

VSO heading to China for historic tour

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There have been quite a few sour notes sounded lately between Canada and China, what with young Canadian activists running Tibetan protests, the federal government criticizing China's human rights record and Prime Minister Stephen Harper awarding the Dalai

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Lama honorary citizenship and not going to the Beijing Olympics.

A little Tchaikovsky and Shostakovich, courtesy of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, may smooth things, at least on the cultural side. The VSO is travelling to China — as well as

to South Korea and Asia's gambling hub Macau — in October, shortly after China's Summer Games are finished.

"It's a cultural handshake across the Pacific," said Bramwell Tovey, the VSO's conductor. "It's also a means of bringing our countries closer together."

It's also a notable moment in our country's cultural history.

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First Canadian symphony orchestra to visit China since 1978

MIRO CERNETIG

From A1

The VSO will be the first Canadian symphony orchestra to visit China since 1978, when the Toronto Symphony Orchestra took the musical journey

across the Pacific.

"This hasn't happened in a generation," Tovey said. "It's an important moment for us."

It's also going to be a moment — moments actually since there will be stops in six cities from Oct. 10 to 20 — that says something about this city's growing maturity when it comes to the high arts. We seem to be figuring out that the mountains and beaches aren't enough to complete the city's cultural tapestry.

Not that long ago, the VSO was struggling as an institution. Money was hard to come by. It has not toured internationally since 1991, when it played in Japan.

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Delaying the Chinese tour was a smart thing to do. The orchestra has stabilized its bottom

line, bolstered its subscriber base and is now looking at a heady expansion period. There's the prospect of a new concert hall downtown in the city's emerging "cultural precinct" and the construction of a major downtown tower that will give the VSO a modern new music school and education centre near the Orpheum Theatre is in the works.

"The Beijing Music Festival would come back to us every year and say, 'Let us know when you're ready,'" recalls Jeff Alexander, the CEO and president of the VSO. "We didn't feel it was the time. Well, now we're ready."

That would certainly seem to be the case. The symphony is on something of a roll.

This year it won a Grammy for a record of violin concertos performed by Canadian violinist James Ehnes, with Tovey conducting. In 2008, it also took the Juno for best classical album.

What may be even more important, though, is that the local community and government are coming through with something that matters as much as a good score for a symphony: A solid bottom line. The VSO's Asia trip will cost \$1.2 million, but the symphony society is not going a penny into debt to make the tour happen.

The budget is coming from the federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the Canada Council and the B.C. government.

Equally significant, the private sector is stepping up to the podium. As all the CEOs of the world's major orchestras will tell you, support from business is essential to put on an expensive international tour.

Air Canada is a key sponsor, arranging airfare for the 95 musicians and staff, as well as all the delicate instruments. The mining sector, flush in the current commodities boom, is chipping in, too. Teck

Cominco is contributing to the concerts in Beijing, the Vancouver-based mining company Longview Capital Partners/Oriental Minerals is helping with the South Korean leg of the tour and Gateway Casinos is anteing-up for the concert in Macau.

One might wonder what the value is in taking a symphony on the road in the digital age, when music is so easily sent around the world. But the reasons are powerful.

This international tour will push the VSO to new performance heights; it will brand Vancouver, B.C. and Canada abroad, and it's the sort of extravagant, heady experience that musicians dream of. It will help the VSO to continue to attract — and keep — major talent.

When the VSO's conductor and musical director entered his office Thursday to tell me about the Asian tour, he had a thick ream of music sheets stuffed under his arm. It was a composition Tovey had just finished that morning for the New York Philharmonic. This is a man who can — and does — conduct the world's greatest orchestras.

Tovey could live anywhere. He'd just have to make a few phone calls. But he chooses to live here, happily conducting the VSO. He smiles and won't answer when I ask how good his orchestra is. That would be gauche and self-serving.

But he did say this: "We won a Grammy ... we're clearly doing pretty well."

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To hear an interview with VSO conductor Bramwell Tovey, go to: VancouverSun.com