

Sao Paulo orchestra makes Chicago debut

Comments

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BY ANDREW PATNER

The Chicago debut of a major South American orchestra. The first performances here by a much discussed young African-American conductor with Indiana roots. One of the world's leading percussionists, who is also an exemplar and advocate of the role of disabled people in the arts and society, in a showcase work. And the launch of a major arts and culture initiative by Chicago's major disability service and advocacy group.

Monday night offered all of these and more in what proved to be a tightly structured and well-paced concert by the Orquestra de Sao Paulo at the Harris Theater. The stars were well-aligned, and management of all involved did its job, to bring together this leading Brazilian ensemble, James Levine conducting-protégé Kazem Abdullah, deaf-and-proud percussionist Evelyn Glennie and Access Living in an unusually successful combination of art and agendas.

The Sao Paulo orchestra was founded in 1954 in Brazil's largest city and has had its ups and downs over the decades. Having undergone major reorganization, taken possession of Sao Paulo's top-flight Russell Johnson-designed Music Hall and enlisted state support and a former Brazilian president (!) to head its board of directors, the OSP recently snared its first internationally known music director, Yan Pascal Tortelier, who last week was a last-minute substitute with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Its current North American tour, however, is led by the 29-year-old Abdullah, Cincinnati-trained with a lot of high-pressure experience at the Metropolitan Opera in New York including a well-regarded last-minute fill-in of his own in Gluck's "Orfeo ed Euridice" this season. At tour's beginning he seemed still to be finding the right balance between "guest" and "conductor" but was a fine mediator of a varied program. Folk-drenched Brazilian works by pioneering composer Alberto Nepomuceno and a traditional encore framed the concert. A rare chance to hear the orchestrated 1942 Fourth "Bachianas Brasi leiras" of Heitor Villa-Lobos completed the national representation in the program, and an energetic take on Bartok's "Miraculous Mandarin" closed the printed program. Abdullah returns here in January to lead the Chicago Sinfonietta in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

Glennie was to have performed a new commission on this tour but when its composer failed to meet deadlines, the whirling, barefoot percussionist substituted her signature 1992 "Veni, Veni Emmanuel" by her fellow Scot, James MacMillan. Her attention to every moment and variant in this multi-instrument, stage-covering half-hour tour de force certainly made clear that disabilities need not be any barrier to artistic expression or fulfillment, something Access Living and its many friends and clients in attendance have known for a long time, too.

Andrew Patner is critic at large at WFMT-FM (98.7).

Western Piedmont Symphony Concert of African American Composers 8 PM Nov. 7, Hickory, NC

From AfriClassical

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The views expressed in these blog posts are those of the author and not of the Chicago

Sun-Times.

liz21 wrote:

This was a fantastic concert! Orquestra de Sao Paulo sounded like a world class orchestra. Glennie's showmanship was amazing to behold. The ending of the Macmillan piece was especially effective. The young conductor certainly had it all in hand. Mandarin was very, very fast. . . maybe too fast?

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