



# A LETTER FROM *Seattle*

Thomas May reports on the innovations that are keeping this West Coast city's music scene vibrant



**A**cross the United States, the pressure is on to redefine longstanding classical music institutions that otherwise face potential extinction. The West Coast in general commands a reputation for spearheading this sort of innovation, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic in particular tends to be singled out as its epicentre. But LA has a contender of late over 1000 miles to the north, where the Seattle Symphony Orchestra (SSO) – with a fraction of the LA Phil's annual operating budget (just under \$30 million versus \$120 million) – has been similarly winning attention for its efforts to revamp the American orchestral profile.

In March the SSO launched a new venue at the corner of its home concert complex (Benaroya Hall) in downtown Seattle: Octave 9, which boasts state-of-the-art tech allowing for sophisticated visual as well as acoustical manipulation of the space. It has the potential to become something of a mini-IRCAM. In its first month alone, Octave 9 presented a 24-hour marathon featuring the work of more than 50 living composers back-to-back. There was also a thoughtful programme on connections between jazz and classical traditions in American music curated by SSO composer-in-residence Derek Bermel, who is using Octave 9's resources to implement various community engagement projects.

Though its size accommodates only solo or chamber performances, Octave 9 is intended to be an educational and experimental arm for what happens in the big concert hall – and an active workshop where visiting composers can work on ideas with orchestral musicians and introduce their art to audiences.

This is exactly what happened ahead of one of the season's most thrilling concerts to date. The German composer Heiner Goebbels, joined by a handful of SSO members and other local musicians, offered an engaging entrée into his aesthetic of theatricalised sonorities, including a chamber sketch of the SSO commission that received its premiere a few evenings later in late April. The latter involved a new movement for *Surrogate Cities*, Goebbels's symphonic magnum opus begun in the 1990s. With the stage crowded to the lip to fit the expanded ensemble and accompanied by a vivid lighting design, music director Ludovic Morlot led an exuberant, overpowering performance. It opened up fresh vistas for what a contemporary symphony can express.

The committed imagination with which Morlot and the players have introduced new music and less familiar repertoire was surely a factor in the public vote that secured the SSO its status this season as *Gramophone's* Orchestra of the Year. Other significant commissions premiered of late by the SSO have included a concerto by the virtuoso clarinetist-composer Kinan Azmeh for his instrument and Caroline Shaw's *Watermark*, in which the

young American's response to the Third Piano Concerto by Beethoven – both played with intensely alert poetry by soloist Jonathan Biss – intriguingly considers alternative paths to those Beethoven chose for his material.

A bittersweet tinge flavours all of these recent successes: Morlot is completing his tenure with the SSO, having made such an indelible mark on its programming and its playing alike. His successor, BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra chief conductor Thomas Dausgaard, takes up the post this fall but is already greatly popular with the SSO and Seattle audiences. Dausgaard has been a regular presence for some time as SSO principal guest conductor and returned in April to lead the posthumous premiere of the late George Walker's moving *Sinfonia No 5 (Visions)*, a compact, uncompromising score written in the composer's 90s and incorporating his reactions to the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church massacre in 2015.

Major changes are afoot at Seattle Opera as well, which general director Aidan Lang is about to leave to helm Welsh National Opera. The company also opened a new headquarters this season,

which promises to allow for more engagement with the public. Taking Lang's place will be Christina Scheppelmann, who currently leads the Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona.

It's naturally too early even to venture a guess as to her vision, but Scheppelmann will inherit a company that has seriously addressed itself to the issue of audience building – particularly through outreach to marginalised communities. Lang has more or less sidestepped Seattle Opera's reputation as a Wagner (or at least *Ring*) house. A number of courageous and risky choices (alongside warhorses) mark his tenure, such as a disturbingly effective mainstage production in the autumn of *The Turn of the Screw* that somehow conveyed the chamber intimacy of Britten's score.

Innovative thinking can also be found in Seattle's flourishing early music scene. In February Seattle Baroque partnered with the contemporary dance company Whim W' Him to present a stunningly choreographed version of Pergolesi's *Stabat mater*. Lutenist/director Stephen Stubbs's Pacific MusicWorks company has been presenting multimedia shows in its 'Underground' series in informal venues around the city.

The University of Washington's Meany Center for the Performing Arts serves as a venue not only for leading pianists and chamber musicians in traditional concerts but for such unusual events as the Jack Quartet's concerts exploring brain-body interactions. In May the Jacks concluded their three-year UW residency with a performance using feedback from specially designed 'brain helmets' and muscle neuron sensors to map out a new kind of synergetic music. **G**