



L.A.'s Santa Cecilia Orchestra

# A C L A S S I C A L A C T

HISPANIC  
CONDUCTOR

BY DIANA A. TERRY-AZÍOS

BRINGS MUSIC  
TO LATINO  
CHILDREN



Sonia Marie de León de Vega conducting.

**S**onia Marie de León de Vega started her conducting career as a toddler hiding behind the living room sofa, pretending to conduct her father's trio rehearsals. Years later as an adult, de León de Vega became the first woman in history—and the second conductor in 150 years—to be

invited by the Vatican to conduct in front of the Pope.

Today, she brings music to the Latino community in Los Angeles in hopes it will influence their lives the way it inspired hers.

Conducting before an audience of thousands is not as easy as it looks. As a student at California State University in Los Angeles, de León de Vega delayed her conducting course until she had almost completed the degree. "I was terrified of standing in front of everyone," she says. "Then I took the course, and I turned out to be very good at it, a natural. My teacher encouraged me to study conducting in grad school."

She earned her graduate degree in 1984, and in 1986 was acclaimed enough to receive the Vatican invitation.

From 1986 to 1992, de León de Vega traveled as a guest conductor with various orchestras and operas.

Moving from one elaborate theater to the next, she began to wonder why an orchestra had to perform in such places. "I saw a need to take music to the community," she says. "I wanted to make it accessible to people." The composers who produced the music were rather poor, she says, so why should only the wealthy enjoy it?

In 1992, she founded the Santa Cecilia Orchestra in Los Angeles, which is dedicated to bringing music to the Latino

community.

As one of the few Latina conductors in the world, her performances have been televised worldwide. She also produces and directs the annual "Opera Under the Stars" concert which showcases young talent. Several national businesses, including Univisión, named her Outstanding Latina Woman of the Year. Through all her accomplishments, de León de Vega says the community and outreach programs are the hearts of the orchestra.

Some of the area schools have no music program, she says, so she sends Santa



School children at a class under de León de Vega's program.

Cecilia's 62 musicians to the schools to give children an earful. Classroom music visits begin with one instrument, build to a couple and then end with the entire orchestra.

Students also hear the musicians' childhood stories and develop an interactive relationship.

"Music offers self-esteem," de León de Vega says. "When children have music in their lives, they get to work at something and see results and learn discipline."

Her goal is to expand the



De León de Vega sends 62 musicians to teach children in L.A.

program to 48 schools by 2002.

"You don't have to join a gang; you can join an orchestra," she says.

Her love for music pumps in her blood. De León de Vega is the daughter of actress and producer Sonia de León and singer and guitarist Reynaldo Sánchez, both Texas natives. Vega's sister, Carla de León, records with Fonovisa records. "[My father] really inspired me to play," she says. "I listened to his rehearsals when I was little, and he bought me my first piano when I was five years old."

De León de Vega is very much tied to her Latino roots. She recalls one incident where she experienced discrimination at a concert she attended with husband Rudolfo Vega. Taking a particular interest in the conductor's activities, de León de Vega leaned forward in her chair to get a better view. The spectator behind her informed her she was blocking the view and added, "You people don't

belong here. You people don't know a thing about classical music."

Although insulted, she felt determined to work harder for her community.

"It makes them feel good to see me conduct because I am one of them," she says. "And if something like that were to happen to someone at my concert, all they would have to do is point at the stage to know they belong."

Unfortunately, there aren't many Latinos in the Santa Cecilia Orchestra, and she

admits that Latino musicians are rare.

In an effort to change that, one of Santa Cecilia's goals is to buy instruments for the school students. Eventually, de León de Vega would like to build community orchestras of local children.

"The response from the children is what really keeps me going," she says, describing letters that students send after attending a concert.

One student wrote: "When I heard you play, it touched my heart and I began to cry because I didn't know there was anything so beautiful in the world."

A fourth grader commented: "When I heard this music, it made everything bad in my life—and there has been a lot of bad in my life—go away, and it felt as if it would never come back."

Another student said: "My friends told me that the only things important in life are



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friends and gangs. Now I know there is more."

With only a small staff of four, and a family to maintain, de León de Vega has faced obstacles "at every turn." The field is always difficult for a woman, especially in the early 1980s when she broke in, and people in the industry "aren't out there looking for Mexican American women," she adds.

To tackle the many tasks of Santa Cecilia, de León de Vega plays several roles—from musician to fundraiser to event coordinator.

Luckily, her husband is supportive. Rudolfo Vega is a licensed family and child therapist with a private practice. It was love at first sound when, on their first date, his car radio

was set to the classical music station. "He has been great," de León de Vega says. "He has worked his schedule around mine so one of us is always with our son."

Rudolfo Joaquín, their two-year-old son, already takes music lessons. When he gets a little older, he will visit his mother's rehearsals and—she hopes—follow in her footsteps the way de León de Vega followed in her father's. **H**

*De León de Vega and the Santa Cecilia Orchestra will perform in July at the John Anson Ford Theatre in Los Angeles. For more information, visit her website at [www.scorchestra.org](http://www.scorchestra.org)*