

NZ Listener

February 7-13 2009 Vol 217 No 3587

On the right track

by Ian Dando

Conductor Marc Taddei avoids stagnation.

Marc Taddei, conductor and music director of the Vector Wellington Orchestra, has again hit the high spots with his programming. His concert of Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* and a semi-staged Bartok opera, *Bluebeard's Castle*, drew uniform superlatives last year.

"You'd think Bartok wrote the Bluebeard role precisely for New Zealand bass Paul Whelan," said one critic. Others called it innovative.

Extremely lively programming indeed. But innovative? New Zealand needs to wake up from its time warp and radically update its boundary between modern and classic. Overseas cities wouldn't bat an eyelid. They'd see the 1911 Bartok and the 1930 Stravinsky as classics by now.

Peter Walls, chief executive of the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, agrees: "The NZSO has toured the Stravinsky *Symphony of Psalms* seven times since 1958, and I've even conducted it myself with the Victoria University Orchestra and Choir, so I wonder at it being championed as innovative programming."

One Wellington critic declared that the Vector's programmes have "consistently been better and more imaginative than the NZSO's".

To which Walls replies: "In our full orchestra concerts of 2009, over 30% of the music to be performed was written in the 20th and 21st centuries. This is well above international averages for major symphony orchestras. I would argue that we are continuously innovative, but if that isn't obvious, so much the better."

Other live-wire orchestral programmes from Taddei have included the genuinely innovative *Holocaust Requiem*, a tragic concerto-symphony for viola and orchestra- by Jewish composer Boris Pigovat, reviewed very positively by Roger Wilson in the *Listener*.

His Christchurch years as conductor and music director from 2001-2006, and his

Vector contract starting in 2007, confirm Taddei as a boldly imaginative programme designer.

At his invitation, I worked with him a lot on programme design during nearly all his Christchurch Symphony Orchestra period, helping to modify and fine-tune them. Taddei turned Christchurch public taste on its head with new horizons, such as Debussy's subtle *Jeux*, Strauss' *Metamorphosen* and Schönberg's *Survivor from Warsaw*. His strength, right up to his Vector years now, is his top-down approach to get a firm philosophy in place first.

“Half the time, we must give them what they want,” he says. “Beethoven and Brahms are important to us all. For the other half, we must be like any good library or art gallery and expand repertoire. We must keep ahead of public taste through vital innovation that earns their trust. If not, pack your bags. Audience and orchestra will suffer slow death by artistic stagnation.” Underline those last three sentences in red.

Taddei's larger Christchurch subscription season of 12 classics required bookends of large frescos – say Mahler No 5 and Beethoven No 9 flanking a number of threads inside linking groups of adjacent concerts, such as modernism, a single New Zealand composer focus and innovative French baroque featuring Rameau and Lully.

With his smaller season of five Vector concerts in 2009, beginning on April 18, Taddei bypasses bookends and goes straight to the unifying threads.

“My most popular is all Beethoven's piano concertos featuring Michael Houstoun. In my contrasty second thread, called “Pulse”, Jack Body's Pulse is a stunning opener, then to the baroque motoric pulse of Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No 3, to the Broadway rhythms of Bernstein's *On the Town*, finally to the alluring tango and jazz pulses of Piazzolla's *Tangazo* and Duke Ellington's *Suite from “The River”* for the fourth and fifth concerts.

“Another thread I am particularly proud of is our introduction of two gifted young New Zealand singers – Aivale Cole and Ben Makisi singing two of the great song cycles of the 20th century, Britten's *Les Illuminations* and the Strauss *Four Last Songs*, which I partner with his early tone poem *Death and Transfiguration*, as the four last songs quote the transfiguration motif at the end very poignantly in the concluding song, *Im Abendrot*. Finally, I believe in partnering with other arts groups. In 2009, we are pleased to also feature a collaborative thread with brass bands – in Janáček's stunning *Sinfonietta* and Respighi's evergreen *Pines of Rome*. ”

Next comes fine-tuning to make each concert a balanced, self-sufficient entity. Taddei's unity within each concert and across a series via threads is common to some European festivals, such as Berliner Festwochen's *roten Faden* (red threads).

A crucial strength of Taddei is his typically American ability to chat up his audience and tuck anything into a concert regardless of how outrageous it is. He's like Bernstein, who used to sell heavyweights such as Mahler's *Song of the Earth* to kids in his concerts for children.

I watched Taddei similarly selling Ives' audaciously esoteric *Putnam's Camp* from *Three Places in New England* to an audience of light listeners in Christchurch by telling them how Ives portrayed two different bands street-marching in different directions, metres, tempi and tunes. He had them eating out of his hand.

This immediately empowered Taddei to transmogrify the CSO's repertoire, suffering initially from bedsores induced by perpetual conservatism, to a large audience lapping up Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* and Taddei's swan song concert of Strauss' *Four Last Songs* with the noisy bravos and stamping of a rock audience. I imagine his communication skill with his audiences is one strong reason that Vector recently extended his contract to 2012.

Taddei's repertoire and thread structures enable him to set programmes apart from, yet complementary to, the NZSO.

"Senseless duplication does not serve the public's interest," he says. "Regional orchestras and the NZSO must work together in a spirit of mutual respect."

In 2009, this enables lucky Welling-tonians to enjoy both the fresh air in Taddei and the Vector and the NZSO's innovative flair of its four-evening Sibelius Festival in the capital in September.

All content ©2003-2009 APN Holdings NZ Ltd. All rights reserved.