

La Philharmonie de Paris: is this a new musical and social future for Paris?

The controversial concert hall might not have been quite finished and its architect might have elected to stay away from the opening concert, but it still sounded amazing, reports Tom Service.

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The multi-level concert complex seats 2,400 on sweeping balconies surrounding the centre stage. It took eight years to build, and at 386 million euros, cost three times its initial estimate.

Photograph: Charles Platiau/AP

The first sound heard in the new Philharmonie de Paris at its opening night gala on 14 January was applause: a sustained and spontaneous ovation for François Hollande and his retinue as they took their seats in the balcony of Jean Nouvel's surreally imaginative interior, an asymmetric assemblage of gigantic floating panels, clouds and boomerangs, of crazily diverse surfaces, colours, and acoustically adjustable geometries and movable seating and stage configurations, all nested within an outer shell whose chaotic lines and curves are covered in 340,000 geometrically tessellating metallic and concrete birds. Mind you, where I was sitting, there was also exposed MDF, chipboard, half-painted flooring, and chair numbers written on Post-it notes. Nouvel – the architect who didn't attend the opening of his own €390m project – was right: the Philharmonie simply wasn't fully ready by the time this inaugural audience took their seats.

Not that it seemed to matter: that applause symbolised the Parisians' desire to make this concert hall mean more than the sum of its sumptuous but unfinished parts. Most hadn't heard Hollande's and the mayor of Paris Anne Hidalgo's uplifting speeches earlier in the evening (which delayed the concert by nearly half an hour), movingly connecting the Philharmonie as a cultural and musical catalyst with France's response to the terrorist attacks last week. Yet there seemed an implicit understanding, even before a note was played by the Orchestre de Paris, conducted by their music director Paavo Järvi, that the Philharmonie must represent more for the city than simply a

place where classical music happens. Instead, the building and its programme is intended to be a sounding board of social, cultural and political resonances. There will be an ongoing programme of education and outreach projects; so much a fabric of musical life in the UK, these are new initiatives in France, and the Philharmonie must also encourage classical music's conventional audience out to the north-east of the city, away from the cossetting delights of the centre-ville. (That's not straightforward either, as the fracas over the new use of the Salle Pleyel, Paris's previous blue-riband venue for orchestral music, reveals.)

But the €390m question is: what does the hall sound like, with its "new typology" of acoustic space for a concert hall, according to the acousticians Marshall Day, floating the entire auditorium inside a reverberating chamber of extra volume? (Another reason Nouvel stayed away: he said there hadn't been enough acoustic testing of the hall before its public opening.) In short: pretty stunning. I can't remember a new hall sounding this good or this characterful at its opening, despite the fine-tuning that will no doubt happen over the coming weeks. There is a combination of dazzling clarity and generous depth in the sound that makes the whole range of orchestral possibility feel like a vivid physical presence, from the ethereal delicacies of the all-French programme – the magical flute solo in the Second Suite from Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloé*, or the intimate piano solo at the start of the slow movement of Ravel's *G major Concerto*, played by Hélène Grimaud – to the huge tuttis, such as the end of *Daphnis*, brilliantly realised by Järvi, or even the noisy note-spinning of the evening's world premiere, Thierry Escaich's *Concerto for Orchestra*.

If the other 2,399 seats are as good as the one I was sitting in, I think that the Philharmonie could be one of the most dynamic and exciting places to hear orchestral music in the world - as well as the most fun simply to sit in, thanks to the combination of intimacy and imagination of the interior.

And while the programme sometimes had the feel of an over-stuffed celebration, not least because the concert didn't finish until nearly midnight, there were moments of ravishing quality and inspiration. The evening opened with Edgard Varèse's deliriously but violently funny *Tuning Up*, a parody of pre-performance orchestral doodling, which turns, in Varèse's hands, into a series of chaotic explosions; there was violinist Renaud Capuçon's passionate advocacy of Dutilleux's *Sur le même accord*, and most memorably, there was the emotional power of Fauré's *Requiem*. This most humanist of all *Requiems* (planned on the programme for months, incidentally) was a moment that quietly but radiantly transfigured grief into radiance, above all in the singing of the two soloists, baritone Matthias Goerne and soprano Sabine Devieille, as well as the Choeur de l'Orchestre de Paris.

The bigger questions about the Philharmonie's success as cultural project won't be answered for years, but if the opening concert and the range of the forthcoming programme are heralds of what's to come, Paris has what could be one of the finest acoustics for orchestral music anywhere, and a centre for year-round musical and educational activity that creates a new vision of the relationship between music and society in France. It has been more than three decades since Pierre Boulez first dreamed of such a genuinely accessible, flexible space for symphonic music: despite the dramatic overspend, the squabbling and the still unresolved Parisian musical politics, France may finally have got it.