



# SEATTLE SYMPHONY

## Alex Ross: The Rest Is Noise

*Books, articles, and a blog by the music critic of The New Yorker*

September 16, 2011

### Changes in Seattle



Last year the Seattle Symphony chose Ludovic Morlot as its next music director, and first impressions were good. He's an expert leader with adventurous taste, and the programming of his first season contains much modern fare, with a concentration on the superfine music of Henri Dutilleux. I'm happy to see, though, that Morlot's boldness goes beyond programming. He seems eager to carry out a general makeover of the ensemble's image in the local culture. He began an interview with Michael Upchurch of the *Seattle Times* by challenging the very way the paper depicts classical music: why aren't Seattle Symphony concerts reviewed in the "Music" section, alongside jazz, rock, and hip-hop, instead of being placed among "The Arts"? (He might also have asked why the *Times* has no full-time

classical critic.) "We're making music for the people," Morlot said, urging potential listeners to set aside preconceived stereotypes. The new music director is bravely taking up aspects of the job for which conservatory cannot have prepared him, such as throwing out the first pitch at a Mariners game and matching wits with the razor-sharp intellects on the local news shows.

The really interesting news from Seattle this week is a set of free ticket initiatives that should significantly change the makeup of the audience. With the idea of cultivating future concertgoers, the orchestra is offering free companion tickets for kids aged eight to eighteen, provided a paying adult goes with them. And the orchestra is giving away free tickets through four allied community organizations: Washington New Americans, the Post-Prison Education Program, a recreation program at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, and the Senior Housing Authority Group. I'm eager to see how the Seattle Symphony develops from here; perhaps there's room for something along the lines of the Toronto Symphony's startlingly successful Tsoundcheck program. Morlot makes his official debut tomorrow night; a free day of music follows on Sunday.



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# The Seattle Times

September 18, 2011

## Morlot debuts with charisma, substance

Seattle Symphony opened its new season with the traditional gala evening Saturday and welcomed new music director Ludovic Morlot. Morlot led the orchestra (and played, too) in Ravel's "Bolero"; also on the program was a Gulda work played by former SSO cellist Joshua Roman, plus works by Beethoven and Gershwin.

By Bernard Jacobson



New music director Ludovic Morlot conducts the Seattle Symphony during a morning rehearsal at Benaroya Hall.

Saturday evening was Ludovic Morlot's first Benaroya Hall appearance as the Seattle Symphony's new music director. The gala occasion may have been more about charisma than about substance, but there was certainly plenty of the

former in evidence, along with a refreshing absence of high-art stuffiness. The young maestro opened the proceedings with words of thanks — in notably fluent English — to everyone he could think of, including the often-unheralded stage crew.



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At the other end of the program, a fine performance of Ravel's "Bolero" sported a telling touch of showmanship. Here, for a few go-rounds of that hypnotic tune, Morlot exchanged the podium for a spell at one of the violin desks, before stepping up again to take charge of the final volcanic catharsis — and the unwavering way the players, with Michael Werner starring on snare drum, held the pace on their own was indicative of the Seattle Symphony's excellent orchestral discipline.

The most substantial piece of "serious music" on the program was Beethoven's "Consecration of the House" overture. Chosen aptly enough for the start of a music directorship, it received a splendidly lithe and well-shaped performance.

Apt too, and witty, was the selection of Gershwin's "An American in Paris" to inaugurate the sojourn of this Frenchman in Seattle. Morlot found some musical substance in it, and drew appropriately juicy playing from the orchestra at the melodic high points.

The evening's concerto was Friedrich Gulda's for cello, scored for an orchestra of woodwinds and brass with one double bass and a small rhythm section. As a pianist, Gulda (1930-2000) was noted for his stylistically insightful playing of Mozart and Beethoven.

His own compositions, however, stand closer to the world of jazz and pop, so that his concerto was an appropriate vehicle for former principal cellist

Joshua Roman, who has been carving out a crossover career. Playing brilliantly, he had fun with the work's freewheeling amalgam of Poulenc-esque zaniness, Respighi-ish nostalgia, Schwertsik-like Alpine evocations (beautifully played by the horns), and manic-Sousanic raucousness.

Wowed again by charisma, the audience clearly loved it, and was rewarded with an encore in the shape of Turtle Island String Quartet cellist Mark Summer's "Julie-O."

Along with the evening's many pluses, there were one or two minuses. Former principal flute Scott Goff retired at the end of last season — his successor, Demarre McGill, made an impressive debut — and concertmaster Maria Larionoff's departure was announced a few months ago.

But unexpectedly, and for undivulged reasons, John Cerminaro also has left the orchestra, after serving with enormous distinction for more than a decade as principal horn. He will be sorely missed.

I hope Morlot will reconsider his reseating of the orchestra when he comes to conduct the major classical and romantic works that really need the violin sections split left and right. And Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony, performed this week, will be the first big test of his interpretive chops.

But in this gala setting, at the very least, he impressed hugely.



# SEATTLE SYMPHONY

## THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

September 22, 2011

### Seattle Symphony's French Revolution

By David Mermelstein



Ludovic Morlot conducting his inaugural concert as Seattle's music director.

Musical chemistry can occur unexpectedly, spurring curious unions. Take the situation at the Seattle Symphony, where on Sept. 1 Ludovic Morlot became the organization's 16th music director. Mr. Morlot, a 37-year-old native of Lyon, France, first led the ensemble less than two years ago, in

October 2009, when the nearly 100-year-old orchestra was looking for a successor to Gerard Schwarz, whose tenure began in 1985.

Mr. Morlot conducted a second series of concerts in April 2010 and by June of that year was appointed music-director designate. Since then he has moved with impressive speed to put his stamp on classical music in this mellow but sober maritime city. Already apparent is the orchestra's new Gallic slant. Five of Mr. Morlot's first six programs (one of them a children's concert) include pieces by French composers. And though most of the works by Hector Berlioz, Frédéric Chopin, Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel featured this season are in no way unexpected (except, perhaps, in their number), scores by André Jolivet, Francis Poulenc, Edgard Varèse and Henri Vieuxtemps come as something of a surprise. Certainly no other U.S. orchestra is paying as much attention to 95-year-old Henri Dutilleux right now; three of his orchestral works (as well as seven chamber pieces) are scheduled between the start of the season and June.

But the changes extend beyond programming. In May, Simon Woods arrived as the orchestra's executive director, and he and the new conductor appear to share a commitment to increasing the orchestra's community engagement in bold ways—including free admission for youngsters to more than 50



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symphony concerts this season, so long as an accompanying adult purchases a ticket to the same concert.

Mr. Morlot even filled some vacancies in the orchestra before his official start date, as Mr. Schwarz let him judge auditions during the transition. Thus four new musicians—including principal flute and principal cello—were on stage when Mr. Morlot gave the downbeat for his first concert as music director, a gala at Benaroya Hall last Saturday. (A new concertmaster will also be joining the orchestra relatively soon, but the conductor is not rushing that process.)

The gala concert and two free programs with the orchestra the following day revealed much about Mr. Morlot's leadership style and how he interacts with audiences. The music performed at the gala was mostly typical fare—Beethoven's "Consecration of the House" Overture, George Gershwin's "An American in Paris" and Ravel's "Boléro." But the program's centerpiece, Friedrich Gulda's Concerto for Cello and Wind Orchestra (1980), with local favorite Joshua Roman as soloist, was anything but business-as-usual. An irresistible five-movement pastiche that gave fresh voice to old forms by incorporating funk riffs and march music into its fabric, it offered the young and exuberant Mr. Roman a showcase for his effortless virtuosity and appealing sound. In the cadenza, part of which is improvised, the cellist interpolated quotes from "La Marseillaise" and "Boléro," in tribute to the new music director.

To conduct the concerto, Mr. Morlot changed from white tie and European-length tails to more casual attire: a Nehru jacket and a skullcap—the latter offered to him onstage by Mr. Roman, who was also wearing one in the fashion that was Gulda's trademark. Such gestures of informality, especially on such an occasion, were unmistakable signs that Mr. Morlot is serious when he says he wants to be "more aggressive about outreach," which he proclaimed that night from the stage.

And he reinforced his regular-guy appeal while cementing a bond with the orchestra when he left the podium midway through "Boléro" to pick up a fiddle and join the first violins for a spell, leaving Michael Werner on the snare drum as de facto leader. He made similar, if less showy,

inroads on Sunday during the symphony's Day of Music, a free event in which various types of music were performed throughout Benaroya Hall and its precincts. (The first such day occurred in 1998 to celebrate Benaroya's opening, but after two annual iterations, it was revived only once more before this past weekend. Mr. Morlot mentioned privately that he hopes to make such events much more common.)

Mr. Morlot is not a showman in the Leonard Bernstein or Gustavo Dudamel mode, nor does he evoke awe à la Riccardo Muti. He is a less attention-grabbing figure. James Levine and Colin Davis stand among his mentors, and an unfussy flair for detail and transparency similar to theirs informs Mr. Morlot's interpretations. Such qualities were apparent in his measured but supple reading of Debussy's "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun" during the Day of Music concerts. He can also be forceful without being blunt, as he proved in performances of "An American in Paris" and "Boléro."

On a technical level, it was a pleasure to bask in the glow of the orchestra's warmly tuned brasses. The woodwinds, too, evoked character without sacrificing precision. The strings, though, could use greater sheen, and the percussion section lacked vigor at these concerts. But Mr. Morlot should have no trouble effecting improvements while burnishing high standards. (In addition to his work in Seattle, he begins a five-year contract in January as music director of Brussels's La Monnaie opera house.)

Mr. Morlot was assistant conductor of the Boston Symphony from 2004 to 2007, and the ensemble has engaged him to replace James Levine on its tour of California in December. Those dates afford music lovers on the West Coast further opportunities to assess this rising talent. But Seattleites needn't fret that their new music director might be scouting a more prominent perch. Mr. Morlot eschewed a standard three-year contract in favor of a six-year commitment here—yet another indicator that though the bond between Mr. Morlot and the Seattle Symphony is young, it is already strong.

*Mr. Mermelstein writes for the Journal on classical music and film.*