

The New York Times

Airy Home for Music and Its Fans

Anthony Tommasini, January 26, 2011

MIAMI BEACH — The New World Center, the exciting new Frank Gehry-designed home of the New World Symphony here, had its ceremonial opening Tuesday night.

A training facility for this acclaimed orchestral academy, which grooms select young musicians fresh from colleges and conservatories, this \$154 million center also contains a performance space and anchors an enticing public arts complex. It has the potential to be a game changer in classical music.

The Tuesday night event was a festive musical party with speeches and tributes, especially to Mr. Gehry, and performances by the orchestra under Michael Tilson Thomas, the academy's visionary founder and tireless artistic director. My colleague Nicolai Ouroussoff, *The New York Times's* architecture critic, has already reported on the 100,641-square-foot building and the adjacent 2.5-acre public park, right in heart of Miami Beach, not far from the old Lincoln Theater, where the orchestra had been based since its founding in 1987. And I share his overall enthusiasm for the handsome, inviting complex.

The centerpiece is the concert hall, which has 756 seats bunched in groups around the tall, airy auditorium. The steeply raked rows bring every audience member close to the musicians onstage. A fuller assessment of the hall's sound, designed by an acoustical team headed by Yasuhisa Toyota, will have to await the formal opening concert, which was to be held Wednesday, including a Wagner overture, the premiere of a major work by Thomas Adès and Copland's Third Symphony.

Still, for the short performances offered on Tuesday, which ranged from a Gabrieli canzona for eight brass instruments to Gershwin's "American in Paris," the sound was clear, resonant and vibrant.

But giving orchestral concerts is not all the New World Symphony is about and not the only public function of the center, as became clear from a tour of the building and campus on Tuesday afternoon. When Mr. Gehry was recruited for this project, he pressed Mr. Thomas to dream, to explain what young musicians in training really needed.

Mr. Thomas wanted to open the place up dramatically to the public. So the facade of this essentially rectangular building is a tall, beckoning wall of windows, showing the trademark Gehry cones, curves and flower-shaped constructions inside. On the ground level there are several soundproof, windowed rehearsal rooms and recording studios, where musicians from the orchestra will practice in full view of the public, which will be free to roam the atrium when the building is in use.

The New World Symphony players will have to get used to being watched as they work. It is hard to know how much these studios will intrigue visitors, who will not, after all, hear the music. But the visibility should demystify the music-making process by showing the everyday routines of working musicians.

Upstairs are two floors with ample private practice rooms, where the musicians will do most of their work. These rooms are equipped with interactive video screens, so fellows in the academy can be coached by master musicians and composers anywhere in the world. This kind of digital-age teaching has already been happening at the New World Symphony. But the new building, which has a state-of-the-art recording, projection and Web-casting infrastructure, will exponentially increase the capacity.

For example, if the fellows are learning a classical work, they can be coached by musicians from the Vienna Philharmonic, Howard Herring, the New World Symphony's president and chief executive officer, said during my tour. Pierre Boulez, he added, is scheduled to work with young players on one of his pieces from Ircam in Paris.

In addition many performances in the concert hall will be presented live in a section of the adjoining park called SoundScape, where video images will be screened on a 7,000-square-foot projection wall with what is promised to be excellent sound conveyed through speakers tucked into a sculptural matrix of pipes.



Michael McElroy for The New York Times

On Tuesday night, after the ceremony in the hall, SoundScape was inaugurated, but only with video art by Tal Rosner and C.E.B. Reas. As the images streamed by, a lively, blasting salsa band played for the entertainment of the crowd in the park. But the system will truly be tested on Friday, when the Wednesday concert is repeated and relayed outdoors.

The orchestra sounded terrific on Tuesday. Mr. Thomas led a feisty account of Ginastera's "Malambo" from "Estancia." Teddy Abrams, a conducting fellow in the program, led his own inventive arrangement of the Prelude from Bach's Cello Suite No. 2, scored for 11 musicians, including marimba and harp players, placed in various balconies and alcoves around the hall.

Mr. Thomas added a work to the program to show off the orchestra in a full-bodied Romantic piece, Glinka's rousing "Ruslan and Ludmila" Overture, which the orchestra played with zest, flair and impressive clarity. And under Mr. Thomas the players brought jazzy swing yet rich, textured sound to the Gershwin score.

The young players looked elated. Some 1,000 applicants compete each year for about 35 places in the New World Symphony. There are usually 85 fellows in the program, and they can stay for a maximum of three years. Some leave early for good reasons, as they get jobs with orchestras. But for the three years the fellows are given a stipend of \$450 a week for the orchestra's 35-week season. And they have individual rooms at two converted hotels nearby for the entire year. A stipend; training with Mr. Thomas and other master musicians; an apartment in Miami Beach, where the weather on Tuesday was in the 70s; and now a spectacular building: not a bad life.