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## Arts Beat

The Culture at Large



March 4, 2011, 10:28 am

# In Hall or Lobby, Toronto Symphony's Festival Offers Intriguing Sounds

By [JAMES R. OESTREICH](#)

TORONTO — The north lobby of Roy Thomson Hall seemed the hot place to be in this city on Wednesday night. And how often can you say that of a nondescript passageway in a symphony hall, anywhere? As a passage it was pretty useless because it was crammed with immobile people before the concert, during intermission and again at the end. But as an adjunct auditorium it served beautifully.

In the main hall the Toronto Symphony Orchestra presented the opening concert in its annual New Creations Festival, conducted by its music director, Peter Oundjian. In keeping with this year's focus on music of North America the program offered works by the American John Adams and the Canadian Vincent Ho. And furthering that focus, members of the Lightning Drum Singers, an aboriginal group based in North Bay, Ontario, performed in the lobby beforehand, and the Roberto Occhipinti Ensemble played new Canadian jazz (as it was called, despite a sometimes heavy Latin tinge) afterward, as many listeners grooved into the night. During intermission the Canadian composer Gary Kulesha interviewed Mr. Ho and Mr. Adams in the lobby.

A listener caught up in the palpable involvement and excitement surrounding this beehive of activity had to remind himself that the Toronto Symphony was an orchestra that some, less than a decade ago, had given up for dead. And this is merely one of many strides that the orchestra has made under the leadership of Andrew R. Shaw, its president and chief executive, who arrived in 2002, and Mr. Oundjian, who became music director in 2004.

Those achievements have been reflected in favorable notices for its performances and in the quality of its recordings on its own label, tsoLIVE. Much of that will have to await a larger article before the orchestra's appearance at Carnegie Hall on March 26.

For now it is enough to point to the orchestra's signal success in the handling of contemporary music. Where many relegate new music to ghettos or try to inject small doses of it medicinally into the mainstream, the Toronto Symphony has, from the beginning of Mr. Oundjian's tenure, celebrated it and created excitement around it in the New Creations Festival.

It is the difference between, for example, what the New York Philharmonic does routinely with its Contact! series off the premises and what it did last spring with its semitheatrical presentation of Ligeti's opera "Le Grand Macabre." And as the Philharmonic did with "Grand Macabre," the New Creations concerts regularly

attract nearly full houses in the large hall, thick with the young listeners every orchestra covets nowadays.

The concert here offered two Adams standards, "Short Ride in a Fast Machine" and "Harmonielehre," and a new work by Mr. Ho, "The Shaman," a concerto for percussion and orchestra written for the virtuoso percussionist Evelyn Glennie. All were clamorously received. But the real attention-getter was that preconcert performance by the Lightning Drum Singers.

Though not new, the music was decidedly North American, representing traditional music of the Cree, Oneida, Mohawk, Algonquin and Ojibway peoples. A small group of singers beat a single huge drum, mostly in a steady unison, and produced a sort of wailed chant that at long last showed some of us, in all its subtlety, what was being so grossly caricatured in those dimly recalled westerns of yore, offensive in so many ways.

With its heavy load of percussion and its presumed ties to shamanistic ritual the performance proved a surprising but apt introduction to the sound world and spiritual underlay evoked by Mr. Ho. And it created a rich sense of place and cultural grounding for the festival as a whole, however far the imaginations of those new creators might stray.

*The New Creations Festival continues on Saturday and Thursday evenings, with the Toronto Symphony conducted by Peter Oundjian (and, on Saturday, John Adams) at Roy Thomson Hall; tso.ca.*

*An earlier version of this post misstated the date of the Toronto Symphony's concert at Carnegie Hall.*

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Deborah

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I am pleased that orchestras are reaching out. But when we repeatedly find that the real hits of the evening are not in the classical genre, is this really a victory? It is time orchestras stopped apologizing for their repertoire and started infecting others with the same enthusiasm felt by the musicians. That is what every other musician does.

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By ALESSANDRA STANLEY

In "The Killing," an American version of a Danish hit starting Sunday on AMC, an observant, thoughtful woman leads a murder investigation in Seattle.

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A small exhibition of collages, organized to celebrate the centennial of Romare Bearden's birth, feels unusually current.

### [In a Broadway Role, Many Returns](#)

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Tate Donovan's turn in "Good People" has brought him back to New York and to his Irish-American roots.

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An exhibition at the Skyscraper Museum explores urban buildings designed for manufacturing in roughly the last century.

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### [Manning Marable, African-American Studies Scholar, Has Died at 60](#)

Mr. Marable was the author of a long-awaited new biography of Malcolm X to be published Monday and director of the Institute for Research in African American Studies at Columbia University.

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Two units of the News Corporation plan to announce on Monday that they are forming a division to be called Fox Hispanic Media with the goal of helping advertisers reach the Hispanic market more effectively.

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The primary public television station in Orlando, Fla., WMFE-TV, announced Friday that the station was being sold to an undisclosed buyer.

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The Bagger stuffs the red carpet gowns and self-referential moniker in the back of the closet as another awards season comes to an end, and leaves behind a few parting thoughts.

### [A Chat With the Mother Who Knows Best](#)

Tom Hooper, winner of the best director Oscar for "The King's Speech," gave a shout-out to his mother during his acceptance speech. She now corrects the record.

### [A Bravo Pan for Those Singing Schoolkids](#)

The Oscars telecast has been almost universally panned, with many scapegoats to go around, but so far only man has blamed the schoolchildren.

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