

# INSIDE ARTS Q&A

## All the stage is a world

For presenters, the World Music circuit is both challenging and exciting. And when it works, it works magic. Two presenters talk about the joy of success and the unique approaches they take to the genre.

**BY ALICIA ANSTEAD**

THE ROAD THAT LEADS TO World Music is a brave one for presenters. At its best, a World Music concert can foster international connection and understanding. At its very, very best, it's a beautiful and transcendent experience. At its most confounding, the World Music concert requires diligent and clever marketing. When performers have well-known names, tickets sell. When the only place a musician has been heard is Bolivia or Africa, selling the show can get dicey. And

with tighter borders, the visa issue can test everyone's patience. But presenters persist. They also seem to agree: If the concert is part of an ongoing commitment to excellence that audiences have come to trust, sometimes the unknown musician outsells the classical music series. The style may be difficult to define—at least in one sentence. But two presenters who regularly present music from around the globe came to the same conclusion: World Music is a hot ticket.



One of the world's most respected percussion ensembles, the Royal Drummers of Burundi creates sacred drumbeats that once heralded the coronation of African kings. Last year, the group performed at John Hay High School in Cleveland, Ohio.

**PRESENTER:** Massoud Saidpour  
**TITLE:** Artistic Director  
**VENUE:** Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio  
**WORLD MUSIC CONCERTS ANNUALLY:** 30



**Why do you think World Music is coming into its own at this point in history? In some ways, it has always been with us. But why is it being presented more now than 10, 20, 30 years ago?**

Part of it is the world has become smaller. Travel is much easier. Artists travel. Immigration has happened from a lot of countries. In New York, a lot of great musicians live there, and they have brought their music, and they play it well. Economic mobilization trends affect this also to a large degree—the notion of the world being smaller and contact being easier.

**What about Sept. 11? Do you think reverberations from that day have anything to do with arts presenters trying to educate the community about the global involvement with others through culture?**

I think that definitely is a by-product. However, if I may use this word: The sanctity of music as an art form above all

### How do you define World Music?

That's a very good question. I've been presenting World Music here for 10 years. And as time goes by, my definition changes. For the purposes of definition, we need some sort of label, and that's how I look at it. In a pragmatic way, we need a label to define something that is very difficult to define. In an in-depth look at the phenomenon of World Music, we're talking about the planet with thousands of years of musical history with so many variants and variations. So it's very difficult to define. I tend more and more to use the label less and less, and talk more of a specific music tradition, for example: the classical music of India or the classical music of Persia.

**When I call something traditional classical Western music, it may conjure up images of Beethoven and Bach, but it also may not conjure those images. It's very, very general.**

Exactly. I agree. That's the weakness of labels, but at the same time we need them. For me, World Music is a collection of the music of this planet. That's not specific, is it? But that's what it is really. In a World Music series, we can present people of other cultures and continents. But at the same time, we can present music from the American folk tradition that is not easily accessible, and use that as World Music.



Namgyal monks (above) perform the dismantling ceremony of the Kalachakra Sand Mandala (left) at Cleveland City Hall.

else. By that I mean music has a function of its own. It's very difficult to define, but when we listen to good music, we know what that role is. When we present music from Iran, which we have done here, and you bring musicians from a country with a lot of tension, and you bring it to a public that is mostly American, it does have an impact. People listen and look at the artists, and at the same time hear something totally different in our media. Now, for me, I don't present Iranian musicians or any musicians because I want to send a cultural message necessarily. Because it's great music, I feel it needs to be presented. And it's a by-product that people get another perspective of another civilization.

**So you go for excellence, from which other treasures come.**

Absolutely. If the music is not excellent, you will not have that by-product impact.

## What are you the most proud of with your World Music presentations?

I don't have a favorite in terms of the music we present. But some have very special qualities and moments. Our performance house is under renovation right now. So we are presenting around town. We have to match acoustic attributes to particular artists. One of the most beautiful moments is when we had the Le Mystere des Voix Bulgares, a Bulgarian women's singing group at a Polish Catholic church, which is quite stunningly beautiful. There was painted glass, and it was a matinee. So the light was playing with the glass. And the music was beautiful. This was a very special moment.

## Do you have advice for other presenters who have not put World Music into their own programming?

Aspire for the finest excellence and also know your audience. Know what they can take and what they cannot. Having that knowledge doesn't mean we are going to program everything that they like. But knowing limitations,



Cudamani, dancers and musicians of Bali, present sacred Balinese Rajang dances at the Gartner Auditorium at Cleveland Museum of Art.

we can program more intelligently, and when we want to push the limitations, we know how and when to do it, and how to create a season of music that both is enchanting and expanding their musical horizons in some way.

## Are there unique challenges to presenting World Music?

The biggest challenge is how do we communicate to our audiences that they are going to have a really good musical time. When we bring artists who are totally unknown and do not have a marketing machine behind them, how do you convince people that this is going to be fun, and enlightening at the same time? There's no easy solution. It's based on the history you develop with the audience. A history of trust basically.

**PRESENTER:** Zulay Febres-Cordero Oszkay

**TITLE:** Artistic Director

**VENUE:** Latino Arts, Inc., Milwaukee, Wisc.

**WORLD MUSIC CONCERTS ANNUALLY:** 8



## How do you define World Music?

To me and for Latino Arts, it is a representation of the Caribbean and parts of Europe. It's music that is a little alternative, not in the crossroads, and it's essentially music of people of color.

## What draws you to World Music as a presenter?

It's a type of music that is not represented in most venues. The quality, of course, is the same as other types of music. It's something I think people should be introduced to, especially in our times now. The blend, the mix.

## Our country has thought of itself for a long time as a melting pot. Why this music now?

For many years, the U.S. led the music beat in the world, not just with jazz but with rock. World Music is opening up doors and reflects the mood of the world right now, not just globalization but the friendly intent to open up people's view and appreciation of the world at large.

## How does your audience receive the music that you program?

Oh, they love it. I get incredibly strong feedback. Given the chance, the audience is there. It's only when they don't hear it that they can't appreciate it because they just don't know about it. The mix is the friendly language of music being put together. The audience reacts to that in a very positive way. They always say: Let's see what Latino Arts is presenting now. Usually, they haven't heard of the groups.



Percussionist Bobby Sanabria did a short interactive workshop last fall with the Bruce-Guadalupe Middle School jazz band (above) in Milwaukee. The event was part of Latino Arts educational outreach organized by Oszkay, pictured below (left) with Huichol artists of Mexico.



## What are you proudest of when it comes to your work?

I am very proud to present the talents that are out there that normally are not presented because they are not headliners. I am proud of how we have grown, and have established quality and credibility with what we present. Every time a new concert comes in, I think: OK, how are you going to top this? I love that.

## Do you present all Latino music?

Yes, but we include Brazil.

## What are the challenges?

It's always a little bit of a gamble. But I never present anything I don't listen to. When I hear something that is really top quality, I'm not afraid at all. The only challenge is getting the message out and making sure we're on the map.

## How do you get the message out?

We have a season brochure. We have subscriptions. We do a lot of establishing friendships with the different neighborhoods in our area. We reach way out into the region in general. People come from far away, six or seven hours. We also do a matinee. It's very important for us to have entertainment accessible to children because those are the ones in the future who are going to look out for this kind of music. In fact, I don't sign a contract unless artists are willing to do a matinee. In most cases, artists are very, very pleased with this audience. If you don't start there—in terms of education and music appreciation—what stays?

## Have you had difficulties with acquiring visas for artists?

We've had some difficulties particularly during this administration—with Cuba, for instance. We brought Cuban artists in the past with minimal problems. Now it's just not that way. Centers are hesitant to deal with immigration issues. So they don't tap on the talents of Cuba as much. They try to catch them on tours, or let somebody else do the work.

## Do these constraints discourage you?

No, I'm very hopeful that things are not going to be this way always. I'm looking at Colombia right now. We have to tackle it so people will know we're interested in bringing those people here.