



Artist As Leader: Tito Muñoz

Tito Muñoz is in his sixth year leading the [Phoenix Symphony](#) as Music Director. Before that he served as Music Director of Opéra National de Lorraine and the Orchestre Symphonique et Lyrique de Nancy in France. He has appeared with many of the most prominent orchestras in North America and is scheduled for forthcoming engagements with symphonies from Denmark to Sydney.

Tito is an ardent proponent of new music and has conducted the premieres of new works from renowned contemporary composers, including Gerald Barry and Michael Hersch.

In February 2020, Corey Madden first heard Tito speak at [SphinxConnect](#), a conference held annually in Detroit, MI and organized by the Sphinx Organization, which is dedicated to developing and supporting inclusion and diversity in classical music at every level. In this conversation with Corey, Tito discusses how he and other symphonic conductors have been taught to lead and considers what's still missing in the training. He also reveals how celebrating contemporary composers and encouraging budding

musicians to be more creative might once again make the classical music hall a place for adventurous audiences.

Corey Madden: I wanted to start off by asking you about your artistic background and training and how it informs your leadership style.

Tito Muñoz: Sure. Well, I guess I can begin with my upbringing. I was born in New York and started with the violin as my musical education, eventually doing performing arts and going to arts high school and pre-college programs and Juilliard and Manhattan School of Music. I decided to pursue it in undergrad, and it was during undergrad that I made more of a transition into the role of conductor.

But I think actually I've always been prone to going after leadership roles even as a musician, even as either first violin of a string quartet or section leader of the orchestra when I was in high school and doing youth orchestras. I was always navigating and felt compelled to be in those positions. Sometimes I would be a backseat conductor when I wasn't and that's not always good. So conducting was a natural fit I think in a lot of ways for me.

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What's interesting is that leadership, I think, is the key element to my profession now. A conductor literally is a leader. So, you are always navigating all the issues that a leader would have to navigate, which is ... dealing with people essentially is what it is and getting people excited about a vision, an idea, whether it's in the moment something microscopic or long-term if you're heading up an organization, it's a lot of that. It's a lot of psychology. It requires a lot of thought, it requires a lot of tact and a lot of interpersonal skills.

Essentially that's where I'm at in my life now.

Corey: That's great. Thank you for that. I'd love to know if we could just dig in a little bit with the idea of your musical training and what about that disciplinary focus translates to the skill of being a leader.

Tito: I think coming up with a vision for a musical work is something that's just inherently part of being a musician. Then relaying and communicating that to an audience inherently is already part of leadership because you already have to bring people in to you and you have to bring people on a journey. Just that in itself, that creative process and that process of figuring out how you're going to communicate to an audience, already begins that journey for oneself of leadership.

It's interesting because when you are working in ensembles and in groups, there is also sometimes hierarchy also, and so you have to learn what that is and how to navigate that. Sometimes you are the one that people look to, sometimes you're not. Even within an orchestra, for example, you learn what that hierarchy is. You learn that if you're playing in a section of strings, that front chair is the person that you first go to for some kind of leadership, whether it's changing a bowing or are we using this part of the bow or whatever the case may be.

You don't go to the conductor directly; you go to the section leader. When you're in that chair as a section leader in a school or youth orchestra situation, usually the conductor is mentoring those people as to what that leadership needs to be. So just in that kind of logistical sense, as a young musician you already do get that kind of training.

I think what's not usually spoken about in the education, what's lacking, is the first kind that I told you about, which is that learning how to communicate to an audience and bring people in. I think in classical music especially we lack a little bit of that more so than maybe other kinds of music. Because I think in other kinds of music performing publicly is a little bit more a natural thing that happens as you're learning, and it doesn't necessarily with classical music. You spend a

lot of time alone in the practice room. You spend a lot of time doing juries and playing auditions rather than actually performing in front of people as a soloist.

I should say that being a conductor is always leadership. And when you're in the beginning stages of conducting, what's really interesting is that you are the beginner in the room even though you're the one that's on the podium. That in itself is a catch-22, in that the musicians want a leader who's experienced, yet you need experience in order to learn how to conduct. So you are constantly navigating that. "How do I deal with my lack of experience when all these people in front of me are extremely experienced at what they do?"

That in itself teaches you a lot of lessons. When I was starting out as a conductor, I ate a lot of crow, as most young conductors do all the time. Literally all the time. Every moment that you're up there you're giving something that's wrong, you're doing something that's wrong, you're mis-stepping, you're giving the wrong beat. Then you have to face the consequences of that. Hopefully it's a positive environment where people are very nurturing and your teacher is nurturing and allows you to make mistakes. But sometimes it's not.

Sometimes you might actually get a job or get a professional engagement when you're not ready for it. So you get up in front of a group, and then you have to navigate that. I think as a young conductor I've definitely had moments, but they're countless. Every moment that you're up there you do have to think very, very quickly as to how to create an environment that allows for your leadership not to suffer. At the same time you're learning, and you're allowing the musicians to play well on top of that.

I think before that, though, for me as a violinist, there were certainly many, many moments where I'd be sitting as a concertmaster, for example, of my school orchestra, whether in college or high school, and learning how to navigate the personality of the teacher, the conductor in front of me. For example, if the conductor in front of me is not a string player but they fancy themselves an expert at bowings even though they might not be ... having to navigate that. There have

been times when I've misspoken, mis-stepped and challenged a teacher, a conductor, because I really thought I was right. I might have been right, but you learn diplomacy very quickly and how to keep a positive attitude so things don't digress into something that you really don't want it to.

Corey: Was there a point in your training when something clicked and you realized, "Oh, I know how to do this. I can honestly say I know what I'm doing as a leader of an orchestra"?

Tito: I think, yes and no, at many points during my growth. You obviously need a thick skin; there's no other way about it. Every moment that you're up in front of a new orchestra, they're judging you right away. At this point I've done it professionally for over a decade now. Whatever, put me in front of a group, they can say whatever they want. I don't really care anymore.

But in the beginning, for sure. Even among my peers, even when I did it in front of my friends in college ad hoc groups and things like that, it was really, really tough. Because you've got your friends in front of you, people who are your peers, and you have to tell them what to do. And that's tricky. Then also you're sort of figuring your own stuff out. "Did they come in wrong because I gave them something wrong? I don't know!" You're sort of racking your brain thinking about that.

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There does come a point where you do have to stop thinking about what you're physically doing, and you have to just do the work. I think I've had several moments in my progression where that was the case.

I'll never forget, for example, the very first time I ever conducted a professional orchestra ever, and that was for my audition for the Cincinnati Symphony, for their assistant conductor job. Before that I had done the Aspen Music Festival, which is a very high-level training program like Tanglewood, but in Aspen, CO. I was there as a

conducting student, so I had a fairly high-level group to work with there when I was studying.

The first time I ever worked with a real professional orchestra — Cincinnati Symphony is one of the major orchestras in this country — I will never forget, the very first thing that I did with them was the last movement of Brahms' First Symphony, and the feeling of looking at this body of some of the best musicians in existence breathing with me and all of that ... !

The first second was terrifying; the second one was imposter syndrome; but by the third beat that I gave, I was like, "This feels pretty good actually." [He laughs.] I remember giving that next downbeat, or whatever that big chord was, and it felt great. I was like, "OK, yeah!" I had that moment where I was like, "OK, I think I can do this. I think this actually works." A month later, again, I was, "I'm a phony. I'm not worthy."

I think you just go up and down constantly within this profession because you are constantly in situations where you don't necessarily get feedback. I think that's the real trouble. When you're a student you get feedback from the people in front of you, from your teacher. But once you get into a professional situation, that feedback doesn't come. You could go through a week and not have anybody tell you you're doing something wrong. You're going to have to figure it out on your own. So that's really tricky.

Corey: I'd love to talk about things you'd like to see change in the field.

Tito: I think new music and diversifying programming are both really, really important things. I worry that some orchestras do become a little stagnant when it comes to being forward-thinking with the art form itself. I think a lot of people think symphony orchestra is the thing, but actually it's the music that we play that's the thing. That's the thing that we present. It's the music that we play that does have life. Everything was once new. Beethoven was once new. Beethoven, when he was

new, had his detractors, much like a lot of new music is perceived as nowadays. It's very similar.

Whenever I present Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony, I always like to quote a review from the time that it was premiered. I'm paraphrasing, but the review essentially says that this music is jarring and jagged and he wrote it for his peers, his colleagues, rather than for the audiences. A lot of the same stuff that we hear about new music nowadays, they were throwing at Beethoven at the time.

That is something that I think really needs artistic leadership in order to keep moving forward: to champion composers, to champion artists, to commission new works ... having those priorities and making that a part of your mission.

So yes, that is something that I think really needs artistic leadership in order to keep moving forward: to champion composers, to champion artists, to commission new works, which is something that a lot of orchestras don't really have the financial priorities to do, because there are a lot of other things that require Orchestras are very expensive. It's having those priorities and making that a part of your mission.

Even diversifying. That's something that I think has not been on people's radar until very recently. Now there are a lot of folks that are really making it an issue. And we're finding out that it's not actually that difficult to do in that respect, really just making it a point to do it and making it a point to keep it on your mind when you do the programming for a season. That's something I'm trying to promote with my orchestra; I try to promote it when I go as a guest conductor to other orchestras. We're seeing it more and more now that the artists are really taking that role.

During that talk at the Sphinx Conference, a lot of the panelists, including myself, shared a lot of the challenges that we face with that. Every orchestra is different, not just the musicians but even the

structure and the support system around it, the environment. In the end, the buck stops at the bucks, at where the money comes from. We are beholden to a lot of that because these not-for-profit organizations are very fragile, as almost any performing arts organization can attest to.

There are a lot of competing ideals, a lot of competing thoughts, but I do think still it comes from at least the focused vision of the leadership, especially the artistic leadership. If you come to the table with that in mind, if you come to the table with that as your priority, the needle will move. It may not move as fast as you want it to, but the needle will at least start to move.

Corey: Yeah, and being that person who voices that and is conscious of that and brings it to the community that you work in does move the needle faster than if there's a default of not really engaging it or talking about it.

Tito: That's correct. It is a balance because there is a little bit of self-preservation in mind, you know, the idea that you want to be able to still have your job and keep your job and be able to do what you can in the system that you've agreed to be in. We're all in the system together, and we have to just work within it and see what we can do.

There is a little bit of "We got to do what we have to do until we can get to the point where we can do what we want to do." That's always going to be the case, I think, with any sort of thing like this, because depending on what the work is, depending on what the music is that you want to promote Sometimes it can be controversial, sometimes not. Sometimes you do need to be a little bit provocative and a little bit controversial in order to get a discussion even started. Because sometimes those discussions aren't even had amongst your constituents because you haven't really pushed hard enough.

A lot of that again comes from experience. You learn who the personalities are at the table and how to deal with them. Just like I do with an orchestra, I would have to do that with my board, or I would have to do that with my audience and try to figure out a way to tell that

story or tell that narrative or bring that new work to them in a way that I think will be effective, maybe not short-term but long-term, who knows. So that's always on my mind.

Corey: If someone gave you just a year or more to do your dream project, what would it be? What would be something you'd really love to have the time and resources to do?

Tito: That's really, really interesting. I would love to put together a festival of music that was curated by a group of composers. A group of composers, a very diverse group of composers. I would love to be in a room and do a round-table discussion with a group of composers, very diverse people with completely different sensibilities, and to come up with an array of programs — doesn't have to be all for orchestra — but just an array of programs that would utilize the venue in different ways or involve the audience in an interactive way.

I would love to create something that would be multidimensional in so many ways, something that everybody who walks in, even people who are seasoned classical music-goers, would be utterly surprised and inspired by. Because I think there's so much amazing music out there that gets pushed to special things, special projects or special concerts and not mainstay concerts.

We talked about one at that talk, Joel Thompson's "The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed," which is a very controversial piece that I think deserves a regular listening. Taking pieces like that, and even forgetting the idea of putting them into just a regular classical subscription concert but actually finding context for them that really enhances the message.

But with all of that, actually taking those composers' ideas and my own and actually using classical works of the canon to give those classical works sort of a different spin. So how would a Beethoven Nine feel or sound like after this particular work? How would this particular new work give a new context and new perspective to a Mozart symphony? Could they utilize the work in between? Would it be something where you could actually do a Mozart symphony, which

is four movements long, and have these difference pieces in between that give it connection, give it context?

I would love to just do that. Like if we had no resources and money wasn't an issue we could all get together and come up with this just crazy, crazy project of showing audiences what music can really do and what these composers meant with their works.

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You know, when Mozart wrote his symphonies, that was all brand-new. We've lost that because we hear it all the time. How can we bring that back? What can we do now to put it in that context that brings that jarring aspect of some of that music back to audiences that have heard it a million time?

Corey: What do you think young people who are studying today need to know about the opportunities to lead?

Tito: That's a great question. For me, it's twofold, I think. One is that I was lucky. I feel very lucky that New York was the place where I happened to be, that I happened to grow up and start music in. I say that because a lot of the education that I got wasn't part of a necessarily cohesive system but maybe just an ecosystem of New York. There was a lot of, I call it on-the-street learning. You learn because of your environment.

I certainly had amazing teachers, don't get me wrong. For sure, the actual "in school" education was fantastic, but certainly the environment that I was in and the music that I was listening to just all around me Even growing up very quickly as a young person in New York, I feel like you grow much faster than young people in a lot of other places. Because you're already on the public transit system. In middle school you're already doing that. You're on your own doing a lot of things that a lot of people wouldn't necessarily be doing at a high

school age. So there's a little bit of that that I think just the environment of New York afforded me by default.

I think also one thing that I think is lacking in classical music education is the creative aspect of the art. I think we focus so much — unless you are a composer, unless that's what you focus on and that's what you're going to do — we focus so much just on the recreation of works and the perfection of the technical aspects of what we do. So there isn't this real opportunity to develop creative skills. There isn't this opportunity to just improvise and make something as opposed to just reading notes on a page.

In 2008 or 2009, I was granted a fellowship to spend three weeks in Germany and two of those weeks were in Leipzig. It was with a conductor by the name of Kurt Masur, who's since passed. He's a very world-famous conductor. He used to be the conductor in Leipzig, Germany and actually used to be the music director of the New York Philharmonic at one point. He was one of my mentors, and he invited me to come to Leipzig for the 250th anniversary of Felix Mendelssohn, the famous composer. They were celebrating his 250th in Leipzig. He wanted me to come out.

What he did was he actually set a couple of meetings with archivists of some of the institutions in Germany, and so I actually traveled around the country, spending time looking at manuscripts and looking at old documents and things like that. One of the things in Leipzig that is really interesting is that they have the very first music conservatories ever created in Germany, the Felix Mendelssohn Conservatory, founded by Mendelssohn. I went there, and he set up a meeting with me there. The archivist didn't have a lot of manuscripts of Mendelssohn's, like of his music, but she did have all of the documents from the early days of the Conservatory, from its opening. She had all the report cards of all the students, all of the jury evaluation forms that Mendelssohn actually wrote. He wrote all of the student evaluations by hand. All of the recital programs of all the students.

The thing that struck me right away was that in all of the recital programs of the students, they were all playing either music that they wrote themselves or music that their teacher wrote. There was hardly anything that was "old." If you played Bach, that was an anomaly, because that just wasn't what the norm was. When you studied music you studied not only your music but you studied singing, you studied composition, you did it all. That was music. We don't do that anymore nowadays.

I always try to tell young musicians to improvise, to try to find creative outlets that are not just reading music on a page and that's the only thing that you know how to do. Because that can be very constricting, and it doesn't allow you to really find a voice for yourself.

I think that the detriment is that we have a lot of musicians who are good players but they're not necessarily great artists. Because they don't have those creative juices that are fostered early on. It's an unfortunate thing that we have now, and I always try to tell young musicians to improvise, to try to find creative outlets that are not just reading music on a page and that's the only thing that you know how to do. Because that can be very constricting, and it doesn't allow you to really find a voice for yourself.

One of the things for me that growing up in New York also afforded me is that when I was freelancing I was doing quite a bit of different things. I wasn't just playing classical music. I was playing on Broadway; I was playing in charanga bands; I was playing all sorts of different kinds of things that required a lot of different skillsets. Some jazz, some Latin music, all sorts of things that I think have really enhanced my view of music.

I think a lot of the more creative classical musicians could say the same thing. They can say that they've had this experience of doing other kinds of music, of improvisation, of composing, of creating music. Because all of a sudden then when you're looking at a piece of

Mendelssohn, you can get into his head a little bit more and maybe pull something out that other people wouldn't have seen.

Corey: Wonderful. Well I just want to finish up by asking if there's any advice that you wish you'd received when you were young or that you'd like to give kind of the next generation of artists?

Tito: Specifically with my profession there is ... this is actually going back to the question you were asking about education of artists. On the one hand, we have just music players, people who play instruments. And then you have conductors in the classical music world.

With the conductors it's interesting because the leadership aspect of conducting is something that is not focused on very much in education. Meaning, when you go to school for conducting, you learn how to analyze a score, you learn how to open up and read it and play it on piano and analyze the chords and all the theory. You learn how to move your arms in a way that ideally will help the orchestra understand what you're doing. But you don't get any training in really how to be, as a human being.

It sort of happens as you go through the motions, but there is no focus on this notion that the conductor is a leader and that there are actual leadership skills that you can learn the way executives learn executive leadership. That's a real thing, and that doesn't exist for conductors at all. Zero. Even though it's exactly the same thing. So that's an aspect for me that I think is terribly unfortunate, because that also trickles into the job search as well.

When you actually go out and start auditioning for jobs, applying for jobs, very little is also placed on this idea that the conductor is essentially an executive leader. Somebody who is supposed to create a positive work environment, for example. Somebody who's supposed to have the wherewithal to be able to diffuse difficult situations, to be able to delegate, to be able to empower people to play their best. That's something that is never ever focused on. As far as young

conductors, I just hope that that's something that people start to take seriously, because I think that's really what is lacking in my profession.

But I also think that young artists, especially young classical musicians, like I said before, would really benefit from spending some time creating in some way or another. Creating and expanding horizons in what they play. Like actually going to shows of other kinds of music at least. But if not, then actually writing music or improvising or actually creating some kind of music, I think, will only benefit the work that you do as a re-creator of a lot of the older music and the new music that we play.

Epilogue

Tito Muñoz embraces and understands the value of the interdisciplinary artist as leader, expanding and trying new things for the benefit of the final result. Insights from our time with Tito include:

- **Watch how others lead.** In the arts, it is a common process to watch other artists and borrow ideas from them (such as getting soloing ideas watching Eric Clapton play guitar). The same is true for leaders. Observe the good things leaders do and borrow those ideas. Also observe the bad things leaders do and avoid replicating those.
- **Be prepared to lead people with more experience.** This is a great situation. Leaders are fortunate if they have people around them who are better at their craft than the leader. The leader's job is to create a space for others to perform at their best. Don't pretend to be the expert at everything.
- **Create a culture of safety.** The space for others to perform at their best (see above) must be safe. Allow for experimentation and for failure so that people can try more, do more and accomplish more.
- **Learn diplomacy.** It's great to have ideas, solutions and answers, and it's more important to know when to insert those into a situation. Figure out the context of a situation so you know the best ways to include yourself.

- **Push for change and know the limits.** In the business of the arts, it can be easy to overlook the work in pursuit of financial stability. Leaders recognize when to push and when to back off.
- **If you want to be a great leader, be a great human.** Always work on both your intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. You won't learn that in any MFA or MBA program.



Tito Muñoz

MUSIC DIRECTOR, PHOENIX SYMPHONY

Praised for his versatility, technical clarity, and keen musical insight, Tito Muñoz is now in his sixth season as Music Director of The Phoenix Symphony. Prior appointments include Music Director of the Opéra National de Lorraine in France, and Assistant Conductor positions with The Cleveland Orchestra, Cincinnati Symphony and Chamber Orchestras and the Aspen Music Festival. Tito has appeared with many of the most prominent orchestras in North America, including those of Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Cincinnati, Cleveland, and Houston, as well as the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, Orchestra of St. Luke's, and the National Symphony Orchestra. He also maintains a strong international conducting presence, with the Frankfurt Radio Symphony, Mahler Chamber Orchestra, Orchestre National d'Île de France, Sydney Symphony and Sao Paulo State Symphony among others. A proponent of new music, Tito champions the composers of our time and has conducted important premieres of works by Christopher Cerrone, Kenneth Fuchs, Dai Fujikura, Michael Hersch, and Adam Schoenberg. Passionate about education, he regularly visits North America's top conservatories/universities, summer music festivals, and youth orchestras. (Photo: Dario Acosta)