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Martha Cuncell-Vargas

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Recommended Citation

Lena, Christine, "Martha Cuncell-Vargas" (2015). *International Faculty Researchers*. 19.
https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/international_faculty/19

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Flutist composer coins new genre, Universal Americanism

By Christine Lena

Travelling to Central America in college is all it took to inspire Martha Cuncell-Vargas to begin a career of teaching, researching, and performing flute music of the Americas.

Cuncell-Vargas is an assistant professor of flute in the School of Music at Western Michigan University, a solo and chamber flutist and a music scholar. Her love of North, South and Central American and Caribbean music was prompted by a study abroad trip in Panama at a conservatory to teach at a music camp for two weeks when she was 19.

“In Panama I fell in love with the music, dancing, and culture,” said Cuncell-Vargas, who came to WMU in 2009. “I met people with so few resources but they showed me a generosity that I’ll never forget.”

Cuncell-Vargas finds it’s inspiring to stay connected to that special spirit she found in Panama because it is “irresistible.” Her musical styling is inspired by Panama and the many other countries she’s visited to teach, perform, and conduct research: Cuba, Ecuador, Dominican Republic, China, Colombia, Argentina, Peru, and Honduras. In France and Germany, she has taken top honors in international flute competitions, and she has been a featured guest artist at several festivals, conservatories, and conventions in these areas of the world.

“I am eternally grateful to WMU because this university supports international travel for research and creative activities,” Cuncell-Vargas said. “This place is truly globally engaged and provides tremendous support for international faculty creative and scholarly research. In 2011, I received a WMU grant to research the Cuban flute tradition in Havana. It was probably the biggest adventure of my career so far.”

Cuncell-Vargas traveled to Cuba expecting some initial resistance among the people she hoped to work with, but she said once they got to know each other “we shared our love of music and were able to learn a lot from each other.” She spent time with musicians who were living in relative poverty with few material resources. Most of their instruments were very old, some from the 1940s and 50s, which the musicians keep repairing “like cars,” Cuncell-Vargas said. She was surprised and impressed to discover that most of the musicians she met didn’t play music from sheet music, but from memory.

“They further strengthened my admiration for musicians that are truly dedicated,” Cuncell-Vargas said. “Despite not having practice facilities, sheet music, or good instruments, they were the most talented musicians I’ve ever heard.”

Cuncell-Vargas says her compositions fall under a genre she calls Universal Americanism. “The music of the Americas is a larger metaphor for the connections between these cultures,” Cuncell-Vargas said. “The music is irresistible. The music shows us we aren’t really that different at all.”

Conducting research and competing internationally has helped Cuncell-Vargas expand her flute repertoire beyond what is standard and connect these different musical styles. Her debut album includes Cuban, Peruvian, Mexican and North American music. Titled, *Gran Danzón*, the album, includes pieces that work together with a common folk or dance element.

“It wasn’t hard to choose the repertoire; most of those pieces were ones I’ve known and played for a long time,” Cuncell-Vargas said. “Every time I travel I’m introduced to different repertoire, which is a great benefit to my students at WMU because I’m introducing them to these new pieces.”

Cuncell-Vargas knew as a young girl that she wanted to be a performer. She participated in public school music programs from fifth grade through high school, after which she earned a bachelor’s of music degree in flute performance at Oberlin Conservatory. Throughout her college studies, she supported herself teaching beginner and intermediate students. “I had really knowledgeable teachers so I felt compelled to continue the tradition and give back what I had been given,” Cuncell-Vargas said.

After completing a master’s of music degree at Rice University’s Shepherd School of Music, Cuncell-Vargas freelanced, taught, travelled, and performed as a soloist and chamber musician. She initially had no inclination to pursue a doctoral degree, but six years after completing her master’s degree, she entered the doctor of musical arts program at the University of Iowa, and graduated in 2009.

“I recognized that a full-time professor job could offer the flexibility to continue developing as an artist, as well as the stability to have a family, too,” Cuncell-Vargas said.

Cuncell-Vargas has visited Central and South America multiple times and she says her most inspirational moments have occurred when teaching students in developing countries.

“All the countries I’ve visited are inspirational, but Honduras stands out for some reason,” said Cuncell-Vargas, who visited the nation’s capital, Tegucigalpa, in 2011. “The students have next to nothing in material resources, but they refuse to allow any obstacle to get into the way of learning more about making music.”

