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New Houston Symphony director Orozco-Estrada set to make a splash



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By Steven Brown
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Andrés Orozco-Estrada knows how to win over a crowd.

After a Jones Hall concert in April, Houston Texans linebacker Whitney Mercilus welcomed the conductor with a No. 15 jersey to mark his selection as

Dave Rossman/Freelance

Andres Orozco-Estrada conducts the Houston Symphony on Friday in a free concert in the Miller Outdoor Theatre.

the Houston Symphony's 15th music director. Orozco-Estrada slipped backstage to change out of his formal wear, then returned to the stage to answer questions.

A woman asked how he kept up his stamina for rehearsals, concerts and the constant travel of an international conductor's life. Without missing a beat, Orozco-Estrada stood and opened his shirt, Superman-style, revealing the red, white and blue Texans jersey.

The audience burst into laughter and applause.

Andres Orozco-Estrada interview
Courtesy Houston Symphony.



It's hard to imagine such a freewheeling moment from the courtly Europeans who led the Houston Symphony for the past quarter-century.

Raised in Colombia, Orozco-Estrada, 36, takes charge Friday as the orchestra's first Hispanic leader in its 100-year history. For nearly half his life though, he has lived in Vienna, Austria, where Orozco-Estrada studied at the conservatory and now leads one of Vienna's orchestras.

The Houston Symphony thinks Orozco-Estrada's mix of Latin American roots and European training will resonate in the United States' most diverse city, deepening the orchestra's appeal to classical-music lovers while reaching people who may never have thought classical music could speak to them. Orozco-Estrada hopes to capitalize on the city's international flavor, creating musical experiences that appeal to everyone.

"My goal is ... to make our audience not only bigger, but richer," he said.

It remains to be seen whether the symphony's strategy will work. Orozco-Estrada's challenge will be leading three orchestras - on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean - simultaneously.

"It's a question of how you arrange your schedule," he says. "We can do all the planning in advance, so everything is well organized - I hope so."

Subhead

Orozco-Estrada will lead a free concert "*¡Bienvenido, Andrés!*" at Miller Outdoor Theatre on Friday. The program will feature spirited music from the United States and Latin America, and KTRK-Channel 13 will telecast it live. After conducting the orchestra's annual opening-night gala on Saturday, Orozco-Estrada will lead a second free performance at Jones Hall Sunday, repeating Friday's program.

"They will see the orchestra is making great music for everyone," Orozco-Estrada said. "You don't have to be intellectual or know all about the composers. Just give yourself the opportunity to sit there and open your eyes and ears, and see this beautiful universe that is an orchestra."

Orozco-Estrada, who was named to the post in January 2013, radiates a more exuberant personality than his two predecessors, who took charge when they were a generation older than he: Hans Graf, the Austrian who led the orchestra from 2001 to 2013, and Christoph Eschenbach, the German who directed it from 1988 to 1999. But Orozco-Estrada matches their musical skills.

"Nothing seems to be difficult for him," symphony violinist Sergei Galperin said.

"When somebody is that talented, they're convincing. He has convinced the orchestra and the audience to enjoy his humor, his charm and his refreshing energy."

Orozco-Estrada belongs to a wave of young Latin Americans making a mark in classical music. The list includes Venezuelan Gustavo Dudamel, leader of the Los Angeles Philharmonic; Costa Rican Giancarlo Guerrero, director of the Nashville Symphony; Peruvian Miguel Harth-Bedoya, leader of the Fort Worth Symphony; and Mexican Carlos Miguel Prieto, a former Houston Symphony associate conductor who now leads Louisiana Philharmonic and the National Symphony Orchestra of Mexico.

Subhead

Venezuelan pianist Gabriela Montero, who will solo during the concerts Friday and Saturday, thinks the Latin free spirit infuses a new flavor into European music. But she sees the Latin American experience as something darker as well.

"As Latin Americans, we're very used to extremes," Montero said. "We see it in daily life. We see the very rich living next to the very poor. We see these contrasts that are unfair, but they're also colorful in their own way.

"I think being able to see life in its totality, both in the beautiful and the difficult aspects, maybe gives us the ability to bring out those contrasts and extremes in music - to bring them alive."

Orozco-Estrada experienced those extremes. Born in 1977 in Medellin, he grew up when the city was a capital of the international drug trade, wracked by crime.

"We would hear the bombs and the police cars everywhere," Orozco-Estrada said. But the music school where he studied the violin, housed in a former mansion on a far-off hill, offered an escape.

"Every day, it was a long trip to school and back," Orozco-Estrada said. "But as soon as you were at the school, you had the feeling that you were a little separated from (the crime). You could disconnect and be in a peaceful, perfect world. At least for eight hours a day, it was very healthy. You had the opportunity to breathe fresh, pure air, not only in fact, but metaphorically. I was very lucky."

Subhead

Orozco-Estrada sang in the school choir and played the violin in the orchestra. Whenever his classes watched videos of musical performances, he imitated the conductors. Noticing his antics, one of the teachers told Orozco-Estrada he would conduct the school chamber orchestra the next day.

"This was when I was 14," Orozco-Estrada said. "And I never stopped."

Though Orozco-Estrada enjoyed the violin, he liked being able to shape an orchestral work according to his view of its music and message. He still considers that ability his profession's main reward.

"We, as conductors, are really the pivot between the musicians and the audience," Orozco-Estrada said.
"This job, this goal - I like it very much."

At 19, Orozco-Estrada moved to Vienna, one of the world's classical-music capitals, enrolling in the city's conservatory to cultivate his skills. He found opportunity as well as challenges. An amateur orchestra enlisted him to conduct, but he had to speak German, which he barely knew.

"I had no idea about the language. But it forced me to find a way to express my ideas," Orozco-Estrada said.

"In terms of the musical level, it was nothing very important. But it was very interesting for me (to help learn) the job of the conductor - to put it all together and get the best from everyone. And all this in German. I was so happy."

Subhead

Orozco-Estrada met his future wife when he took over the student orchestra at Vienna's Polytechnic University. Julia Orozco-Estrada, now a veterinarian, was a member of the viola section.

Classical music scouts turned out for Orozco-Estrada's graduation concert, which capped six years of study.

"Vienna is a small city," he said. "If someone is talented, everybody knows about it, and everybody is curious. ... People went to the concert, and they said 'OK. We would like to work with you.'"

Though he received multiple offers, it was a last-minute opportunity that proved pivotal: After he filled in for an ailing conductor with the Vienna Philharmonic, one of the world's top orchestras, the critic for the city's Kurier called him "a stand-in worth his weight in gold." In 2009, Vienna's Tonkünstler Orchestra offered Orozco-Estrada his first music-director job.

"Perhaps you'd compare it to the first love in your life," he said.

Orozco-Estrada will leave the Viennese orchestra at the end of this season. This fall he also becomes the chief conductor of Germany's Frankfurt Radio Symphony. In 2015, he will be the principal guest conductor of the London Philharmonic, which he says will take up two or three weeks a year.

The Houston Symphony was looking for a new music director to replace the retiring Graf when it invited Orozco-Estrada to make his U.S. debut in 2012. Though other conductors had also made guest appearances, ostensibly trying out for the job, "We felt like lightning had struck," executive director Mark

Hanson said at the time.

Three months later, the orchestra named Orozco-Estrada music director. His five-year contract calls for him to spend 12 weeks a year in Houston.

When Orozco-Estrada returned last season for four programs, the musicians got to know him better.

"I think a lot of people were a little nervous," English horn player Adam Dinitz said. Was the excitement of his first visit a fluke?

It was not. The musicians found that while Orozco-Estrada made high demands and worked meticulously, his good humor kept rehearsals tension-free.

"He's the real deal," Dinitz said.

The orchestra and Orozco-Estrada have come together at the right time, Dinitz said. With a new, four-year labor contract in place and relations among players and management harmonious, the orchestra can focus on expanding and serving the community.

Principal trumpeter Mark Hughes agreed.

"This is a good time to be in the Houston Symphony," he said.

Subhead

Orozco-Estrada's arrival excites the Hispanic community, too, said John Esquivel, chairman of the orchestra's Hispanic Leadership Council.

"Having Andrés as music director brings a great sense of pride from the Hispanic community - a sense of 'Wow!'" Esquivel said.

"We're always looking for role models, whether it's in business, education, law or medicine. To have Andrés as the pinnacle of role models for the Hispanic community in the performing arts is overwhelming with potential. ... I'm sure he's going to be pulled in 101 directions."

Debut weekend

8:30 p.m. Friday: "*¡Bienvenido, Andrés!*" Works by composers from the United States and Latin America, including George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" with pianist Gabriela Montero; Miller Outdoor Theatre, 6000 Hermann Park Drive; free.

7:30 p.m. Saturday: Annual opening-night concert, including Modest Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" and Joseph Haydn's Trumpet Concert, with trumpeter Alison Balsom; Jones Hall, 615 Louisiana; \$29-\$165.

6 p.m. Sept. 14: "Fiesta Sinfónica con Andrés," repeating Friday's concert; Jones Hall, 615 Louisiana; free.

Details: 713-224-7575, houstonsymphony.org.

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