

Tuesday, October 14, 2008

Vancouver Orchestra brings tour to Seoul

By Christianna Lee

In a historic six city tour of Asia, the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra performed at the Seongnam Arts Center in Seoul on Saturday with a program of Tchaikovsky, Berlioz and a sparkling 21st century piece, "The Linearity of Light," by former composer-in-residence Joshua Ryan.

This is the first international tour for the orchestra in 17 years.

Acting as musical ambassadors for Canada, the VSO will be the first Canadian orchestra to perform at the prestigious Beijing Music Festival. The tour also marks the first time in 30 years that a Canadian orchestra will perform in China.

Relaxing in his dressing room before the concert, VSO Music Director and Conductor Bramwell Tovey said that this is his fourth visit to Korea and he is starting to feel at home.

"They keep giving me all this food," he says, gesturing to the spread on the table. He conducted the KBS orchestra last year, and made visits in 2003 and 1987.

"We're in a unique position as the largest arts group in western Canada to represent a world of culture across the ocean," Tovey said. "This tour truly is a cultural handshake across the Pacific."

It was a handshake that was eight years in preparation, as the orchestra built up the financial health needed to undertake such a monumental excursion.

The cost of the \$1.2 million tour is being covered by a combination of performance fees, private sponsors, as well as the provincial and federal governments of Canada.

"Music is an opportunity to communicate on a good news basis," Tovey says.

Grammy Award-winning violinist, Hilary Hahn, opened the concert with a regrettably lackluster performance of the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto. Hahn played two Bach encores, the second of which was the only piece to truly showcase her originality as an artist.

The orchestra's expansive and passionate interpretation of Berlioz *Symphonie Fantastique* was followed by encores of Brahms *Hungarian Waltz* and Elgar's "Nimrod" *Enigma Variation*. Maestro Tovey even handled an audience member's ringing cell phone with characteristic grace and good humor saying, "Please answer it. It may be a friend."

In addition to the evening concert, members of the orchestra also worked with the Seongnam Youth Orchestra and coached an enthusiastic rendition of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*. The tour includes several such community outreach programs. VSO instrumentalists and Maestro Tovey will host a family concert, conduct master classes, and perform at special needs schools.

The VSO will appear in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and the Special Administrative Region of Macau.