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When Music Calls: Foregoing the Safe Path and Finding Fulfillment

BY ROBERT SCHULSLAPER

As Music Director of the Boulder Philharmonic Orchestra, the Shreveport Symphony and the Williamsburg Symphony, Michael Butterman is in the midst of a decades-long career that has included positions with a wide range of orchestras and opera companies, such as the Rochester Philharmonic, Jacksonville Symphony, Lancaster Symphony, Opera Southwest in Albuquerque, the LSU Opera Theater, Ohio Light Opera, and the Opera Workshop at the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. He is a sought-after guest conductor who has led many of the country's preeminent ensembles, including the Cleveland Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra, Detroit Symphony, and National Symphony, and his creative artistry and innovative programming go hand-in-hand with his commitment to audience development and community engagement. His new CD, *Emporium: The Music of Aldo López-Gavilán*, is a showcase not only for his masterful conducting but for the colorful and exciting music of an extravagantly gifted composer and pianist featured elsewhere in this issue.

Welcome to Fanfare, Michael. I'd like to begin by asking if music was an integral part of your childhood?

Growing up, my home was filled with music even though neither of my parents was a professional musician. I studied piano and violin from a young age, playing violin in youth orchestras, but generally preferring (and working harder on) the piano. After high school, I deferred admission to Oberlin as a pianist, intending to attend the University of Virginia for a year to see how much I missed music. Surprisingly, foregoing conservatory turned out to be a good decision for my eventual musical career.

I immersed myself in UVA's choral program, serving as accompanist in addition to singing and taking all the theory and history classes they offered, along with private piano and voice study, even while pursuing a primarily pre-med curriculum. I became music director of an a cappella group, studied conducting, orchestration and instrumentation, played chamber music and generally drank in all the musical inspiration I could find.

The year after graduation, the head of UVA's choral program, Donald Loach, was planning to take a sabbatical. (Incidentally, in his youth, Don had been a student of Antonia Brico, who happened to be the first Music Director of the Boulder Philharmonic!). He offered me the opportunity to conduct those ensembles in his absence, which prompted me to enroll as a graduate student in musicology during the coming year. It was such a tremendous opportunity and experience, and I often consider that, had I attended Oberlin, I might well never have had the opportunity to discover conducting in the way that I did.

When did you decide to pursue a career in music?

A few days into my first year of law school! I'm only partially joking. After completing my degree in musicology, I decided to enroll as a student at UVA Law School, reasoning that I would have the opportunity to continue conducting the Virginia Glee Club (to which Dr. Loach was not returning) while pursuing studies leading to a stable career path. It quickly became clear

to me that the kind of passion for law that I could see in some of my fellow students was what I felt (though even more strongly) for music. I found the classes I took and cases we studied to be interesting, but came to understand that "interesting" is a far cry from "exciting." I found myself, in every spare moment I had, always thinking about the next rehearsal, or how to plan the next concert program. It was telling that I was not ruminating over matters of the law.

Later that year, I had the opportunity to meet and briefly chat with Robert Shaw, who advised me to go to Indiana University if I really wanted to test my mettle as a musician and grow as a conductor. It turned out to be great advice. IU is a perfect environment for an aspiring conductor—so many students, ensembles and opportunities to make things happen. Coming from a small pond (musically) at UVA, it was also important for me to see how I fared when thrown into the deep end, so to speak.

Because there is so much going on at IU, and so many opportunities to explore, I found myself moving from choral music to opera, and then from opera to orchestral music. I rather doubt that I could have had the same opportunities anywhere else.

What attracted you to musicology? What was your area of specialization?

I'd always enjoyed music history and analysis, and when I decided to remain in Charlottesville to conduct for a year, I reasoned that I might simultaneously continue studying music at the graduate level. I was (and still am) particularly interested in practical performance applications of musicological investigations. Research that informs performance practice or brings unknown works to light is especially important, in my view. My thesis project involved preparing (from the composer's manuscript) a performance edition of a Magnificat setting by Pachelbel.

How many orchestras are you currently involved with?

During the past 25 years, I've had affiliations as music director or staff conductor with between three and five professional orchestras at a time. I'm grateful to the Rochester Philharmonic and the Jacksonville Symphony for giving me so many wonderful opportunities early on. Once I also took on music director responsibilities with Boulder and Shreveport, I was able to fully flesh out some of the community-connecting work I'd begun in New York and Florida, aligning the orchestras' missions and identities with the distinct characters of the communities they serve. This has been especially fruitful in Boulder, where our work resulted in an invitation to open the first annual SHIFT Festival of American Orchestras at the Kennedy Center in 2017. Our appearance there recognized our creative programming and community collaborations, holding us up as a model for other 21st century American orchestras who are looking to "shift" public perceptions about the relevance and importance of symphony orchestras today. We were honored to be punching above our weight as a per-service, regional orchestra standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the other participants: the Atlanta Symphony, North Carolina Symphony and The Knights.

These days, I am the music director for three orchestras (Boulder, Shreveport and Williamsburg), though until just recently Lancaster and the Pennsylvania Philharmonic were included, as well. It makes for a lot of travel, but also fosters professional and artistic growth, since each organization challenges segments of my skill set in different ways.

Doesn't constant traveling make it difficult to find time to prepare for concerts?

When the season is in full swing, I often find myself rehearsing one program while, that same week, studying and preparing for the following week's repertoire. I do my best to use airplane time to study and mark scores, but there's no denying that traveling, itself, is exhausting and time-consuming. I try to learn new repertoire during the summer, so that, once the season has begun, it's just a matter of refreshing my study in order to bring a piece into my 'working memory,' you might say.

While it can be tiring, I will also say that I find travel to be stimulating. Each orchestra has its own quirks, personalities, challenges and joys. Each audience responds in its own way and each community offers a different set of opportunities and needs. I feel privileged to see and experience different parts of the country and the world through music.

How do you find new pieces to perform? Does the orchestra commission music?

I receive submissions from composers and their representatives all the time, and I truly do listen to (or look at) everything I'm sent. Some of them are looking for premiere performances to be given, other times, a composer or manager may have an idea for a new work that they'd like to bring to fruition.

Sometimes, we're able to commission new works, either through grants (we received an NEA grant to commission a new piece for our performance at the Kennedy Center, for example) or from our own funds, and sometimes we're able to participate in consortium projects. In the latter case, it's especially helpful to be able involve more than one orchestra of mine in the process. I think of Philip Glass's Piano Concerto No. 3 (written for Simone Dinnerstein), which both Boulder and Shreveport helped commission. This season, Williamsburg and Lancaster are co-commissioning an interactive guitar concerto from Austin Wintory (for guitarist Mak Grgić).

Of course, there are never enough opportunities to share or perform every worthy piece of new music. I look for works that have the capacity to make an impact on first hearing, and works that offer unique takes on important topics or that speak to an idea that's resonant in a particular community. Over time, and with careful curation, I feel we've been able to build trust among our patrons when it comes to unfamiliar works, even to the point that they look forward to hearing the 'new discovery' every bit as much as the more standard rep that may also be on a given program.

How did you come to be a frequent guest conductor for the Havana Chamber Orchestra? Was that before or after you met Aldo?

My experience with the HCO is really an outgrowth of my relationship with Aldo that began with his first Boulder engagement. It's a fantastic, young ensemble that has made several trips to the US and collaborated with Joshua Bell and other illustrious artists. They have a terrific music director, Daiana Garcia, and a really wonderful spirit about them—so many smiles and so much positive energy. I first conducted some American music (Copland, Bloch) along with a few pieces by Aldo for piano and strings. In subsequent years, we've done Mozart and even Wagner together. It's always such a lovely experience for me, and one that reminds me of just how universal the experience of music is.

You've mentioned that while at Indiana University, choral conducting led you to opera, a genre that in the years since became increasingly important to you. What is it about opera that so captivated you?

For a conductor, there's nothing quite so demanding as opera. It's so full of rubato and accompanied recitative that you have to be able to start, stop, and turn on a dime. In some operas, it seems that each new line of text has its own new tempo and mood. The orchestral writing is often quite complex, but you must simultaneously be attentive to the needs of the singers, sensing their pacing and phrasing on any given night, ready to spring to the "rescue" with a corrective cue on occasion. So much is going on, between staging, costumes, props, and entrances, that you have to be ready for anything to happen. I had the privilege of singing a lead role in one of the operas at IU while there, which I know helped me to develop sensitivity to the particular needs of singers on stage, in performance.

The combination of text, narrative drama and brilliant orchestral color can be emotionally overwhelming in a wonderful way. It's thrilling to be in the vortex of all that intensity and energy. I also think it's extremely helpful for orchestras to play opera with some regularity, since it helps develop a sense of responsiveness and compels careful listening and ensemble awareness.

Did you do any teaching when you were the Director of Orchestral Studies at LSU?

I was incredibly fortunate to join the Louisiana State University faculty just as I finished my studies at Indiana. There, I was privileged to work with wonderfully talented student musicians and supportive faculty colleagues, delving into standard rep, new music, neglected masterpieces, and quite a lot of opera. In addition to conducting and supervising the orchestral ensembles, I oversaw the master's program in orchestral conducting, teaching technique, score study and repertoire/analysis classes. I'm proud to say that quite a number of former students are enjoying outstanding performing and teaching careers today. Brian Cole, for example, is now the Chancellor of the North Carolina School of the Arts.

There's no better way to learn something than to have the responsibility of teaching it. Teaching conducting technique compels introspection and methodical analysis of what is often a mostly unconscious process. I'll quickly add that at some point the physical side of conducting must become like one's innate vocabulary that can be drawn upon when needed, without much conscious focus, so that one's attention can be trained on what one is hearing, shaping phrases, and pacing the long-range energy within a performance. Still, as a young conductor and teacher, I found it very helpful to be tasked with analyzing students' technique. It clearly made me more self-aware and allowed me to effectively give myself feedback in those important early years.

How did you come to be awarded the Seizi Ozawa Fellowship that enabled you to study not only with Maestro Ozawa but also Robert Spano and Jorma Panula?

I was a conducting fellow at Tanglewood in the summer of 1999. You really do feel the weight of history there, attending classes at Saranac (Koussevitzky's former estate) and rubbing elbows with the illustrious guest artists and conductors (along with some terrific student colleagues). At this point, I had been out of grad school for four years, so it was really helpful to receive some new feedback, now that I had gained a fair bit of experience. The trio of teachers complemented each other really well. Spano and Panula (professor at the Sibelius Academy and teacher of students like Esa-Pekka Salonen and Klaus Mäkelä) kind of divided the summer between them, while Ozawa would make "guest appearances" especially when we were studying one of his specialities like *The Rite of Spring*. Spano approached things quite analytically, with very specific and clear observations and suggestions, while Panula encouraged us to do relatively

little (physically) and to focus on only helping where necessary—and never getting in the way of —the orchestra's music-making.

But perhaps the most transformative experience for me at Tanglewood was my involvement with a special "early" seminar that they offered called "Reinventing the Family Concert." For about a week prior to the beginning of the regular session, I was among a handful of Tanglewood Music Center Fellows who worked with renowned arts educator Eric Booth to design our own version of an orchestral family concert—the sort of performance experience intended to engage and inspire young children and their parents. We really looked thoughtfully at how to facilitate active listening, to bridge the divide between stage and audience and to offer entry points for kids to engage with the unfamiliar world of classical orchestral music.

The combination of program designing, hosting and conducting really appealed to me. I've always believed that performers need to be evangelists for great music, enabling more and more people to have the kind of relationship with classical music that we do. This interest led directly to my engagement with the Rochester Philharmonic a year later, who, fortuitously, were looking to hire the first-of-its-kind Principal Conductor for Education and Outreach.

Through its inherent flexibility, an orchestra is uniquely able to serve as a catalyst for collaboration among a community's arts and culture groups, as well as a partner for institutions like schools, libraries, hospitals, museums and social service organizations. My work in Rochester and Jacksonville focused on forging community connections and bringing the orchestra into contact with ever wider segments of the population. In Boulder, we have developed a comprehensive education program, encompassing early childhood education, special needs, and partnerships with public and private schools, the Greater Boulder Youth Orchestras and the University of Colorado. We've hosted guided nature hikes for 13 years that connect in different ways to specific upcoming performances, and have involved more than 30 different groups and organizations in our performances over the past decade and a half. This work, along with lobby representation from a host of allied organizations at each performance, helps to position the Phil as not merely 'an orchestra in Boulder,' but rather, as 'Boulder's orchestra.'

While at Tanglewood you were granted the privilege of sharing the podium with Seiji Ozawa in leading the season's opening concert: what was that like?

It was thrilling and an honor, but also somewhat terrifying, to be honest. We rehearsed the TMC orchestra for several days right at the beginning of the festival, and Spano had not arrived yet. So Seiji, whom I was only just getting to know, was on his own when it came to coaching me. I was conducting the Dance Suite by Bartók, full of mixed meters and multiple tempo changes. Seiji had lots of suggestions, and most of them he demonstrated rather than describing verbally. But I am 6'4" with very long arms and Seiji was…well, quite a bit more diminutive! I tried earnestly to adopt his suggestions, but I found them unwieldy. They just didn't fit my body and I became frustrated. A couple of days before the performance, Spano arrived and pulled me aside to share something along the lines of "Here's what I think he's getting at…" It made all the difference, and I found I was able to adapt Seiji's suggestions to my very different build and innate way of moving.

Another highpoint of your early career was the opportunity to conduct a performance of Leonard Bernstein's 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue at the Kennedy Center.

1600 brought together two theater titans: Leonard Bernstein and Alan Jay Lerner. The production was a flop in 1976, but both men knew that it was full of brilliant work, even if it had flaws as a work of theater. Bernstein had long wished to revisit and revise the piece, but he passed away before he was able to do so. He had also had a long and fruitful relationship with the School of Music at Indiana University; in 1993, IU was asked to work with Lerner scholar Erik Haagensen to recreate a pre-Broadway version of the show. Through a series of strokes of good fortune, I ended up as the music director for our performances in Bloomington and at the Kennedy Center.

A year or so later, the Bernstein estate invited me to New York to help prepare a performance of a further revision of the work. Eventually, the piece evolved into what is now called *A White House Cantata* and presented primarily as a concert work, rather than in its original theatrical form.

I am forever grateful for my involvement in this project, and for the support of my teacher, Robert Porco, and IU Dean Charles Webb. Having grown up in Washington, the experience of conducting at the Kennedy Center in my mid 20s was absolutely thrilling. Through it all, I learned a tremendous amount about long-range project planning and working with pieces "in progress." It also considerably fueled my passion for music theater and opera.

Turning to Emporium, how did you first encounter Aldo's music?

It was one of those classic "driveway moments." I had tuned to *Performance Today* midway through a piece that absolutely captivated me right away. I just had to stay in my car until the piece finished in order to learn what this amazing work was. It had been a broadcast of the world premiere performance of *Emporium* at Classical Tahoe. Some internet searching allowed me to make contact with Aldo's U.S. management, and we were able to engage him for the following season in Boulder.

I'm especially interested in works that make a great impression on first hearing because I'm keenly aware that audiences don't have the privilege of studying and getting to know a work over a period of time—they usually have just a single opportunity when encountering a new piece of music. That said, *Emporium* and the clarinet concerto have such depth and marvelous detail in their structures that they continue to reveal new delights as I study and work with them over time. This is a very special blend—immediate listening appeal combined with rewarding study over time.

I love *Performance Today* for the serendipity that it offers. Through it, I've 'discovered' a number of pieces that I've gone on to program quite a bit (*La Tierra Sin Mal* by Richard Scofano and *To Notice Such Things* by Jon Lord come to mind). I'm also grateful that they have broadcast quite a number of my performances over the years, both with orchestras, and also as a pianist accompanying soloists like Zuill Bailey in chamber music.

I recently watched a concert Aldo gave with his brother Ilmar, and was struck by the rapport between them and the easy good humor with which he spoke to the audience in between selections.

Aldo radiates joy, both as a person and a musician—he's always there with a smile as we make eye contact during performances. His passion and energy are irresistible, and never fail to envelop everyone on stage and in the audience. As a pianist, his facility seems to know no

bounds and his mastery of complex polyrhythmic textures is especially impressive. He's very special, and I am so proud to call him a friend.

What can you tell us about Aldo's Clarinet Concerto? Also, do you know if he's planning on composing any new orchestral works or concertos?

Aldo wrote the work to honor his grandfather, Juan Jorge Junco, but he wrote it especially for his cousin, clarinetist Alejandro (Coqui) Calzadilla, to play. Coqui joined the Havana Chamber Orchestra when we presented the Cuban premiere in the spring of 2024, just a few months after the world premiere with Ricardo Morales in Boulder. I don't know what plans Aldo may have for new orchestral works, but I have been encouraging him to consider a violin concerto for his brother, Ilmar, who is first violinist with the Harlem Quartet.

Is there a reason why you haven't yet conducted Emporium in Cuba?

As far as I know, Emporium has only once (and only quite recently) been performed in Cuba. It requires a large orchestra, which, these days, presents a huge challenge. Especially since the pandemic, the country has experienced a significant exodus of musicians, teachers, doctors, and more. Even before the harshest sanctions of the past year or so, life there was undeniably difficult, with scarce food, consumer products and fuel. It seems to me that the indomitable spirit of the Cuban people can be seen most vibrantly in the arts—music, dance, theater, painting and sculpture. The level of both artistry and passion is so high, perhaps because the opportunity to create beauty and to express oneself becomes all the more precious as other aspects of life become increasingly difficult. I have the greatest respect for the way that the Havana Chamber Orchestra and all Cuban musicians have continued to create at the highest levels under such difficult circumstances.

When did you and first perform Emporium with Aldo? How many times have you done so since? How have the various audiences reacted to the piece?

We first presented it together in Boulder in the fall of 2019, and I immediately engaged him to play it the following season in Louisiana. The pandemic had other plans, of course, so we had to wait until 2022 to get back on track. Between Colorado, Louisiana, Pennsylvania and Virginia, we've performed it together 10 times so far. Invariably, musicians have approached me during the rehearsal process to express how much they love the writing and wondering how I came to know the piece. Audiences are always on their feet afterwards and asking how they can listen to the piece again, which certainly contributed to our interest in making this recording.

Both concertos are skillfully and colorfully scored: did Aldo study orchestration when he was a student?

When a pianist writes for a large symphony for the first time, there is often a learning curve when it comes to orchestration. Not so with Aldo! In fact, I asked him a couple of years ago who had orchestrated Emporium. When he told me that he had done so himself, I was amazed, because it's characterized by finesse, imagination, and an ear for tone color that one normally finds from composers who have been writing for orchestras for many years.

Aldo's father is a well-known conductor (and composer) in Cuba. I can only assume that Aldo's exposure to orchestral music as a young person enabled him to develop an especially keen ear for instrumental color.

How did Reference Recordings get involved?

Neil Birnbaum, who put together a travel opportunity for Boulder Philharmonic patrons when I first conducted in Cuba, had worked with Reference when he was the Executive Director of the Northwest Sinfonietta. He reached out to RR president, Marcia Martin, after we we returned from the first trip and were musing about a way to share Aldo's orchestral music more widely. Like all of us, she was also captivated by Aldo's music. It was also fortuitous that GRAMMY-nominated producer, Don McKinney, with whom they'd worked in the past, was at the time on the faculty at University Colorado Boulder. It seemed the stars were aligning.

What's next for Michael Butterman and the Boulder Philharmonic?

My experience working with Reference has been extremely positive. Marcia and I have already discussed our mutual desire to engage in future projects, either with the Boulder Phil or perhaps the Williamsburg Symphony, which is a very fine orchestra, having been heard on *Performance Today* probably two dozen times in the past couple of years. There is lots of terrific repertoire to consider. Perhaps Aldo will indeed write a violin concerto. There's also an album's worth of cinematic orchestral music inspired by America's national parks by Stephen Lias (who wrote the NEA-funded piece for the Kennedy Center I mentioned) that I think would be well-received. Or tuneful and evocative music from bandoneonist/composer Richard Scofano. Perhaps that's three discs right there!