

VSO makes music - and history - in China

Enthusiastic response from young audience at Beijing Music Festival

Aileen McCabe, Canwest News Service

BEIJING -- Thirty years after the last Canadian orchestra performed in China, the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra delighted and moved a sold-out audience at the prestigious Beijing Music Festival Friday night.

For its second encore -- there were three -- the orchestra played Edward Elgar's Nimrod, from the Enigma Variations, a piece conductor Bramwell Tovey described as so steeped in the feeling of friendship, "it is like a direct message to the people of China."

"There isn't a single politician out there who could say as much to them about friendship," the maestro said in an interview.

The audience at Poly Theatre in central Beijing was predominantly Chinese and full of young people. The wild applause clearly indicated they loved the sentiment and the piece.

Grammy Award-winning violin soloist Hilary Hahn was a hit with the enthusiastic audience, too. The slight 28-year-old American's style is subtle and intense but also incredibly accessible. Her rendition of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto in D Major was magical. Her music was at times sweet and at other times peppery, but always crystal-clear, with the orchestral accompaniment only gently cradling her moment in the spotlight.

The soft-spoken Hahn said in an interview before the performance that when she's with the VSO, "I don't play it my way, I play it our way."



Hilary Hahn rehearsing with the VSO in Beijing Friday.
Photograph by : Steve Curtin

Hahn was the centrepiece in a show that opened with Jeffrey Ryan's spare and dramatic *The Linearity of Light* and closed with Sergei Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet Suites*.

The story of the star-crossed lovers is less familiar to a Chinese audience than to a Western one, but the music bridged that gap with such ease that the listeners seemed as engaged as if they had been brought up on Shakespeare's plays, instead of Mao's *Little Red Book*.

Not incidentally, the suites' pomp, thunder, sweet romance and black despair were the perfect showcase for the orchestra's varied talents. Tovey showed them off shamelessly on stage, just as offstage he made a point of mentioning the role he and his musicians can and do play as cultural ambassadors for Canada.

"It's through cultural organizations, whether it is orchestras, operas, ballets, theatre, or whatever, that we can shake hands across the Pacific Ocean," he said after rehearsal Friday.

To press home his point, he used the example of how far U.S. relations with North Korea have progressed since the New York Philharmonic's breakthrough concert in Pyongyang in February. Discussions on nuclear issues are moving ahead and the United States recently removed the hermit nation from its list of states sponsoring terrorism.

Tovey won't talk about the recent chill in Canada-China relations, but he certainly thinks a more liberal dose of cultural diplomacy can help cure international ills, real or perceived. "I think that, as a country, we are behind the rest of the world in realizing the potential for both diplomatic and business goodwill with our arts organizations," he said.

For him and his musicians, the orchestra's "soft diplomacy" only begins at the door to the concert hall.

During rehearsal Friday, the maestro coached two master students from the Beijing Central Conservatory of Music, letting them conduct the orchestra. It's unlikely either one had ever had 88 musicians at the end of a baton before, but Tovey played patient teacher to them for over an hour.

The musicians performed to the students' command.

Tovey has no real answer as to why it has been 30 years since a Canadian orchestra performed in China, the last time being the Toronto Symphony Orchestra's visit in 1978.

The federal and B.C. governments both helped underwrite the VSO tour, along with the Canada Council, Air Canada, one private donor and several corporate sponsors. Vancouver's Teck Cominco Limited was the prime sponsor in Beijing. Howard Chu, Teck's vice-president for Asian affairs, said it sponsored the Beijing concert because "we're a Vancouver company and good corporate citizens."

However, when asked specifically, he also allowed that Teck is actively looking to buy mines in China and that having a high profile at an event sure to attract Beijing's elite was a worthwhile expenditure for the company.

Some \$1.2 million in donations later, the VSO's two-country, six-city tour is at its penultimate stop. All 102 orchestra and crew members and 9,000 kilograms of luggage move on to Shanghai for a concert Sunday, and then back to Vancouver on Tuesday.