

Vancouver Symphony 2015-16 season mixes new with old

BY DAVID GORDON DUKE, SPECIAL TO THE SUN MARCH 4, 2015



Vancouver Symphony Orchestra Music Director Bramwell Tovey.

Like the daffodils, announcements of next year's artistic seasons seem extra early this year. As a case in point, the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra released its plans for 2015-16 earlier this week.

The tightrope all classical presenters face is how to maintain their traditional (read, "increasingly gray") base audience while also drawing new and/or younger members into the tent. If this were easy, classical music wouldn't be so susceptible to gloomy soul searching. Due in no small measure to the enthusiasms of Music Director Bramwell Tovey, the tightrope act is done with more elegance and confidence at the VSO than at many similar institutions.

For one thing, VSO audiences have come to expect that fresh works will liven up the classics playlist. Next season promises a good deal of new music, starting with several works by popular composer-in-residence Jocelyn Morlock. We can also look forward to the Oct. 24 and 26 world premiere of Paganini Variations by Poul Ruders (whose intense and disturbing Nightshade was featured just last week at the Vancouver Sun Symphony at the Annex concerts), the premiere of a new work by Vivian Fung, a collaboration between the VSO and the Vancouver Biennale on Sept. 26 and 28, and music by Thomas Adès and Philip Glass (the latter's Third Symphony, Feb. 19 and 20).

Familiar concerti will be played by such wonderful soloists as Isabelle Faust (Bartok's exquisite Second Violin Concerto, April 30 through May 2, a work she played in last summer's Proms in London), Alexander Melnikov (Beethoven's "Emperor" Concerto, March 12 and 14), Augustin Hadelich (the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto, Jan. 16 and 18), and Stephen Hough (the Schumann Piano Concerto, Nov. 14-16).

There are also a number of real workouts for the orchestra. Bartok's Concerto for Orchestra, in which each member of the ensemble is tasked with music of soloistic difficulty, is a commanding demonstration of musical content and orchestra virtuosity (Nov. 14-16). Tovey is also recalling some of the great moments from his now complete Mahler symphony cycle, taking a second crack at the most emotionally charged of them all, the tragic Sixth (June 4 and 6). There is also a welcome try at symphonic Wagner, an idea Tovey essayed in his very early days with the VSO. "Ring without Words" (April 18) is the late Lorin Maazel's collage of best orchestral bits from the Ring cycle operas, a highlight of the "War of the Romantics" spring festival conceived as a cage match between Wagner and Brahms.

Another thread running through the concerts is a parade of suitors for the VSO Music Director position that opens up in 2018. The drill here is to design programs with enough flash to be memorable, but which also test depth and range. Some of the "guests" will play it safe, while others have tricks up their sleeves: John Storgards, for example, plans to introduce Alexander Zemlinsky's fantasia The Mermaid (Jan. 16 and 18); Christopher Seaman will conduct Walton's electrifying First Symphony (March 12 and 14); and Alexandre Block will test drive Messiaen's Les Offrandes oubliées (Oct. 9 and 10).

The VSO/University of BC connection which proved so fresh and vital this season in the Britten War Requiem will continue in a double bill of Fauré's Requiem and Stravinsky's wonderful Symphony of Psalms (Nov. 21 and 23).

Add-ons to the various main series also show an orchestra changing with the times. Bugs Bunny will return to the Symphony (Nov. 7 and 8) a delight for fans of classics and classic animation alike. The orchestra plans to host the Bollywood Masala Orchestra and Dancers (Sept. 23), the National Circus and Acrobats of the People's Republic of China (Sept. 2), and even, from far-off Vancouver Island, the Victoria Symphony on a 75th anniversary tour (April 3).

VSO at Whistler

Things are looking up for summer activities as the VSO will be running an educational program at Whistler as well as doing public events. The idea is simple: Bring VSO artist/teachers and talented students together for individual coaching, chamber music, and a Whistler Institute Orchestra, under the charismatic direction of Bramwell Tovey.

Given the success of music in the mountains programs at Aspen and Banff, a Whistler initiative seems long overdue offering, as it does, a winning mix of facilities and scenery within an easy drive from the city. The first ever VSO Institute in Whistler will run from June 28 to July 5.

For more information, check out vsoinstitute.ca.

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