

Los Angeles has been a hotbed of string playing and teaching ever since the heyday of the Hollywood studios in the 1930s and 40s. But Gustavo Dudamel's arrival has energised the city's string scene like never before, says **RICHARD GINNELL** on the eve of this month's NAMM trade fair in the city



# BOOM TIME *in the* city of angels



Los Angeles is unlike any other major city of its size and importance in the world. It sprawls from a small inland city centre across a wide coastal basin, over and around mountain ranges into semi-arid valleys, and is riddled with self-contained ethnic neighbourhoods as well as innumerable earthquake faults. It is famous for several things – year-round sun, smog, traffic snarl-ups, beaches and Hollywood. It is not particularly famous as a centre and incubator for string players.

But it should be. If you hear violins swelling on the soundtrack of the latest cinema hit, there's a good chance that those strings are coming to you from a Los Angeles recording studio, or at least a Los Angeles-based film company. Many a string player in major US symphony orchestras received a good deal of their basic training in Los Angeles music schools, universities and youth orchestras.

The city boasts a strutting world-class orchestra, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, which performs in one of the few auditoriums in the world that can legitimately be called a tourist attraction, the Walt Disney Concert Hall. You could say the orchestra's summer home, the Hollywood Bowl, is also on the tourist circuit. There are several good-to-excellent regional ensembles in the shape of the Pacific, Pasadena and Long Beach symphony orchestras. Then there is the superb Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, the Hollywood

Bowl Orchestra, and the Los Angeles Opera and Los Angeles Master Chorale orchestras – all of which use expert string players moonlighting from the film, TV and recording studios.

ALL THIS STRING ACTIVITY didn't just sprout overnight. Back when films began to talk, Los Angeles became a mecca for many of the world's most skilled string players, drawn by big salaries in the studios. Some of these players became legends in their profession, among them Israel Baker, Louis Kaufman and Felix Slatkin, founder of the great Hollywood Quartet. Distinguished émigrés fleeing the wars of Europe became Los Angeles residents. The University of Southern California (USC) could boast such luminaries as Jascha Heifetz and Gregor Piatigorsky on its faculty. Henri Temianka founded the California Chamber Symphony. Bruno Walter and Igor Stravinsky had their pick of LA studio players for their stereo recordings in the 1950s and 60s.

Today the USC Thornton School of Music string faculty still boasts such world-renowned soloists as Midori and Ralph Kirshbaum. The Colburn School, centrally located on Grand Avenue across from Disney Hall, serves as both a Juilliard- or Curtis-like music conservatoire, with all tuition, >

LOS ANGELES DOWNTOWN PHOTO LA INCIGARZA GROUP





► Gustavo Dudamel conducting the Los Angeles Philharmonic

† Dudamel with the YOLA Expo Center Youth Orchestra



SONDRA MARRAS/PHOTOJULIA  
CHRIS CHRISTODOULOU



room and board taken care of, and as a performing arts school for all ages and levels in the community. Herb Alpert, the pop trumpeter and A&M Records co-founder-turned-philanthropist, has recently given substantial donations to two local music schools – UCLA's Herb Alpert School of Music, whose undergraduate music programme is among the top-ranked in the country, and the Herb Alpert School of Music at the California Institute of the Arts.

'I think that the West Coast scene was always strong,' says Henry Gronnier, first violinist in the Rossetti Quartet, who teaches at the Colburn School and is a professor of violin at USC. 'We have a lot of foreign students at USC; having Midori and Ralph Kirshbaum on the faculty is such a magnet for all these students. I was raised in France with a system that doesn't give you many choices: you become a soloist or a member of an orchestra – chamber music doesn't really exist in the training. But we are able to give students a transition between school and a professional life. We give them a lot of possibilities to perform chamber music.'

Midori says of her experience of teaching at USC: 'It's been an extremely important part of my professional life. Being able to collaborate with the vast array of renowned professors in not only the music school, but also in fields such as neuroscience, athletics and communications, has helped to make the music department a vibrant, creative place for faculty, staff and students.'

**THE IDEA OF YOUTH ORCHESTRAS** and student ensembles carrying forth the mission of classical music has taken centre stage ever since the ascension of young Gustavo Dudamel to world fame. But again, this is not exactly news in Los Angeles. The American Youth Symphony, founded by Mehli Mehta and conducted by former LA Philharmonic concertmaster Alexander Treger, has been immersing talented youngsters in the standard classics since 1964, and has served as a pipeline to major orchestras for many excellent young string players. The Young Musicians Foundation (YMF) Debut Orchestra, whose origins go even further back to 1955, continues to do the same – and it has an outreach programme for underserved inner-city schoolchildren.

Nevertheless, Dudamel's appointment in the spring of 2007 as music director of the LA Philharmonic (starting in the 2009–10 season) was a landmark event. With Dudamel, who was just 26

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when he was hired, the orchestra got itself an instant across-the-board celebrity, and a Latino role model for a city with a Latino plurality. The string community was pleased to learn that Dudamel is a violinist himself. That autumn, Dudamel brought the Simon Bolívar Youth Orchestra – the flagship of Venezuela's national music education programme, El Sistema – to Disney Hall for two tumultuous concerts that had the effect of launching the Philharmonic's own attempt to replicate El Sistema's success.

Hence the YOLA (Youth Orchestra Los Angeles) EXPO Center Youth Orchestra, an inner-city children's ensemble that rehearses in the multi-purpose EXPO Center just south of downtown. This programme was in part created so that Dudamel could have a children's orchestra to visit when he was in town (which, due to his loaded international schedule, wasn't terribly often during his first year with the Phil). Unlike the near-professional-quality American Youth Symphony and YMF Debut Orchestra, YOLA is made up of beginners, most of whom have barely begun learning their instruments. On one occasion when Dudamel was around to rehearse them, he worked the kids hard, especially the cellos and basses, and he sets goals for them – the next being a real concert on the Disney Hall stage.

The 'Dudamel effect' has spread beyond the youth orchestra realm into almost every corner of classical music making in Los Angeles. Even seasoned professionals are feeling the energy that Dudamel has breathed into the standard overplayed classics. 'Unless you're playing Beethoven's Fifth Symphony with Carlo Maria Giulini or Kurt Sanderling, it's old,' says Rochelle Abramson, a long-time member of the Philharmonic's first violin section who played under both conductors and many other revered maestros. 'Dudamel is someone who can make it fresh, and the people who are performing it with him think it's fresh.'

'There's all this energy of youth getting into classical music, and it's growing. It filters over into my world, too,' says Pamela Gates, a freelance studio and orchestra violinist, and a member of the board of directors of the American Federation of Musicians' powerful Local 47. 'In the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra everybody





◀ Walt Disney Concert Hall, home of the Los Angeles Philharmonic

↑ The Hollywood Bowl has its own orchestra



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is thrilled [although Dudamel has never conducted them]. There's a positive vibe in the classical community.'

From his experience at the Colburn School, Gronnier says that students mention Dudamel as a reason why they want to study strings. 'They want to go to concerts because they love Gustavo Dudamel,' he says. 'He's young, he's approachable. He treats them as individuals, spending a lot of time talking to them, asking them if they want to have a career in classical music in the future.' Gates says that her students don't mention Dudamel themselves, but she puts the seed about the young Venezuelan in their minds, and they have joined youth orchestras 'because of Gustavo and the fact that he did it'.

Linda Rose, a member of the violin faculty at California State University, Long Beach, opts for the longer view of history. 'I think what Dudamel's doing has been done before,' she says. 'When I first came to Los Angeles, Mount St Mary's College had a programme where I taught an all-black children's orchestra. The things that are happening with YOLA are wonderful, but I don't think it's all due to Gustavo.' She has a point, since YOLA is being built on the foundation of a pre-existing inner-city music programme, the Harmony Project.

A RECENT PARALLEL DEVELOPMENT is the founding of the SOL-LA Music Academy in 2007 by Margaret Lysy, whose husband Antonio Lysy is co-chair of the strings department at UCLA. This West Side school runs classes for 4- to 18-year-olds from all income levels and ethnicities. In the spirit of West Coast openness, the school claims to make no distinctions between musical genres – presumably a Bach Suite for solo cello is as good as a rock number for electric violin.

SOL-LA has liberally borrowed some ideas from El Sistema, such as the 'buddy system' of teaming an older, more experienced child with a younger player. There is a YouTube video on its website where a group of young violin students is playing a tune

to a loping cowboy rhythm outdoors on a perfect Santa Monica day – the California dream personified.

If there is a brake on all this activity and enthusiasm, it shouldn't come as any surprise as to what the problem is – money. California has become an

economic basket case: the unemployment rate in Los Angeles County was 12.4 per cent at the time of writing, the state budget is forever out of balance as the governor and legislature squabble, and music is always one of the first things to come under the knife. Public school music programmes have been slashed and Rose says that Cal State Long Beach has had to endure furloughs and other cuts.

Money is also the core reason for a dip in options for freelance studio players. According to Gates, outsourcing, while long a factor in Hollywood, is more prevalent than ever as film composers opt to record their soundtracks in places where the rates are cheaper – particularly in Eastern European cities like Bratislava, Budapest and Prague. 'Their base of generic classical orchestra sound is pretty good,' she says, 'and the composers get unbelievable cost breaks by going there. They don't have to pay health and welfare, or pensions.'

On the other hand, what Los Angeles string players do have over their overseas colleagues is unparalleled versatility. 'If scores call for certain styles or stylistic motifs, music directors often can't get those in the Eastern European bloc or in London,' says Gates. 'Even in the strings, if you need a country, jazz or cartoonish style, they can't do it – they don't have the experience and training. LA musicians, however, can cross over into almost any style you want. These guys can do it in one take, over and over.'

Gronnier agrees: 'California has been quite amazing in breeding young artists. I don't know if it's the sun, but people are happier here and the level of string players is extraordinary. It's amazing to see the kids now saying, "We don't need to go to the East Coast to get our training. We have it here in our backyard."'

Read about the unsung string heroes of Hollywood's golden age in an article from the November 2009 issue, by subscribing to The Strad Archive at [www.thestrad.com/StradArchive.asp](http://www.thestrad.com/StradArchive.asp)