

**BRAMWELL TOVEY**  
**The Boston Globe • August 30, 2011**

## **Prelude to at least one storm**

*BSO gets 'Porgy and Bess' in before Irene hits, and before ART's controversial production*

BY JEREMY EICHLER

LENOX - In Act II of "Porgy and Bess" a fierce storm bears down on the characters of Catfish Row, and Gershwin conjures it with a swirling orchestral tempest, complete with the ringing of a hurricane bell. Surely the question ran through the minds of most present here for Friday's concert performance of the opera: How soon and how fully would life imitate art?

Irene began drenching Western Massachusetts some 24 hours later, with the BSO calling off its season-closing performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the first such cancellation in 75 years. Saturday night's all-Beethoven program with Itzhak Perlman took place as scheduled.

At least there was an enjoyable "Porgy." The opera has been much in the news of late thanks to the production set to open at the American Repertory Theater, en route to Broadway, which has already generated controversy based on early press reports of director Diane Paulus's plans to adapt the original opera with an eye toward modernizing the piece, filling out the backgrounds of various characters, and even fashioning a happier ending for the work.

While the ART's production officially opens its doors to reviewers tomorrow, Friday night's vibrant performance of the original score, albeit with some over-aggressive cuts, left one with the impression that Gershwin's masterpiece has hardly been languishing as it awaits the revisionism of Paulus and her team. The multivalent brilliance of Gershwin's score, deftly shaded in a good performance, fills in so many of the apparent holes that may be spotted when the libretto is read on paper.

Friday's rendition in fact brimmed with a theatrical vitality that carried it far from the typical concert opera presentation of singers planted on stage holding scores. The cast sang from memory and was set free to roam at the front of the orchestra in what amounted to a light staging. At its heart was the British conductor Bramwell Tovey, in his BSO debut, conducting with a sure hand and a clear affection for this score's roiling amalgam of classical, jazz, and vernacular traditions, invented or otherwise. Tovey didn't so much thread the needle between styles as he did make the score's disparate musical inheritances feel like they belonged together, which is not always the case with "Porgy," a work often hailed as a masterpiece yet still fated to wander between the worlds of opera and musical theater.

At times the BSO itself seemed to be the least persuaded party on stage, turning in a respectful and accurate reading that sometimes edged toward the blandly polished. The members of the Tanglewood Festival Chorus, meanwhile, threw themselves wholeheartedly into their roles, as if Tovey had encouraged them to not only sing but to participate as full partners in the drama unfolding on stage. They remained on the risers behind the orchestra but broke their typically uniform ranks to respond as

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a mass of individuals swept up in the events before them. And if acting at times slid toward overacting, the chorus's sheer commitment lent the affair a kinetic energy that drove the night's momentum and supported the contributions of the strong cast.

Laquita Mitchell showed off a supple and refined soprano as Bess, infusing the role with a touching vulnerability and innocence yet at the same time an awareness of her own weakness that gave her portrayal a weightier pull. When in Act I, the drug dealer Sportin' Life tries to play on her fears and lure her off with him to New York, Bess replies, "I ain't come to that yet," with the key word of course being the last one, which Mitchell sang with a heartbreaking sense of knowing. Alfred Walker was a regal and sympathetic Porgy, singing with a smooth and shapely bass-baritone and a shadow of melancholy that not even the resolutely cheerful "I got plenty o' nuttin' " could fully displace. Nicole Cabell as Clara, Marquita Lister as Serena, and Gwendolyn Brown as Maria all gave fine performances, as did Gregg Baker as a formidable Crown, John Fulton as Robbins, Robert Honeysucker as the lawyer Frazier, and Jermaine Smith as a sleekly conniving Sportin' Life.

It came as some surprise that, in the BSO program, the work was listed as "The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess," the same title that has itself become a flashpoint for some of the controversy around the new ART production. It turns out that this title was in fact mandated by the Gershwin Estate, according to the BSO, as "a condition of using the required rental performance materials." It's not, in short, part of Paulus's reinvention, which in a way makes it more insidious. We may often refer to operas in shorthand as the creation of their composers (Mozart's "Don Giovanni," Strauss's "Rosenkavalier") but for the Gershwin Estate to stipulate this title as the required billing is to grossly undervalue the contributions of DuBose Heyward. As Stephen Sondheim pointed out in his colorfully furious letter to the New York Times, Heyward was the author or coauthor of the opera's most memorable lyrics. He was also the author of the original novel, "Porgy," without which there would be no "Porgy and Bess."

**BRAMWELL TOVEY**  
**The Plain Dealer • August 8, 2011**

## **Bramwell Tovey leads Cleveland Orchestra in satisfying program: Review**

BY MARK SATOLA

Introducing three excerpts from Mendelssohn's music for "A Midsummer Night's Dream," conductor Bramwell Tovey noted, "Many of you have heard this music in an ecclesiastical setting, some of you more than once, so perhaps it needs to carry a bit of a health warning -- in case it brings on palpitations." Fortunately, medical attention was not needed as Tovey led an incisive and near-perfect reading of the Scherzo, Nocturne and Wedding March Sunday at Blossom Music Center.

The rest of the evening followed suit, with first-rate performances of works by Richard Strauss and George Enescu. Latvian violinist Baiba Skride also made her Cleveland Orchestra debut at the concert, with the Violin Concerto No. 1 in G minor by Max Bruch. The English-born Tovey, who is also an award-winning composer, has been best known to Americans as conductor, since 2004, of the New York Philharmonic's "Summertime Classics" series, though he also has had a high profile as music director of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra in Canada, which he has led since 2000.

Skride played Bruch's First Violin Concerto with a beautiful richness of tone, smooth-as-silk phrasing and an Apollonian approach that emphasized the classical form of Bruch's masterpiece. She was lyrical and intense in the opening Allegro moderato and the deeply felt Adagio, and brought considerable fire to the Allegro energico finale, where her sure-fingered technique and interpretive poise earned her a loud and long ovation. Tovey again addressed the audience after the intermission, providing a detailed road map to Richard Strauss' tone poem "Don Juan," outlining the music's close adherence to its poetic source, a long poem by Nikolaus Lenau. He drew attention to some of the instrumental felicities that the casual listener might miss, including the sensuous oboe solo at the heart of the seduction scene.

Principal oboist Frank Rosenwein was especially fine during this lengthy passage. Tovey's reading was briskly paced and exciting.

Introducing the final work on the program, George Enescu's famous Romanian Rhapsody No. 1, Tovey revealed that the Cleveland Orchestra, inexplicably, had not played this great favorite since the 1950s. He then proceeded to rectify this peculiar omission with a dangerously fast performance of Enescu's showpiece that had the players working hard to maintain their usual perfect ensemble. Enescu gave no quarter in his wild evocation of Romanian dance, and there were some moments in Sunday night's reading that were a little rough around the edges. But even that was in keeping with the sense of exhilarating abandon that the composer built into his score.

The program that Tovey conducted Sunday for his debut with the Cleveland Orchestra was significantly different from the one announced earlier this year. But while one might have regretted not hearing works by Walton, Delius, Vaughan Williams and Parry (whose ode "Blest Pair of Sirens" had been promised), the satisfying performances that Tovey so winningly led more than made up for it.

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The Vancouver Sun • June 12, 2011

### Review: VSO ends season on high note

BY DAVID GORDON DUKE

VANCOUVER - The Vancouver Symphony likes to end each season on a high note; a pairing of Tchaikovsky and Mahler Saturday at the Orpheum ensured a grand finale to this year's music making.

First off, though, was something new: Resonance Unfolding by VSO composer-in-residence Scott Good. Using the super-sized orchestral complement assembled for Mahler's First Symphony, Good's work was a sure-footed (and often subdued) colour study for truly extravagant instrumental forces.

The orchestra's recording partnership with violinist James Ehnes has produced brilliant results, so this season's reunion of Ehnes, conductor Bramwell Tovey and the orchestra was much anticipated.

Even though Tchaikovsky's popular Violin Concerto is programmed on a regular-as-clockwork basis, we rarely hear performances of such shining quality. Ehnes has the technique, the tone, and the presence for the work. Add emotional generosity coupled with an infinitesimal dash of reticence, and his interpretation is both warm and tasteful.

His overall sound is focussed, sweet and refined. Lyrical passages breathe eloquently. And while there's plenty of fire and genuine brilliance, there's also precision and no grandstanding. Ehnes has long been in the forefront of younger violinists; it can now be said with complete confidence, that he is one of the leading artists of his generation.

Pairing Tchaikovsky with Mahler might have seemed a bit of Romantic overkill. Yet it couldn't have been more effective, as the most exuberant of the Mahler symphonies was given a richly engaging reading.

Bramwell Tovey put great emphasis on the First's quiet, attenuated opening—an enchanted pastorella that flavours the entire extended structure of the piece.

On Saturday the opening was intentionally unhurried, and relaxed casualness extended through much of the first movement. The second movement emphasized the heavy contrast between rustic and more sophisticated materials; the famous slow movement (with its mordant Frere Jacques parody) was exemplary.

Mahler's grandiose finale is the ultimate destination of the journey, but Tovey once again took time to savour the work's lyrical moments before the final blaze of glory brought the symphony, and the 2010/11 season, to a spectacular close.

**Bramwell Tovey****The Los Angeles Times • September 3, 2010****Music review: 'Candide' at the Hollywood Bowl**

By MARK SWED

"Candide" -- failed book by Lillian Hellman, delicious lyrics by Richard Wilbur, inspired score by Leonard Bernstein -- opens on Dec. 1, 1956, in New York and closes two months later after 73 performances. Broadway applies the f-word. A flop? We know better.

Sept. 2, 2010, "Candide," given in a concert performance (based on the one Bernstein prepared in London in 1989), opens at the Hollywood Bowl as part of the Los Angeles Philharmonic's summer season. It closes after a single night. That is all that was scheduled. It is a hit.

The tale that Voltaire's classic satire tells is long and winding. And the tale of the Broadway show or (as Bernstein called it) American operetta to its present state as quintessential American opera (or music theater piece) is also long and winding. Over the years the piece got new books, new numbers, additional lyrics and new orchestrations until Bernstein finally conducted the full score in London with narration and a cast of opera stars.

Since then Bernstein's "Candide" has belonged more to the opera house and concert stage than to Broadway. Many things to many people, "Candide" tempts interpreters. A wonderful musical performance by the New York Philharmonic in 2004, which was televised, was subverted by harebrained semi-staging. Two years later, a scandalous, politically way-incorrect opera production in Paris satirized a drunken chorus line of state leaders in skivvies (Bush, Blair, Berlusconi, Putin and Chirac, to be exact).

For the straightforward Bowl presentation on Thursday, the nonsense was mainly that found in "Candide," with just a touch of cute horseplay. Bramwell Tovey conducted an expertly paced performance. Nearly all the music was included. Richard Suart, a Gilbert and Sullivan man from England, was the sharp-witted narrator and Pangloss, advocate of cockeyed optimism. Otherwise the cast was North American and schooled in opera. Frederica von Stade brought star power and something of a Russian accent to the Old Lady.

Victimized by the era of Sen. Joseph McCarthy, Bernstein (who was blacklisted for two years) and Hellman (who was called up before the House Un-American Activities Committee) began work on the show in 1954, using Voltaire's 1759 French satire on optimism to parody the communist witch hunts in America two centuries later. But for Bernstein, the story of Candide, who travels the globe getting in hopeless situations, was also his first truly eclectic work.

He threw in every kind of dance imaginable -- waltz (Venetian, Viennese and Parisian), polka, mazurka. There is a barcarolle and a schottische. The score also relies on coloratura frippery and heavy chorales. The Old Lady's tango has Spanish and French lyrics meant to be sung with the "High Middle Polish" accent of "Rovno Gubernya." She also makes merry of her record number of humiliations (whipped, stripped, starved, burned, cut in four) to the accompaniment of a punishing 12-tone row.

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Pangloss and his pupils -- the dim-witted and ever sanguine Candide, Cunegonde (who loses her virginity repeatedly) and her vain brother Maximilian -- find themselves on many continents and in many absurdly dire situations, from which they always come out worse for the wear. The craziest is a riotous Spanish Inquisition ("What a day for an auto-da-fé"), the HUAC in thin disguise.

"Candide" comes to an arresting end. After deflating the notion that all is the best in the best of all possible worlds from every angle, Bernstein, at his most gloriously affirmative, transforms earlier melodic motives into "Make Our Garden Grow." The words are banal, the music a statement of our essential humanity.

Alek Shrader, a young Canadian tenor with a lyric voice and clear diction, was a rare Candide, an innocent to be admired rather than a bumpkin to be ridiculed. Anna Christy, an experienced, sophisticated and flirtatious Cunegonde, made "Glitter and Be Gay" sparkle without campiness. A stylish Von Stade has to work hard to ham, and she worked just the right amount on the Old Lady.

Suart's narration engaged. His baritone is worn but works. And his Gilbert and Sullivan expertise, along with dry humor, served him very well. Maximilian (Paul LaRosa), Paquette (Kathryn Leemhuis) and the Governor (Beau Gibson), were characters created to amuse and they did. The Los Angeles Master Chorale made Eldorado heavenly.

Given Gustavo Dudamel's advocacy, Bernstein's music has taken on new luster in Los Angeles. But the L.A. Philharmonic has a history. Some of the best performances of Bernstein I've ever heard (conducted by the composer himself, Michael Tilson Thomas and Dudamel) have been by this orchestra in this amphitheater. Tovey, on Thursday night, joined that select company.

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The Los Angeles Times • August 8, 2010

### Bramwell Tovey mixes a mean musical cocktail

*The convivial Canadian (by way of Britain) is returning for his third summer as principal guest conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Hollywood Bowl.*

By KEVIN BERGER

Reporting From New York

— It's tempting to call Bramwell Tovey the Noel Coward of conductors.

In the past decade the native Brit has become renowned for his droll and witty remarks from concert stages.

In June, as host of the New York Philharmonic Summertime Classics series, Tovey guided the orchestra through a dramatic, seductive performance of pieces from the ballet score "Raymonda" by Russian composer Alexander Glazunov.

After the applause came to a rest, Tovey faced the full house at Avery Fisher Hall and offered his opinion of Glazunov, a contemporary of Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky and Prokofiev.

"I think he was right at the top of a second-class act," Tovey said.

The audience broke out in laughter.

Still, Noel Coward isn't quite the right comparison for Tovey, who returns Tuesday for his third summer as principal guest conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Hollywood Bowl.

Yes, Tovey is urbane and wears his learning lightly. It's just that his elegance comes out in his conducting and not his, well, look.

On a June afternoon in Manhattan, seated in an old-world Italian cafe, the portly Tovey, 57, was wearing brown corduroys and a brown shirt with a zipper that ran up the collar. Actually, the shirt was kind of stylish.

There was no mistaking, though, his inner rumpiness.

Tovey has a cheerfully big head that appears to sit directly on his shoulders. His nose juts outward and drops abruptly south, like a broken rooster beak. An inveterate cricket player, Tovey has taken one too many balls to the face.

"How would I describe myself?" Tovey said, thinking for a moment. "Cosmetically challenged."

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Tovey enjoys his reputation as the witty bloke whom everybody loves to gather around at the pub. It's not an act. It's who he is.

At the same time, his Falstaffian image overshadows a fascinatingly diverse musician, a champion of contemporary music and a composer himself who writes in surprisingly dark and unflinching tones.

"I'm just this whole cocktail," he said.

Tovey grew up in a modest home in East London. He descended from a long line of Salvation Army evangelists who spread the Protestant word with the fire of the Holy Ghost and the sound of brass bands.

Tovey played the piano, tuba and violin by the time he was a teenager.

His father, a World War II vet, always wanted to be a professional musician, yet lived out a melancholic life as an accountant for a jewelry company. He died of cancer when Tovey was 15.

Nobody laid out a red carpet for Tovey to enter the privileged world of art. He made it on his own street talent and smarts. The artful dodger became the conductor who could lead anybody to classical music.

In the restaurant, maybe because Kelsey Grammar was sitting a few tables away from us, our conversation veered to the surreal world of celebrities. Tovey recalled his first brush with fame.

At home in London one morning in the late '70s, Tovey picked up the Daily Star and saw a huge photo of the "lovely" flute player he dated a few times when they both attended the Royal Academy of Music. He wondered what happened to her.

Quite apparently, he explained, "she had run off, joined a rock band and built a singing career." Now here she was in bold type in one of England's storied tabloids: Annie Lennox.

"My wife is a huge Annie Lennox fan," he continued. "When I told her I went out with Annie, she said, 'Did you sleep with her?' I said, 'No!'" Disappointed that Tovey didn't have a good coda for his story, his wife, Lana, a Canadian music educator, said to him, "Why not? What's wrong with you?"

Tovey has lived in Canada for more than two decades. In the '80s, while on tour in Canada with a British ballet company, he formed a chain of lasting relationships. Beginning in 1989, he served as the music director of the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra for 11 years. Since 2000, he has been the music director of the Vancouver Symphony.

While Tovey is best known in the U.S. for his summer gigs with the L.A. Philharmonic and the New York Philharmonic, generally conducting crowd pleasers such as Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture" — which he will do for two nights at the Hollywood Bowl — he is celebrated in Canada as the consummate raconteur.

"In Winnipeg, Bramwell was a superstar," said Glenn Buhr, a Canadian composer and pianist, who has worked with Tovey for 20 years. "He was the most famous person in the city. I've never seen anything like it.

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"Everybody — politicians — wanted to know him. Even in Vancouver, he's at the top of the fame game."

Buhr, whose piercing, tranquil work "Winter Poems" is often performed by the Vancouver Symphony, called Tovey "as good as any conductor in the world right now." He underscored the typical first impression of him.

"When I first met Bramwell, I thought of him as a party animal," Buhr said. "I hadn't been to rehearsal with him yet, and I thought, 'Oh, this is going to be fun, he's just going to joke around.'"

"But he walked in and he was very strict. He never let the orchestra out a second early. He always had something more for them to do. He's an impeccable musician."

In 1990, Tovey and Buhr launched a new music festival in Winnipeg, featuring both local and international composers. ("Arvo Part writes very beautiful music," Tovey said. "But he tinkers with it constantly. He's quite frustrating to have around.")

It was the force of Tovey's personality, Buhr said, that broke down the barriers that typical classical music subscribers erect to new music and earned the festival a wide audience. "Bramwell can sell anything from the stage," Buhr said.

Tovey's commitment to new music is seen plainly in his own compositions, which he works on every morning from 6 to 9.

Influenced by the hard-edged Romanticism of his beloved countryman Frederick Delius, Tovey often finds his voice in dire currents. In 2003, he won a Juno, Canada's Grammy, for classical composition of the year for "Requiem for a Charred Skull," a searing work for choir and brass band. As Tovey explained, the work was inspired by his disgust at England's lavish "millennium" celebration in 1998, when it dumped \$2.5 billion into a "ridiculous" exhibition dome. "At the same time, there was genocide in Serbia. There was nothing to celebrate."

Tovey's fidelity to his art hit the public airwaves in December 2009 with an impact seldom felt by classical music. The Vancouver Olympics' organizing committee asked Tovey to record Barber's "Adagio for Strings" for the opening ceremony. Thing was, the performance would be credited to Tovey and the Vancouver Symphony, but would be mimed on stage by another telegenic conductor and orchestra.

No go, Tovey responded to the committee, he wouldn't record it. "It was awkward to begin with," he said. "It's an iconic American piece for a Canadian opening ceremony. And when I was told another conductor would mime it, I said, 'That's dishonest. Get somebody else to do it.'" The committee did, though later publicly apologized.

The range of Tovey's talents will be on display at the Hollywood Bowl — good news for audiences and the L.A. Philharmonic itself. "The orchestra loves working with him," said Deborah Borda, president and chief executive of L.A. Phil.

For years, Tovey had conducted the occasional concert with the orchestra. So when Leonard Slatkin's run as

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guest conductor at the Hollywood Bowl ended in 2007, Borda said, Tovey was the unanimous choice to replace him.

While Tovey's eight upcoming programs lean toward popular works by Beethoven and Brahms — one night will be consumed by Leonard Bernstein's operetta "Candide" — the Sept. 7 evening will spotlight one of Tovey's own works, the jubilant "Urban Runway," his lampoon of the high fashion world.

Our conversation turned back to Canada. For some reason, I said, it was difficult to imagine the true Brit fully at home in Canada.

"I do feel slightly stateless," Tovey said. "I love Canada. And I am Canadian. But when I walk out on top of Malvern Hills in England, where Elgar used to go, and come down and have a pint of bitter at the pub, I think that's when I feel most at home."

## Bramwell Tovey

The New York Times • July 7, 2010

### Opera Bits and Pieces, Gently Scrambled

By STEVE SMITH

“Opera is, by and large, all about the world of fiction,” the conductor Bramwell Tovey announced from the podium shortly into a concert by the New York Philharmonic at Avery Fisher Hall on Tuesday evening. In part he was referring to the evening’s program, “La Dolce Vita,” a collection of popular arias and pleasant instrumental knickknacks gathered mostly from French and Italian operas.

Mr. Tovey, in his droll, avuncular way, was also making a more practical point: Since the order of the pieces in the concert was changed, the printed program was now largely fictitious as well. Pay attention to the announcements, he gently advised, lest you wake from a brief nap to think you’re hearing something you already missed.

Fat chance. The concert offered a substantial lure in the form of Nicole Cabell, a stellar soprano making her Philharmonic debut. And the playing on offer was simply too vibrant and absorbing to allow for drowsiness, blazing heat outdoors notwithstanding.

You can be tempted to view Summertime Classics, the series over which Mr. Tovey has presided since it was founded in 2004, as a pops offering. Don’t. True, Rossini’s Overture to “La Cenerentola” and the ballet music Gounod wrote for a Paris Opera production of his “Faust” constitute lighter fare than the Beethoven, Brahms and Mahler works that make up the orchestra’s core programming.

But when you hear such pieces played with the expressiveness and effervescence they had on Tuesday, you could only wonder why these works don’t play a bigger role in the Philharmonic’s standard routine. The unostentatious eloquence of the bassoon and clarinet in the Rossini, the grandiose brassy and rhythmic sparkle of the Gounod, the poised string soloists in Puccini’s Intermezzo from “Manon Lescaut” and the gorgeous English horn in Massenet’s ballet music from “Le Cid” would measure up anywhere they were encountered.

Ms. Cabell, adorned in a different gown for each half of the program, was consistently alluring, her bright, creamy sound deployed with a beguiling ease. If she missed a scintilla of gravitas in Mozart’s “Dove Sono,” among the operatic repertory’s greatest treasures, she still provided richness and ample heart.

In Gustave Charpentier’s “Depuis le jour” (from “Louise”), the Jewel Song from Gounod’s “Faust” and Donizetti’s “Prendi, per me sei libero” (from “L’Elisir d’Amore”) Ms. Cabell was ideal, with an attentive partner in Mr. Tovey. Warmly received throughout, Ms. Cabell drew the audience to its feet with her encore, Puccini’s “O Mio Babbino Caro” (from “Gianni Schicchi”).

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The Vancouver Sun • June 14, 2010

### A blazing season finale for the Vancouver symphony

*Enormous orchestra rises to meet Stravinsky's challenge with feverish intensity*

By David Gordon Duke

Scheherazade/The Rite Of Spring

When: Saturday

Presented by the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra Where: Orpheum Theatre

Two of the greatest orchestral showpieces provided the canvas for VSO conductor Bramwell Tovey's end-of-season extravaganza: Rimsky-Korsakov's Scheherazade and Stravinsky's The Rite of Spring. The pairing is unorthodox but wildly effective. Scheherazade gorgeously runs the gamut of late Romantic orchestral colours; written a generation later, The Rite of Spring is a tough but undisputed Modernist icon, and a work of blazing orchestral virtuosity.

Usually Scheherazade is relegated to pop concerts, not the orchestra's flagship "Masterworks" series. Not that this mattered one iota: Rimsky-Korsakov's richly coloured example of musical narrative rarely fails to please, which it certainly did on Saturday.

Scored with a plethora of solo turns, Scheherazade is akin to a concerto for orchestra. In this respect the performance underscored positive recent developments in the VSO, which has been inexorably changing over the course of Tovey's tenure. Most obvious was the excellent work of new concertmaster Dale Barltrop, who negotiated all Rimsky-Korsakov's florid violin writing with old-school elegance and a rich, honeyed tone. Consistently impressive, too, was lovely solo work by principal clarinet and principal bassoon -- playing of considerable finesse and outstanding presence. Maestro Tovey was his most extroverted self, keeping the pacing taut and delivering a rousingly effective reading.

No matter how enjoyable, Scheherazade can't compare with the radical impact of The Rite of Spring. Serious listeners know it is one of those compositions which can only really be experienced in live performance. On Saturday the enormous orchestral forces (were there really nine horns back there?) produced the requisite feverish intensity. The VSO can be counted on to rise to a challenge; to a player, they responded fully to Stravinsky's complex, intricately crafted music.

Tovey demanded complete commitment from his musicians and got it. Whatever the physical cost to the players, there were no hints of flagging stamina, no slight unravellings, no lapses in concentration. The result was mesmerizing, white-hot from beginning to end.

When the cheers from the nearly full Orpheum finally died down and we were emerged into the late spring twilight, we knew we had been on one hell of a ride.

The performance repeats Monday, 8 p.m.



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## **Bramwell Tovey**

**Huddersfield Daily Examiner, UK • April 3, 2010**

# **Orchestra of Opera North with Bramwell Tovey and Paul Watkins**

*VENUE: Huddersfield Town Hall*

BY CHRIS ROBINS

CONCERTS like this show the Orchestra of Opera North to be touched by true greatness, not only in their playing but also in their programming.

To invite Bramwell Tovey – not heard often enough in his native UK – to conduct works by three of the ‘big four’ 20th century British composers was inspired.

In Vaughan Williams’ Tallis Fantasia, the Orchestra’s strings were warm, deep, flexible with a crisp surface to their tone – in fact, they could do it all.

In Elgar’s Cello Concerto soloist Paul Watkins matched the Orchestra’s strings – he too could do it all. His unsentimental approach prevented Elgar’s indulgent long-breathed melodies and extended developments from seeming over-long.

Tovey’s emphasis on orchestral winds helped make the work more vital and emotionally complex than usual. Although the Elgar sounded – for the first time in my experience – a significant work, Walton’s First Symphony was still better.

When will we ever acknowledge Walton for what he is – superior to Vaughan Williams and Elgar! In this performance the Symphony – now 75 years old – was as fresh, exciting and relentlessly tense as it must have been when its first performances prompted John Ireland to tell Walton “it has established you as the most vital and original genius in Europe”.

Among many interpretative revelations, Tovey showed its famous ‘con malizia’ scherzo to be more jazzily picaresque than malicious and the opening bars of its finale to be among the most glorious utterances of any composer.

## Bramwell Tovey

The Vancouver Sun • February 1, 2010

### **Mahler's Eighth Symphony a resounding triumph**

*The symphonic spectacle packs drama in its broad brush strokes -- but there's real wonder in the details*

By David Gordon Duke, Special To The Sun

Symphonic spectacles don't come any grander than Gustav Mahler's Eighth Symphony, given the first of two performances by the Vancouver Symphony Saturday night. Indeed, it's rather staggering to see the impractically huge stage of the Queen Elizabeth Theatre crammed with instruments and acres of choir. But the Eighth embraces certain paradoxes: enormous forces and quiet moments; theatrical bombast and touching intimacy.

Under the direction of Bramwell Tovey, Saturday's reading had it all. The first section, a setting of the Latin hymn *Veni, creator spiritus*, is at least as long as many complete classical symphonies; yet its tightly concentrated music often of extraordinary contrapuntal complexity.

The second section, with texts from the conclusion of Goethe's *Faust*, is more extended and discursive. Vocal soloists, used as just one element of the rich textures of the first movement, become a cast of real characters, each assigned material reflective of their respective voice qualities. All were effective. Soprano Tracy Dahl, for example, was granted only a tiny cameo; Measha Brueggergosman drew the most flashy and pivotal assignment. Yet it was the wonderful Susan Platts who sang with the most impressive Mahler style and with moving depth and intensity.

Mahler employs enormous choral forces -- on this occasion the Vancouver Bach Choir, the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir, and the Vancouver Bach Children's Chorus -- and makes extraordinary demands on them. Certainly the phalanx of singers rose to all the symphony's grand occasions and handled its role with aplomb.

But it would be misleading not to acknowledge the true stars of the show. Bramwell Tovey and his orchestra are now about three-quarters of the way through the complete Mahler canon. Their familiarity with Mahler's mercurial idiom pays off, and pays off handsomely. There is a consistency and a sense of pacing that is both reliable and reliably impressive. Individual instrumental soloists -- virtually all the first desk players at some point -- deliver with poetry; complicated colour mixes, often with wildly disparate instruments, are nicely balanced, clear and precise. Tovey has the necessary showmanship to make the protracted composition work, even for an audience who may not necessarily know it well. Broad brush strokes help define the symphony's obvious drama, but the real wonder is in the detail.

These rare performances, an opportunistically programmed contribution to the Cultural Olympiad, are a resounding triumph for both conductor and orchestra and a shining moment in Vancouver's musical life.

Mahler's Eighth Symphony repeats tonight at 8 p.m. at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre.