

For drama, Tovey heads to the bar

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Composers often fret about how conductors will handle their music, especially when rehearsal time is short (as it usually is for new works). No worries on that point for Bramwell Tovey, who led the Toronto Symphony Orchestra in two of his own pieces on Wednesday, including a premiere.



VSO Music Director Bramwell Tovey.

Tovey's new commissioned trumpet concerto, *Songs of the Paradise Saloon*, borrowed a scenic idea and some musical material from *The Inventor*, an opera he is writing with John Murrell for Calgary Opera. Tovey, who is music director of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, invited us to imagine ourselves in a 19th-century New York bar, and gave us the option of hearing sketches of its inhabitants in the piece's 12 variations on a theme.

The theme was an expansive, hot-house affair that spread itself across violas and cellos at the start, bobbed up in fragments throughout the piece, and reassembled itself later on. Tovey's zesty variations exploited the colours of a large orchestra and four solo instruments: C and piccolo trumpets, cornet and flugelhorn, all played by TSO principal Andrew McCandless.

There was a Spanish-sounding variation for flugelhorn, a polytonal waltz led by the woodwinds, some soft-footed jazz for a section with muted trumpet, and a Gallic flavour to much else. The solo part, by turns brilliant and reflective, felt less like a protagonist than a privileged observer, presented by McCandless with flair and sensitivity.

Tovey is fond of regular strophic phrases and American rhythms, and apparently sympathetic to the eclectic, evocative symphonic writing of the best Hollywood composers of the forties. These traits recurred in *Urban Runway*, a brief orchestral work related (said Tovey) to the diversity and playfulness of runway couture. This effervescent entertainment featured some high-kicking music led by the brass, a sentimental melody for violas, a bit of fugal business for woodwinds and a stubbornly recurrent *idée fixe* for marimba and piano. Both pieces showed a strong theatrical sense, which bodes well for Tovey's opera, which opens in Calgary in January, 2011.

The remaining work was Dvorak's *Symphony No. 9 in E Minor* ("From the New World"), given a fair but not stellar performance by players who occasionally evinced doubt about the precise location of Tovey's downbeat. Tasty solo turns were taken by Cary Ebli (English horn) and Joaquin Valdepenas (clarinet).