

Conversation with Jimmy López Bellido

June 8, 2024

MODERATOR: Good afternoon, everyone. And Jimmy, thank you so much for making the trip to Houston once again to have this conversation with us. We're always so happy to have you with us.

JIMMY LOPEZ BELLIDO: And I'm always happy to be back.

MODERATOR: So Simon set this up really nicely, but I thought we could start by just — to set up some context for the audience. And maybe you could tell us a little bit about the Resilient Sounds Project and how it was structured.

JIMMY: Well, the Resilient Sounds Project went across a year and a half to two years, I think. And I always like to say that it was much — as much about the destination as the journey. Because what we had was, at the core, a mentorship program for six young composers. And as Simon said, three from Rice University and three from University of Houston. And — but besides that, we actually gave it a human dimension when we paired each of those composers with a refugee from Houston, the Houston area. And for that we had the help of Interfaith Ministries.

To make things more complicated for us, we decided to add creative partners. And the reason for this is I didn't want any work in the program to compete with the other. I wanted each of them to be completely unique. So we had one, which was made for a film, another one that had a soprano, a soloist, like the one we're going to hear today, had a narrator, and so forth. So each project was unique and special.

And of course, that added to the complexity. But for that reason, we created this frame that was very well-structured, started with, of course, an initial meeting with everyone. And then a workshop, where we had just — we were testing the creative partners and a piano reduction for the — for us to see what the progress of the composers was. By then they had already met the refugees and had shared their stories. Then we had another workshop with a full orchestra. They had private meetings with me, for me to mentor the composers, and we had endless logistical discussions about how to bring this about, all of that culminating in the concert, of course, that really created a sense of community here.

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MODERATOR: Yeah, and I think that the way you conceived it, and the way that we created this project was really beautiful, because every piece ended up being so unique. It just — like all of the stories that the composers were telling. But in terms of giving them experience in writing for the orchestral art form, they were also able to get experience working with other types of creative artists, and understanding the additional layer of having to consider what a voice is capable of, what it meant to work with a dancer or a filmmaker.

And on top of that, they were all in different levels of their own development education, because we had a bachelor's, a master's, and a doctoral student from each school. So it was diverse in many different ways. And that really made it so rewarding to see their growth over the course of the project. And we'll talk a little bit about, down the road, how those composers have had their own trajectory.

So I remember sitting with you almost exactly six years ago at the hotel right across from Jones Hall, having a discussion with some of our colleagues, and that ended up being the conception of this project. But when you started as our composer-in-residence, you already had the idea in mind of doing a project working with young composers. So can you tell us a little bit about your inspiration, and how the idea for this project came about?

JIMMY: Absolutely. Well, my idea when I came to Houston was to really understand what was important to the city of Houston, you know? And really, what — that's why we have these strategic meetings, these brainstorming meetings with the whole team. And one of the questions that I asked was, what is it that makes Estonians most proud? And unlike what I thought, they will probably mention the space program, which we're all familiar with. They are very proud of it too, of course. But diversity came first.

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Houston being the most diverse urban area, ethnically speaking, in the United States. Not only that, but it is also the city in the United States that welcomes the most refugees. So knowing this was actually an eye opener, and it made me think, well, we need to actually broadcast this, we need to make this — we need to make a whole project about it. And I understand why they are proud about it. And that's when the idea of not only making — creating six new works, which in and of their own was, of course, very valuable for the composers, to work with musicians on the level of the Houston Symphony, which every young composer doesn't get that chance.

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But to add this layer of — of humanity to the project. And to create code elections within the fabric of Houston. Because these are people who were coexisting in the same society, probably visiting the same restaurants, but not necessarily talking to each other. And we had all these creative partners, composers, musicians, and refugees who had come from vastly different realities, come together, and create this project together. So that was actually what ignited the desire to make this what it is now.

MODERATOR: And I remember talking to the composers who are part of this program after they met their refugee partners, and they were just blown away by the harrowing and inspiring stories, but also just the hopefulness and the light that they brought in all of their conversations. And I know they felt just so inspired and so moved and privileged to have made those connections. And just to shine a light on the work of Interfaith Ministries. Interfaith Ministries resettles legal refugees fleeing their homelands in fear of political, social, or religious persecution. And they provide services to the refugees, such as housing, English classes, cultural orientation, job placement and school enrollments.

And over 90% of the refugees that Interfaith Ministries work with become independent and productive members of society after six months, which is extraordinary when you consider what it must take to become a part of a new community, and learning a new language, and learning how to live and starting from nothing in a community, it's really pretty amazing. So several of the composers that we worked with of the six, and all of them actually have gone on to embark on exciting professional journeys of their own. So I know you spent a lot of time working with them in workshops, in a lot of one-on-one mentorship time with them, which I know is really valuable, and really helped bring along a successful six performances for us. So are you still in touch with any of the composers that you worked with over the course of this project?

JIMMY: Well, I just was in Houston recently for another premiere of mine, the first part of my symphony, Eclipse, and I met one of the composers who attended the concert, Victor, who was here momentarily. He's going to go do a PhD now. And actually have seen two of our composers, Alejandro, went back to Mexico, Erberk Eryilmaz went back to Turkey. And they are doing really important work in their own respective countries, interacting with a lot of high-level musicians and continue to create. And I've seen all our other composers also continue to flourish and continuing to advance in their degrees and their knowledge. So it makes me really proud to have actually been in touch with them at some point and have been able to contribute a little bit to their development.

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MODERATOR: Yes, and we're sorry that Patrick, who is the composer of the piece that we'll be performing for you today wasn't able to join us because he's now a composer and arranger in the United States Air Force band. And so he wasn't able to get leave to join us. But hopefully he'll be able to see us on livestream. So, hi Patrick. We miss you.

JIMMY: We're very proud of you.

MODERATOR: Yes. So for those in the audience who might be interested in embarking on a project like this, you feel inspired by this work, or by another thing that they've seen in the conference and are wanting to take on an ambitious project, what advice might you have for those people?

JIMMY: Do it. [LAUGHING] Please do. I mean, it really made my life so much richer. I think everyone here in Houston. There was not a single dry eye at the end of the concert. Because that audience was comprised of people who were deeply connected to the material. We always — we tend to think, or at least modern audiences used to, especially not — less so now, to think that classical contemporary music was somewhat far removed from our reality. But we went through this project, have proved that there is nothing — nothing more far from it.

Because in fact, by creating new works, that we're telling, retelling the stories of these refugees who belong to their community, and we hear where their brothers or sisters or mothers or children, looking at a work that was celebrating their struggles and celebrating their triumph, and the way that they overcame all these difficulties. And so seeing that on stage, framed by a completely new work, was really moving, was really inspiring. So that's when we can harness the power of contemporary music to create works that are relevant to us today.

You know, I — for example, when I was working here, and I worked on this, my second symphony, I kept saying, well, Beethoven, with all his genius, couldn't have written a piece about the space program, you know? Because it was just not his time. We are here in our time to celebrate our time. Let's create works to celebrate our stories, current stories, and that's how contemporary music and have a very close and important impact in the everyday life of your audiences.

So I think if you actually have that focus, if you come to a community like I did. I do not live in Houston, but I feel like I'm part of the family now through this project, because I really immersed myself, understanding what was important to this community. And I think us artists who usually visit other places, we might be a little slightly disconnected with the places that we go. So it's important to really foster and try to encourage those connections.

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MODERATOR: Well, Jimmy, thank you so much for sharing all of this with us today. And you're such an important part of the Houston Symphony family. And we're so glad that we were able to share some of this with all of the conference attendees. So if all of you will join me in welcoming the musicians of the Houston Symphony after the orchestra tunes, they will perform "What It Takes to Thrive" with music by Patrick W. Lenz, words by Logan Butcher, and narration by Mohammed Yunus-Khaerisman, conducted by our assistant conductor, Gonzalo Farias. Thank you so much.

JIMMY: Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

END OF TRANSCRIPT