

TSO excels in variety of sizes

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JOHN TERAUDS

The current Toronto Symphony Orchestra program is misleading. "The Philosophers" promises brain food, but last night's performance at Roy Thomson Hall went straight to the gut.

Much of the credit is due to fine work from all involved, especially conductor Peter Oundjian and the American guest violinist, Robert McDuffie.

A bonus was hearing not one but three different variations of the Toronto Symphony. The first was a light 'n' agile small classical ensemble made up of strings, English and French horns and harpsichord. Their crisp playing was a tribute to Haydn's 1764 *Symphony No. 22* ("The Philosopher").

The second was a slightly larger group, backing up McDuffie in a deep 'n' muscular rendition of Leonard Bernstein's 1954 *Serenade*, inspired by Plato's dialogue *The Symposium*. It's a virtuoso showcase for the soloist, and McDuffie made his elegant most of the wide range of moods and musical styles.

Heard live, his 1735 Guarneri del Gesu violin has an exquisite tone. In the piece's opening, an almost melancholy violin solo, the instrument sounded like it was playing itself, so easy and mellow was the sound.

The evening's closing piece, Richard Strauss's sprawling *Also sprach Zarathustra* from 1896, drew on the full resources of the modern orchestra. But where the complex orchestration can often sound thick and muddy, Oundjian coaxed an ideal sonic balance.

A remarkable experience.