

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Santa Cecilia Orchestra at the Wallis

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, January 20th, 2016

I have been a frequent visitor and enthusiastic admirer of the [Annenberg Space for Photography](#) since it opened in Century City in March 2009, but I had not yet experienced the [Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts](#) that opened in Beverly Hills in October 2013, in the remodeled Historic 1934 Post Office, with the addition of the state-of-the-art 500-seats Bram Goldsmith Theatre. Read our [Cultural Weekly article](#) for more info.

So I finally decided to pay a visit and I picked a [classical music concert by the Santa Cecilia Orchestra](#), because I was intrigued by its founder and conductor, Sonia Marie De León de Vega, who started her symphony orchestra in 1992 with the mission of making classical music accessible and affordable to Latino families in Los Angeles.

Sonia had fallen in love with music at the age of 6 while listening to Beethoven's 7th Symphony on the radio. As it happens that is also my favorite piece. The 2nd movement in particular moved me to tears, while I was studying the classical music composers on my own, through books and (vinyl) records, as a teenager growing up in Italy in the 60s. I could not understand why the history of music was not part of the curriculum in my classical high school, where we *did* study the history of art, literature, history and philosophy, Latin and ancient Greek.

Sonia was born in San Antonio, Texas, in a Mexican-American family and grew up in Los Angeles. Her father was a musician, her mother an actress. She studied piano and organ in college, then focused on conducting in her post-graduate studies. After founding the [Santa Cecilia Orchestra](#) (SCO), named after her deceased father's favorite saint, Sonia realized that she had to build an appreciation for classical music in the Latino community. So in 1998 SCO started a musical education program that has reached more than 170,000 children in 60 schools in Los Angeles. Sonia stated, "Music is a great equalizer, where skin color, money in the bank and education doesn't matter. It inspires kids."

The concert at the Wallis last Saturday night was preceded by a talk with Cuban composer [Yalil Guerra](#), whose musical piece "A la Antigua" would be performed. He said, "Sonia is a pioneer conductor, the only Latina music director in the country. She's a brave and heroic human being, tremendously talented. She transmits her energy to the musicians."



Maria Bermudez (c) Wallis

When we entered into the theatre, we marveled at the exquisite architecture of curved wooden panels, then enjoyed the amazing sound quality of this intimate setting. Sonia conducted her orchestra, where two-thirds of the musicians are women, with gusto and enthusiasm. In the first act, the "Three Latin American Sketches" by Aaron Copland, inspired by Mexican dances, were

especially lively. In the second act we were treated to the dramatic flamenco dancing and singing by [Maria Bermudez](#), interpreting the ballet by Spanish composer Manuel de Falla, “[El amor brujo](#)” (Bewitching Love), about the Andalusian legend of a gypsy woman haunted by the ghost of her dead husband.

For me it was a delight to discover this music, since I always felt a great affinity for Spanish and Latin-American culture; partly because Italian is the most similar to Spanish of the five European languages derived from the Latin spoken in the Roman Empire, with French, Portuguese and Romanian. Living in Los Angeles for the past forty years, and traveling to Spain, Mexico and various South American countries, has given me an opportunity to study Hispanic history, literature and music. And this concert furthered my education, a life long pursuit. Thanks Sonia!

We are grateful to [Wallis Annenberg](#) for founding these cultural institutions to enrich art appreciation in our city.

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