

Seasoned Venezuelan conductor makes Alabama his home and is changing the lives of American musicians

Carlos Izcaray was born under the rainforest canopy of Venezuela's capital, Caracas; an unlikely beginning for a champion of 21st-century classical music.

Growing up with a father who was a well-known conductor and music educator and a mother who worked in music administration, Izcaray was nourished with music from the beginning. This early knowledge carried him to musical heights as principal cellist in the Venezuelan National Symphony, the musical director at the American Youth Symphony Orchestra, and the conductor at the Alabama Symphony Orchestra.

"I grew up running around behind theatres, which made everything seem more accessible," Izcaray said.

At 3 years old, Izcaray was enrolled in Venezuela's public system of youth orchestras, where his small fingers first became familiar with his violin strings. As his love for music grew, so did the size of his instrument. Izcaray took up the cello, on which he played when his love for music became his own.

It was the summer of 1993 when Izcaray knew music was his passion, and he describes it as his moment of "infection".

"The good kind of infection," Izcaray said.

"My friend who was also a cellist was visiting me at my parents' house. We had an inspiring conversation. It was in a split-second. I knew I was going to be a musician," Izcaray said.

Before starting high school, Izcaray packed up his growing music interest and moved it to the United States, where his parents came to pursue higher education degrees in music. Concentrating on cello, Izcaray's musicianship flourished. As a chamber musician and a soloist, he earned the title of principal player at the famous Larkin Arts Academy in Harrisonburg, Virginia.

But, his move into the world of music was only beginning.

Izcaray picked up interest in composition and conducting. At age 17, he was enrolled in conducting lessons. Soon after, he began his bachelor's degree at the New World School of Fine Arts in Miami, Florida, where his father had been hired to teach conducting classes.

After earning his first degree, Izcaray put conducting aside and refocused his time and effort into his cello. When his student visa ended, he returned to Venezuela and became principal cellist at Venezuela's National Orchestra.

But, once again, his passion for conducting continued to crescendo.

"I had to decide if I was going to be a full-time cellist or a conductor," Izcaray said.

As he began conducting symphonies and operas around the globe, it was clear that conducting was where his heart lied.

Izcaray learned that being a music director is not just about being a conductor, but also about being the face of the ensemble to the community and connecting with all kinds of people.

"You feel like an actor who has been over all of these incredible lead roles. They are all amazing," Izcaray said.

One of the most important lessons that Izcaray said he learned that music is not just about abstract sounds, but it's about the people and the community as well.

His traveling led him to Alabama, where Izcaray began his career as music director of the [Alabama Symphony Orchestra](#). Located in the heart of Birmingham, the ASO is made up of professional symphonic musicians that travel on annual tours.

“Birmingham is a family-friendly environment, but the arts scene is what did it for us,” Izcaray said.

He now splits his time between Birmingham and Los Angeles, where he is also the music director of the American Youth Symphony.

“I am a full-time music director, but I also consider myself an educator and a music creator,” Izcaray said.

When Izcaray first became the conductor of ASO, his schedule filled up with rehearsals and concerts, but, he got to drive his kids to school, which made his hard work well worth it.

Izcaray recognizes that his passion for music and perseverance through difficult times has brought him to success in the world of music.

“I like the art form, but I also like the process. It's like climbing a mountain. Persistence is part of it, and staying focused is important,” Izcaray said.

But, his wife would describe him as being stubborn about his passion for music.

“My family members are the first ones to hear my crazy theories. The community gets to hear me through a lot of filters,” said Izcaray.

Kyuna Kim was the concertmaster of the Alabama Symphony Youth Orchestra from 2018-2019 and looked up to “Maestro Izcaray” despite not playing directly under his leadership.

“Maestro Izcaray didn’t get paid to be with us, but he would still show up to our rehearsals and encourage us,” Kim said.

But what is etched into her mind is the way that he reacted to the young orchestra’s mistakes. He would respond with kind and encouraging words and never made one negative comment towards the orchestra.

“He is so open and easy to approach. He makes you want to have a conversation with him and learn more about him,” Kim said.

Tara Aesquivel, executive director for the American Youth Orchestra, describes Izcaray’s passion toward music and the younger generations as “spiritual”.

“To him, it’s not just a job. It’s something that he truly feels committed to with every fiber of his being,” Aesquivel said.

Izcaray commits himself to this art form because it allows artists to connect with others in a language that is deeper than words. This principle brings hope to Izcaray, and he hopes it does the same for others.

Performing top works written by composers like Beethoven with a fine orchestra is one of Izcaray’s favorite parts about his job. But, he still savors composing cello concertos and performing his own works.

Izcaray values working with orchestras because he can welcome people of all backgrounds, cultures, and personalities into his world of music. Diversity is what he pays attention to.

Music evangelizing, as Izcaray calls it.

For Izcaray, being someone who is from a place that isn't necessarily associated with classical music gives him further motivation to open his arms to people with any level of music background, or lack thereof, with a passion to learn.

Much like a cool, big, brown rescue dog, as Izcaray put it.

"I like to be the one who cares who they are and where they came from. I knock down all of those barriers," Izcaray said.

How did Izcaray say that he wants to be remembered?

"As a musician who gave it all."