

## **Bramwell Tovey signs on for five more years**

*Symphony has flourished under 10 years of leadership by charismatic conductor*

By David Gordon Duke

The timing couldn't be better. Just a few days before the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra presents Gustav Mahler's mammoth Eighth Symphony as part of the Cultural Olympiad, there's a longer-lasting reason to celebrate: The orchestra has just announced that maestro Bramwell Tovey has signed on for a further five-year contract as music director. Tovey will continue in his high-profile gig with the VSO until 2015, which will make him the VSO's longest-serving conductor, surpassing the tenures of both Irwin Hoffman (1952- 64) and Kazuyoshi Akiyama (1972-1985).

Born in the United Kingdom in 1953, Tovey came to the VSO in 2000 after a 12-year stint with the Winnipeg Symphony; before that, he conducted for the Royal Ballet and the D'Oyly Carte Opera. During his time on the West Coast he has reenergized the ensemble with his broad and eclectic range of talents: conductor, composer and, perhaps unexpectedly, accomplished jazz pianist. (Next up, after this weekend's Mahler, Tovey will both conduct and perform the solo keyboard part in Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue.)

VSO president and CEO Jeff Alexander considers Tovey's decision "fantastic news for the VSO and for Vancouver, for B.C. and for the country. Bramwell's done amazing work, and we couldn't be more happy that he's agreed to continue," he said, noting as well Tovey's "great enthusiasm for our community." Alexander points out that Tovey masterminded successful tours to Asia and Central Canada, won Grammy and Juno awards with the orchestra, conducted more than 400 performances, and has overseen the hiring of one-third of the current members of the orchestra.

After a decade of Tovey's directorship, the VSO is a confident, key player on the arts scene. This has happened at a time when things have never been worse for orchestras; the roll call of organizations in dire straits (like the 109-year-old Honolulu Symphony which filed for bankruptcy protection last month) grows longer every day.

By contrast, the once-troubled VSO is a well-run organization with a secure subscriber base and committed patrons.

Tovey's personal stature as a cultural leader is unassailable; his quick wit and affable demeanour have ingratiated him with thousands who may never have set foot in the Orpheum. His clout and his backbone could be felt in December 2009 when he took a principled stance against fakery in the service of Olympic spectacle, refusing to participate in pre-recorded sessions in which VSO performances,

including his own, would be mimed at the Games opening ceremony on Feb. 12 by uncredited performers.

So while "business as usual" isn't always much of a story, in this instance (and to the great relief of VSO subscribers and staff), it is. Tovey has so many irons in the fire -- including composing a new work for Calgary Opera, and acting as music director for summer series with both the New York Philharmonic and the Los Angeles Philharmonic -- that there's been an uneasy feeling around the Orpheum that perhaps it might prove opportune for Tovey to move on to greener pastures.

In a phone conversation Tuesday, just before the good news became public knowledge, Tovey wryly acknowledged that music directors do indeed have a natural "shelf life," but he believes that "it's the good will and support of the musicians you work with" that determines how long to stay, and when it might be time to go. Vancouver has become home for Tovey and his family, and he enjoys his sense of connection to the orchestra and the community at large. Several years ago, when he worked with both the VSO and the Luxembourg Philharmonic, Tovey decided, "Ultimately, a conductor has to commit to one orchestra -- and one community." Vancouver offered the "best potential for a week-in/ week-out opportunity" to make great things happen.

What are his key strategies and projects for the coming years? First of all, there's completing his cycle of the Mahler symphonies in the next few seasons. With the Eighth soon to be crossed off the list, there remain some important late works to do -- "and the Fourth Symphony, which somehow slipped by."

He's absolutely intent on new music, and intends to enjoy the VSO's role in bringing contemporary music to contemporary audiences. As well, he's excited by the possibilities inherent in the VSO's music school, which will provide teaching facilities for VSO musicians in purpose-built spaces still under construction just north of the Orpheum.

The school should help recruit (and keep) younger players for the orchestra -- professionals rarely in a position to teach from home. He sees the new school as a tremendous outreach initiative and a great asset to the whole spectrum of local music education.

So there are lots of ideas in circulation. But somehow the conversation came back to the central leitmotif: The maestro is happy in Vancouver. He's also delighted to re-commit to a future with his much-valued VSO colleagues, "so many of whom have devoted their lives to music-making in our city."

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