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Music, maestro, please

Conductor JoAnn Falletta talks of her art and dreams as she look forward to three more years in front of the Long Beach Symphony

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With quiet power and passion, JoAnn Falletta stood before the orchestra, raised a baton, embraced the sound and fell in love. Her suitor was the Long Beach Symphony. Now it was her turn to return the kiss, and she did so gracefully and willingly.

It was April 8, 1989, and the 35-year-old conductor was in town to audition for the job of music director, one of five candidates invited to perform a tryout concert.

"She was obviously superior," recalls viola player Laura McCrary. "She conducted the pants off everyone else."

Then, as now, the petite, soft-spoken musician belied the stereotype of the charismatic conductor with an ego the size of Carnegie Hall. She was unpretentious, sweet and scholarly. And she was (drum roll) a woman--a civic curiosity in those days, a revolutionary presence in a nearly all-male fraternity.

Last month, to the delight and relief of a city that has come to think of her as its most beloved asset, JoAnn Falletta renewed her vows with the symphony. She signed a contract for three more seasons.

She laughs a little at the memory of that first night at the podium of the cavernous Terrace Theater. Yes, she was nervous. Of course she was nervous. She still is. Despite her unflappable exterior, she says in her heart she's still the shy little Catholic girl who sat quietly in the back of her grade-school class.

"Before a concert, there is a lot of anxiety," she says. "There is a feeling that anything could happen, a sense that it's really very important. You learn that being nervous is useful. You USE the anxiety. Without the anxiety, there is no sense of adrenaline. Anxiety is what keeps conductors going."

"I am very, very hard on myself," adds Falletta, a woman hailed by the publication *Musical America* as "one of the most promising conductors of her generation," and by the *Los Angeles Times* as "one of the brightest stars of symphonic music in America."

"There is no critic as hard on me as I am on myself. You have to be. That's the way you get better. There have been times I've gotten great reviews and I have been miserable. That feeling can stay with me for days. You know you always could have been better, you always could have known more or studied harder."

"There is pain. It can be lonely. But it is worthwhile. To participate in music is a tremendous, tremendous privilege. Sometimes I get to a city and I'm tired and angry that I have to go from place to place. But I only have to be in rehearsal 10 minutes and I feel great. I get that feeling from the music. To be part of the very best that human beings are capable of is completely life affirming."

Falletta, who will celebrate her 40th birthday in February, is seated in the living room of her eighth-floor apartment in the Villa Riviera in downtown Long Beach. She's just arrived from San Francisco where she serves as music director of the Women's Philharmonic. The week before, she was at the podium in Norfolk, Va., where she also serves as conductor. Next week, she's off to Mexico City.

Last year, she performed a staggering 125 concerts - from Honolulu to Antwerp, Buffalo to Beijing, quite possibly chalking up more frequent-flier miles than Warren Christopher.

Not surprisingly, her Long Beach residence is a cross between hotel and home. Other than a lute and a couple of photographs of her adored niece and nephew, the pastel apartment is more functional than fashionable.

She does not own a TV.

Real home is Westchester, N.Y., where she spends two months of the year with her husband, Robert Alemany--if she's lucky. Alemany, a computer programmer and clarinetist, frequently joins his peripatetic wife on trips, as he did recently on a visit to China.

Falletta admits the travel and constant demands on her time can be exhausting. Still, she says, "I think it's made our marriage more special. We really, really enjoy each other, and we don't take one another for granted."

There was a time when Falletta talked of wanting children very much. On this day, she says with a touch of sadness, "A baby doesn't seem to be in the cards for me. And I'm very sorry about that."

As she talks, Falletta is a fully engaged conversationalist with strong opinions on everything from the state of California to the state of mind of the nation. Although the Long Beach Symphony serves as a national model of fiscal health, arts groups throughout the country are facing severe budget reductions and closures. Orchestras from San Diego to Rochester hover on the brink of collapse.

#### Great concerns

Falletta is acutely troubled by the cutbacks in the arts. "Art is the only solution to our problems, and we don't see that," she declares. "Musicians are trained and then they are silent. In this country, we only talk about financial poverty. Our concern should be emotional poverty.

"We've retreated into our homes. We don't trust there's cause to celebrate. The arts are seen as an extra, a frill. Art should be seen as the only answer. Art lets people know who they are, and who others are. "Art is the common denominator."

Falletta has just read part of an interview with Ernest Fleischmann, executive vice president and managing director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and totally disagrees with his analysis of the American classical music scene ("There are far too few good conductors"), and his ideas about creating a kind of centralized mega-orchestra.

#### Outstanding training

First, she says American conductors are better trained than ever before, and are versatile in an astonishing range of music from Baroque to the most fearsomely difficult contemporary work. Yet only a very small minority of the top conductors in the world are American.

"As a whole, we have the strongest orchestras in the world," she says. "The bulk of the European orchestras could never compete with the orchestras here. Our technical level is unmatched. Yet Americans still have that inferiority, that feeling that if it's European, it's got to be better."

What the Europeans do have that Americans lack is a tradition of respect and support of the arts. In Europe, art is not viewed as a bonus. Rather, it is viewed as an integral part of the fabric of life. In Mannheim, Germany, for example, the population is smaller than Long Beach, yet fully 900 people are employed by the city as musicians and dancers, lighting designers and stage managers, opera singers and orchestra conductors, Falletta says.

"Every night something is going on. Musicians are your neighbors. Art is a normal part of life.

"Fleishmann's idea of a mega-orchestra is against the whole American philosophy," she adds. "It's inhumane to tell a community not to strive for excellence. Small orchestras are treasured by their communities.

"The success of the symphony in Long Beach is because Long Beach cares about it. The public cares. Companies and corporations care. It would not be the same if the L.A. Philharmonic came here. Sometimes small orchestras are spectacular, and they often take the biggest risks."

Falletta, who has not yet met her glamorous Los Angeles counterpart, Esa-Pekka Salonen, rates the LBSO at the top of the second tier of orchestras in the country. No, it isn't in the major leagues with the symphonies in such cities as New York and Boston.

#### High-caliber town

Because Long Beach is located in one of the richest cultural areas in the nation, however, she says the caliber of its musicians and staff is qualitatively higher than most orchestras.

“This is the greatest talent pool in the world. We look to be an alternative to the Los Angeles Philharmonic. We are known for our unusual repertoire, and for playing American artists, and that identity gives us enormous strength.”

Despite some occasional grumbling from those who don't think they've been to a concert unless they've heard Beethoven, Falletta is unswerving in her commitment to perform the work of women and of contemporary composers. She has given performances of Ellen Zwilich's “Concerto Grosso” and Joan Tower's “Sequoia,” as well as commissioning and performing a new work by Mark McGurty. Championing contemporary composers not only rekindles freshness and energy in her work with more familiar orchestral fare, she views the exploration and discovery of new music as a vital force in music making.

She credits Long Beach with being more open-minded than many communities in the United States. When on the East Coast, she says she finds herself regaling people with stories about California - how the enterprising, free-lance musicians in Long Beach often come to rehearsals with portable phones, how the members of the brass section of the Women's Philharmonic show up wearing leather boots and chains and studded wrist bands.

“It's so liberating,” she says. “It's challenging. I'm more open-minded and in touch with life than I used to be. There is vividness here.”

#### Memorable times

Looking back, she says she is more comfortable at the podium all the time. Her ground-breaking performances in recent years include leading the 213-year-old Mannheim Orchestra in Germany, conducting the Women's Philharmonic at the 25th anniversary of the National Organization for Women at the Kennedy Center Concert Hall in Washington, D.C., and appearances with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra of Belgium and the Central Philharmonic of China.

She recently recorded a CD of selected works of Jerome Moross with the London Symphony Orchestra for the Koch International Classics label, and will record music of Shulamit Ran with the English Chamber Orchestra in December.

With every season, there is a richer, deeper understanding of the music, she says. There are no child prodigies in conducting. You can endeavor to get closer to the essence of a piece of music all the time, but in the truest sense, she says, music is never completely knowable.

“As I get older, I see things in the music I wouldn't have seen years ago.”

Although there are those who predicted Falletta wouldn't sign a new contract in Long Beach and would be swept away by a more prestigious orchestra, those who know her best aren't surprised by her decision to stay. She isn't trying to set the world on fire. She isn't a prima donna. Her passion is simply this: to learn, to grow, to make beautiful music.

#### Praiseworthy

Members of the orchestra describe her as a dedicated, gracious, thinking conductor.

“She does what she does without making a big flashy deal about it,” says violist McCrary. “She never makes people feel small. She doesn't glare at us. She isn't as tortured as other conductors I've known. Her focus is music.”

Adds concert master Roger Wilkie, “She's very warm. That's unique among conductors. She knows how to communicate both with the audience and with the orchestra.”

Her affection for those on both sides of the podium has grown since that April night in 1989. But when she reflects on her tenure in Long Beach, she saves a special kiss for the audience.

“I think what I am most proud of is the feeling that the audience has become musically so sophisticated. The audience here has a real sense of each concert, and that is not the norm. It is extraordinary.”