

A comment on the July 29th concert with Gustavo Dudamel and the L.A. Philharmonic Orchestra.

by Rubén Blades

It was an honor and a rare privilege to have had the opportunity to perform with one of the world's top Philharmonic Orchestras, led by the great Gustavo Dudamel, considered one of today's best classical conductors.

Equally important to me was the circumstance of participating in an experiment that went beyond the musical aspect because it challenged cultural notions of conformity.

It was a tough decision to make but Gustavo and I, supported by a wonderful orchestra, decided it was worth the risk. The purported obstacles were evident. It was an evening highlighting latin music, which included in its program a segment of "Salsa" supported by a superb band that specializes in classical themes. Gustavo and I had already presented this odd combination, afro-cuban rhythms supported by classical strings, in a gigantic concert held at a civil airport in Caracas, Venezuela. More than 200,000 people attended. The presentation was based on a musical work in two parts titled "Maestra Vida", that I had written in the late 70's and recorded in the early 1980's. Many of the people who came to the show knew of the musical, its themes of life and death and family, its lyrics. It was and still is the only work of its kind that combined original salsa material with Caribbean percussion and a full classical orchestra.

That show, although completely beyond the notion of capacity, (I was told it was one of the largest gatherings of humanity ever recorded for a single concert in the history of live musical events in Latin-America), I am sure did not please everyone. Many people were disappointed because I did not play songs that have become classics, like "Decisiones", "El Cantante", or "Ligia Elena". Some people left once it became obvious to them that this was not another "Salsa" concert.

However, the overwhelming majority of people stayed and shared a rare sight indeed: a performance where two genres that generally are markedly different in intention and atmosphere combined to produce a cultural contribution directed to all people. The scenario in Los Angeles Hollywood Bowl, on the other hand, had different components. Commenting on the evening, the Los Angeles Times' music critic Mark Swed titled his review, "Ruben Blades gets lost in translation". The salsa star's performance with L.A. Philharmonic can't hold on to the crowd".

I do not want to sound defensive, nor do I dismiss Mr. Swed's review. But it is necessary for me to comment on some of his opinions. He writes there was a, . . ."cross-culture disconnect at Bowl concert". But wasn't the evening precisely directed to confront and remedy such situation, which today exists in this country

between latino and non latino audience? Wasn't it evident, in the context of our choice, to unite "Salsa", a genre of action and passion, with Classical music, a genre of reflection and intellect, that we were looking for something BIGGER than just pleasing a paying crowd, composed of different nationalities?

Mr. Swed writes . . . "try as the L.A. Phil might . . . this is not really full L.A. Phil material". This is the type of comment that forces me to respond to reviewers.

The "material" for a musician who performs in an orchestra such as the L.A. Philharmonic is MUSIC. It comes in all its different colors, tempos, accents and should be played by them. Indeed, they did play, and did it well, showing their professionalism and their love for all music. The true musician, the same as the true intellectual, will always be curious. Such characteristic, curiosity, encompasses the true definition of a free spirit. To suggest that Afro-Cuban music is not really the kind of stuff the L.A. Philharmonic could, or should be performing sounds dangerously close to elitism, or worse.

Someone could then proceed to affirm that Classical music should only be heard by people with an European sensitivity . Or that a Shakespeare play should and could only be performed by actors other than Latinos. On that line of thought, Jose Ferrer should have not played "Cyrano de Bergerac", (Oscar 1953, best actor) and Danilo Perez, a Panamanian, shouldn't play Jazz.

I was not my usual self on stage, that is true. I had forgotten how large the Hollywood Bowl stage is, (like the Radio City Music Hall, you need a cab to take you to the other side). I became unsure as to the protocol on how to behave when the Orchestra was playing and I wasn't singing, (usually I get off the stage when my Salsa Band is playing so that people can look at them, and not at me). The setting of the stage, more operatic than intimate, the enormity of the stage, the emotional situation itself, proved enormous to handle.

Plus, many of those in the "picnic area" in front of the stage gave me the impression that we were a part of some sort of National Geographic-type of evening. Most of them seemed to have no clue on what was going on. And probably did not. Mr. Swed was right in pointing out that on these occasions we need translations to the words of the songs to be, either printed in the programs or projected on screens, in English and in Spanish.

Mr. Swed added that . . . "Blades . . . didn't quite know how to connect with the kind of mixed crowd, . . ." Again, he was correct. Part of the problem was time constraints. In order to communicate with the crowd in either language, (and i had to do it in both) I'd be taking time away from a performance that only provided us with an hour to play. In my regular concerts I have two or three hours, which allows me to make that connection happen. The Bowl curfew's weight was on me.

But in this particular case, perhaps it was THE AUDIENCE the one who had to make the connection, with the material presented and the format employed to do so. All the screams I

every so often heard through the busted ear-monitors i wore for most of the show, indicated a considerable amount of people, especially those in the back of the Bowl, who did not need to have the purpose of the evening spelled out, or explained. The music did motivated them, made them react and support what was happening on the stage. It was not a total "disconnect".

Finally, the review, no matter how respectful it is, suggests this show was a wasted opportunity. To me it was not. It made a valuable and crucial contribution, to bring these type of programs intending to not only integrate music from different cultural sources but to also bring its audiences together as well.

As every early experiment shows, results will be mixed. Not all will succeed at first. "Something" . . . Mr. Swed writes. . . "and I am not sure what, was lacking" . . .

Perhaps what was lacking for some members of the audience was the musical curiosity, coupled with the understanding and solidarity needed to enjoy an event with such a laudable cultural purpose. Culture is not for the narrow minded.

Instead, perhaps Mr. Swed and others went with the type of expectations that, as any experiment will prove, are difficult to meet the first time around, especially in polarized scenarios, as those defining cultural issues in this country are becoming.

Once again, to Gustavo Dudamel, to the L.A. Philharmonic, to the Hollywood Bowl and to the 8,888 plus who attended, THANK YOU for the opportunity of a lifetime. It will always be a special gig for me.

Gracias!

Rubén Blades
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