

Musically Speaking

The Eugene Symphony's leading man

By Alexandra Arch



Eugene Symphony's Giancarlo Guerrero

A mark of concentration deepened between Giancarlo Guerrero's furrowed eyebrows as he searched for just the right words to describe a live orchestra performance. Seconds later his eyes lit up. "It's exciting, like a kid with a new toy," he said as his infectious smile returned. "There is a spark that makes it all happen, and the audience catches on that there is that excitement on stage." And the best part, he confided, is watching the performance from the best seat in the house: the podium.

Guerrero, music director and conductor of the Eugene Symphony, is a large man with wavy, dark hair. His passion for music is communicated through his smile, animated gestures and careful words. He's a professional who conveys a business-like attitude about

conducting an orchestra. But his charismatic approach confirms he has fun doing it.

"I wake up in the morning, and my body requires that I pick up a score and start studying or listening to music," Guerrero said. "I've got to be the luckiest person on the face of this earth. I am doing what I love to do."

***'One thing I love about Eugene is that I can be very creative. This is an audience that wants to be challenged. They really want their symphony to, in a sense, educate them.'* – Giancarlo Guerrero**

Guerrero, 35, is young in the conducting industry, but he has already built an impressive resumé. In June he received the Helen M. Thompson Award from the American Symphony Orchestra League, which recognizes the accomplishments of young conduc-

tors nationwide. In addition to working with the Eugene and Minnesota orchestras, he has also performed with the Philadelphia, Houston and San Diego symphonies. He regularly works with international orchestras as well as select opera companies.

Guerrero's musical beginnings are unusual. He was born in Nicaragua, but his family fled the country for Costa Rica during the 1979 civil war. There he began playing percussion in the Costa Rican Youth Symphony at 10. His parents saw the orchestra as a way to keep him busy after school, and Guerrero saw it as a way to hang out with friends. But the orchestra evolved into a way of life. At 13, Guerrero joined the national symphony and began performing around the world.

By high school, music had become a disciplined passion — one that eventually led to a full scholarship to Baylor University in Texas to study percussion. Despite his rudimentary knowledge of English, he assimilated into the American university life. The conducting bug hit him his junior year at Baylor during a mandatory conducting course. "My teacher said that I was good at it. He had an eye for such things," Guerrero said. "Maybe it was because I was used to having sticks in my hand." Later Guerrero pursued a master's degree in conducting from Northwestern University in Illinois, working at a mortuary to pay his bills.

Guerrero is now in the middle of his third season with the Eugene Symphony. Besides conducting the orchestra, he also develops the programming for each season. Guerrero said offering a variety of music is what entices the community to attend concerts.

"One thing I love about Eugene is that I can be very creative," he said. "This is an audience that wants to be challenged. They

Jay Kernis, Jennifer Higdon, people that 100 years from now are going to be seen as the next Mozarts."

Guerrero's programming not only intrigues the audience but also challenges the musicians, according to David Kammerer, the president of the Eugene Symphony Board of Directors. "He is very animated and good at engaging the musicians," he said. "He knows how to draw them out."

Guerrero explores the personal and social context of featured composers before most concerts, which gives the audience a richer understanding and connection to the music. But work, life on the road, and spending time at home with his wife and two children in Minneapolis mean Guerrero has little time these days to play percussion.

"I miss playing so much it hurts," he said. "I miss hanging out with my pals and making fun of the conductors." However, he loves the challenge of being on the other side of the orchestra. "In the end the one thing that I want to make sure of is that [the orchestra] respects and understands what I am trying to achieve musically."

Tim Cogswell, principal percussion for the symphony said, "When the baton goes up and comes back down, that's the beat. [Guerrero] is precise and articulate. He knows exactly what he wants to communicate with his baton. He is a great conductor that can be in command of a group and bring everyone together."

Michael Anderson, the principal clarinet at the Eugene Symphony, agrees. "Giancarlo is a fantastic musician. He really has an ability to find drama in music."

Guerrero hopes to help more people find that drama. "One of my biggest goals of being a conductor is to hopefully break down some of those barriers that have been around

really want their symphony to, in a sense, educate them. That's why I think that we've been so successful in not only presenting the Beethoven, the Brahms and Stravinskys, but we've also been successful presenting also music of our time: John Corigliano, Aaron

for a long time," he said. "To me, one of the great joys is when I see younger people come into the concert hall." ■

The Eugene Symphony presents the Tchaikovsky Festival on Jan. 27 and 29. The festival includes performances, lectures and other events. For more information, go to www.eugenesyphony.com or call 682-5000.

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