



Violinist excels with new Glass

Toronto Symphony Orchestra ★★★★★(out of 4)

With violinist Robert McDuffie. Peter Oundjian, music director. Repeats Saturday. Roy Thomson Hall, 60 Simcoe St. 416-598-3375 (www.tso.ca)

It's not every day that one gets to hear the live premiere of a major new work by one of the world's most influential composers, 72-year-old American composer Philip Glass.

The first performance of the work – *Violin Concerto No. 2, "The American Four Seasons"* – was so spectacularly played by the new piece's muse, American violinist Robert McDuffie, at Roy Thomson Hall Wednesday night, that the event turned into one of the most exciting musical evenings of the year.

The Toronto Symphony Orchestra, led by its music director Peter Oundjian, was also in top form, helping McDuffie carve and shape Glass's collection of repeated and layered short musical motifs into an expressive work of art.

McDuffie deserves a medal for his stamina. Glass gives the soloist little respite as he alternates between joining with and separating away from the rest of the all-string orchestra (augmented by a synthesizer keyboard). The four movements vacillate between a dark-undertoned mechanistic frenzy and slow, mesmerizing meditation. Each section is joined together by a violin solo that really gave McDuffie a chance to shine.

Both composer and players showed off their very best work, although one would be hard-pressed to find many allusions to Vivaldi's familiar *Four Seasons* in the piece.

Peter Oundjian programmed Beethoven's "*Pastoral*" *Symphony* as a companion, describing it as "the world's first minimalist composition." That was carrying the reasoning too far. The orchestra's reading was full of light and air, making it a powerful counterpoint rather than companion on the bill. Opening the concert was a beautiful piece by American Christopher Theofanidis, *Rainbow Body*, which set a high tone for the rest of the concert.

A concerto with baroque and modern influences



Philip Glass gets a standing ovation, while Beethoven leaves them sitting

Robert Everett-Green
Friday, December 11, 2009

Toronto Symphony Orchestra

- At Roy Thomson Hall in Toronto on Wednesday

You might think that Beethoven would always get a bigger reaction from a symphony crowd than Philip Glass. But it was Glass, not Beethoven, whose music got the only standing ovation at Wednesday's concert by the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, after the first performance (with soloist Robert McDuffie) of Glass's *Violin Concerto No. 2, The American Four Seasons*.

It's a major new piece from a composer who didn't use to have much time for concertos, but who has written half a dozen in the past decade. Like the *Concerto for Harpsichord* (2002), the new work is a creative response to the sounds and conventions of baroque music.

From the opening soliloquy, so similar in tone and technique to a solo violin work of the 18th century yet so clearly not of that period, it was evident that Glass had found himself a big playground to explore. The baroque fondness for repetition, motor rhythms and arpeggiation fit so well with his established practice that, at times, it seemed less that he was working from a model than that the model was anticipating him.

The piece is scored for a baroque-sized string orchestra, with an electronic keyboard which, in the early going, took on the supporting role of a harpsichord in a baroque concerto. The keyboard (played by Gregory Oh) came into its own in a percussive duet with violin in the third movement, then led the strings in a section that recalled Glass's writing for his own ensemble.

Each of the four movements was driven by some kind of rhythmic or harmonic patterning (especially in the cellos), though it was the concerto's melodic richness that really carried the piece. The solo part was often passionately, even ornately lyrical, as if Glass's dalliance with the baroque had allowed him to depart from the more usual leanness of his melodic writing. The soaring theme of the second movement was particularly poignant.

The concerto moved between the private world implied by the four solo introductions and the more sociable realm of the movements proper. This stratagem also allowed the air to clear somewhat between seasons. The robust third solo cleverly hinted at a tarantella without actually producing one, and the fourth gave a richly double-stopped base from which to propel the piece into the rollicking final movement. Only the wide-spanned second solo let down the side, sounding too much like a student's string-crossing exercise.

By Glass's own account, this piece came into the world largely because McDuffie kept prodding him to write it. The violinist took possession of his prize with gusto, performing with great commitment and sensitivity, and really rocking out in the final pages. He also paid Glass (who was in the hall) the compliment of playing the first performance with his part memorized. McDuffie (who reprised the concerto with the TSO at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa Thursday) will be on the road with this piece for the next couple of years, in performances that will pair it with Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*.

TSO music director Peter Oundjian followed the concerto with Beethoven's *Symphony No. 6*, which he conducted with a score. There were some lovely things in this performance, including the first movement's perfectly balanced final chords, Neil Deland's glowing solo on French horn, and the swinging, irresistible final movement. But the first two movements felt rather unsettled, as if the band had not been completely sold on the tempos chosen, and Oundjian's beat was often too inflexible to give the symphony's many beauties space in which to bloom.

The remaining piece was *Rainbow Body*, a high-minded trifle by American composer Christopher Theofanidis, who ran a chant-like theme through a number of costume changes, culminating in a coat of many colours that glittered like the apotheosis of an American feel-good adventure movie. I can think of at least a dozen active Canadian composers who have written better pieces than this.

The TSO repeats this program, without *Rainbow Body*, Saturday night at Roy Thomson Hall.

TSO naturally inspiring

By Richard Todd
December 11, 2009

The Toronto Symphony is one of Canada's most polished and accomplished orchestras. Before the ascent of the Montreal Symphony's star in the early '80s, the TSO was, by common consent, Canada's major orchestra. It's still one of our most important, so its not-quite-annual visits to the National Arts Centre are always much awaited occasions.

Thursday evening, the TSO and its conductor Peter Oundjian appeared on the stage of Southam Hall with a curious program. The orchestra is noted for its relative zeal in promoting Canadian music, but this program was made up of two recent American works and one by a long-dead German composer -- Beethoven. It's hard to complain, though. Each of the offerings was terrific in its own way.

The program had a theme: each of its offerings was nature-related in one way or another. The first was *Rainbow Body* by Christopher Theofanidis (b. 1967). This is a work of varying moods and spare-textured orchestral writing. The composer writes that he was trying to express his admiration for the beauty and grace of the music of Hildegard von Bingen. A wondrously beautiful melody appears several times, though much of the piece is based on fragments of the melody transformed to express the turbulence expressed in much of the score.

Next came Philip Glass's *Violin Concerto no. 2*, subtitled *The American Four Seasons*, which received its world premiere on Wednesday in Toronto. The soloist was the American violinist Robert McDuffie.

Many listeners found Glass's repetitive music tedious in the early years of his celebrity, about 25 years ago, but almost everyone agrees that he has come a long way since then. This concerto, though 43 minutes in length, doesn't wear out its welcome by a single beat.

It is made up of four movements, each preceded by an extended, unaccompanied 'song' for the violin. Glass has not abandoned his underlying technique or repetition, but he has learned to use it in the service of compelling music. It's a virtuoso piece and McDuffie was entirely up to its challenges. He, the orchestra and the score were rewarded with a standing ovation.

Whatever else you've played for an audience, promising Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* will make the concert a success. It was just that symphony that made up the second half of the program. It was no surprise that the performance was richly romantic and robustly textured.