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Dispatch from Miami: New World Symphony Center preview

Mark Swed, January 26, 2011

The fireworks were canceled for the grand opening ceremony of the ballyhooed new concert hall in Miami Beach, the New World Symphony Center. The clouds were thick, but at least the downpour and winds nearly strong enough to uproot the newly planted palm trees came later in the evening. The real and radical fireworks — musical, social, philosophical, educational — will be illuminated gradually.

Over the next few days, the New World Symphony Center, designed by the Walt Disney Concert Hall team of architect Frank Gehry and acoustician Yasuhisa Toyota, will reveal its multimedia novelties. The job of the New World Symphony, which was created by Michael Tilson Thomas 23 years ago to train orchestral musicians, will be to demonstrate why the Center matters.

On Thursday, Tilson Thomas will present a tour through Schubert's life. And on Friday, the Center will attempt its first "wallcast," projecting in high definition video a repeat of the opening concert on the 7,000 square-foot façade of the building, for which a sound system of 167 individually tuned loudspeakers has been developed. The projection wall was inaugurated Tuesday night with the pleasantly abstract "Chronograph" by video artist Tal Rosner (who has also made a film to accompany Adès' "Polaris") and software designer C.E.B. Reas.

For Saturday night's performance of Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition," Tilson Thomas commissioned USC film students to create animated shorts to be projected on all the video-friendly interior wall space Gehry supplied.

So how well does this musical spaceship work, and how does it sound? It's too soon to say. Inside, the 756-seat hall feels like a small Disney. The vineyard layout is similar, the seats are similar; even the orchestra's risers and music stands are the same. The sense of intimacy, however, is considerably greater and the immediacy of the Center's acoustics are more immediate. The room is not just alive, but alive and kicking. Bass is a knockout, but the highs will require some taming. The New World members, most of whom are preparing for orchestra careers, are sensational, and they know it. And Tilson Thomas, as proud papa, loves to show them off.

There was little actual music Tuesday. The New World brass flawlessly knocked out a Gabrieli canzon. The full orchestra dashed through Glinka's "Ruslan and Ludmilla" Overture, was aglitter in the Mambo from Ginastera's "Estancia" and at its swinging best in an excerpt from Gershwin's "An American in Paris." A conducting fellow, Teddy Abrams, arranged the prelude from Bach's Second Cello Suite for several players placed around the hall, demonstrating the building's, the conductor's and the players' flexibility.

But every new concert hall is a new world, and finishing every new concert hall is a last-minute nightmare. By all reports, this was no exception. Tilson Thomas said he had expected to begin rehearsing in December but was probably lucky that he could finally start work in the hall last week. The ambition here is vast, and throughout the week much of that will be revealed. And then the tweaking and teaching can begin.



Photo: "Chronograph" on the projection wall of the New World Center at the opening ceremony Tuesday night. Credit: Mark Swed/Los Angeles Times.