

Broad Street Review

Philadelphia Orchestra's 'Inca Trail' concert



BY: Steve Cohen
01.25.2011

For one magical evening, the varied music of South America's Inca Trail spilled out of Verizon Hall and into the Kimmel's usually vacant lobby. Is his the long-awaited formula for breathing life into Philadelphia's underachieving cultural center?

Philadelphia Orchestra: "The Inca Trail." Miguel Harth-Bedoya, conductor. January 14, 2011 at Kimmel Center, Broad & Spruce Sts. (215) 893-1999 or www.philorch.org.

Harth-Bedoya: Ten years on the trail.

Fresh air from very far south of the border

STEVE COHEN

For one evening, at least, the Kimmel Center was almost all of what it can be. On Friday, January 14 you heard buzz throughout the huge lobby. A Brazilian musical group played a free performance while patrons stood at the bar, or sat at café tables near the bandstand. Traditional South American instruments like pan pipes, gourd shakers, goatskin drums and rainsticks were displayed for passersby to handle. More people than usual mingled in the building's public spaces.

At 7 p.m. many of them entered Verizon Hall to hear the Philadelphia Orchestra perform a concert of South American music that included no less than eight local premieres. Three of the composers were on hand to take bows and talk with audience members during intermission and after the concert. Many in the audience appeared to be newcomers to this orchestra's concerts.

Is this the long-awaited magic formula for breathing life into the Kimmel's mostly empty spaces? Not quite, because on that Friday there was no concert in the adjoining Perelman Theater. And the former gift shop space was disturbingly empty. But on balance, this was a magical moment in the Kimmel's nine-year history.

A long, long trail

The Peruvian-born conductor Miguel Harth-Bedoya has devoted a decade to researching and disseminating South America's musical legacy, in particular the areas near the Inca Trail. He created Caminos del Inka, an organization to popularize that music. That group has made recordings; it also organized the January 14 concert.

The Inca Trail is generally thought of as the hiking path between Cuzco and Machu Picchu in Peru, but that's merely the final stretch of an ancient roadway that stretched from Quito, Ecuador, all the way down the spine of the Andes mountains to Argentina— about 3,500 miles, a distance farther than Philadelphia is from Machu Picchu. So you can logically expect a broad variety of musical styles along that trail. (The concert was accompanied by projected photographs of the Inca Trail.)

We heard a fascinating series of compositions from different parts of South America as well as different time periods. *Responsorio*, by the Ecuadorian composer Diego Luzuriaga (who now lives in suburban Philadelphia), is

based on the drumming and bamboo flute playing Luzuriaga heard in his native mountains, expanded for a contemporary symphony orchestra. Luzuriaga skillfully used modern instruments to interpret folk-inspired melodies.

A Jewish Argentinean, too

The program also included *Illapa: Tone Poem for Flute and Orchestra*, by the American-Peruvian Gabriela Lena Frank, an impressionistic setting of a Peruvian legend with a flute solo by Philadelphia Orchestra first-chair Jeffrey Khaner; and the propulsive pop-oriented *Fiesta* by Jimmy Lopez of Lima.

The composers' varied backgrounds help explain the great diversity among their pieces. Another excellent composition, for example, was *Mariel*, by Osvaldo Golijov, an Argentinean from an Eastern European Jewish family. Golijov's elegiac composition featured an intricate cello solo by the Philadelphia Orchestra's Efe Baltacigil.

For an encore, the Orchestra played *Brasil*, by Francisco Alves, written in 1939 and much played during the era when the U.S. was promoting a "Good Neighbor" policy to forge closer ties with Latin Americans.

Haunted by Simon and Garfunkel

My only disappointment in this program was its opening number— which may be a reflection on me. Alberto Gonzales arranged the 1913 Daniel Robles melody *El condor pasa* ("The Condor Passes") for a large orchestra. When I think of that tune, I picture myself back in Machu Picchu, listening to the song played by a solo wind instrument and echoing across the valley. Or I remember the haunting arrangement by Simon and Garfunkel. Gonzales's orchestration was just too grandiose for my taste.

The concert's title prompts comparison with Yo-Yo Ma's recent project, "The Silk Road." I found more accessibility and more visceral appeal in this Inca program, and I'd welcome the inclusion of any of the pieces mentioned above in the Philadelphia Orchestra's regular repertoire.