

FOR BUSY CLARINETIST JOAQUIN VALDEPEÑAS,
THE MUSIC IS ALWAYS THE MAIN THING

here to stay

STORY BY STEWART HOFFMAN

In 1979, KRMA Television in Denver produced a documentary featuring three of the Aspen Music Festival's most promising students. One of them was clarinetist and conductor Joaquin Valdepeñas. A slender 24-year-old at the time, sporting big glasses and lots of dark, wavy hair, Valdepeñas is first seen practising the Mozart *Clarinet Concerto*, then conducting sections from Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony* and a Dvořák serenade. His clarinet instructor says in a voiceover that Valdepeñas is "one of the best clarinetists" he has ever heard, while Murray Sidlin, conductor of the New Haven Symphony at the time, says Valdepeñas is "a remarkably sensitive, natural musician. He someday will be a first-rate conductor."

Back then, Valdepeñas figured he would end up playing with one of the great American orchestras — maybe Boston, New York or Philadelphia — but just five months after the film was made, he auditioned for and got the job of principal clarinet with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. And he's been enriching the local music scene ever since.

"I'm going to be here until I'm '75," he says, flashing the brilliant smile that punctuates much of his speech. Along with his duties with the TSO — which recently included appearances as soloist for Luciano Berio's reworking of Brahms's *Clarinet Sonata No. 1* — he happens to be one of the most active chamber musicians in town. He appears four times a year with the Amici Chamber Ensemble, the celebrated group he co-founded 26 years ago with pianist Patricia Parr and cellist and fellow TSO member David Hetherington, as well as with numerous other ensembles throughout the season.

CLARINETIST JOAQUIN VALDEPEÑAS RELAXES AT HOME, REEDS AT THE READY,
WITH HIS 15-YEAR-OLD SON, JOSUÉ, WHO PLAYS PIANO AND CELLO, LOOKING ON.



And if his hectic schedule performing and teaching weren't enough — the Mexican-born clarinetist teaches and conducts at the Royal Conservatory of Music, at the Aspen Festival and occasionally at a university in Mexico City — he's also helping design a new clarinet for Yamaha. "I'm very restless, always moving and thinking of ways to do something different," he says. Hetherington confirms it: "Joaquin likes to be busy. The last thing he wants is time on his hands."

Classical music was not a big part of Valdepeñas's life growing up in Mexico, in the city of Torreón until he was eight, then in the scruffy town of Tijuana for four years — though he has fond memories of his mother and a "couple of uncles with big tenor voices" singing traditional songs while playing guitars. It wasn't until he was in Anaheim, California, where he'd moved with his mother and sister at age 12, that he was turned on to music. "In Grade 7 we had a wonderful band teacher," he says, "and he would let some of us get up on the podium and conduct. That's where I got the bug to wave the stick. It felt so great."

But he didn't dive wholeheartedly into a career in music until he'd completed his second year at the California State University at Fullerton, where he'd been studying privately with Los Angeles Philharmonic principal clarinet Calvin Block. "He was an incredible musician. That's where everything came into focus for me and I changed my degree."

During his final year at Cal State, Valdepeñas successfully auditioned for Aspen and subsequently placed first in the orchestral placement auditions. "Some of the best students from the conservatories were there. That's when I realized I could really do this thing: if I work really hard, practise hard and become the best that I can be, maybe this can work."

The TSO audition came up during his second year of graduate studies at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. By that time he had some good experience under his belt — college orchestras, eight concerts a year with the New Haven Symphony, and Aspen, where he played principal clarinet in a chamber symphony whose membership boasted violinists Joshua Bell, Cho-Liang Lin, Nigel Kennedy and Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg — but considering he was auditioning for the principal clarinet position, it wasn't a lot. And surely more than a few eyebrows were raised when he copped the job.

Arthur Kaptainis, music critic for the *Globe and Mail* at the time, made much of Valdepeñas's youth — and music director Andrew Davis's gamble — in a 1982 review of the clarinetist's first solo appearance with the orchestra. "Happily," wrote Kaptainis, "Valdepeñas... has proved Davis a high roller in the best Nevada tradition." He went on to heap praise on the soloist's "cool, blemishless and beautiful" tone, "gentle and introspective" state of mind and "instinct for organized phrasing suited to the maturest of veterans."

Hetherington recalls that while Valdepeñas hadn't yet developed the kind of sound that could "barrel through an orchestra," his sensitivity, musicality and dynamic range were unsurpassed, "as was the wide spectrum of colour he could coax from the clarinet." Of course, adds Hetherington, his youth made him all the more impressive.

Apart from the frigid Toronto winters — Valdepeñas had never even seen snow before going to Yale — he had to get used to living in a city that rolled up the sidewalks on Sundays. "Life in Toronto back then wasn't what it is today. People wouldn't look you in the eye. It's changed. It's so multicultural and I think it's having an effect."

And Toronto multiculturalism has paid dividends in more ways than one. Valdepeñas has been married to his wife, Korean-born TSO violinist Mi Hyon Kim, for 16 years, and they have two sons, Josué, 15, who plays piano and cello, and Alejandro, 10, who plays violin.

Valdepeñas first performed with Hetherington and Parr at a Faculty Artist Concert in 1985 that Parr organized at the University of Toronto. By 1988 they'd become Amici, and launched their first concert series at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church. They moved to the Glenn Gould Studio in 1994, and to date have racked up a discography of nine highly acclaimed CDs.

With a relatively small repertoire of music for clarinet, piano and cello to draw on, Amici collaborates with musical guests — violinists Cho-Liang Lin, Shmuel Ashkenazy, Jaime Laredo and Arnold Steinhardt among them — to perform everything from Bach to Shostakovich to the latest commission from composers Chan Ka Nin and Jacques Hétu. "Our primary objective is for the programs to be interesting," says Valdepeñas. Judging from reviews spanning the past quarter century, the ensemble has consistently achieved that goal and more with performances acclaimed for their virtuosity, intelligence and musicality. The remaining season concerts at Glenn Gould Studio feature soprano Barbara Hannigan on April 21 and violinist Ida Kavafian on May 12.

And how does Amici manage to stay amici after so many years of intense musical collaboration and the inevitable disagreements, both musical and otherwise? "We're very open with one another and we say what we think," says Valdepeñas, pointing out that he and Parr are "a little more impulsive" than Hetherington. "She's very strong, but I can be very strong and stubborn. I'll say 'Why do we have to do it like that? Can we do it like this?' Then she'll say, 'Well, I don't think so.' David tends to be the diplomat. He'll often say, 'Well, there's merit to both sides! He's a tempering element. But it's like a good relationship — you say your piece, but no matter what happens, you respect each other and get past it. Ultimately, the music is the main thing.'"


Of course, the advantage of having such a long musical relationship is that the musicians develop a sixth sense with regard to where their colleagues are taking the music.

"We'll vary what we play if we've done a piece a lot," says Hetherington. "Joaquin and I are often tossing a phrase back and forth; he will do something with it and I will do something with that. We often expand on what we discuss at rehearsal. It makes it interesting and brings a smile to the other person's face." A smile surely reflected back by their audience.

Ask Valdepeñas what the future holds for him and he points out that he likes his life just the way it is. "When I came here out of school," he says, "I thought I would be here a few years and move on." As it turns out, when that coveted job in Boston finally opened in 1993, he didn't even bother taking the audition.

He looks forward to recording a few CDs — among them the entire set of Luciano Berio's *Sequenzas* for Naxos, Mieczyslaw Weinberg's *Clarinet Sonata* for Sony, as well as a Sony CD with the ARC Ensemble (Artists of the Royal Conservatory). "We're the only institution in all of Canada," boasts Valdepeñas, "that has a major recording deal with a major company."

He conducts the TSO occasionally and that, along with his Glenn Gould Academy Orchestra at the conservatory, is about as much conducting as he cares to do. Any more would mean something has to go.

"I don't want to leave the symphony; I love it. And chamber music is very important. I just want to keep playing well — hopefully, my teeth won't fall out — and I want to keep doing good repertoire and working with good people. There's always a challenge around the corner. To me that's very important." 

THE AMICI CHAMBER ENSEMBLE — THE CELEBRATED GROUP JOAQUIN VALDEPEÑAS CO-FOUNDED 26 YEARS AGO WITH PIANIST PATRICIA PARR AND CELLIST AND FELLOW TORONTO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA MEMBER DAVID HETHERINGTON — PERFORMS FOUR TIMES A YEAR. PHOTO: V. TONY HAUSER



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