

Tovey aims to give trumpet new voice

Vancouver conductor commissioned to create concerto for Toronto Symphony

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Bramwell Tovey, music director of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, was commissioned to produce a trumpet concerto for the TSO. (Tyler Boye/TSO)

Grammy-winning Vancouver conductor Bramwell Tovey set out to create the atmosphere of a saloon in 19th century New York in a newly commissioned work to have its world premiere in Toronto Wednesday.

Tovey, music director of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, was asked to write a trumpet concerto by the Toronto Symphony, which has five commissions by different composers debuting in 2009-10.

The result is *Songs of the Paradise Saloon*, which riffs off another work Tovey is currently composing — *The Inventor*, an opera which is to debut in Calgary in 2011.

The opera follows the story of Alexander Keith, a smuggler, conman and ne'er-do-well, who is on the lam in the seedier parts of New York.

"There's a scene in Act 1 of the opera where he is on the run from his creditors and they track him down to the Paradise Saloon — it only lasts five minutes in the opera," Tovey told CBC News.

For *Songs of the Paradise Saloon* he conceived of a moment before Keith's capture when life in the saloon would have been going on without interruption.

The piece calls on TSO first trumpet Andrew McCandless to play six different instruments — a piccolo trumpet, two cornets, a flugelhorn, a C and a D trumpet. These voices form into a lyrical whole that conjures a cast of characters throughout the concerto.

"There's an atmosphere of a 19th century pub with the adults leaving the children in the gutter while they went inside and spent their money. You know how it is in pubs — you have the deepest conversations of your life and the most trivial," Tovey said.

Tovey admits to loving the sound of the cornet and believing the trumpet sorely unappreciated as an instrument.

"There's so many trumpet concertos with the trumpet sounding like something out of the Old Testament and I really didn't want to write an Old Testament trumpet concerto ... I wanted to write something that was a little bit different," he said. "Yes, more contemporary but also more cheeky."

'I wanted to write something that was a little bit different ... Yes, more contemporary but also more cheeky' —Conductor Bramwell Tovey

Several of Tovey's earlier compositions, including pieces for Canadian Brass, are for brass instruments, though he has also written for viola and cello. British-born Tovey was brought up in the Salvation Army and says brass bands have a particular resonance for him.

"I wanted to write something that would show off the character of the brass instruments — that it's not only brilliant and high and loud but also very soft and moving," he said.



Andrew McCandless, trumpeter for Toronto Symphony Orchestra, will perform Songs of the Paradise Saloon in its world premiere. (Lidija Buckwalter/TSO)

Tovey has conducted McCandless in the past, as part of the TSO. The young trumpeter is considered a great talent and Tovey judged he'd have the agility to switch among the instruments.

Songs of the Paradise Saloon is being played as part of program that includes another of Tovey's compositions, *Urban Runway*, which he wrote for the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the New York Philharmonic. That piece, for strings, harps, piano and timpani, debuted in July 2008 in New York and has had several more performances in the U.S.

Tovey will also be conducting the TSO for Dvorak's *Symphony No. 9, From the New World*.

Tovey is in high demand as a conductor — in addition to his duties at the VSO, he is principal guest conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic and conductor of the New York Philharmonic's Summertime Classics series and also works with the National Youth Brass Band of Britain.

That makes getting time to compose a challenge, yet he has several projects underway. Tovey said he works early in the morning before rehearsals or other commitments begin.

But he'll mull the music over in his head, sometimes revising for weeks, before he puts pen to paper.

"I have to be very certain before I'll put it down. I have to live with it for a while to make sure the concept is working," he said.

The new commission has its world premiere with the TSO on Wednesday and the same program is scheduled for Thursday at Roy Thomson Hall in Toronto. Another commissioned work, Philip Glass's *Violin Concert No. 2, The American Four Seasons*, debuts Dec. 9 and 11.