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CLASSICAL MUSIC

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Classical scene gets Latin boost

The Miami Symphony has hired Venezuelan composer and conductor Eduardo Marturet.

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The Miami Symphony has hired a prominent Venezuelan as its associate principal conductor, perhaps positioning itself closer to filling the void left by the demise of the Florida Philharmonic.

“I have no plans to retire,” says Miami Symphony conductor and music director Manuel Ochoa. But he also insists that Eduardo Marturet, whose appointment will be announced at a concert tonight, “will not be my assistant.” Instead, Ochoa, who courted Marturet for more than a year, looks to a partnership with the Venezuelan as part of an expansion plan to make his organization “*the* orchestra of Miami.”

ALSO A COMPOSER

Marturet’s 30 years of conducting experience includes the Venezuelan National Symphony, the Sinfonietta Caracas and the Berlin Philharmonic. He also is a respected composer.

The 50-year-old maestro, who with his wife Athina has made Miami his home away from home for the past 25 years (“I rest and compose; she shops”), knows the Florida orchestra scene well. “I followed the case of the Philharmonic’s library very closely,” he says, sitting in the patio of the Biltmore Hotel. The scores of both the Florida Philharmonic and the earlier Miami Philharmonic have been saved for posterity but after the Florida Philharmonic’s bankruptcy, there was a fear they would be lost, or at least gone from the community.

Marturet has yet to conduct the Miami Symphony, but he is well acquainted with its musicians and has performed with many of them in other ensembles.

“This is the right moment,” says Marturet, “and we have the right guys.” He is referring to the Miami Symphony’s Board of Directors and to Fred Menachem, recently hired to

market and fund-raise for the organization. But mostly he is praising the quality of the musicians, which he calls very high, “contrary to a certain opinion that is out there” -- a thinly veiled reference to the local press.

‘LACK OF VISION’

“The failures of orchestras in Miami are due to a lack of vision,” Marturet says boldly. “And one element is not considering the Latin audience.”

“Once in El Paso, Texas, I was asked what one had to do to attract Latinos,” he goes on. ‘And my answer was, ‘don’t make them feel like Latinos.’”

That means, he explains, not “tailoring” concerts for a Latino audience -- “that just alienates them more.” What matters is that Latins feel that they “belong to” an orchestra and its scene. Right now, Marturet believes, South Florida’s Latin audience feels that scene belongs to others -- with the exception of the Miami Symphony, Ochoa points out.

Although he says he doesn’t consider his orchestra a “Hispanic” one, Ochoa cites the large number of Hispanics among both musicians and audience. And he is pleased his new conductor is a world-class Latin-American artist.

Along demographic lines, one has to know what is going to “hit” with a particular audience, Marturet explains, giving the example of the Miami Symphony bringing Spanish guitarist Angel Romero as a soloist. “He has the kind of charisma that works for this public,” engaging South Florida’s Hispanic audience, Marturet says.

Ochoa plans to program pops concerts “without lapsing into vulgarity,” the maestro insists. But Marturet says he is eager to introduce new music to his audience. “I can’t accept that we do not listen to the music of the moment in which we live,” he says, adding that in his native Venezuela schoolchildren are introduced to contemporary compositions as part of their music education.

Admitting that “the worst enemies of new music are the musicians themselves” because they are used to playing the canon, Marturet says that “we live in a very exciting moment for composition.” Some of that music -- including, of course, Marturet’s own work -- is Latin-American.

“When I took the Berlin Philharmonic on tour through Latin America, the public, obviously, wanted to hear them play German music. But I also included Latin-American compositions in the programs.”

If Miami is the cultural capital of Latin America, as Marturet believes, that should include classical music. “We already have well-structured music departments in our universities,” he says. “And a certain apathy toward the Latin-American arts has been dispelled by Art Basel, which includes so much work from the region.”

In the end, though, the success of an orchestra hinges on excellence. “I didn’t pick Marturet because he was Hispanic but because of his track record,” says Ochoa, who is bringing the head of the Rome Philharmonic to guest-conduct the Miami Symphony. (Ochoa will travel to Rome next month to conduct that orchestra, as well.)

“The Miami Symphony is a great orchestra,” Marturet says enthusiastically, “and it will become an even greater one.”

For the Venezuelan artist, such greatness is always a work in progress. Excellence, he declares, is an unattainable goal. “Excellence does not exist,” he says. “It is a path.”