

An American Conductor's Bolivian Composition

In '97, the National Symphony Was as Tiny as Its Public; Today, It's an Orchestra Worthy of the Name

By Juan Forero
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LA PAZ, Bolivia -- He had apprenticed with legendary German conductor Kurt Masur and conducted youth orchestras in Chicago. Then, almost on a lark, David Handel, an American violinist, came to this isolated capital in the center of South America -- a city 12,000 feet above sea level, seemingly stuck in a time warp and, with its enormous indigenous majority, not exactly a hotbed for Bach and Stravinsky.

Handel remembers that when he arrived in 1997, the National Symphony Orchestra he was hired to remake was a shambles -- it had no concert hall, generated little public interest and was barely able to muster seven or eight sparsely attended concerts a year and pay its musicians a few dollars per performance.

It could have been, Handel recalled with a wry smile, a calamitous career move. Instead, it has become his life's work, molding a ragtag group of musicians into a highly competent orchestra.

Handel, then 33, saw it as a unique, if entirely unconventional, opportunity. "My aim was to conduct an orchestra and make a big social impact," he said.

Indeed, Handel could teach, experiment and construct from the ground up, and in the process bring the music he loves to barren, forgotten corners of a poor country that some dismissed as a wasteland for high culture. Handel began by taking the orchestra on tour, the first stop being El Alto, an extensive warren of adobe and cinder-block homes with a population of 800,000 -- and considered Latin America's most indigenous city.

"When we started out, the orchestra's public was tiny; the orchestra itself was tiny," said Handel, now 44. "The idea was, if it's the National Symphony, it really ought to represent everyone in the country, and it's a country that demographically is very diverse."

The orchestra's eclectic group of musicians -- some of them teachers, others part-time mariachis, a handful of them university students -- traveled across the high plains to Oruro, a mining town where nearly everyone is Aymara Indian. They also played in Bolivia's lush Amazonian lowlands and in resource-rich Tarija in the south, regions with a rich musical tradition, but folkloric music, heavy on windpipes and melancholic lyrics. While some in La Paz advised Handel to "Bolivianize" the orchestra, he said it was vital to stick to what orchestras do, play masterworks, while building a mixed repertoire that includes Bolivian composers.

"The point was that you don't talk down to your public; you speak to your public, you express to your public on the same level," he said. Recalling his first concert in El Alto, on an old basketball court, Handel said he was not sure what Bolivians would make of a repertoire heavy on the classical workhorses, such as Beethoven and Tchaikovsky.

"It was completely European," he said, "and people loved it."

With a shaved head and piercing blue eyes, Handel, who as a young man trained with Masur at the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, couldn't on the surface seem more out of place in this country of 9 million. But in his trips throughout Latin America -- Handel has been guest conductor for 40 orchestras in many countries -- he's learned to speak nearly flawless Spanish, complete with the soft cadence of most Bolivians.

Perhaps most importantly, he has become something of an expert in Bolivian music, easily pointing out the finer points of Bolivian composer Alberto Villalpando, the love songs of Enriqueta Ulloa or the protest songs of Luis Rico. But the onetime budding violinist from Buffalo, where he grew up regularly attending the highly regarded Philharmonic Orchestra, is obsessed with the majesty of classical music.

And he wants to share it.

That, too, was the philosophy that refugee musicians from Europe brought with them to Bolivia in the 1940s. Mostly Polish and Austrian Jews escaping war, they were founding members of the orchestra, turning it into a vibrant, if little-known, institution in the center of the continent. Many of those first musicians eventually left Bolivia, its dictators and chronic instability prompting them to pull up stakes.

But their legacy lived on. They had been, after all, teachers and mentors to many of the older members of today's orchestra. These older musicians look back on tough times, when they played in frigid gymnasiums and stuck to tried-and-true formats, usually Bolivian folkloric music. And then there was the lackadaisical style of some former conductors, who did little to inspire the orchestra.

Jaime Bravo, who plays first flute and has been in the orchestra 30 years, said playing had become just another job, offering little hope for improvement.

"Before, we were limited to works that were very small and very repetitive," he said. "For a lot of time, we did just Bolivian music prepared for the orchestra. And when we did classical music, we did simple things, like Beethoven's first symphonies and some works by Strauss."

Now, Bravo said, the orchestra takes on works by such composers as Dvorak and Debussy.

"Every program we do is a challenge," Bravo said. "The repertoire is inspiring."

The public has, to be sure, responded.

Where the symphony once played 10 concerts in a good year, attracting 2,000 people, it now offers nearly 50 performances attended by 25,000 people.

Juan Ortega Landa, a former Coca-Cola executive and president of the National Symphony Orchestra Foundation, said the goal is to make the orchestra more accessible. He said that means improving wages for the musicians and funding more extensive tours.

"Classical music was for a small elite in Bolivia," Ortega said. "Our dream is to popularize classical music."

With a new foundation made up of music lovers, Handel was able to raise money for a prized acquisition -- the old Cine Teatro La Paz, now a 600-seat concert hall. It took \$3 million, a pittance for an orchestra in the United States but sizable for Bolivia, and the help of President Evo Morales's government, which has given the symphony sole use of the space, at no cost, for 100 years.

On a tour, Handel tried to catch his breath as he climbed the creaking stairs of the concert hall, which is in the last stages of a four-year renovation. The building had once been majestic, a 19th-century mansion, complete with a wide staircase, ornamental ceiling reliefs, interior patios and French doors. But it fell into disrepair, becoming at one point a place where porn was shown, Handel said.

"We found all kinds of old films, from "Tarzan" to pretty tawdry stuff," he said.

Now, it features two performance spaces, a rehearsal hall, practice rooms, dressing rooms and -- vital in a city so high up in the Andes -- a heating system. "It's the right-sized hall and it's a great-sounding hall," Handel said. "And for the first time in the orchestra's history, we have our own home. We're the owners of it. So it's a great thing."

With the new performance space and busy schedule, orchestra members are being pushed to new limits. Once having just 45 musicians, the orchestra now has 70. The financial situation is still too precarious for many of the musicians to make the symphony their full-time job. But salaries have doubled in recent years, in some cases to \$600.

Valery Patiño, who is 18 and interning with the symphony, said she has been pressed like never before. Playing for Handel means showing up on time and rehearsing late into the night.

"Really, this is another level," she said shortly after a rehearsal. "The good thing is that he is very demanding, and sometimes that makes us feel silly, but that makes us practice even more."

Handel said there is no reason the orchestra should not reach for the highest levels. In the future, that could mean tours abroad and fellowships for musicians with some of the world's great orchestras.

"The idea, with people who are not strong in certain positions, is to work with them, to make them part of the team," he said. "Every conductor aspires to conduct the greatest symphony he can."