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MUSICAL EVENTS

SCHUBERT ON THE BEACH

The New World Symphony's radical new home.

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At Frank Gehry's New World Center, in Miami Beach, the fusion of live music and film is so seamless that it almost heralds a new genre. Photograph by Iwan Baan.

On a recent morning in Miami Beach, a middle-aged man in a tracksuit was walking along Lincoln Road, the glitzy strip that runs from the ocean to the bay, when he veered away to investigate an orchestral tumult emanating from a nearby park. It was the sound of the New World Symphony rehearsing Wagner's "Flying Dutchman" Overture. The ensemble, an advanced-training orchestra under the direction of Michael Tilson Thomas, was settling into its new home, the New World Center, and technicians were testing an array of a hundred and sixty-seven speakers that relays music from the concert hall to the park outside. "You gotta come hear this," the man barked into his phone. "It's unbelievable."

Walking behind him, I had the same thought. The speaker system has enormous impact, but without the fuzzy bloat typical of outdoor amplification. A few artificially beefy bass notes aside, it captures, to an amazing degree, the airy power of sound reverberating in space. It operates in tandem with an equally impressive video-projection apparatus, housed in a podlike contraption out of the "Alien" movies, that throws crystalline images onto an exterior wall measuring seven thousand square

feet. Two days later, the system had its official *début*, and close to a thousand people gathered on the lawn for the occasion. At one point, I walked around the edge of the park, which is called the SoundScape, watching passersby as they registered this musical mirage in the Miami night. Three teen-agers stopped on the sidewalk. “This is so gay,” one of them said, unenthusiastically. But they stood there for a good minute before checking their phones and moving on.

The New World Center is the creation of Frank Gehry, who is at once deeply attuned to classical music and keenly skeptical of its surrounding culture. When, two decades ago, he designed Disney Hall for the Los Angeles Philharmonic, his aim was to present the orchestra as a vibrant organism, not as a decrepit form trapped within a fortress of culture. The New World Center is an even more radical articulation of the same idea. At first glance, it’s unprepossessing, its wide façade presenting the projection wall on one side and a curtain of glass on the other. It lacks the swooping lines of a classic “Gehry building.” Inside the glass enclosure, though, is a nest of irregular shapes—internal structures that contain rehearsal studios and practice rooms. The implication is that you need to walk inside to discover what the place is about—in contrast to Disney, whose metallic exterior is more traditionally monumental. When Gehry asked Tilson Thomas what kind of hall he wanted, the conductor asked simply for a space that invites people in, and early evidence suggests that he got his wish. The SoundScape, the projection wall, the tantalizing inner forms, the glass-walled rooms that reveal musicians practicing: these all pique the curiosity of newcomers, if only for a moment.

The New World complex seems to reflect not only the personality of the architect but also the boyish enthusiasm of Tilson Thomas, its sixty-six-year-old artistic director. Gehry was among the first to notice that enthusiasm: nearly six decades ago, in Los Angeles, he was a babysitter for the young Tilson Thomas and listened to him talk about his favorite composers at the piano. The New World Center is likely to become an incomparable vehicle for music education, in keeping with the mission of its resident group. The New World Symphony, which Tilson Thomas founded in 1987, is something between a student orchestra and a professional ensemble: its members are culled from the ranks of leading conservatories, and spend three years in Miami before moving on to other jobs.

No one is quite sure how a New World concert is supposed to go, and all kinds of experiments have ensued. In place of the standard two-hour show, the New World is trying out Journey concerts (extended explorations of a single composer); Discovery concerts (dissections of a single composer, with video enhancements); Pulse concerts (clubby events that go from 10 P.M. to 2 A.M.); an evening of several thirty-minute performances, each costing two dollars and fifty cents; and Gallery Walks, with musicians performing all over the building. Some formats may go over better than others—the Schubert Journey that I witnessed during the inaugural week of the New World Center meandered in the middle—but the laboratory spirit of the place is healthy.

Tilson Thomas is also an unusually tech-savvy conductor, and the New World Center is a maximally wired space. Each room is connected to Internet2, the university-based broadband network, which allows members of the New World to participate in online projects and take lessons from

distant mentors; in coming months, musicians will receive coaching from IRCAM, the modernist bunker in Paris. The main concert hall, too, is decked out with gizmos. Ten robotic cameras transmit images to the exterior projector and to the world outside; there's even a camera fixed to the ceiling, which yields a wonderfully vertiginous overhead shot. Meanwhile, high-definition projectors inside the hall can show slides and films on five separate "sails," gently curved surfaces floating above the stage. The projection system imparts basic information—a brief note about each piece, translations for foreign-language texts—and encourages collaborations between composers and filmmakers.

The hall itself, a beachy room in shades of sandy white, driftwood brown, and oceanic blue, accommodates seven hundred and fifty-six people. It looks like a scaled-down version of Disney Hall, with the audience seated in galleries around the orchestra. As at Disney, Gehry worked with the acoustician Yasuhisa Toyota, a wizard of this mysterious craft. My first impressions of the acoustics were a bit mixed. The sound was bright, alive, responsive to all registers and instruments. At climaxes, though, it seemed excessively vivid, even shrill, especially when I was close to the stage. (I tried out various seats around the hall.) Sometimes the sense of detail was so overwhelming that I had a hard time taking in the total sonic picture. I had a similar reaction to Disney when it opened, in 2003; within a year or two, the L.A. Philharmonic had adjusted to the space, and the New World players should have no trouble doing the same. The acoustics certainly passed the foot test, which so many modern halls fail: during a fortissimo passage with rolling timpani, you could feel the floorboards trembling in sympathy.

Tilson Thomas is, above everything else, an elegant, sensitive conductor, and amid the gadgetry the music-making remained at a high level. In three days of programming—various works by Schubert, Glinka's "Ruslan and Ludmila" Overture, Gershwin's "American in Paris," Copland's Third Symphony, and Thomas Adès's new piece "Polaris"—Tilson Thomas led with an unfailingly idiomatic hand. He imposed discipline on his young players without dampening their excitement. Particularly notable was the melancholy warmth of the ensemble in the first movement of Schubert's "Unfinished" Symphony, with softly piercing woodwind solos setting the tone. Tilson Thomas's balancing act between music's past and future is a major feat: no other conductor today seems so alert to the entire cultural landscape around him.

The most telling moment in the New World Center's opening week came when the lights went down for the première of "Polaris," for which Adès, the virtuosic young British composer, collaborated with the Israeli video artist Tal Rosner. Composers and filmmakers have been joining forces for more than a hundred years, but in almost all cases one party is the servant of the other: either the composer is locked into the rhythms of a film or a film is assembled around a piece of music. At the New World Center, an engineer in a control room above the stage monitors the progress of the footage, and if the conductor slows down or speeds up the engineer can compensate. Even more important, the hall is explicitly designed as much for the projection of images as for the projection of sound. The fusion of film and live music is so mesmerizingly seamless that I felt I was witnessing not

just a technological forward leap but the emergence of a new genre.

Rosner's video for "Polaris" is gently atmospheric, presenting images of two women on a rocky, wave-beaten coast, gazing out to sea. It was inspired, the artist says, by Rockwell Kent's illustrations for a 1930 edition of "Moby-Dick." Adès's piece, by contrast, is a grand, brash creation, among the most immediately forceful statements that this unapologetically ambitious composer has made. It is derived from a theme containing all twelve pitches of the chromatic scale, although the emphatic reiteration of a central pitch, or polar note, gives the music a strong tonal feeling. (It's more or less A major.) Brass instruments positioned throughout the hall—the New World Center is designed for maximum flexibility in this respect—play in canon, with two trumpets taking the lead and the tuba bringing up the rear. Strung around the melody are glistening webs of instrumental sound, reminiscent at times of American minimalism or of Indonesian gamelan music. All the glitter falls away for the final announcement of the theme, low in the strings, with raucous shouts from the rest of the orchestra. In an age when so many younger Anglo-American composers are writing inoffensive, eclectic stuff, it's a joy to hear a work so elemental, so monolithic, and, not least, so gloriously loud.

"Polaris" was heard twice during the center's inaugural week, the second time at the début of the SoundScape. When Adès came out for his bow, Tilson Thomas grabbed the score off his stand and held it next to the composer's head. He was obviously thinking of the crowd outside, wanting to emphasize that this marble slab of sound came from a living composer—and, by extension, that classical music is a living art. The entire New World complex is engineered to send such a message. How many outsiders will receive it is hard to know: most, I suspect, will turn away, like the kids I saw standing on the perimeter of the park. If one in a hundred becomes curious, though, that's something: at least five million people walk down Lincoln Road every year. ♦

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