
Minnesota Orchestra Performs in Cuba Friday Night

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Few of the visiting Americans speak Spanish, but "the universal language of music" was all they needed, said Mele Willis, the orchestra's artistic operations manager.

The performance at Havana's 2,000-seat National Theater is to include famed Cuban pianist Frank Fernandez and the Cuban National Choir. Live broadcasts are planned for Cuba and in the U.S. via Minnesota Public Radio.

Smaller groups of U.S. classical musicians have visited Cuba in recent years, but a 1999 visit by the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra is believed to be the last by a major orchestra.

Friday's concert comes a day after the Americans held standing-room-only master classes with music students at a Havana high school and university. Students filled every seat, sat on floors, peered in through windows and videotaped the sessions with cellphones.

The Americans' lack of Spanish did not impair their enthusiasm. Trumpet player Bob Dorer gave a thumb's up and demonstrated trumpet technique by mouthing an "O" after a spike-haired teenager, Antonio Diaz, performed. Shouts of "Bravo!" erupted after violin student Jorge Enrique Amado played a challenging modernist piece he composed. "We're very impressed," said Roger Frisch, a violinist in the orchestra who asked for a copy of Amado's piece.

"I'm not used to hearing high school students play at such a high level," agreed percussionist Brian Mount, who said he was "blown away" and "almost wanted to cry" watching the Cuban

kids in a jam session.

Natali Chongo, 18, said it was a "privilege" to be coached on drumming four kettledrums by the orchestra's Peter Kogan. "The musicians of the U.S. and the musicians of Cuba always have friendship in their hearts," she said. "They need our music and we need their music."

The Cuban Ministry of Culture invited the Minnesota orchestra to perform as part of Havana's International Cubadisco Festival. "It is an extremely important moment," said Orlando Vistel, president of the Cuban Institute of Music.

The Minnesota Orchestra also played Havana in 1929 and 1930, when it was called the Minneapolis Symphony. Friday's all-Beethoven program was a reprise of its 1929 repertoire, with performances of "Overture to Egmont, Opus 84," "Fantasy in C minor for piano, chorus and orchestra, Opus 80," and "Symphony No. 3 in E-flat major, Opus 55."

Another concert was scheduled for Saturday night along with a jazz performance by Minnesota players and Cuban musicians at the Havana Cafe.

The trip marks a healing for the orchestra, which is rebounding from a bitter labor dispute that included a canceled season.

Its tour has cost nearly \$1 million, which was underwritten by Marilyn Carlson Nelson, an heir to the Carlson hotel company fortune, and her husband, Glen. The U.S. government gave special permission for a direct charter flight from Minneapolis to Havana for the event, putting four tons of equipment and 160 people on an Airbus 330.

Orchestra CEO Kevin Smith said the musical exchanges were "the most exciting part of the trip, along with the fact that it's happening in such a dynamic period in relations between the U.S. and Cuba.

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Cuban National Art School student Betsy Brizuela plays the oboe as Minnesota Orchestra oboe player John Snow conducts a master class in Havana, Cuba, on Thursday. (Photo: AP)
