

40 Years Later



The story begins in 1969 when I went to La Paz, Bolivia, to spend two years as concertmaster of their National Symphony Orchestra. It was a rich and intense period which played a major part in shaping my life during the years that followed. I did everything relating to the violin. In addition to playing in the orchestra I played concertos and conducted, I organized a chamber music group which toured all over the country. I taught all the advanced violin students. I was Mr. Violin for an entire country — heady stuff! I became fluent in Spanish, the right way: I learned in the street. I was there for two revolutions! It was the time of the Vietnam War. Everybody hated the US. But that didn't effect our personal friendships. The people were warm and welcoming. Rapport was quick and real. We discussed politics incessantly. It was there that I started my journey towards appreciating and loving my country.

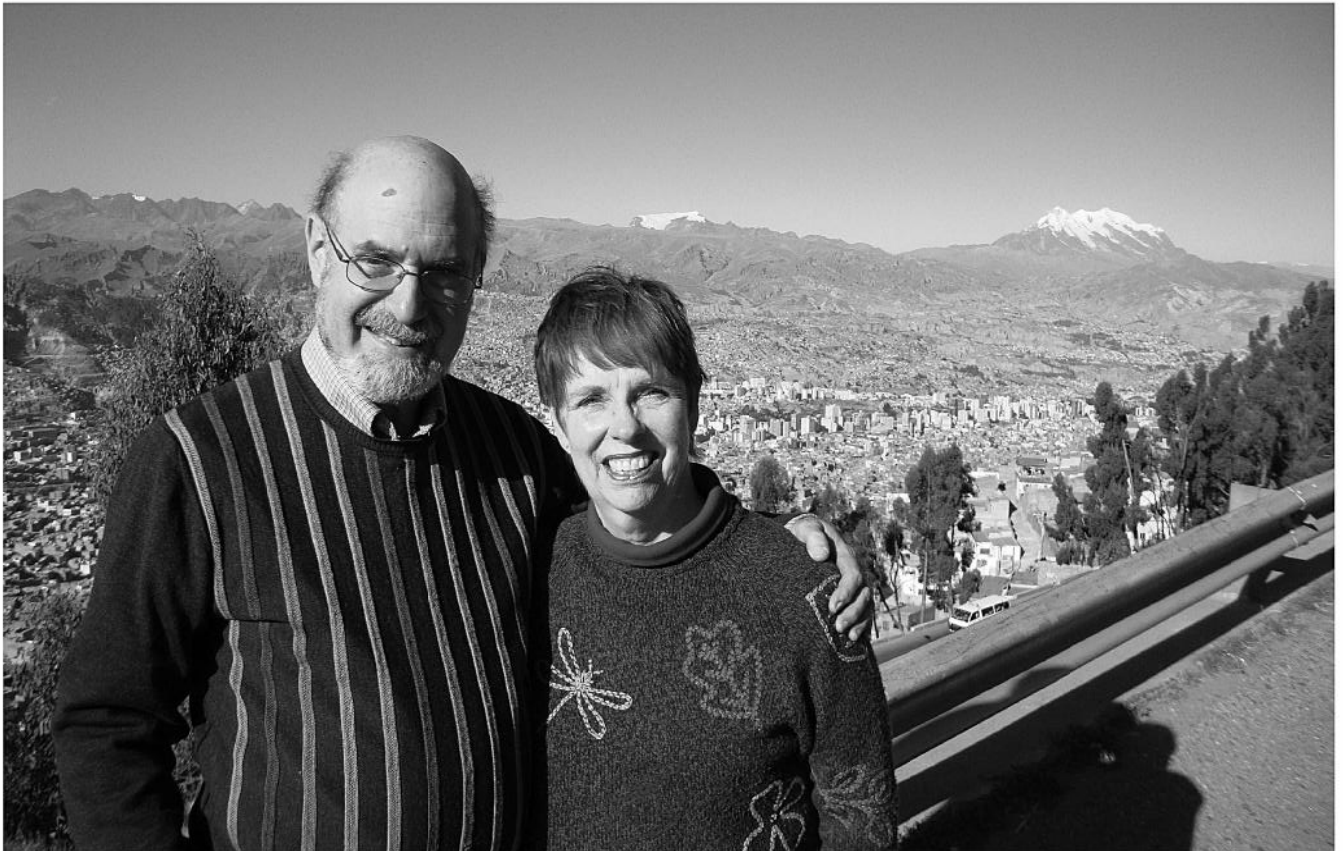
The conductor of the Sinfónica, Gerald Brown, was a Peace Corps volunteer. His job with the Peace Corps was to conduct and build up the Sinfónica Nacional. He hired professional players from the United States, Argentina and Uruguay, to be the leaders of the Sinfónica and to teach. So there was a group of about 12 of us who were responsible for building up the classical music culture of the whole country. The sense of a collective mission was powerful indeed. I thrived on that sense of mission and have looked for it in vain everywhere I have been since.

Fast forward forty years. Life has been full and often hectic. All of a sudden I'm retired and able to do all the things I've always yearned to do — if only I could think of what they were. I got out my memorabilia from the Bolivia years — photos, newspaper articles, concert programs. Wow! What a rich and rewarding time that was! Wow! To go back there and share it with Charlotte! But not as tourists! To be part of the life stream. To live and work with the people. Perhaps to make a difference!

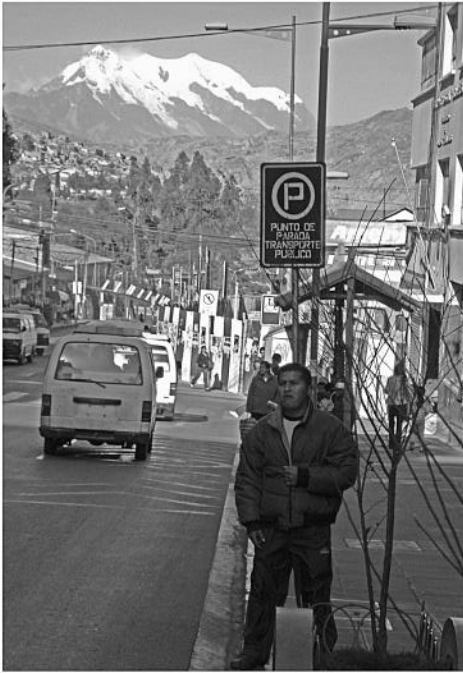
With the help of my old Bolivian buddy, Willy Sucre, I got in touch with the conductor of the Sinfónica, David Handel, to see what the possibilities might be. So a bunch of e-mails went back and forth and with remarkably little fuss and bother we were set: Roy to play as guest co-concertmaster of the Sinfónica, lead a workshop for string players, and play in an international festival; Charlotte to teach a workshop and master classes for singers. Of course some items remained hazy such as travel schedules, living arrangements, financial arrangements — but as David Handel aptly put it, "If you want to get along in this part of the world you have to be able to roll with the punches!"

The months roll by. The festival is postponed and then postponed again. Dates still in flux. No word about flights or living arrangements. Roy isn't surprised. The time draws close. Charlotte is getting uncomfortable with the whole thing. "What's the matter with those people anyway? Why can't they get their act together? How can I teach master-classes when I don't speak the language? I'm worried about

Continued on pg. 4



This is the first glimpse of La Paz that all visitors see, approaching the city from the airport. The city spreads out panoramically in the mountains. If R&C were not in the way you would see about a fifth of the city in this photo. The mountain at the right is Illimani, 21,122 ft. You can see a short video of this panorama on my YouTube page: <http://www.youtube.com/user/roysonne>



Top left: Typical street in La Paz with the nearby mountainside in the background and towering above, the more distant peak of Illimani

Top right: The Peña Folklorica, Marka Tambo, where the people gather for food and drink while they enjoy the traditional Bolivian music and dance. In the foreground are the patrons sitting at their tables. On stage are two couples performing a traditional dance. The backdrop is a spectacular mural of Murillo, who led the revolution against the Spaniards in La Paz.

Middle: Bolivians never miss an opportunity for a fiesta. Here we see the dancers celebrating the Entrada Folklórica Universitaria., in front of the Iglesia de San Francisco on the city's main thoroughfare. On July 25 I was awakened at 9:00 a.m. by the sounds of the bands as one group after another, walked, danced, sang, played instruments, and displayed their skill and their beauty, throughout the city; each one more elaborately costumed than the last. At 9:00 p.m. the festivities were still going strong.

Bottom left: Charlotte really enjoyed shopping for Bolivian handicrafts or artesanias. Here she is with the shopkeeper in a very typical shop on calle Sagarnaga, where one finds the best and most plentiful folkloric objects.

Bottom right: The ever-present houses on the mountainside.



the altitude.”

Roy: “I’ve been through all this before. It’s all going to work out I hope!”

Finally we receive word — they’ll be putting us up at the Hotel Presidente. We look it up online. Five star hotel! Gorgeous!

June 15 we start our journey, forty years later, almost to the day. First stop, Miami. Dinner with my old Bolivian buddy and former student Freddy Ortiz. I call Aerosur to reconfirm our flight. “Sorry, Señor, those reservations were cancelled.” Yikes! Not again! The same thing happened in 1969! Frantic phone calls! Waiting! And more waiting! “Hola, Sr. Sonne. Your reservations are reconfirmed.. Qué tengan buen viaje.”

And so we arrived at the La Paz airport and walked off the plane onto the tarmac at 14,000 feet. It felt fantastic. The air was crisp and dry. The temperature was bracing. Our friendly driver met us there and drove us into the city, down the famous road with the phenomenal view of La Paz — the photo on page 2 doesn’t begin to do it justice. We unpacked at the hotel and went for lunch with David Handel. David took amazing care of us every step of the way — making sure that all our needs were met, both personally and professionally. Charlotte had one very bad day of altitude sickness — horrible headaches all day. Roy, fortunately was OK except for the usual shortness of breath and tiredness that everybody goes through.

Monday: we started our teaching activities. Roy started his string workshop at the Centro Sinfónico. It ran three hours every day for two weeks with a concert at the end. There were 32 people playing and another 10-15 listening. The level was far above what it used to be. So many talented people! And they are HUNGRY to learn. Irresistible!! Meanwhile Charlotte met with 24 gifted singers and voice teachers at the Conservatorio Nacional. The language barrier turned out to be non-existent (I told you so!) and soon they were all in love with her and vice-versa!

All too soon Charlotte had to return home to get ready for her trip to Uganda. But we did manage to fit in a spectacular all day excursion to Lake Titicaca with our own fabulous private tour guide. (See cover photo.) We also did a lot of walking around La Paz and a lot of shopping in their fantastic Sagarnaga marketplace. So we had a tearful farewell and for five weeks we had to communicate every day via Skype. Thank God for technology! Most days we would talk for half an hour or more. The cost was \$0.02 per minute. Amazing! If you don’t know about Skype be sure to check it out at <http://skype.com>.

So I stayed on in La Paz. I played as co-concertmaster of the Sinfónica for two concerts. What a thrill to see how it has grown

over the years. There were actually a couple of people still there who I had known earlier including my old compañero and former student, Fredy Cespedes who is now their concertmaster. More about Fredy on the next page. I also started rehearsing for my solo recital with a wonderful Bolivian pianist, Grace Rodriguez who had actually been a very young student in the Conservatorio when I used to teach there. AND . . . I made myself available for lessons for the members of the Sinfónica and the Conservatorio. Every day for the next month three or four people came to my hotel room for lessons — many wonderful talents, some quite accomplished, all HUNGRY for whatever I could offer them. I was in Heaven!!

There was even a little time left for relaxation. An evening with my friends Christian Asturizaga and Ximena Inchauste at a Peña Folklorica to enjoy indigenous Bolivian music and dancing. (Photo on pg. 3.) A couple of wonderful dinners with my friend and former student, Johnny Gelernter. I went to a jazz place, Club Thelonius, and sat in with the band. The band leader told me I was welcome back anytime, and in his broken English he said, “When you go back to U-nit-ed States, you tell them that in Bolivia we play f**ing good!!”

In Bolivia you never know what’s gonna happen next. At the last minute the President of the country, Evo Morales, asked the orchestra to play on July 16 for the celebration of the 200th anniversary of La Paz. Morales is somewhat of an enigma. He is the country’s first indigenous president. Running as a socialist in the mold of Venezuela’s Chavez, he promised to be “the US worst nightmare.” (Delusions of grandeur IMHO) But he is certainly welcoming American businesses and as far as I could tell there is a lot more prosperity than there used to be. Many people who I respect, believe that he is doing a lot of good for the country. A common viewpoint seems to be “Fidel, No! Chavez, No! Evo, Si!” At any rate he is a big supporter of the Sinfónica Nacional, and its American conductor. So the entire schedule of the Sinfónica got shifted around and on July 16 we played at one end of a huge ballroom, and at the table at the other end of the room were four leftist presidents: Morales of Bolivia, Chavez of Venezuela, Correa of Ecuador and Lugo of Paraguay.

More wonderful new friends, more students, more concerts, more adventures. Time to say hasta luego and return to Pittsburgh knowing that we will return next summer and hopefully again and again. Summing up, I found La Paz still teeming with life, even more crowded than it used to be, with more amenities, more new buildings and many, many more cars; but the essential look and feel of the city and the people remains remarkably unchanged. I am thrilled that Charlotte came to love it too, to understand what it has meant to me, and to look forward to returning together. I also have one great regret — that I lost touch for so long and waited so many years to return. Better late than never, ¿verdad?



DAVID HANDEL

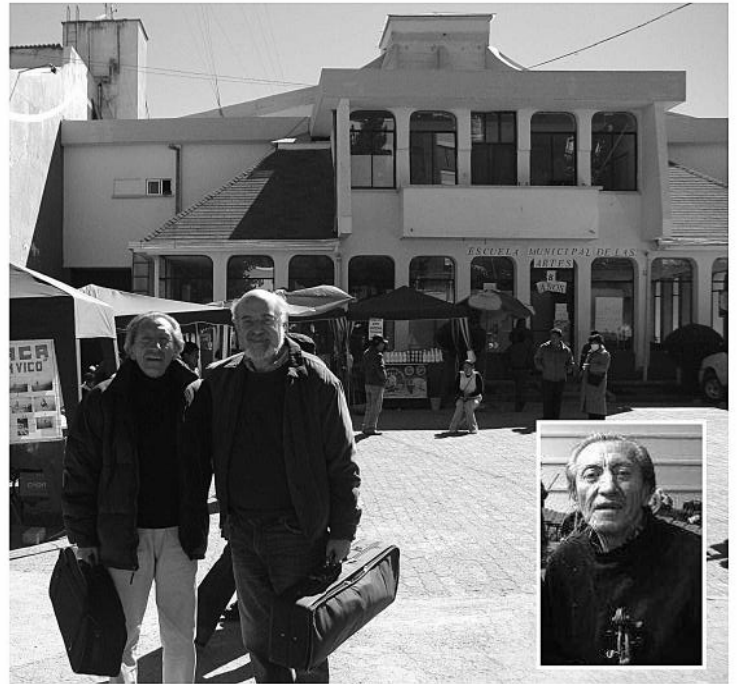
Is history repeating itself? Once again the OSN of Bolivia has an American Music Director. DAVID HANDEL has a remarkable ability to establish personal rapport and work together with people on all levels, from the janitors and security guards, to the musicians, to the symphony staff, to corporate CEO’s, diplomats, and up to the President of the country and the cabinet ministers.

After twelve years his accomplishments are formidable:

- *He has elevated the playing level of the Bolivian National Symphony to an unprecedented level, instilling for the first time a culture of professionalism among the musicians and the staff.*
- *He has increased the audience many times over and has created new musical events including Bolivia’s first international music festival.*
- *He has built a base of corporate support for the orchestra, making it the only orchestra in Latin America to enjoy such support.*



Top left: An Indian lady or chola, wearing her traditional garb, sells her wares in the plaza outside the Iglesia de San Francisco.



Top right: Roy and Fredy Cespedes in front of his Escuela Municipal de las Artes in El Alto. Fredy deserves a chapter all to himself. In the city of El Alto, a city which didn't exist 40 years ago and now has a population of over a million, mostly poor people, Fredy has built an amazing and inspiring music school. To do so, he had to secure gifts of 200 instruments from the Chinese government, and a beat up old building, (the former City Hall) from the city government. Working for eight years with a skeleton teaching staff of four people, his Escuela Municipal de las Artes, now has an orchestra of 80 young people. They all receive free instruction for ten hours a week or more in addition to the use of their instruments. I sat in on a rehearsal of the Beethoven Choral Fantasy. ¡Formidable!

Middle: Residential area in an affluent section of the city. Anybody interested in living here? The cost of living is amazingly cheap. People with a reasonable US retirement income could live like kings in La Paz.



Bottom left: Roy rehearses in the Centro Sinfónico with the students of the String Seminar.

Bottom right: Charlotte with some of her students from the vocal workshop.

