

# Percussion in Costa Rica, 1972–82

BY STUART MARRS

In September of 1971, the government of the Republic of Costa Rica developed a plan that would later be called “The Costa Rican Musical Revolution” and “The Musical Miracle of America.” The Vice-Minister of Culture at the time, Guido Saenz, enjoying the unconditional support of President Josi Figueres, had the idea that a single institution could fulfill the two-fold tasks of National Symphony Orchestra and Youth Program. The professionals that would be brought in to form the corps of principals and assistant principals would also be the applied instrumental instructors in the Youth Program.

The first problem encountered in the realization of this plan was a lack of qualified music professionals and teachers in Costa Rica. At a great personal and political cost to himself, Saenz made the radical decision to import from abroad a group of professional musicians who would perform in the National Symphony Orchestra and, more importantly, who would teach the eager young music students of Costa Rica. Saenz then contracted a youthful and energetic music director, Gerald Brown, who, until then, had been the conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra of Bolivia. Six players from this same orchestra were recruited at that time. This writer was a member of that group.

The transition from the former National Symphony, made up entirely of native Costa Ricans, to the newly reorganized National Symphony Orchestra, half of which was foreigners, was a painful one. It is not hard to imagine the campaign of criticism that followed. Nevertheless, the authorities held their ground with the firm conviction that the suffering inflicted upon the nationals who were replaced by foreigners would be outweighed by the enormous benefit to the country in the end.

President Figueres, who had always realized the importance of maintaining a balance between economic development and cultural development, brought presidential support to the program when, in an important speech, he rhetorically questioned, “Why tractors without violins?” With this memorable observation Figueres categorically stated that the economic development of Costa Rica was meaningless if it were not accompanied by its cultural development.

Since that speech in 1972 and up to today, the whole country has stood behind its musical program. The details have been covered in several books. What follows will cover the development of the art of percussion in Costa Rica during the decade of 1972–82.

## AUDITIONS FOR THE YOUTH PROGRAM

Six thousand students auditioned for the 250 openings offered by the Youth Program. Those who auditioned cut across all socioeconomic lines, since then, as today, the government bore all the costs. The audition tested aptitude rather than formal knowledge. To test the ear, students were asked to sing the National Anthem and to repeat rhythms clapped by the examiner. Each student was asked what instrument he or she would like to play. Students knew the names of the new teachers from the

extensive publicity surrounding the founding of the Youth Program. This produced some amusing situations, as in the response of one very young student to the question of his preferred instrument, “I want to study persecution with Stuart Marrs!”

## FIRST STUDENTS

Elementary school-age children comprised the majority of students in the Youth Program. The first percussion studio, however, included two university-age students. The percussion section of the National Symphony Orchestra was understaffed and we hoped that, following a short but intense period of training, these older students would become part of the section. As for the younger students, a ten-year plan of studies would lead to an audition for the National Symphony Orchestra.

The plan worked well. The two older students practiced hard and soon were able to occupy positions as extras in the percussion section of the National Symphony Orchestra. At the same time, these older students made ends meet by being active professionals in pop groups. Scheduling conflicts inevitably arose, and the pop gigs won out due to the economic advantage that they offered. Luckily, these conflicts persisted only until the younger students were sufficiently advanced to play as extras in the section.

Since enrollment in the percussion studio was limited to eight to ten students, there was strong competition for these spots. Because of the selection process, the program benefited by having some of the strongest talents that the country had to offer as students. Periodic examinations were held to ensure that all of the students matriculated in the program were progressing at



Stuart Marrs conducting a percussion ensemble concert for officials of the CIDESIN in 1978. PAS Hall of Fame member George Gaber is seated in the audience. The tam-tam player (second from right) is Fernando Meza, now head of the percussion department at the University of Minnesota. The Ringer timpani were purchased from Carnegie Hall, and the timpanist is Sergio Quesada, formerly with the Caracas Philharmonic and now timpanist with an orchestra in Portugal.

appropriate rates. The State could not afford to squander its hard-gained investment on anyone who would not perform up to standards.

A healthy spirit of competition evolved, accompanied by an equally strong *esprit de corps*. Once the fire in their souls for love of percussion was ignited, nothing could have stopped what eventually transpired: The Costa Rican “school” of percussion playing, known internationally for its musical and technical excellence, was firmly established.

On one occasion, the percussion ensemble was to accompany a dance program that included “Eight Inventions” by Kabalac. The last movement bears the title “Diabolico”—and indeed, it is. This movement is replete with changes of meter in almost every measure while accelerating to a dizzying tempo approaching the speed of light. I anticipated a long and arduous first rehearsal for this movement and was prepared to start working at a very slow tempo. To my astonishment, the group had gotten together and prepared the section in question so that they not only “nailed” their respective individual parts, but the ensemble was perfectly coordinated.

Percussion lessons were intense. While some students became visibly upset at this intensity, they always returned possessing more energy and motivation, and dedicating more hours to the practice room. A simple premise was employed: to achieve desired goals, a highly developed sense of self-discipline is required. So, anyone who came to his or her lesson unprepared would be sent home without a lesson. Students who forgot their assignment book would have to go home to fetch it before the lesson could continue. All of this left its mark on the students as an appreciation for the value of self-discipline and the importance of finishing what one has started. As an example of this work ethic, one of the students from this period, at the age of 11, had already acquired a practice routine of three hours a day. That student was Fernando Meza, now head of the percussion department at the University of Minnesota.

## INSTRUMENTS

This adventure began with a minimum of percussion instruments and equipment, and what the program had was neither of the best quality nor in the greatest condition. There was one pair of old Slingerland timpani, a small tam-tam with a dilapidated stand, a bass drum in a state of disrepair, etc. I had brought some of my own small instruments, such as a snare drum, triangle, and some other accessories. A short time later, I sent home for my old Deagan xylophone and that is how we began.

One day I received a phone call from my father, who was a music teacher in New Jersey. He had been to a concert in Carnegie Hall and afterwards was backstage greeting some of the musicians when he discovered that Carnegie Hall was looking to sell its set of Ringer timpani that Stokowski had purchased for the American Symphony. Aware of my situation in Costa Rica, he bought the set of four timpani for me for \$4,000. When I told the Board of Directors of the National Symphony Orchestra, they quickly made the decision to buy the instruments for the orchestra. The director, Gerald Brown, knew that the huge impact these quality instruments would have on the sound of the orchestra was well worth the small investment. My father built some shipping crates and LACSA, the Costa Rican airlines, agreed to ship them free of charge for the symphony.

The next instrument on my agenda was a marimba. After all, the marimba is the “national instrument” of Costa Rica. This one I purchased for myself, although I kept it in my studio for all of my students to use. In Costa Rica, as in many other parts of the world, acquisition of instruments made elsewhere (e.g., U.S. or Japan) is an enormous problem. The retail price is usually out of reach for most, and when you add the nearly one hundred percent import duty, it is practically impossible. Costa Rica has, however, a mini-industry of arts and crafts made from tropical woods. With plenty of wood-working talent in the area, we were able to acquire some locally-produced important implements of our art such as sticks and pads.

In 1977 a miracle occurred. The Legislative Assembly of Costa Rica accepted a loan of \$1,000,000 from the First National City Bank of Boston for the purchase of musical instruments for the entire country. I was in charge of preparing the list of percussion instruments for Costa Rica. Finally, I had the opportunity to buy the percussion inventory needed by all of the musical institutions in the country.

## JOHN BECK

One day, the Aeolian Consort, a chamber group consisting of faculty from the Eastman School of Music, came to town as part of a State Department sponsored Latin American tour. John Beck, who is still a faculty member of that institution, was the percussionist. He was invited to sit in on some of the percussion lessons to provide some professional feedback. To everyone's great satisfaction, his comment was, “These youngsters are playing at the level of some of my university students at Eastman!” This helped the students to feel that they were not isolated, but part of the mainstream musical world.

## CIDESIN

In 1978, the OAS (Organization of American States) founded the “Interamerican Center for Instrumental Studies” (CIDESIN) in Costa Rica. Through this center, it was possible to establish a music seminar program of students from throughout Central America and Panama. The procedure was to invite internationally recognized artists to give master classes not only to our Costa Rican students but also to selected music students from the Central American region. In the specific case of percussion, we had the great fortune to have George Gaber, recognized internationally for his contributions to percussion education and then Professor of Percussion at Indiana University. There were master classes, workshops, lectures, and a marathon televised percussion ensemble concert. It was a wonderful opportunity for percussion in Central America that is discussed to this day.

## TELEVISION PROGRAMS

During this time period, other television opportunities presented themselves. One, “Journey Through Percussion,” was a one-hour tour through the world of orchestral percussion in which this author acted as tour guide and was interviewed by Guido Saenz. Another presentation was on a children's program called “Chunche y el Gran Buho.” This is hard to translate, but it means something like, “The Thing and the Wise Owl.” The two stars of the show were dressed in enormous foam rubber costumes. The Wise Owl was a pretentious, pseudo-intellectual character and the Thing was just that, an indescribable...thing. The Wise Owl began by saying that he and I had made friends

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when he began perching on the windows of the National Theater while I was practicing on stage. The show continued with my presentation of the instruments with the Thing and the Wise Owl supplying a running dialogue of jokes and word-play on the names of the instruments!

#### CASTELLA CONSERVATORY

Costa Rica is a small country (approximately the size of West Virginia), with a great culture. In 1976 the Central Valley, with a population of half a million, supported five conservatories of music. It was only logical that the other conservatories would take advantage of the presence of music professors brought in by the Youth Program of the National Symphony Orchestra. This situation was also advantageous for the professors, who were able to boost their incomes.

The first to see the potential for this sharing of resources was Arnoldo Herrera, Director of the Castella Conservatory. The Castella is a K-12 school for half a day, and school of the arts for the other half. It is the only institution of its kind in the country and enjoys a fine reputation in the community. The best way to describe the working atmosphere at the Castella is "controlled chaos." The lack of rigid structure required the successful student to be highly self-motivated. There was something in that slightly wild environment that stimulated the creative juices, and many of today's successful Costa Rican composers, musicians, and artists began their studies at the Castella.

There were many students who wanted to study percussion, but there were only five spots available. They were auditioned to see who would be accepted, and I announced the results. There was one young boy, Marco, who did not make the cut. Curiously, upon hearing the announcement, all the others came to me to plead Marco's case. "You HAVE to take Marco," they cried, "or he will die of grief!" With that kind of insistence, I said that I would

take him conditionally. He did very well and became the first of my students to win a full-time position in the National Symphony Orchestra.

#### UNA

The National Autonomous University (UNA) in Heredia is a popular university. The philosophy of the department was not to duplicate the efforts of the Youth Program of the National Symphony Orchestra or the other conservatories in the country, but rather to aid a musical sector that had been totally ignored by the other institutions: popular music. The department's doors were opened to the popular musicians who (for the most part) were self-taught, and they were provided training in applied technique, theory, and arranging. The idea was to work for the betterment of the craft rather than to condemn it. Percussionists were taught reading and snare technique, mallets, and timpani, but also drumset, which was not part of the orchestrally oriented Youth Program curriculum. In addition, a marimba program was created, since it is the national instrument and there was no other institution offering its formal study.

#### ALUMNI

Graduates of the various programs have been successful in Costa Rica and abroad. In addition to Fernando Meza (who will be writing a follow-up article to this one on the next decade of percussion in Costa Rica), other players include Sergio Quesada, Principal Timpanist with the Caracas Philharmonic, and Bismarck Fernandez, Principal Timpanist with the National Symphony Orchestra of Costa Rica and Professor of Percussion in the Youth Program and the University of Costa Rica. Many others play in popular and folkloric groups. One graduate from the UNA in Heredia went on to the Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana, Cuba to study Afro-Cuban percussion at the Masters level. Other percussion students from the Youth Program went on to distinguished careers as medical doctors, engineers, and architects.

Today, sixteen years after my return to the U.S., many of these former students are professional musicians and teachers. They have, in turn, imparted the teaching to a third and fourth generation of percussion students in Costa Rica and abroad. It can now safely be said that the Costa Rican "School of Percussion" is firmly established and will continue to flourish on its own impetus for many years to come.

Stuart Marrs received his doctorate from the Indiana University School of Music, and regularly tours the U.S., Europe, and Latin America as a soloist, conductor, clinician, and teacher. He has performed with the orchestras of Louisville, Bolivia, and Costa Rica, and was director of the San José Chamber Players and on the faculty at the National University of Costa Rica. Dr. Marrs is founder and former president of the Maine Chapter of the PAS. Since 1985 he has been teaching percussion and music history at the University of Maine. He has recently developed a course in Digital Music, and his research interests lie in the area of Latin Percussion. Presently, he is producing a CD-ROM multimedia database lexicon of Afro-Cuban percussion.



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