



## **Miami Symphony Orchestra marks 25 years with greatly improved playing, continuing financial struggle**

By David Fleshler  
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Eduardo Marturet opens the Miami Symphony Orchestra's 25th season Sunday night at the Arsht Center.

The Miami Symphony Orchestra was headed for Carnegie Hall, and many people were appalled.

Despite the civic puffery of Miami politicians over the trip in June of 2000, informed listeners cringed at the thought of a third-rate orchestra representing the region on the nation's most prominent concert stage. New York Times critic Bernard Holland tried to be kind but found much of the performance to be sloppy and out of tune, saying "the ear labored unreasonably hard to penetrate the Miami's murky ensemble playing."

He would not write that today. As the orchestra prepares to open its 25th season this Sunday at the Arsht Center's Knight Concert Hall, it is a vastly improved ensemble, thanks largely to the infusion of talented new musicians and the energetic leadership of music director Eduardo Marturet.

The Miami Symphony still doesn't approach the level of second-tier orchestras in comparable cities, such as Kansas City, Houston or Atlanta. And it faces formidable financial challenges, including paying its musicians on time. Yet there is an excitement and a polish to its performances that had not been present just a few years ago.

"Eduardo brought tremendous dynamism and professionalism and really increased the quality of the performances," said Rafael Diaz-Balart, chairman of the orchestra's board. "Miami needs and deserves a first-class orchestra. I think Miami—besides being the Hong Kong of the western hemisphere—could also become the Venice: a commercial powerhouse but also a center for the arts."

Founded in 1989 by Manuel Ochoa, a choral conductor in pre-Castro Cuba, the ensemble started out playing pops concerts at the Grand Ballroom of the Hotel Inter-Continental. As it aspired to grander repertoire, it was lashed by critics for ragged, out-of-tune playing. Once during a performance of the second movement of Dvořák's New World Symphony, the musicians became so lost they had to start over. In one of many tough reviews, The Miami Herald's late critic James Roos called the orchestra's sound "amateurish and constricted" and described one English horn solo as "a horror."

Enter Eduardo Marturet. The Caracas native had spent years leading orchestras in live performances and recordings in Germany, Holland, Venezuela and many other countries. And he had long had a home in Miami. He joined the orchestra in 2005 as associate principal conductor. "It took me a year because I was traveling all over the place and Ochoa didn't want to talk on the telephone," he said. "He had this obsession that Castro was listening to him and Chavez was listening to me."

The next year Ochoa died at the age of 80, and leadership of the orchestra fell to Marturet if he wanted it. A man with a busy conducting schedule, Marturet said he only wanted to get involved if there was a chance of really building something in Miami. "I told the board, 'Listen, I'm only interested in staying here if we're going to make a good orchestra,'" he recalled, speaking by phone from his home in Caracas. "Otherwise, I'm wasting my time."

Once in command, Marturet did not charge in and immediately begin handing out pink slips. But he began to program more difficult repertoire, set higher standards and allowed those who couldn't keep up to gradually drop out. "I made a point that we shouldn't fire anybody," he said. "'Don't worry, I told the board. It won't be necessary and I don't think it's very good for the community. The music will fire them. We'll play more difficult music and they won't be able to cope with it.'"

Meanwhile, he started to look for fresh talent, particularly for leadership roles in the various sections of the orchestra. "I was very careful to recruit important principals," he said. For the crucial position of principal horn, he hired the fine Honduran player Hector Rodriguez, whose robust, smoothly phrased solos are a highlight of the orchestra's concerts. "He's a big star," Marturet said. "When we put that guy in, he changed completely the color of the brass. We've been doing the same thing in the other sections."

Last season Marturet hired a new principal double bass, Luis Gomez-Imbert, who had worked with Marturet as principal bass of the National Symphony Orchestra of Venezuela and the Caracas Symphony.

“He called me to join the orchestra and I said yes absolutely, I’m more than delighted to do so,” said Gomez-Imbert, a professor at Florida International University’s School of Music. “Eduardo is a person with a magnetic personality and he effuses that passion for music to the orchestra. The performances are very electric. They are infused with a lot of energy, and I think the audience can feel that energy from the orchestra with Eduardo on the podium.”

Perhaps most important, he recruited Daniel Andai as concertmaster, the leader of the first violins, a position that amounts to the orchestra’s second-in-command. A Miami native, Andai had played with the orchestra as a teenager and still speaks of Ochoa with warmth and respect. He went on to graduate from an elite conservatory, the Manhattan School of Music, and eventually returned to South Florida to join the orchestra.

“I saw what Maestro Marturet was doing, that he was taking the orchestra to a new level, and I decided that was something I really wanted to be a part of because Miami is my hometown and I really love it,” he said. “So I asked what positions were open, and he told me the concertmaster’s position was open.”

Under Andai’s leadership, the violins have become the orchestra’s strongest section, with a virtuoso sheen and knife-edged precision. This came about through the recruitment of strong players and a focus on fundamentals. “My main goals were to try to find a unified sound in the string section, and eventually among the winds and brass too,” Andai said. “And I was very much interested in bowings and what strings we played certain passages on.”

Marturet has handed Andai more and more responsibility, including conducting concerts and said he hopes at some point that the young violinist will become his successor on the podium.

Conductors who dramatically raise the level of an ensemble can be intimidating, dictatorial figures. At the Vienna Opera, Gustav Mahler was famous for the icy stare he directed at offending players. At the Cleveland Orchestra, George Szell had a habit of firing underachievers on the spot.

This is a different era, of course, and conductors would have a harder time getting away with such autocratic methods. Still, by all accounts, Marturet has distinguished himself by carrying out the improvements with a minimum of strife, keeping a high morale level in the orchestra, and creating an atmosphere in which musicians feel valued.

“Everyone knows everyone by name,” Andai said. “Eduardo makes a big deal about introducing new people that come to play.”

“Many nights Eduardo and I spend discussing things about the orchestra and always, always taking into account every musician and how they felt and what kind of experience we wanted them to have.”

Pleasant as working conditions may be, everyone likes to be paid, and here the orchestra has fallen short. The orchestra still owes its musicians money from last season. Marturet attributes the problem to cash-flow issues, partly from contributions not coming in on time.

“Our financial obligations to the musician are paramount and we always honor the payments to our musicians, though at times, lamentably, late,” he said. “Due to our fundraising challenges and difficulties, we still have pending payments of last season to the orchestra musicians. We have been making payments to the musicians in the last few months, and are working to continue doing so in the short term as we also balance the payments with the current season obligations ahead.”

The orchestra ran a deficit of \$319,833 in the last fiscal year. Revenues have risen significantly over the past three years, from \$886,256 in the 2008-09 season to slightly more than \$1 million in the 2010-2011 season, still far too low for an orchestra of Miami’s aspirations. Season subscriptions have risen from a low of 231 in the 2010-2011 season to 305 this season.

The orchestra faces a challenging fundraising environment as it chases the same classical music dollars sought by the New World Symphony, Florida Grand Opera and that interloper from the shores of Lake Erie, the Cleveland Orchestra. “Although I have great respect for the orchestra, Cleveland, takes a huge stake of our fundraising potential,” Marturet said. “I understand why they do it because they’re also in a survival mode in their town.”

And as board chairman Diaz-Balart points out, the gleaming towers going up across downtown Miami and the beach conceal the presence of two economies, a gilded international one fueled by money from Brazil, Venezuela and other countries, and a local one.

“We have the local economy and we have the economy that comes from abroad,” he said. “That’s fantastic. I’m not saying it’s bad. But they’re not really committed to the community. All the wealth that you see doesn’t translate into [local] support for the arts.”

And while he and other board members have tried to broaden the board from the days when the orchestra was considered strictly a Hispanic enterprise, he said that work remains incomplete. “We want the board to be representative of the community in Miami, and I think we have been successful in attracting—I hate the word—anglos onto the board,” he said. “We have brought in more anglo board members, and it’s better, but I would like it to be even more inclusive.”

Despite the orchestra's challenges, Marturet doesn't go in for the sort of craven programming that produces concerts full of Tchaikovsky, Beethoven, Rachmaninoff and the rest. Those popular composers are there, of course, as they should be, but the orchestra routinely performs contemporary music, world premieres and obscure works from the corners of the classical repertoire.

This season, for example, will include the world premiere of Orlando Jacinto Garcia's *Voces Celestiales* for Two Double Basses, new works by the orchestra's composers in residence and the South Florida premiere of Arturo Márquez's *Danzón No. 3* for flute, guitar and orchestra.

The final concert will include the South Florida premiere of Scriabin's *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire*, a work that requires something called a color organ that translates sounds into colors. In addition to all the new repertory, there will be plenty of works by the established masters, including the Brahms Double Concerto for Violin and Cello, the Brahms Symphony No. 2, Prokofiev's Symphony No. 1 and Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5.

Next Sunday's season-opening concert will include a work by Marturet called *Homage to Waldo*, Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 5 with soloist Andreas Boyde, Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez* with guitar soloist Ángel Romero and Bernstein's "Symphonic Dances" from *West Side Story*.

In his programming, Marturet said he tries to provide something the audience goes in looking forward to as well as challenging works that will sharpen everyone's hearing.

"There is always a catch to attract the audience, something the public is attracted by and also something that the musicians will enjoy playing and look forward to," he said. "And something that shakes the heck out of the public too. I like to do that at the beginning of a program if possible.

"That somehow raises the RAM memory of what they come to listen to, so after listening to a totally new piece of music their references are fresh at that moment, and then when they hear a Beethoven symphony or a Mozart concerto, they listen to it fully fresh, and it's very effective."

The Miami Symphony Orchestra opens its season 8 p.m. Sunday at the Arsht Center. [themiso.org](http://themiso.org), 305-275-5666.