG: The basic UNAM orchestra is made up of 106 musicians, plus the conductor, plus the whole administrative support team, the librarian, the people who set up, who put out and take away the chairs, move the instruments, put everything in its place, do the lighting, help with the sound equipment....That's why time management is so key; every minute of the orchestra's time is quite expensive, because we're paying the musician, the conductor, the team and also for the music, because only the pieces that no longer have copyrights are free. Some of the music we buy and it stays in our musical library, but a lot is paid for by contract: they send it to us, it's played and we return it. That could be for a couple of concerts and their respective rehearsals. The orchestra rehearses three hours a day, four days a week, and we give concerts on Saturday night and Sundays at noon. We have three short seasons: two in the first half of the year and one in the second half.

The idea is that the university community as a whole, including, of course, high school youngsters, come into contact with music and get to know their orchestra.



OFUNAM at the Uxmal archaeological site.

**This is a university orchestra.
We want to educate, and we are educating
a more open, more aware audience, more
committed to the music and to the university.**

VM: Here we come to one of the OFUNAM's most important artistic extension projects, "Music Lives in the University," which aims at breaking the paradigm that says that the artists are on one side and the audience on the other.

AG: The idea is that music and its context expand further and further, that the university community as a whole, including, of course high school youngsters, come into contact with music and get to know their orchestra. Going into the preparatory high schools is something completely new; never before in the history of the university had the OFUNAM performed in all nine of the UNAM-affiliated preparatory schools. This experience brought us very pleasant surprises. In the surveys we did after the performances, we got comments like, "Come back soon," "I hope this happens very often," "We loved it," "I thought I was going to be bored, but I wasn't," and "I thought this music was for old people, and it's really great!"

I think this all has to do with the way we work, Rodrigo, our assistant conductor, and I. The idea is to stop being stiff and try to communicate with the students through music, but using their own language. People might criticize us for asking them if they thought "it was cool," but language is a living thing. It changes, and what seems to be nails on a blackboard in the ears of older people, in the future is going to be commonplace.

Rodrigo and I agreed to use their language, but also to give them information, because we believe that knowledge produces pleasure: if I go to a concert and I don't understand anything and nobody explains it to me, well, I'm not

going to like it or it'll scare me. But, if somebody gives me a little information, even just basic info, about what's going on, then I start to pay attention. I'll learn that the orchestra is divided up in a certain way, and that this guy is the concert master, and that they have to tune up at so many hertz. Along the way I learn what a hertz is...because I do ask them if they know what a hertz is —after all, we are in undergraduate schools and high schools— but if they don't know, we explain it. Then, at some point, a kid who already knows more about what an orchestra is decides to impress his girl and he explains it to her. That's what we're looking for, for these youngsters to get into musical language a bit, for them to know that, like in any language, in musical discourse, there's a period to end a sentence, a period at the end of a paragraph, a comma, and exclamation points. The only thing is that it's complicated to follow, so we explain that one principle of composition is repetition, so we can retain it.

VM: The preparation of these concerts, then, the selection of the music and the performance time are all fundamental for getting these young people's attention.

AG: It's all perfectly planned. Each performance is conceived of like dosages of homeopathic medicine. Even though in the surveys there were comments like, "It was too short" —which we, of course, were delighted with— we think that the people who were there for the first time probably wouldn't be able to take a two-hour concert. But after these small doses, maybe they would. The themes are organized with an eye to accessible music, with an expla-

At Preparatory High School 3.



David Delcorte/Archivo JB Arcos Estudio

Lorenza Alcaraz



Elsie Montiel

Next year we're planning to go to the five Sciences and Humanities High Schools. They're a tough audience, too.

VM: To document this activity, a film was made that will be broadcast on the UNAM television station. It also reflects the spirit of many of the participants in this huge undertaking that is university cultural activity.

AG: The filmmaker who made the documentary, Bernardo Arcos, was nominated for an Ariel² for another one he did on the Mining Palace Symphony Orchestra. He's really someone who contributes and who works with us above all for love of the UNAM. We also have experts who contribute their photographs for publicity, and some of us lend equipment to save the orchestra from having to rent it and use up its budget. This is the kind of impetus that Gustavo

Music, like all the arts, is connected to a part of human beings, the most spiritual part. In it, there is color, there are timbres, there are subtle differences, but there is also conflict and passion.

nation beforehand. All music is complex, but with this language, up to a certain point, we are getting them to understand what it's about. But I also question them; I make them see that I can tell them anything, and maybe that's not so; so they think about and get involved in what's going on. We also use a few tools, like a program, where not only do we explain what the piece is about and who composed it, but we also add suggestions about how to listen to the music, or quotes from books on the history of music. It's all very short so people's minds don't stray.

The programming includes music that has a certain reference point, that might remind them of something, for example, the Overture to the *Barber of Seville*, which a lot of them recognize because it's used in cartoons. That's the hook. But then we play something they haven't heard before. It's a short program, about an hour long including what Rodrigo and I tell them. The idea is to not tire them out, to give them the information they need and invite them to come to our home, the concert hall, so that the work we're doing to familiarize them with music can fully flower.



Rivero Weber, the UNAM's director of music, is trying to maintain. He was the one who thought of going out to the high schools and of hiring an assistant conductor. Rodrigo Macías is very young, no more than 30-something. He studied in Mexico and then in Italy; then he came back, auditioned and won the post. He's helping us enormously; he's very easy to talk to, very pleasant and patient with young people; he talks to everyone. It's really good that we have someone with his profile, his musical talent, and his desire to work, to contribute to the university, because he's one of our main spokespersons.

We are attempting to reach out to young and not-young people. We believe we're also achieving a lot with the ones who go to the rehearsals open to the public on Saturday mornings. While the orchestra was on its break, which lasts half an hour, we realized that the audience remained seated waiting for them to start again. And we wanted to take advantage of those moments. So, now I stand there and start explaining how the orchestra is made up, what a musical scale is, the sounds, and, even though there's a program that explains this also, I try to answer any questions they may have about the pieces and the composer. Be-

cause —coming back to this— this is a university orchestra, and we're taking full advantage of that. This is an orchestra with a social objective. We want to educate, and we are educating a more open, more aware audience, more committed to the music and to the university. At the end of the day, music, like all the arts, is connected to a part of human beings, the most spiritual part, the part that creates enjoyment that goes beyond the immediate emotions. In it, there is color, there are timbres, there are subtle differences, but there is also conflict, passion. And this orchestra is here to discover all of that. **MM**

Elsie Montiel
Editor

NOTES

¹ All quotes and information in this article are from an interview with Alejandro Guzmán on April 15, 2010 in the OFUNAM offices at the University Cultural Center.

² The Ariel is Mexico's top award for cinema. [Translator's Note.]



Elsie Montiel



Elsie Montiel

Photos previous page and this page, performance at "The Islands" area in the heart of University City.