



Photo © Grant Leighton

Take a Bow

After 25 years, Marin Alsop conducts her finale with Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music

By Stacey Vreeken

Marin Alsop is leaving at the top of her game. The conductor and music director for the Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music leads her last season in Santa Cruz July 31-August 13, after 25 years at the helm showcasing new music by living composers. She leaves the two-week summer festival with an international reputation and a legacy of nurturing artists and audiences.

Alsop, who directs both the Baltimore and the Sao Paulo symphony orchestras, has a reputation for innovative programming and developing talent. She's established OrchKids, a youth music program, and Rusty Musicians, a program for amateur adults, in Baltimore.

She's also been appointed director of the graduate conducting program at the John Hopkins Peabody Institute.

When Alsop first started with the Cabrillo festival, she was a young and upcoming artist, the first woman to win the Koussevitsky Conducting Prize and a student of Leonard Bernstein. On her way, she's won an incredible series of honors and awards, including a MacArthur Fellowship, and made lifelong connections. She has guest conducted with some of the greatest orchestras in the world and has a close relationship with the London Philharmonic and London Symphony.

In honor of her last season, the evening's

concerts have been named for the qualities that make her so extraordinary: Power and Devotion; Inspiration and Impact; Courage and Connection; and Memory and Meaning. In between, there will be open rehearsals, talks, a family concert, the Church Street Fair, and more.

(Top) Marin Alsop strikes a signature pose during the Cabrillo Festival. Alsop made history when she became the first woman to conduct a major US symphony orchestra when appointed to the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra in 2007.



Photo: © r.f. Jones

(Above) Marin Alsop works with the orchestra during open rehearsals at the Cabrillo Festival in 2004.

Santa Cruz Style: You've been conductor and then artistic director for 25 years at the Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music. Can you speak about some of your most memorable moments?

Marin Alsop: When we did (Leonard) Bernstein's Mass (1999). That was pretty special. You know, it's not like a normal symphony experience. Cabrillo is very unique in that every summer it's a different journey, and a very unique and special journey because of the living composer elements. I think we all remember these incredible collaborations we've had, whether it's with Osvaldo Golijov, or John Corigliano, or Jennifer Higdon. They've been very, very special, and always enhanced by the fact that the composers are present. Every summer has been unique because of the personalities involved, and also because of the musicians. The musicians are very, very special. They're there because they love new music. The audience is there because they love new experiences. And you certainly can't say that about most audiences, or most situations. It's unique.

Style: Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music celebrates new music by living composers. Why is programming contemporary music and nurturing talent so important to you?

Alsop: I always like to say Beethoven was new music too, at one point. So, I try to



Photo: © r.f. Jones

(Above) Scottish composer James MacMillan and Marin Alsop discuss a composition during rehearsals for Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music.

approach every piece like that, maybe not with that depth of reverence, but certainly with the idea that if we don't have new music, we will miss the next Beethoven. I feel certain about that. It's very, very rewarding to work with the composers and creators. And for me, I've never really been a person who's deeply impressed by credentials. I'm much more deeply impressed by talent. That's what I try to lead with. I try to feature composers who I think have unique and very special voices. Some are very well known; some are lesser known. Sometimes they hit it big, sometimes they don't. To me, that's irrelevant. I'm always happy for any artist to succeed. For me, it's about how I connect with their voice. Then once a composer comes to Cabrillo, if that connection is enhanced by their experience with the orchestra, then they develop their own relationship with the orchestra and the community, and so they become regulars. ...So often, some of our regular composers become very well established, someone like Jennifer Higdon, and then she recommends students of hers. It's a wonderful creative mentoring cycle that starts to happen.

Style: During your time at the Festival, it has attained worldwide notice and appeal, and this year, some of its most popular and distinguished composers will be in residence. Can you tell me about working with composers such as John Adams (August 6) and Sir James MacMillan (August 5)?

Alsop: They're all like family in many ways. John Adams I've known, oh gosh, for decades now. He has a unique relationship with the festival because he was the music director for a season, and he lives in area.



(Above) Carolyn Kuan (L) and Marin Alsop during the Cabrillo Conductor's Workshop in 2006. Kuan, who regards Alsop as a mentor, progressed from student, to associate, to filling in for Alsop after her injury in 2013.



(Above) During a 1982 rehearsal, Marin Alsop looks on as her hero and mentor, Leonard Bernstein, works with his orchestra.

That's a very, very special bond. He's also become a lead mentor at the festival through supporting these commissions for younger composers. He's connected to us in at least those three ways. Someone like Jimmy MacMillan, I've championed his music since the early '90s, and he's been to the festival a few times. He fell in love with the festival the first time he came and talks it up worldwide. Every time I see him, he asks about everyone there. I think it's the same with everyone. It's a very special place. John Corigliano and his partner Mark Adamo asked me to marry them

at Cabrillo. I think that speaks volumes about how much people love the area but also the feeling of acceptance they embrace that exists at Cabrillo.

Style: Why are you reprising Pulitzer, Oscar, and Grammy-winning John Corigliano's *Symphony No. 1* on August 13, the last day of the Festival? You first conducted it in 1993 at the Mission San Juan Bautista.

Alsop: That was the idea. To try to close the circle in some ways, also to point out how while 25 years ago the subject matter that inspired his writing the piece was more urgent and in the news, the essence of piece is as relevant today as when it was written. And that's what great art is all about. That was my motivation.

Style: The Festival Orchestra has commissioned a piece in your honor by John Adams, *"Lola Montez Does the Spider Dance,"* premiering August 6, based on themes from an upcoming opera. Does this piece speak to you personally? Do you spider dance?

Alsop: That's what I'm doing in all my spare time — spider dancing. I don't know what a spider dance is, it must be like a tarantella that goes crazy. I can't wait to see it. It's excerpted from an opera he's working on at the moment. I think the fact the musicians got together to honor me in this way is extremely emotional. It's really an incredible thing. I am very, very touched by it. I don't know what else to say. It sort of addresses John's long relationship with Cabrillo, and the fact that he makes room in his extremely busy schedule — he's crazy busy — to add this to

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his plate. I think it's only because the musicians asked that he decided to do that. It's really beautiful. I'm very honored and touched.

Style: *You have a huge reputation internationally. Santa Cruz is a pretty small city, even with its impressive music scene. What attracted you to stay with us for so long?*

Alsop: When you think about it, it's two weeks a year for 25 years. It's been a little over one year that I've really been there. (She laughs.) That's how I'd like to think about it. It's just spread out over a long period of time. What's funny is when I came in, it was Dennis Russell Davies who approached me about taking on the directorship. He said he'd been there 19 years. I thought to myself, you know in my 32-year-old little pigeon brain, 'Who would stay some place for 19 years?' And here I am 25 years later. (She laughs harder.) I think that's an incredible testament to both Dennis and I. We almost did half of the festival, each. I think that's a testament to the creative recharging I get from being there. From really working with musicians and composers in such a positive, nurturing setting where cash is not currency. New music is the valuation.

Style: *Can you talk about the importance to youth of learning to play an instrument and OrchKids, the program you help found in Baltimore? Additionally, the program you have where amateur adults get to play alongside the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra?*

Alsop: In 2008, shortly after I took over as music director, I started an afterschool program for kids in West Baltimore to learn to play instruments. We started with 30 kids. Today, we have 1,100 kids playing instruments. It's a program about music but it's much more about life skills. Developing those skills that are so advantageous that we learn playing an instrument: eye-hand coordination, the listening, the fact that you have to motivate yourself, work as a team, that you understand about practicing daily, that when you apply yourself on a daily basis you improve and gain ground. These are the life skills that many of these kids miss out on. It's a little bit like trying to offer them a sense of possibility in their futures. That's really what's happened. They're doing incredibly well. I think they will be the future of classical music in many, many ways. It's all about creating a landscape and environment filled with possibility. I was reading about the fact that more people play instruments today than ever before in history. We should really be connecting with these people. These are the people who love classical music. We started Rusty Musicians Project, a couple times a year where people are invited to sit in with us, and we morphed into a fantasy camp in the summer. A very intensive



(Above) Marin Alsop and the Cabrillo Orchestra take a bow after a performance in 2015.

week in June, working with the orchestra, master classes, night and day music, and they're all nonprofessionals. It's the only thing I've ever done where everyone who filled out a survey, we had 100 percent satisfaction. It's very rewarding and the musicians love it. It's really about our musicians and how great they are. How they can share their expertise with others. All based on same principals I try to bring to Cabrillo. Art is for everyone not just a select few. The creative process is a process that is owned by every single human being. Not just "talented" people, and sharing the creative process is a win-win. It's what we do at Cabrillo. Everything's about access, inclusion, information, and enjoyment.

Style: *You are now Music Director for the Sao Paulo Symphony Orchestra in Brazil, touring internationally and recording. Can you speak to your goals for the near future?*

Alsop: I really want to focus a little bit more on the programs I've invested in, like OrchKids and doing more teaching. I've taken over the conducting program at the conservatory here. My focus now is more on sharing and mentoring and doing more teaching at this stage. It feels like the right next step for me. I also have a 12-year-old son, and he loves coming to Cabrillo, but I never get to see him. I want to go on a vacation during summer when he has free time. ...It's not that I wanted to leave Cabrillo to do something else, it's more about an evolution. After 25 years, I am attracted to certain kinds of music, certain kinds of composers, who write certain kinds of music. It's a good moment to have another perspective; someone coming in with a different set of passions, for different composers, for different styles of music. To take the

orchestra and challenge them in new ways. And to challenge our audience in different ways. I feel that many of the relationships that have been established between audience and composers that I brought to them will last a lifetime. You don't need me to broker that anymore. It's a good time to get a different perspective. Twenty-five is a good number. It's not easy because I really love it there. There's no motivation besides feeling that it's a good moment, and it's a healthy transition time. The festival is on great footing. It's a very strong organization, and the board and staff do a terrific job. The best time to leave a place is when it's doing super well. It's set up well for next person, which is what you always want. ♠

IF YOU GO

Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music

WHAT: This two-week music festival focuses on new music, often by living composers in residence. Dance and imagery are often part of the concerts, and artists with international reputations solo with the acclaimed Festival Orchestra. Open rehearsals, talks, a family concert, and the Church Street Fair are part of the festival.

WHEN: July 31 through Aug. 13

WHERE: Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium, 307 Church Street

INFORMATION: 426-6966; www.cabrillomusic.org