



PERFORMER CORNER

The Unexpected Life of Paraguayan Harpist Nicolas Carter

by Elizabeth Prielozny Barnes

Now a long-time fixture of Latin American music making in the Twin Cities, Nicolas Carter never intended to be a professional musician. His multi-faceted professional life is a reflection of his musical philosophy—it's an improvisation based on working from the heart and following the path as it unfolds, even in the most unlikely ways.

Paraguay is a small, landlocked country in the middle of South America. Nicolas' father, a native of Minnesota, and mother, who was raised in Argentina and Uruguay of Swiss parents, moved permanently to Paraguay in the 1960s to work as social workers and missionaries, and it is in Paraguay that they raised their family. Nicolas counts elements typical of his lower middle class Paraguayan environment as his strongest influences. Folk music was everywhere growing up; it was on the radio, central to all festivals and celebrations; it was in his parents' workplace and at church. Guitar was the number one choice to learn, but harp was next in popularity. Paraguay has a unique, 36-string harp that was originally inherited from the Spanish missionaries who brought the music and instruments of Europe when they came to the Americas in the 16th century. (The 1986 film *The Mission* beautifully depicts this time and place.) The area's native Guarani people proved to be so musical that even after the missionaries left, the tradition of building, playing, and then further developing the harp continued in its own way. Known today as the national instrument of Paraguay, the Paraguayan harp has its own unique construction, playing techniques, and sound. (Simply google "Paraguayan harp" to easily find basic information about the instrument.)

Contentious national politics compelled many musicians to leave the country in the 1940s, and their exile introduced much of the western world to the folk music of Paraguay. This emigration coincided with a growing recording industry and renewed interest in folk music that resulted in many Paraguayan musicians becoming quite well known as far away as in Europe. One

of these expatriates, master harpist Isidro Caballero, having grown weary of the life of a touring musician, returned home to Paraguay in the 1960s and made his living going from house to house giving harp lessons. He was Nicolas' first teacher. These first harp lessons were presented in traditional folk music style, developing finger techniques, learning tunes by ear and with it developing a strong memory and improvisational skills.

Describing himself as just a regular kid who played soccer with perhaps "just a bit" more relish than he made music, it was never Nicolas' intention to become a professional musician, just to make music like what he heard all around him. In his neighborhood music making was most often passed down within the family, from generation to generation. In one house lived a family of guitarists, while down the street was a family of singers. Being "outsiders" (not originally from Paraguay) Nicolas' family was not a part of this natural family-based music making system, but his mom was somebody who arranged everything for the household, and that included finding music teachers for her children! Growing up Nicolas most often played music with his brother, who studied guitar. And they played anytime, for everybody. Such pride infused this family music making that when they traveled to the United States, the harp came with them so Nicolas could play for his grandparents!

Nicolas' formal education and professional development took its own unique path but continually called him back to the harp. Coming to the University of Minnesota as a theater major he felt no need bring his harp along. However when contacted by renowned Paraguayan folk singer Lizza Bogado—also in Minnesota at

the time—as the only Paraguayan harpist in the area he was honored to accompany her as she performed. (He was able to retrieve that harp brought to his grandparents' so many years ago.) Lizza introduced Nicolas to professional music making, and they became close friends. Everything Hispanic was coming to the fore, and Lizza became part of a local "new song" movement using music to protest against right-wing dictatorship politics in South America. People from many Spanish-speaking communities in Minnesota were first brought together by this unifying force based in song.

Still knowing he was destined for the theater, Nicolas finished his bachelor's degree, returned home to Paraguay to be a hot theater director, and dropped music once more. But before long Lizza invited him to tour and perform with her. He accepted and took very seriously his responsibility of representing Paraguay and its music as far away as Sweden. So he returned to harp lessons with higher aspirations than before. These lessons proved to be so rich

that he listened to recordings of them for years to come to be able to incorporate everything.

After the tour to Sweden, Nicolas returned to the States in the early 1990s and began work on an M.F.A.

in theater at the "U." Straddling the world of theater with his university studies and the music making that earned income, he began performing in an ensemble called *Son del Sur* with Latin-American musicians from a variety of cultures. Virtually everything multicultural was embraced here in Minnesota, and Nicolas recognized that the charm of his harp made it a perfect way to exemplify Latino people.

Nicolas' next trip to Paraguay in 1994 had him teaching theater, when it was announced that he'd received a Fulbright to



study theater in Paris for the 1995-96 season at the Center of Theater for the Oppressed. But after only a few months of studies he was saturated! Then seemingly out of nowhere, an Ecuadorian harpist invited him to play harp together—they played everyday for a month in the Metro in Paris. Eight hours a day; he'd never played so much in his life! This was an amazing and intense laboratory, learning repertoire and new styles of Latin-American music. He also learned in a very practical way how much you can achieve when you spend so much time learning and practicing your craft.

Nicolas finds the trajectory of his life as a musician to have been circumstantial, that opportunities have just happened in mysterious, profound and unbidden order. Firmly ensconced for the time being in Minneapolis with his wife and three children, Nicolas' most recent musical experiences have focused on moving beyond using music as a representation of specific Latin American cultures, to combining music from many cultures and backgrounds to explore the

timeless, borderless shared heart of music making. His proudest work is with Argentinean guitarist Renato Lombardi, with whom he created the ensemble Nube, doing just that type of musical exploration.

Nicolas has also worked on several projects with me that cross the conventional boundaries between classical and folk music. He worked with MNSOTA member Toyo Lang and her string students in the Minneapolis Public Schools, introducing them to improvising over Latin American rhythmic patterns and song forms. From these improvisations they created a string orchestra composition for which all were very proud and excited. Nicolas has also performed as guest artist with a community orchestra I direct in the east metro, and worked with, coached, and performed with the professional string orchestra Vox Corda. This winter we worked again with string students in the Minneapolis Public Schools, this time introducing Latin American folk music by exploring and learning to create their unique and, from a classical music per-

spective, complex rhythmic framework, first through listening and feeling, next through playing on the instrument, and only then by reading printed music. This is all fitting work for somebody who embodies the heart of improvisation, which is to say "yes" as experiences come your way, learn, develop and continue wherever the path leads. Learn more about Nicolas and his work by visiting his website: www.nicolascarter.com.

Chicago native Elizabeth Prielozny Barnes is an orchestra conductor who has also worked extensively in outreach and arts-in-education. Through these experiences she was introduced to some of the extraordinary musicians working outside of the classical music realm. This led her to create Vox Corda (voice of the string), as a way to explore all genres of acoustic string music and offer another facet of string music advocacy. This past season the professional Vox Corda String Orchestra presented its first season of cross-cultural string orchestra concerts. Visit www.voxcorda.org for more information. †