



Jacinto Convit

World  rganization



**Interview  
with Victor  
García Sierra**



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**Our team had the great opportunity to interview Victor García Sierra, a renowned bass-baritone, opera stage director and artistic director of the Orquesta Sinfónica Carlos Cruz-Diez, who was treated by Doctor Convit for 17 consecutive years.**

## Did you grow up in a musical environment? Can you share more about your childhood? What influenced your passion for arts? How were your beginnings as an opera singer?

It wasn't a musical environment but there was a piano in my house. It was funny because my mother wanted my sister and brother to play piano in the conservatory, but the only one who asked to play was me, and I never stopped. I was the youngest, but I don't know if it was that piano or what; I was always inclined to the artistic part of the theater, not the musical part. I was more passionate about theater and dancing. I have been dancing since I was 6 years old, I don't know why. I vividly remember the teachers choosing me to present a show. They took a large photo and gave me a microphone taller than I.

I owe my life to my voice; I really do. I have achieved everything because of my voice. When you do it, you don't realize it until somebody else tells you. It's like I've been doing it all my life. I thank God that being on stage doesn't make me nervous like other people. I like to communicate. Since I was a little boy, I danced in cultural events and all those things. Then in high school, I continued to dance, which I liked very much. Many of my classmates would join just to joke around, but I was very serious and danced to learn.

I was in a theater group too. A friend of mine, Enrique Lozada, won a prize from La Provincialista. One of my classmates, Maria Cristina, who is wonderful, won the prize for best high school choir. Of course, in the Caribbean, almost always, tenors have high voices. Low voices are more for Russians. I don't know if it is a result of the climate, but then of course, my voice was low, and it was like a treasure for them [in high school]. I graduated and applied to the Orquesta Sinfónica de Maracaibo —which was very known—, as well as the symphony orchestra choir, and all of us from that high school who had awards, were accepted.

*Orquesta Sinfónica  
de Maracaibo*



My first professor, Otto Soto Arenas, who was and is a tenor, heard me and after 20-odd years of not doing an opera in Maracaibo, a new opera production finally took place. Mr. Soto asked me if I wanted to be a part of it [opera]. I didn't even know what he was talking about, but it was okay for me. I wasn't directly involved, but we did the opera. That was the golden age of opera. Imagine everything... stage manager, director, conductor, pianist, scenery, costumes, all from the Metropolitan Opera of New York. Everything was organized there. In the second opera that was performed, with the Italian tenor Lando Bartolini, who I heard in the opera, almost all of the characters die. There, the leading lady, who is called Mimi, dies, and the tenor, who is her boyfriend, shouts to her: Mimi!, with despair.

I was backstage, and when I heard that "Mimi!" my hair stood on end, and I said, this is something else.... So, I started to work, to go to the conservatory and study music, among other things. I also worked as an artistic announcer for official events, as well as cultural events. I became the announcer of the Maracaibo cultural secretariat. I also studied up to the sixth semester of architecture.

*"When I heard that "Mimi!" my hair stood on end, and I said, this is something else...."*



Metropolitan  
Opera of New York

**How did you know you had leprosy? Can you describe the emotional and physical challenges you faced during the years of treatment for leprosy? How was your leprosy treated?**

In high school when I was 17 years old, I had this condition on my hand that left me with a lesion to this day. Thank God, it's not that bad. Doctor Francisco Morales, who was a friend of mine, told my brother to take me to a medical department because he had suspicions. Other doctors thought it was an obstructed nerve because I couldn't feel my hand; I had no sensation. They operated me and it was useless. I realized that I had built a defense, a barrier, because, afterward it's not that I felt bad, but when I went home everyone was looking at me... my siblings and my mother. On Sundays,

my mother used to tell us to wash the dishes. So, one of the things doctors told me was to be careful with my hands, not to wash in case a glass broke. So I didn't wash. That was positive. But, of course, I didn't like my mother to feel guilty. I was young; I couldn't work, but I didn't like that situation, so I tried to minimize the problem. I watched movies and documentaries, because the last leprosarium was on a small island on Maracaibo Lake, where all lepers were placed and isolated. That was Bolivar's decree if I'm not mistaken. [Libertador Simón Bolívar enacted this law in 1828, establishing the first anti-leprosy

hospital in Venezuela, an inhospitable place that sheltered more than a thousand leprosy patients]. I learned the basics about leprosy and put myself in hands of professionals. I remember when I used to sit and wait for the doctors to arrive. I also remember sitting next to a small lady who had a head like a tomato, all swollen and with a strange color. There were others who no longer had fingers. They were human beings who were stuck in a shell that was no longer beautiful. They asked me "Boy, how old are you?" And told me that I was too young to have this disease, because it seems to take a while to develop.

*Vestiges of the antileprosy hospital in Maracaibo*



So my case was strange because I was too young to have leprosy. In fact, it affected me when playing guitar because I couldn't control the pressure on the strings. I gave up everything because of that. But well, I can't complain, at least I have my fingers. There were people who didn't even have that. I was treated in Maracaibo for about 10 years, then in Caracas for another 7 years, and the treatment was very unpleasant because it wasn't just about taking a little pill at that time. I had to take one or two pills after each meal. They were tiny. And the injection, that was the complement of all this.

The medical doctors administered the vaccine on the buttocks and arm, alternately. I still have the lesion on my hand, but the disease didn't progress. What they used to give me then was therapy treatment, which was a paraffin bath. Doctors did research on my body at least once a month, and grabbed me with those scissors that were like tweezers. They gently grabbed my earlobe, squeezed it tightly until it was pale, and then cut it with a scalpel. If there was no blood in it, the liquid that remained in the scalpel was placed on a small slide to analyze it.

Each ear, each elbow, and each knee. That wasn't nice. I felt them cutting me, even if it was a small cut. That went on for a long time. The liquid that they took out determined how the treatment went. There was another treatment with electricity, also exercises, questions, etc. Later, when I moved to Caracas, it was just one injection a month, and the researchers always continued with the investigation of the treatment. Well, I spent 7 years in Caracas doing that, and then I was supposed to go get checked every year. I never did. Later, I left the country.

*Lesion caused  
by leprosy*





## Could you talk about how you met Doctor Convit? What would you highlight about him?

Nowadays, when celebrities show up, everyone fawns over them, and celebrities love attention. But Doctor Convit didn't; for him, that kind of attention was like a necessary evil. I had the impression that the people around him were waiting to pick up all his wisdom and learn from him.

Doctor Convit said brilliant and interesting things. He saw me and already knew what my clinical picture was like. That's experience and wisdom. But beyond the gratitude, he was a special person, he had magic without showing off, that's the beauty of it.

His simplicity was unique. There is no one like him. He managed to gather people around and convince them to follow him.

This gentleman matters. That time I felt encouraged. When you have the person who researches next to you, it gives you confidence. You know the captain is there guiding the ship. That is what gives you security. When they tell you that you have leprosy, the first thing you have to know who he is and then you are even more surprised that he is a Venezuelan. Doctor Convit was very easy to recognize with his eyes. He had a strong presence. Reflecting on all these memories, I want to express now my gratitude to Doctor Convit. Without his groundbreaking discoveries, my life could have taken a drastically different turn. I might not be here. Maybe I would be lacking essential features like my nose, ears, and hands. It's truly remarkable how deeply and positively a person's work can impact the course of one's life. This realization has been instilled in me by my mother, who taught me the importance of gratitude.



*Doctor  
Jacinto Convit*



## Can you elaborate on your journey as the first Venezuelan stage director of opera, working in prestigious theaters in Italy and around the world? How did you formally start in the world of opera?

I was always creating. Today, I'm benefiting from the years I spent in architecture, because it helps me to design opera sets. I am the first Venezuelan stage director of opera. There are several, but I'm the first one who emerged in that field and who has contracts in Italy. I'm going to Italy very soon. I'm going to Sassari, which is an island in Sardinia, and from there, I go directly to Bologna, to the Teatro Comunale di Bologna, which is a very important theater in Italy.

I have been in many important theaters, and thank God the reviews have always been excellent. So sometimes I laugh when I see the "maracuchos" explaining opera to the Italians, so we can say I'm the first Venezuelan stage director in the world. It sounds bad to say it, but that's how it is. And that's what I was talking about. Sometimes it's not valued.

*"I am the first Venezuelan stage director in the world. It sounds bad to say it, but that's how it is."*



*Teatro Comunale di Bologna*

I let things pass and I don't publicize anything, but the problem is that if you don't mention your achievements, someone else comes along and takes your job. It's like in America when they say that the Vikings were there first but they didn't mention it. Columbus talked about it and he got the laurels. He discovered America. Anyway, then I was working in Maracaibo, where I did the first opera with Giuseppe Verdi. Later, I did La Boheme, and from there I moved to Caracas and began to work every year in the opera season of the Teresa Carreño theater until I began to venture into Europe doing international competitions.

At that time, it wasn't online. There was the qualifying round in Buenos Aires for the most important competitions in Vienna.

There was a first competition of Plácido Domingo at the European level, and then a worldwide competition of Plácido Domingo. I participated in that contest in Argentina because there were elimination rounds in different parts of the world. There were a lot of people. For me, it was exciting because there is a very long opera tradition in Buenos Aires. So, from there I started to travel. There were almost 3,000 people at the Plácido Domingo, 56 of us got to Vienna. Then of those 56, they selected 20, and I was among those 20, and people never knew that in Venezuela, nor did they broadcast the finals. So nobody knew that a Venezuelan was in the semifinal. Of those 20, they selected 10. I was about to pass. And well, from there I went to New York in search of new opportunities because making a

career in Venezuela was a problem. I wasn't a genius to be given a leading role. They gave me supporting roles, and I began to make inroads and win contests. That's how it was until I had to make the decision to live in Madrid because I was looking for an international singing career.

*Teatro  
Teresa Carreño*



## Could you share more about your background and your diverse artistic activities? How have these experiences contributed to your career and artistic vision?

In relation to my current roles, there are several things. Do you know the Duchess of Alba has more titles than the Queen of England? We are going to play soon in the palace of Liria, which is the palace of the Duchess of Alba. I am an opera singer. Thank God that I did a lot of theater, dance, architecture... I have always liked the creative part. For some time now, I've been doing a little bit of everything. Some people trusted me and I began to work on the operas

there. Thanks to that I didn't do like many stage directors, who must spend 5 years as an assistant to become a director. Thanks to my friends in Peru, which had a great national theater, I worked with master Luis Alba, who is one of the pioneers. He's a genius, an artist. He was already very old and he ran the opera in Peru. Mr. Alba always let me handle the scenes of the last operas we did. After that, some friends who were in charge of the opera at the Grand National Theater [of

Lima], a beautiful theater, trusted in me to conduct operas for the opera season. Then I came up with the idea of working with painters. People consider opera as an elitist thing, and it's not. In fact, most of us who are in the opera business do not come from a high social background.

*"I am an opera singer. Thank God that I did a lot of theater, dance, architecture."*



Palace of Liria



*From the serie: "El Circo"  
Fernando Botero*

I remember in Venezuela, that there were several people who were from the slums. There was a great tenor nicknamed "el chamo opera" ["the opera dude"]. He would come down from the slums and the people would let him sing. I don't know why but there are very humble people who have been touched by opera and classical singing. I love opera, which for me is one

of the highest expressions of art. It isn't only the singing, which requires studies and technique, but, in my case, I had a symphony orchestra of 40, 50, 70 musicians depending on the theater, I had dancers, I had to know how to act, do costumes and lighting, in other words, it involves many things. I wanted time to work with the stage painters so I developed an idea

for the opera "The Elixir of Love" inspired by the work "The Circus" of Fernando Botero, represented by real people, because it seemed ridiculous to make an inflated suit with the little head of the singer. Besides it would be totally disrespectful and would not represent his work. So... master Botero came to the premiere, he loved it, and painted for me. He told me "I thought you were going to adapt

two little things" but I did all the scenery inspired by his paintings. I have already staged it nine times. In fact, in November [2023] I will be at the Teatro Comunale in Bologna. I already think it's the ninth or tenth time that it's been presented in different theaters around the world. And then, in Peru, I will present the Faust award, from Gounod's opera Faust, also inspired by a Peruvian painter José Tola, because he painted devils and distorted figures. I also have works by Dalí and other artists.

# How did you become part of the Cruz-Diez orchestra?

In 2019, Manuel Jurado dreamed of founding an orchestra. He called Janet Hurtado who knew me, and she put us in touch. Janet told him that I have more experience and can help, so we found this group, a triad, with Jonathan Alvarez, who is no longer with us. One time I was walking on the street after many years outside of my country, and someone said "Hello Victor" and I answered "Do I know you? They were musicians who had accompanied me at the

6 Teresa Carreño [theater], and others from Maracaibo. At that time we started recruiting people.

We got a place to practice and it was very exciting. About 25 musicians showed up. Manuel picked up the baton and it sounded good and everyone cried. Of course, it's the experience of being there. There were teachers with students. When you're young, you have more opportunities to travel and do things, but when you're older you say "I'm not going to compete anymore". It was exciting to be part of the orchestra again. It was all for free, nobody got paid. Today we get contracts. We started with 25 people and now there [Orquesta Sinfónica Carlos Cruz-Diez] are more than a hundred. The orchestra was born with a Venezuelan heart

but now there are people from Spain, Peru, Australia, and there are many who come and feel at ease because Venezuela has never been discriminatory. They feel at home because nowadays you can see the orchestra's musical and interpretative capacity. Behind each instrument there is a human being. When the orchestra is playing you are transported, you forget you are away from home and you feel like a family, like a group. When we performed at the Plaza Colón it was thanks to Código Venezuela, which is a foundation that works excellently, with a friend called Beatriz. Thanks to her we went viral.



*Orquesta Sinfónica  
Carlos Cruz-Diez*

## What motivates you to continue singing, dreaming, and working?

Well, the motivation stems from a profound belief that if you stop dreaming, you essentially lose a vital part of yourself. I've encountered individuals of my age who express sentiments like, "I've already lost my youth, that time when I could sing." In contrast, I choose to keep singing, dreaming, and working. An inspirational figure for me is Fedora Alemán, a remarkable Venezuelan singer, who, even at over 70 years old, remained dedicated.

She served as the director of the Keyboard Museum, where I also worked. Witnessing her daily commitment and the fact that she continued dreaming convinced me that to stop dreaming could lead to being labeled as just an

immigrant. I reject that label; when I walk down the street, I don't feel like an immigrant. I consider myself a contributing citizen, making significant contributions to the fields of culture and art. The silent world is a dreadful one, and the pandemic, in a strange way, underscored the hunger that people have for culture. Friends of mine sang or played on balconies, providing a sense of connection and culture during challenging times. I echo Master Fernando Botero's sentiment that art should reach out to the public without the need for an expert to explain. Art, be it a captivating painting or a few seconds of movement in a theatrical piece, has the power to make us forget many things for a brief but meaningful moment. I believe we are more than our physical bodies; we are energy.

When we interact, there is an exchange beyond the earthly plane. That's why I encourage seeing each other as unique, incomparable human beings rather than attaching labels.

*Victor García with  
Fernando Botero*



My journey from Alcalá de Henares to participate in this interview was a dream, an opportunity to meet someone different. I'm curious about what could come out of this interaction [with Dr. Carballo]. I advocate against labeling oneself or others. There's more to each person than any label suggests. The Orquesta Sinfónica Carlos Cruz-Diez, which I'm proud to be part of, wasn't founded with an immigrant mentality. We've discarded that label and don't seek pity. Venezuelans, in general, are not pitiful; we are entrepreneurs and fighters. A significant percentage of Venezuelans possess inventiveness, artistic talent,

and the ability to contribute in various ways. We take pride in our rich history, much like the Liberator Simón Bolívar, who led and won battles, making significant contributions. Venezuelans abroad contribute to the economies and cultures of other nations. I've observed that even a waiter or waitress may have a background as an engineer or doctor, speaking to the diverse and multifaceted nature of individuals. I encourage people not to label themselves, as these are not fixed definitions. Others may see you through their own lens, but once they get to know you, they'll remove those labels. Every day, I have a project in my mind, I continue to study singing

and, although I should have retired, I'm actively working and designing. The ideas in my head keep me active, and many of these life lessons come from the wisdom of Doctor Jacinto Convit.

*Victor García*







**Interview with Victor  
García Sierra conducted  
by Jeismar Carballo, PhD.,  
Chief Coordinator at  
Jacinto Convit World  
Organization, Inc.**

*(From left to right, Jeismar Carballo  
and Victor García Sierra.  
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*Official translation by*

*Marie-José Alsina  
Certified Public Translator  
English/Spanish*

*Design by*

*Gabriel Méndez  
Marketing Manager  
Jacinto Convit World  
Organization, Inc.*