

**Vancouver Symphony
Orchestra**

Saturday, June 16, 8pm

Orpheum Theatre

by Colin MacDonald

In a concert of 20th century music that clocked in just under three hours, the VSO made sure that its loyal audience got its money's worth in this final performance of the 200/2001 season.

A last-minute addition to the program paid homage to recently deceased composer Nikolai Korndorf, with the first movement from J. S. Bach's *Concerto for Keyboard in Dm*, as played by his talented student, 9-year old Ian Wood. Seeing young prodigies perform can often take the air of a circus sideshow, but in this case the young soloist's confident playing was a testament to the influence of a respected teacher, and was an inspiration to everyone present.

The scheduled concert continued with *General William Booth Enters Into Heaven*, by Charles Ives. As one of the first American experimental composers, the sound of Ives' work maintains a freshness that continues to engage contemporary musicians. This work, for chamber orchestra and baritone vocalist, foreshadowed the playful referencing of postmodernism by quoting from popular hymns, layering melodies from multiple sources, and making breakneck transitions of texture and character. Although the harmonies and melodies sound a bit dated to modern ears, the music is still original and thought provoking.

The Canadian premiere of *Asyla*, by English composer Thomas Adès, tested the collective talents of the VSO and conductor Bramwell Tovey. Adès is something of a new music *wunderkind*, an internationally

recognized conductor, composer, and pianist, all barely at the age of thirty. Maestro Tovey carefully prepared the audience for this challenging contemporary work by introducing some of the unusual instruments that were used to expand the sonic palette of the orchestra, including imported cowbells, out of tune pianos, and a gong lowered into a bucket of water. There is no doubting Adès' skill as a composer for the orchestra, commanding extremes of range and instrumental colour, and fashioning a work of rigorous structure that owes much to the heritage of European modernism. While the asyla (plural of asylum) referred to in the title gave one the hope for a sanctuary or a safe haven, the restless melodies and abrasive harmonies more often brought to mind the madhouse. Fascinating in its complexity, the tone of the work was tense and fatalistic throughout, with the sense of a civilization at its height about to plunge into decay.

Immediately familiar to anyone who goes to the movies, the opening chords of "O Fortuna," from Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*, still have the power to send chills up the spine. The entire piece is much longer than many people expect, covering a wide variety of 13th century drinking and love songs, and really must be experienced in person to get the full effect of the massed choir and orchestra. Primarily a large-scale cantata, there were a few moments for select soloists, and this performance was marked by the inspired presence and drama of baritone Brett Polegato.