

Maverick conducts to a different beat

Cabrillo Festival's Marin Alsop has achieved global acclaim by refusing to heed barriers

By Richard Scheinin

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SANTA CRUZ — Marin Alsop, classical music's coolest conductor, is an ex-studio musician who played on KFC and Lysol television commercials as a struggling 20-something. Now here she is, a globe-trotting superstar — facing a 60-piece orchestra in a glorified gymnasium, which just happens to be her headquarters for North America's biggest festival of new symphonic music.

No Beethoven or Brahms here. Just brand-new music and a new perspective: "The groove is everything," Alsop tells her players, which is not how most conductors talk to the members of an orchestra.

Alsop is not your typical conductor.

She is preparing for today's opening concert at the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium of the Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music, which she has directed since 1992. A multiple trendsetter, she is also the first woman ever to lead a major American orchestra — the Baltimore Symphony, where she has been music director and conductor since 2007. Mentored in the 1980s by Leonard Bernstein, she guest-conducts the world's top orchestras from New York to London and Paris. A 2005 MacArthur "genius" award winner,

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KAREN T. BORCHERS — MERCURY NEWS

Conductor Marin Alsop, right, instructs Pierre Simard on Monday during a workshop for young conductors at the Cabrillo Festival.



KAREN T. BORCHERS — MERCURY NEWS

Marin Alsop leads a workshop for young conductors Monday at the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium as part of the Cabrillo Festival, which Alsop has directed since 1992.

Alsop

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she was, in 2006, the only classical musician invited to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, alongside presidents, prime ministers, big-time CEOs and Bono of U2.

She said "hi" to him in the hallway, she reports. He wasn't very tall.

While getting started, Alsop, 52, once saved up \$10,000 to create her own orchestra, hiring friends to let her be their conductor. Her old swing band, String Fever, recorded with Billy Joel. Today she collaborates with Trey Anastasio of Phish: Earlier this year, the Baltimore Symphony performed his songs along with an extended work he cowrote for orchestra.

Why all the genre crossing?

Alsop is the daughter of

Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music

When: Concerts today through Aug. 16

Where: Venues in Santa Cruz and San Juan Bautista

Tickets: Generally \$30-\$50; 831-420-5260, www.cabrillomusic.org; full schedule of concerts, free rehearsals and other events also available at the Web site.

LaMar Alsop, once a prominent violinist in New York orchestras, as well as a jazz saxophonist — and a friend to Bernstein, the legendary conductor, Broadway composer and all-around musical iconoclast. All of this hopping across musical boundaries seems to have shaped Alsop, who is as devoted to Beethoven and Mahler as anyone, but flies wherever her musical interests take her.

Like Michael Tilson Thomas of the San Francisco Symphony — another Bern-

stein protégé with a reputation for hipness — she has embraced new media. She talks to her audiences. She pops up on NPR and the "Today" show to banter about classical music.

"The pendulum is swinging away from classical music as an ivory-tower, elitist experience," Alsop says. She doesn't apologize for not being a purist. "I have managers who tell me, 'Oh, maestros don't do that.' They're always trying to get me to be more maestro-like. It's a losing battle."

On the podium at the Civic, Alsop crouches at the shoulders like a jazz hipster, coaxing rain-forest sounds from her musicians: marimba melodies, reverberations of gongs and, yes, deep grooves rising from the cellos and basses.

It's a piece by Israeli-born composer Avner Dorman, titled "Spices, Perfumes, Toxins!" To be performed Saturday at the festival, it's

typical Alsop fare: exotic, melodic, colorful, rather accessible. Some new-music mavens think Alsop isn't rigorous enough, that the music she chooses doesn't require enough work from the listener.

Still, every summer in Santa Cruz, where she enjoys near-rock-star status, she manages to push the envelope as few conductors do. John Adams — the Berkeley-based Pulitzer Prize-winning composer whose works have numerous times found a home at Cabrillo — calls her an important energizer on the classical scene.

"I've been very spoiled by good conductors," he says, "but Marin is definitely up there at the top rung. I feel very privileged that she's a fan of my music."

Alsop has referred to Cabrillo as an "artistic oasis" and a "no-negativity zone." She and her partner, Kristin Jurkscheit (the festival orchestra's principal horn), and

their 5-year-old son, Auden, a budding violinist, feel as if they are "coming home to family" each year, Alsop says, when the festival rolls around.

Home, in the beginning, was Manhattan and its suburbs, where Alsop took up the violin at 6. Her mother, Ruth Alsop, was a cellist in the New York City Ballet Orchestra. Father LaMar was that orchestra's concertmaster for 30 years. They were busy people.

It rubbed off.

Alsop laughs at one of her early professional escapades. In the early '80s, she and String Fever had a gig one night at the Pierre Hotel in Manhattan. A youthful optimist, she had scheduled herself that same night — between sets at the Pierre — to perform a violin solo with composer Philip Glass' ensemble at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

After the first set with String Fever, she hopped into

her little Toyota and began driving over the Manhattan Bridge to Brooklyn — and was caught in gridlocked traffic. No movement whatsoever. So she turned off the engine and handed her keys to the strangers in the car beside her, asking if they might later bring her car around to the academy. Then, in her high heels, Alsop ran across the bridge, barely arriving in time to perform with Glass.

"So I finished my solo," she says, "and the guy at the stage door says, 'Oh, some guy just dropped off a car for you.'"

"Yeah, I'm nuts," Alsop says. "I grew up in an environment where I watched my parents — they never missed one concert their whole career. My father played a concert the day after he had a hernia operation. The show must go on, you know what I mean?"

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