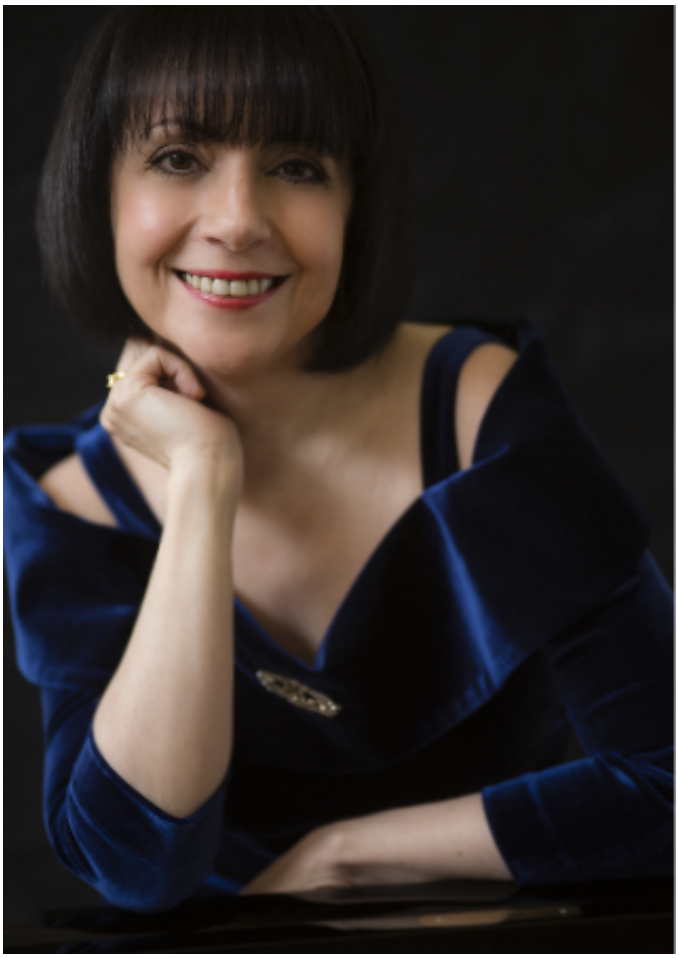
ARGENTINEAN ARTISTS

Meet Marcela Fiorillo



COULD YOU TELL US A BIT ABOUT YOUR CAREER AND HOW YOU FIRST BECAME INTERESTED IN THE PIANO?

How I first became interested: there was a piano in my house. My dad played the piano excellently. He was a lover of the things I do, a lover of Piazzolla, and a lover of Albéniz. Not surprisingly, I was always attracted to the music of Piazzolla and Spanish music. Well, there was a piano, and it seems that I tried to play it all the time. They said, 'We're going to send her to study because it was unbearable.' But it was a house that already had a legacy; my uncle, who is a few years older than me, had already studied piano too. That piano had stayed there somewhat magically; it was the gift that my grandfather gave my grandmother—who always wanted to play the piano—when my dad was born. She never studied, thinking she was already too old. The one who inherited the piano and that talent was my dad, and he passed it on to all of us, his children. We are four siblings, and we all studied music. At one point, several of us were studying more than one instrument, so people thought it was a conservatory because in every room there was a different instrument being played.

So that is the origin of my career: a musical family, a family very interested in and committed to art and music. I had enormous support because a musician's career is very sacrificial; it is a very solitary life being a pianist.

My parents have always respected my decisions. When I finished school, I also finished first in the conservatory, but I had to wait for my degree because I hadn't officially graduated. They always respected my vocation. Concerts started to appear when I was twelve years old; I started playing for the Conservatory at nine.

During that time, which was a glorious era for Argentine culture, the Conservatory—then known as the Carlos López Buchardo and now the University of the Arts—was located in Santa Fe and Las Heras, just two or three blocks from the old Radio Nacional. They used to send us to play live at the radio station at a very young age.

I remember playing Liszt's Funerals at twelve years old on the radio, and performing with an orchestra at thirteen. These were very formative experiences for an adolescent, and for me, they were my life and my ecstasy.

In Argentina, I had wonderful teachers. Haydeé Loustanau was my great piano teacher, followed by Celia Bronstein, also in piano. I also studied composition with Jacobo Ficher. It was a time of great names and significant influences in Argentina.

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In 1987, I traveled to Bloomington for the first time to study with Alfonso Montecino, a wonderful and super generous Chilean teacher who was a student of Arrau. With him, I worked a lot on Beethoven, which was primarily my focus with him. Soon after, I returned to study with Menahem Pressler, who passed away very recently. He was the creator of the Beaux Arts Trio and its pianist throughout his life, playing the piano until he was ninety-seven years old. He was a wonderful teacher with whom I worked on pieces that I love, and he was very generous in his teaching.

And well, then I started to travel. First, there was a trip to the United States, which resulted in my first CD focused on Argentine music. The people recording the concert offered to produce it for me. It was a project I loved very much because it included a repertoire that I adore, spanning everything from Williams to contemporary works—a lot of repertoire. After that, I traveled to France and Italy, where I played at several festivals. In France, I performed classical music concerts in general. At that time, I wasn't as specialized in Argentine music as I later became. I also did recitals of Argentine music. It always amazed me to see people's connection with our repertoire, which is not as well-known. Ginastera and Piazzolla are somewhat familiar to everyone, but composers like Sáenz, Williams, or Tauriello are not as well-known. Each composer resonated differently in various countries. Tauriello was appreciated in the United States due to his Copland influence, while Sáenz fascinated the French because of his unique style of language. And so on.

And then, well, I got married and moved to Australia in 2006. I started touring Southeast Asia, playing in countries I never thought I would perform in, sharing our music—mostly Argentine music—in places like Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok, locations very different and distant from our culture. One tends to wonder, 'How will they receive this?' It amazes me to see that music reaches everyone from the same place and with the same understanding, proving that it's a universal language.

This shows the role of music in bridging cultural gaps between different countries.

In 2016, I toured Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Argentina, and Chile with a Piazzolla concert. After the performances in Kuala Lumpur and Argentina, two people approached me with tears in their eyes, very moved, with the same comment about 'Oblivion': 'I would love for this piece to be played at my funeral.' It was also the same comment that someone made to me here in Australia in 2006 after a Piazzolla concert. It's incredible. Music is a language that goes directly to the spirit and requires no translation. And this is not explored by politicians or politics. I believe that the language that touches people from a place of spiritual edification can do a lot in an era where spiritual edification is non-existent.

We live surrounded by things that undermine the building of the spirit, and I think this is one of the main issues humanity and countries face today. That's a bit of the journey.

Here in Australia, I did things that significantly impacted me, such as the premiere of María de Buenos Aires. It was an odyssey because we needed to find musicians who could capture the essence of Piazzolla's music, which isn't simple, especially for strings that play a crucial role in the work. Piazzolla composed this piece to be performed on stage, not to be staged or danced. Ferrer added a clause prohibiting the translation of the text because, obviously, the text contains a lot of slang that's untranslatable. Working with the singer to understand what certain phrases meant was quite a challenge because it was truly difficult. It's a surrealistic text about the foundation of Buenos Aires and María, who is about to give birth to the city.

Nonetheless, we did marvelous work between some musicians from Canberra and Sydney, with the unconditional help of Jorge and José Bragato, Piazzolla's right hand, who handwrote the arrangements. I had told him, 'Maestro, I don't have the number of musicians needed;

I need a transcription where the base is a trio of cello, violin, and piano, to which we will later add percussion, flute, and other elements, but the base must be that.' It was a truly wonderful experience, and the play was awarded. The audience loved it, despite the text not being translated. The music was so powerful that translation wasn't really necessary. The music is magnificent.

Later, we did something I loved very much and consider very important for the musical life of Canberra, which was the premiere of the Cantata for Magical America in collaboration with the school of music. It's a wonderful and avant-garde work with ancient Mayan and Aztec texts by Alberto Ginastera, for twelve percussionists, two pianos, and a mezzo-soprano—a very impactful piece.

After that, other things emerged. In 2013/2014, I was commissioned to write a piece in homage to Lake Weereewa (Lake George). Composing Weereewa was life-changing, very moving, and special. When I visited the lake, which was dry at that time, a woman I adore and admire, Cameron Dallman, lived in front of the lake and held a ceremony for us to enter the lake. This deeply impacted me, and the presence of that arid, dry crater—like an image from the beginning of the world—inspired me to create a piece related to the lake, where the water appears and disappears, reflecting the beginning of the world.

This was Weereewa, featuring the voice of Aboriginal Duncan Smith and a didgeridoo. I wrote texts and asked for them to be translated into the Aboriginal language to introduce each movement of the piece. I also remember fondly playing Beethoven's Fourth with the Bangkok Symphony Orchestra, a concert I loved doing. It was a concert that perhaps was a pending assignment. When I was studying with Pressler, I wanted to study Beethoven's Fifth, but he urged me to study the Fourth because it suited my pianism. At that time, I was working on the Schumann concerto, not Beethoven's.

When the Bangkok Symphony Orchestra offered me the chance to play, it was part of a cycle of Beethoven's five concertos, and they offered me the Fourth. It was a beautiful experience, and I hope to repeat it someday.

Well, that's a bit of my journey where my whole life has somehow been tied to experiences that end up being multicultural.

WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE MOST REWARDING ASPECT OF MAKING ARGENTINE MUSIC WHILE LIVING ABROAD?

I believe the most rewarding aspect is spreading our roots. Sharing our culture, which is incredibly vast—only a part of it is known, and many highly valuable elements are not recognized. There are works by composers with very prolific outputs who were not fortunate enough to gain exposure in time or be discovered by publishers who would promote their work. So, one of the most gratifying things is spreading and enjoying it. When you create something in your own language, there is a significant sense of identity. When you play your own music, there is a profound sense of identity.

HOW HAS LIVING IN ANOTHER COUNTRY INFLUENCED YOUR MUSIC AND TEACHING STYLE?

Living abroad has given me a deeper sense of identity in my music. While I was in Argentina, my main repertoire consisted of the sonatas of Beethoven, Liszt, and Chopin, as well as Spanish music. I began exploring Piazzolla when an artistic director wanted me to perform in a show. I told him I didn't play tango, and he responded that it wasn't tango; it was Piazzolla. He handed me a manuscript of a cadenza that Piazzolla had written for 'Adiós Nonino' as a challenge to Ziegler, his pianist at the time.

When I played it at home, both my father, who was a fan of Piazzolla during a period when his music was heavily boycotted in Argentina, and I were fascinated. That marked the beginning of my exploration of this music. Later, when I had the opportunity to travel to China and aimed to spread Argentine culture, I started including works by other Argentine composers. Since then, their music has been a constant companion. Thus, living abroad has profoundly shaped my musical identity.

AND HOW HAS YOUR TEACHING STYLE CHANGED?

Living abroad has made my teaching style much more pluralistic. In Argentina, I primarily taught Argentineans and occasionally Chinese immigrants who were always eager to study music. Here, my students come from diverse backgrounds: Australians, children from Chinese families, and children from Malaysian, Thai, and Sri Lankan families, among others. This diversity requires me to connect in different ways because they have different mindsets and study methods. Additionally, I notice that young students here study music for a period, generally until they finish college, except for those who aspire to become professional musicians and pursue a longer trajectory. Music is very important for their development, and there is great appreciation and motivation to excel in it during their studies.

WHAT ROLE DO YOU THINK TECHNOLOGY PLAYS IN MODERN PIANO EDUCATION?

Technology can play two completely opposite roles. On one hand, it offers an excellent advantage by providing access to performances by great artists, master classes, and numerous resources through platforms like YouTube and the Internet. There are many benefits, but also some drawbacks, which is why this access needs to be guided.

A downside is that many, particularly teenagers, try to imitate certain things and end up taking bits and pieces without proper criteria for elaboration or research. Ultimately, the danger of technology, in my opinion, is that it leads people to believe that studying online is the same as studying in person. While art can be studied online and we can have online classes as a temporary measure, it is not the ideal way to study.

WHAT COMMON CHALLENGES DO YOUR STUDENTS FACE, AND HOW DO YOU HELP THEM?

The challenges faced by anyone in the art world are their own personal limits. The challenge a teacher has in front of a student is to help them overcome those limits and open new windows for them. Assistance is always provided from a place of possibility, never confronting them with what they can't do, but rather focusing on what they can do and helping them grow from that possibility. This is very important, as is instilling the awareness that not everyone is Martha Argerich and that playing the piano does not require mastering every piece that exists for the instrument. There are repertoires that better suit certain temperaments, certain hands, and certain bodies more than others. It has nothing to do with size; it is about spirit, natural strength, and a natural muscular predisposition.

You can help by guiding a career, especially for those who want to dedicate themselves to this field. Guide them in what is viable and what is a dream that will consume a lot of time without yielding results. It is very important in the life of an artist to have knowledge and awareness of their own capabilities, strengths, weaknesses, and limits.

WHAT CHALLENGES DO YOU FACE AS A TEACHER?

I apply the same structures or paths that I use with my students: researching, training, and studying. I design work systems that help me evolve in various aspects.

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I research what I play because I believe it is very important to know a lot about the composer, but above all, to know a lot about the repertoire that the composer produced to understand it, to speak its language, and, if possible, to make oneself a little invisible when conveying a composer. This is something I have seen a lot in actors. For example, when listening to Alcón recite, beyond it being Alcón doing what he does, there is great delight in hearing him convey García Lorca. It's not just acting they're doing, but a symbiosis. I believe that when an artist truly manages to become involved with what they do, in a way, they disappear so that the other can emerge. That's how it should be.

CAN YOU SHARE SOME FUTURE PROJECTS OR GOALS WITH US?

One of my future projects is the recording of my next CD. Last year, I recorded "Clásicos Argentinos, Volumen Uno," which was dedicated to small musical forms within Argentine music. This upcoming CD will be dedicated to Piazzolla's "The Four Seasons." Accompanying this project is something very important to me: my acceptance as an associate artist by the Australian Music Centre. This institution brings together all Australian composers and is responsible for publishing and promoting their work. My compositions will be published there.

WHAT MESSAGE WOULD YOU LIKE TO LEAVE FOR THE LATINO COMMUNITY IN GENERAL AND THE ARGENTINE COMMUNITY IN PARTICULAR?

I believe the message to the Latino community and the Argentine community is that we should be extremely proud of the enormous cultural potential we have. In the case of music, I am talking about composers, performers, and also genres. I am talking about our roots. We have enormous composers like Ginastera, Piazzolla, Tauriello, Sáenz, Williams—I could go on naming hundreds who are wonderful—some very recognized and played abroad, others not, but all equally valuable.

The work of Guastavino is wonderful and is shared within certain circles, but it is not widely consumed. I invite all Spanish speakers to explore these composers. We have performers of all kinds, from Martha Argerich and Daniel Barenboim, who represent us wonderfully, to Atahualpa Yupanqui in his time, and Mercedes Sosa. We don't need to refer only to classical music performers, as the performers of our music have been recognized at the Sorbonne, in places where culture is studied deeply.

It is absolutely important that we have generations following those I mentioned, who are now in their 80s, like the generation of Nelson Goerner, who won the Queen Elizabeth Piano Competition. We have artists of wonderful caliber and very varied genres.
If one takes Argentine folklore from the north to the south, it is vast and absolutely diverse, just like the people who inhabit our country and its landscape. I believe that music is the landscape, it is the painting of that landscape, and this is transcendent. When people listen to our music, in the case of Argentines who are listening to our music, they are immersed in those images, in that landscape. For those who are not Argentine and do not know our country, the music brings them closer to that reality. ■

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