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Photos: Boston Symphony Orchestra & Claremont Trio

Classical



Shuffling conductors at the BSO, and 10 concerts you should hear

Some good musical news in troubled musical times

Pain and pleasure

By LLOYD SCHWARTZ | January 26, 2012



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TESTING THE ACOUSTICS The Claremont Trio inaugurated the Gardner Museum's new Calderwood Hall.

What a turbulent time we've been having in Boston's musical life. People are talking less about music itself than about companies closing, celebrated performers canceling, and the firing of a beloved musician. On the other hand, there's another hand. We've now had the opening of an elegant (though acoustically challenging) new concert hall in the new wing of the Gardner Museum; the premiere of a wondrous new symphony by John Harbison, commissioned by James Levine and the Boston Symphony Orchestra; the Boston debut of an exciting young conductor; and radiant versions of seldom-heard late-20th-century Schnittke and Pärt choral masterpieces by David Hoose and the Cantata Singers (best known for their deeply austere Bach). Significant pleasures along with the pain.

>> **PHOTOS:** [Boston Symphony Orchestra & Claremont Trio](#) <<

I've now heard two concerts at the Gardner's new Calderwood Hall, a just-under 300 seat auditorium with a square central performing area and three-levels of narrow single-row balconies surrounding the players. At a donor's preview, Paavali Jumppanen played Beethoven's *Moonlight* and *Lebewohl* sonatas on a lidless piano (better tone? better sight lines?) that sounded both warm and bright, though his playing was antiseptic and inexpressive. Then in Beethoven's *Kreutzer* Sonata, he was joined by the livelier Corey Cerovsek, whose fine violin sounded oddly unreverberant.

This lack of resonance was a bigger problem at the official public opening the following Sunday. The Claremont Trio played Mozart's late C-major Trio, K. 548, a newly commissioned *Trio* by the young composer Sean Shepherd, and the luscious Mendelssohn D-minor Piano Trio. Sitting in the first balcony, behind the players, I could hardly hear the strings over the lidless piano, and what I could hear sounded thin and dry. I moved up to the second balcony (quite dizzying up there, but similar sound) for the Shepherd, which had many appealing moments, especially in the pretty second movement, which begins with solo cello and ends with solo violin. Back in the first balcony for the Mendelssohn, I was more disappointed by the lack of rhapsodic thrust than the thin string sound. The concert was broadcast live on WGBH and featured announcer Cathy Fuller interviewing Shepherd. Unamplified, their voices didn't carry up to the second balcony. I'm sure it will take at least a season of fiddling with the acoustics (by the celebrated Disney Hall acoustician Yasuhisa Toyota), just as Ozawa Hall at Tanglewood took a year to work out its acoustical lumps. (By the way, given only a low glass barrier at the edge of the balconies and the unobstructed view they offer of patrons' laps, I'd advise women not to wear short dresses.)

John Harbison's Symphony No. 6 is a new treasure, and it seemed to be getting a superlative performance from the BSO and refined and eloquent Irish mezzo-soprano Paula Murrihy, under the baton of David Zinman, who replaced James Levine, the originally intended conductor. Like Harbison's Fifth Symphony, it has a vocal element. The first movement sets a haunting James Wright poem, "Entering the Temple in Nimes," a subtle evocation of the difficulty of re-entering the past and the world of art. The end of the movement, with the entrance of the cimbalom (a Hungarian hammered dulcimer), is ravishing, one of the most magical moments Harbison has ever written. The meditative and moving second movement, the rambunctious and almost violently syncopated Scherzo, and the dissolving finale all pick up on themes first laid out in the vocal movement. I'm not yet hearing how all the pieces fit, yet I love what I hear and can't wait for another try.

The odd program began with Weber's exhilarating and lyrical *Euryanthe* Overture (once a familiar concert piece) and the Norwegian virtuoso Leif Ove Andsnes in a sparkling Beethoven First Piano Concerto, and ended with a truly musical (rather than cartoonish) performance of Richard Strauss's famous, darkly comical tone poem, *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*.

The following week, in response to the unfortunate cancellation of Riccardo Chailly, one of the leading candidates to replace James Levine as BSO music director, the BSO came up with another unusual program. The first part of the program consisted of conductorless performances by sections of the orchestra. Principal horn player James Sommerville, pointing out that there would be "no guy on a box with a stick," introduced Copland's ubiquitous *Fanfare for the Common Man* and the very first BSO performance of Henri Tomasi's *Good Friday Procession*, the fourth of his 1947 "Fanfares liturgiques" from his opera *Don Juan de Mañera* (brass and percussion). Principal flute Elizabeth Rowe was more excited about the wind section performing Richard Strauss's early Serenade in E flat for 13 Wind Instruments than I was about hearing this mild piece, however refined the performance. Most remarkable was Tchaikovsky's gorgeous and moving String Serenade in C, which George Balanchine choreographed in his famous ballet *Serenade*. The large contingent of strings, everyone but the cellists standing (a first for BSO strings), with Malcolm Lowe as concertmaster, was virtually impeccable in coordination and intonation, and was given intense emotional charge. All the players in this part of the program seemed to be having a field day.

The second part of the program was unchanged: Stravinsky's *Lesacre du printemps*, which despite its numerous BSO performances still requires a taskmaster conductor to get through its rhythmic and sonic intricacies. The BSO invited the young Costa Rican conductor Giancarlo Guerrero to replace Chailly, and he did a literally sensational job, sensation itself being one of his major intentions. From the moment of principal bassoonist Richard Svoboda's opening lament, there was always something percolating, something not only happening but about to happen. Tingling bells and demonstrative bass pizzicatos seemed to wave at us from the orchestra, as if for the very first time. The weighty percussive tread and ferocious, almost maniacally primitive discords took us back to pagan Russia, and maybe even earlier. Guerrero's sweeping gestures were always pointedly aimed at often-overlooked orchestral details, now suddenly sounding. This was not exactly the most refined *Sacre*, but it was refreshing and powerful, a reminder of what might have been going through the minds of the original audience at that notorious 1913 Paris riot. At Symphony Hall, the audience seemed blown away.

David Hoose called his latest Cantata Singers program "The Astonished Breath." Moving from their usual Jordan Hall venue to the First Congregational Church in Cambridge, not one of the area's better acoustical environments but less bad for choral than instrumental works, the 16-voice chorus — *a cappella* in the transliterated Russian of Alfred Schnittke's Concerto for Choir (1984-85) and lightly, astringently punctuated by Ian Watson's organ in Arvo Pärt's Berliner Messe (a 1997 revision of his piece from 1990) — faced enormous rhythmic and especially harmonic challenges.

In four movements, Schnittke sets the third chapter of the 10th-century Armenian monk Gregory of Narek's "Book of Mournful Songs," his poignant and consistently self-referential conversations with God. Ironically, given what one knows about Schnittke's penchant for irony, this piece has no irony, or else it's the irony of composing a completely earnest spiritual work before religion had made its Russian

comeback. The 40-minute piece seems to float timelessly, but with increasing urgency and increasingly uncanny harmonies, and voices, sometimes very high, that seem to leap out of the general choral drone like solar flares. I can imagine a more Russian performance — with more idiomatic Russian, for one thing — and gutsier, earthier. But I was deeply impressed.

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The Pärt Mass is, if anything, an even stranger piece. Pärt's devotional impulse is here all air — buoyant, angelic, cool, abstract, with few attempts to colorize the familiar drama of the Latin text. The crucifixion is as light-winged as the resurrection. It's as if the mass were being sung not on earth but in heaven — not beseeching, not lamenting — like a distant memory of Christianity. The final "Dona nobis pacem" seemed almost more interrogative than imperative. If you had told me that the Pärt was actually composed by Schnittke, and the Schnittke by Pärt, I might have believed you.

PS. More good musical news. Will Chapman, executive director of Monadnock Music and one-time marketing director of the late Opera Boston has just announced that as of February 1, Gil Rose, founder and conductor of the Boston Modern Orchestra Project and longtime artistic director of Opera Boston, will take over as artistic director of Monadnock Music.

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