

Coming together Tulsa Symphony creates near-perfect fit on opening night

By JAMES D. WATTS JR.
World Scene Writer

A bit of history happened Friday night at the Tulsa Performing Arts Center: The Tulsa Symphony performed its very first concert.

"The keystone of the arts in our city is being re-established in Tulsa tonight," said KOTV personality Glenda Silvey as the evening began.

More than four years have passed since the city's first fully professional orchestra, the Tulsa Philharmonic, dissolved into a stagnant puddle of bad debts and disastrous management after 54 years of operations.

It was 11 months ago, almost to the day, when Dr. Frank Letcher first proposed the idea of an entirely new and different orchestra to be called the Tulsa Symphony Orchestra — a fully professional ensemble that would employ its musicians throughout the organization, not just as performers on the stage.

It is a tribute to the musicians' commitment to Tulsa that this concept was put into action so quickly, because so many former Philharmonic musicians continued to live and work in Tulsa after that orchestra's collapse in 2002.

In fact, Friday's concert was hardly the orchestra's debut. That came in February, when it accompanied Tulsa Ballet's production of "The Sleeping Beauty." The Tulsa Symphony has also performed with the Tulsa Oratorio Chorus, and many of its musicians were part of the orchestras used by Tulsa Opera and Light Opera Oklahoma this year.

Even so, Friday's concert, titled "Get to Know TSO," was the real benchmark for the Tulsa Symphony Orchestra — the first performance it could truly call its own, its attempt to make good on the idea, as Silvey put



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The Tulsa Symphony Orchestra performs in Friday's inaugural concert at the PAC.

it in her opening remarks, "that an orchestra is not a luxury but a necessity."

So — how did they do?

Three words: pretty darn good.

It wasn't a perfect evening, to be sure. Jose-Luis Novo, the guest conductor for this concert, set a tempo for Mascagni's "Intermezzo" from "Cavalleria Rusticana" that struck us as too slow. Some soft high notes from the trumpets during the "Some-

where" segment of Bernstein's Symphonic Dances from "West Side Story" — tough sounds to produce, we grant it — were a little wobbly. And one over-eager fiddler hit one note too many at the end of the first movement of the Symphony No. 5 by Beethoven.

Yet, these moments were aberrations (or, in the case of the Mascagni, differences of taste). What made the evening special, on a musical rather than a his-

torical level, was that the Tulsa Symphony Orchestra lived up to its name on the most basic level.

The word "symphony" comes from a pair of Greek words that mean, respectively, "sound" and "together." That is what the Tulsa Symphony did — for all the many people and instruments that make up the ensemble, the sound they made was one of complete togetherness, remarkable clarity and unwavering purpose.

ture Symphony's Thursday night performance. Imagine that same puzzle with all the pieces connected, and you have the Tulsa Symphony.

That might also be why Novo chose a slower-than-usual tempo for the Mascagni — to show off that unity and cohesiveness, to stretch things out so that the orchestra could not simply coast along on the music's beautifully sad melodies.

The Symphonic Dances from "West Side Story" gave a number of the musicians a chance to show off a little — in particular, principal violist Jeffery Cowen, principal flute John Rush, timpanist Gerald Scholl, percussionist Steven Craft and principal French horn J. Bruce Schultz.

And the Symphony No. 5 by Beethoven got an unusually joyous reading from the Tulsa Symphony. The sound of "fate knocking at the door," as Beethoven described the famous di-di-dah motif that runs throughout the piece was played here less as something to fear as a challenge to be met — and overcome.

That, in a real sense, is what this "Get to Know the TSO" concert was all about. It has met the challenge of creating a new musical entity for the city of Tulsa, of taking its first steps on what it hopes to be a long and fruitful artistic journey.

The challenge now is to make certain that those present at the start of this journey — the 1,000-plus season subscribers, the organizations that have contributed to getting the TSO to this point, the orchestra's musicians and staff — will keep moving forward once the feel-good glow of this "opening night" has passed, to make certain that the Tulsa Symphony Orchestra "sounds together" for a long time to come.

James D. Watts Jr. 581-8478
james.watts@tulsaworld.com