



Classical review

## Baltimore Symphony gives festive centennial concert with accent on youth



Inside Meyerhoff Symphony Hall during the BSO's centennial concert (Jordan August)

**Tim Smith Contact Reporter** The Baltimore Sun

The BSO's 100th birthday party included a Champagne toast, new music and the stirring sight of young players.

The Baltimore Symphony Orchestra threw a 100th birthday party for itself Thursday night. About 2,100 folks turned out to help celebrate and, from the sound of things, had a good time doing so.

Meyerhoff Symphony Hall was specially decked out for the occasion, starting with a new outdoor lighting system that made the edifice stand out nicely against the cold winter sky.

Concertgoers entered a lobby festooned in gold and encountered tables with row upon row of plastic Champagne flutes, waiting to be filled for an en masse toast to the orchestra that would be given inside the concert hall.

For some of its earlier anniversaries, the BSO dusted off and reprised the inaugural program of Feb. 11, 1916. But that program — Beethoven's Eighth Symphony, a little Wagner and Saint-Saens, a couple of opera arias — wouldn't likely be much of a box office magnet today.



Meyerhoff Symphony Hall lobby decorated for BSO centennial concert (Tim Smith)

The centenary salute, conducted by music director Marin Alsop, provided something more American. More youthful, too. Other than a timeline display in the lobby and some references to old days in remarks made from the stage, Thursday night was more about the present and the future.

No reflection on the guest artist — the ever-stellar violinist Joshua Bell — or any other element of the concert, but I have to say that the evening's biggest kick was the sight of dozens of students from OrchKids and the BSO Youth Orchestras coming down the aisles and walking onto the stage, all the while playing along with the BSO during the closing minutes of Ravel's "Bolero."

It was at once homey and grand, personal and universal — a striking affirmation of what it means for an orchestra to be bigger than itself, to be part of its community in a meaningful, rather than dutiful, way.



As the BSO celebrates its 100th anniversary, take a look through its rich history. (Jordan Bartel)

Given that the BSO began as a civic enterprise entirely funded by the city, and was the country's first orchestra to offer a concert series expressly for children, this coda to the centennial bash was all the more fitting.

That "Bolero" performance, finely paced and shaped by Alsop, also found the BSO in sterling form, with lots of winning solos from woodwinds and brass, and a sensuous tone from the strings. Principal percussionist Christopher Williams maintained the rock-solid snare drum foundation, ably joined toward the end by student player Devron Dennis.

The evening began with a stately arrangement of "The Star-Spangled Banner" that featured the warm voice of soprano Janice Chandler-Eteme, a longtime BSO collaborator and friend. A pleasant, if somewhat pale, account of Gershwin's "Cuban Overture" followed.

Things moved into high gear when Bell bounded onstage to join the orchestra for the Suite from Bernstein's "West Side Story."



Violinist Joshua Bell performing Suite from "West Side Story" during BSO Centennial Concert, Marin Alsop conducting (Jordan August)

Arranger William David Brohn manages to honor the indelible music from the path-breaking Broadway show, while giving the violin equal opportunities for sensitivity and bravura. Bell revealed both attributes in abundance, backed with great finesse by the BSO under Alsop's expressive guidance.

After intermission, Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake led the now well-fluted crowd in a toast. In loose and funny form, she also read an official centennial proclamation, tossing out all the "whereas"-es with such aplomb that Alsop picked up on the refrain in her own subsequent remarks.

During those remarks, when Alsop said that "the heart and soul" of the BSO had always been its musicians, the audience erupted in one of several ovations of the night that must have pleased the orchestra.

Those players got a chance to demonstrate their versatility in two short pieces by living American composers.

Kristin Kuster's "MOXIE," the first of several BSO centennial commissions to be given world premieres this year, proved to be well-crafted and colorful. Five rich chords — the composer says they represent the five letters in "Marin" — appear periodically amid post-minimalist churning that recalls vintage John Adams in orchestration and rhythmic pulse.

Mason Bates, known for moving easily between genres, was represented by his 2011 opus "Mothership," a score a bit light on substance but long on vitality and vivid flourishes of instrumentation. The composer, embedded in the ensemble, handled the work's vivid electronic elements. Short solos by saxophonist Tim Green and Cris Jacobs on cigar box guitar added to the flavoring.

(Programming "MOXIE" and "Motherside" one after the other wasn't quite good for either; the Kuster premiere would have been a better fit at the start of the concert in place of the Gershwin item.)



BSO at 100: Looking ahead to the next century

In addition to Rawlings-Blake, former Baltimore mayor and current University of Baltimore President Kurt Schmoke participated in the concert as host. He saluted predecessor James Preston, whose mayoral tenure included the initial authorization of funds that launched the BSO 100 years ago.

Rheda Becker, longtime narrator for BSO children's concerts, fulfilled some of the evening's hosting duties in typically charming fashion.

The star host, though, turned out to be 13-year-old Keith Fleming, an OrchKids participant who spoke of the program's benefits, musical and otherwise, in his life.

(There was room, too, for a video, which, surprisingly, included an appearance by David Zinman. Zinman, in an unbecoming moment of pique, gave back the title of music director emeritus in 2001. He hasn't worked with the BSO for more than 15 years.)

A centennial is no small thing, especially for any arts group, so there's good reason to make a fuss over the BSO's milestone. I've said before: This

orchestra is every bit as important and valuable as either of the city's sports teams — only it keeps winning, year after year.

Thursday's upbeat concert underlined Alsop's mantra for the BSO: "Accessibility, relevance, opportunity." In addition to feeling accessible and relevant, the evening also made you think of how much opportunity there is for this orchestra and those it serves as a second century begins.