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In Paris, a Music Hall Built for Unity Offers a Stirring First Act

By **ANTHONY TOMMASINI** JAN. 15, 2015

PARIS — For months, contentious debates and infighting played out in the international media. Could the Philharmonie de Paris, the new concert hall for the Orchestre de Paris and the final linchpin in a decades-long project to turn a park on the northeast rim of this city into a major cultural center, open on schedule? It seemed impossible.

Although its 2,400-seat hall was basically ready, the complex was far from finished. Much was riding on the success of this 386 million euro venture, about \$455 million, not just for the larger educational aims of reaching potential new audiences in the Paris suburbs, but also for Jean Nouvel, its eminent architect, who was fiercely opposed to opening the Philharmonie before it was ready.

Then the horrific terrorist attacks happened here. Suddenly, the determination of Laurent Bayle, the Philharmonie's president, to inaugurate the hall on schedule, even if elements of the complex were not ready, seemed the only right action to take in response.

The Philharmonie opened, as planned, on Wednesday night with the Orchestre de Paris in a substantive and challenging program conducted by its music director, Paavo Jarvi. The performance was dedicated to the victims of the massacre. If anything embodies free speech and the pursuit of enrichment in life it is music and culture. Before the concert there were speeches to a group of patrons, dignitaries and media representatives from Mr. Bayle; Anne Hidalgo, the mayor of Paris; and President François Hollande, who received a prolonged ovation when he entered the hall for the concert a little later.

But Mr. Nouvel snubbed the opening night. In a statement that appeared on Wednesday on the website of the French daily *Le Monde*, he accused the leadership of the Philharmonie of displaying “contempt” for architecture and for “the architect” with its decision to open the uncompleted hall.

You can understand how he must feel. The exterior of the building is an exhilarating sight, covered in some 340,000 cast-aluminum pieces meant to suggest birds. But it is still under construction and looks it up close. And inside there are countless missing details, including any kind of hand-drying implements in the men’s rooms. On this night, the striking, bare white-walled lobbies looked like the twisting corridors of a modern art museum with no art.

What matters most, though, is the concert hall. And from first impressions it seems acoustically marvelous. Marshall Day Acoustics and Ducks Scéno, working with Mr. Nouvel, created a hall basically in what is called the vineyard design, with seating areas surrounding the stage, like the Berlin Philharmonie. But this one puts a twist on that concept. The balconies almost float in space, each with its own contours, appearance and placement. The space has been designed to be modular, so certain seating areas can be retracted to create flatter walls. The entire floor can be leveled, if desired, to make the hall adaptable to diverse genres and styles, from flamenco to hip-hop to world music.

On Wednesday, in its orchestra-concert configuration, the acoustics were enveloping in the best sense. You never felt swamped with orchestral bigness and brashness; though reverberant, the sound had detail and clarity. There was, I thought, a certain spatial diffuseness to it. Sometimes I wanted to be more directly walloped by a crashing fortissimo. But I heard this program from only one seat, in front of the orchestra, six rows up. For a program on Friday I will try out one of the balconies.

The Orchestre de Paris players are still adjusting to the hall. More acoustical testing needs to be done. Its true character will take time to emerge.

The program, though planned long ago to show a range of French musical styles and sonorities, made a powerful memorial. It opened with “Tuning Up,” by the seminal French-born modernist Edgard Varèse, a piece he patched together in 1947, using bits of existing pieces. It was intended for a film called “Carnegie Hall” but never used. (The score was later readied for performance by Chou Wen-chung.) The piece toys with the custom of an orchestra tuning up, and, true to the Varèse style, is full of heady chaos and bursts of din, including the regular howling of a siren. It was a little chilling to hear the siren. The sounds of sirens have been permeating the streets of Paris of late. Strict security

measures were employed for this concert, including metal detectors.

The brilliant violinist Renaud Capuçon joined Mr. Jarvi and the orchestra for “*Sur le même accord*” by Henri Dutilleux, the towering French master who died in 2013 at 97. First performed in 2002 for Anne-Sophie Mutter, this nine-minute piece alternates sections of nocturnal lyricism with stretches of rapid, fidgety restlessness. Dutilleux’s mystically modern harmonic language was conveyed with radiant, penetrating sound by the orchestra; Mr. Capuçon balanced impetuosity and determination in his compelling performance.

It was almost eerie that four sections of Faure’s tender Requiem had long ago been chosen for the inaugural. This glowing performance, with the chorus of the Orchestre de Paris, was poignantly consoling, especially the full-bodied, mellow and impressively unforced singing of the chorus. The baritone Matthias Goerne brought grave beauty and firm sound to his solo work. In the beguiling “*Pie Jesu*” the sweet-voiced soprano Sabine Devieille was angelic without being precious.

The pianist Hélène Grimaud played with crackling vitality and bite in Ravel’s jazzy, jaunty Piano Concerto in G. Yet she also revealed the wistfulness of the languid contrasting theme in the first movement and gave clashing intervals a startling extra nudge. She stilled the audience with her soulful playing in the sadly dancing slow movement, and was capricious and fiery in the perpetual-motion finale, played with such panache that the audience would not stop applauding. Ms. Grimaud and the orchestra repeated the finale, an encore in the traditional sense.

After intermission Mr. Jarvi conducted the premiere of a formidable 30-minute work: Thierry Escaich’s Concerto for Orchestra. The piece begins with primordial low rumblings that provoke the percussion to break into skittish fits. This episodic, vividly scored, gritty piece goes through lurching digressions, by turns combative, reflective and exploratory.

The program concluded with Ravel’s “*Daphnis et Chloé*,” Suite No. 2, in which the chorus took part. Ravel’s glittering, sensual, voluptuous music is a good show-and-tell project for a new hall. Mr. Jarvi tamped down the cinematic opulence of the music, letting arcs crest and subside. During some passages heavy brass playing covered the chorus. Still, the sound overall was dark, palpable and balanced.

From the start of this project, the decision to build the Philharmonie in the 19th Arrondissement, adjacent to the ring road that surrounds the city and borders the suburbs, has been hotly debated.

The orchestra is leaving its longtime home in central Paris, the Salle Pleyel, which is owned by the state and will no longer present classical music. This is all part of an effort to bring music to the more working-class areas of the city that have been on the cultural margins. The orchestra is hoping that its subscribers and older patrons will make the trip to the new Philharmonie. The hall and the arts center it is part of are right near a Paris Métro stop. It took me only 35 minutes to travel from the hall to a favorite Left Bank restaurant.

But will the hoped-for new audiences of young people and banlieue residents who are much closer be enticed to check out the Philharmonie? This Saturday there are free family events and concerts all day in all parts of the arts center. I am eager to see how things turn out. Special educational family weekends are planned for the entire season.

Meanwhile, the major international ensembles that used to perform regularly at the Salle Pleyel, including the Berlin Philharmonic and the London Symphony, have concerts coming up at the Philharmonie. If the hall fulfills its potential, this risky move could be a momentous breakthrough for a troubled field.

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