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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

O Canada! Long may you play

The last of a breed, the CBC Radio Orchestra sounds vibrantly alive.

By Mark Swed, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

VANCOUVER, Canada — Canadians are a hardy people. On Sunday, while members of the CBC Radio Orchestra played their matinee program at the Chan Centre for the Performing Arts — a modest, acoustically pleasing, cylindrical building nestled in a stunning forest on the University of British Columbia campus — a few robust souls were likely enjoying the clothing-optional beach down the cliff on this brilliant, chilly autumn day.

Impressive as that may seem, the resilience exposed on the stage was more so. The ensemble's new young, adventurous French Canadian music director, Alain Trudel, conducted an engaging, unusual, multicultural program with enthusiastic verve. But if it was a medical marvel that Trudel was there, it was a marvel of musical ecology that anyone at all was on stage.

The CBC Radio Orchestra is the last of its breed in North America. Supported by the Canadian Broadcasting Corp., this is the only surviving radio orchestra on the continent.

Radio orchestras, which continue to play an important role in the musical life of Europe and Asia, were once crucial organizations in the U.S. and Canada. In 1937, the NBC Symphony Orchestra was formed by the network to lure Arturo Toscanini to New York. That partnership, which lasted for 17 years, is credited, through its broadcasts and recordings, of greatly helping create a mass market for classical music in America.

Shortly after the NBC Symphony's first Christmas broadcast, a pioneering broadcaster and conductor, John "Jack" Avison, founded the CBC Vancouver Radio Orchestra, one of several radio orchestras throughout Canada. A particularly sturdy Canadian who led the orchestra for 42 years, he is remembered for once finishing a broadcast despite having amputated the top of his finger on a ceiling fan during the performance. In 1980, the British early music specialist John Eliot Gardiner took over the orchestra for three years, and then the respected Canadian conductor Mario Bernardi led it until last season.

Although they enjoy the widest accessibility to listenerships of any symphonic ensemble, radio orchestras — such as those in London, Amsterdam and Cologne — have ironically become bastions of experimentation for the simple fact that they enjoy guaranteed sponsorship. Operating in an environment of state support for Canadian art, the CBC Radio Orchestra, which broadcasts its concerts throughout Canada on CBC Radio 2 and which streams over the Internet at cbc.ca/radio, is expected to participate in the radio's ongoing program of commissioning new work from native composers. And the appointment of Trudel, who at 36 is a rising star, was clearly meant to inject a feisty, youthful image to an orchestra that had come to feel a bit stodgy and that competes with the more traditional Vancouver Symphony Orchestra.

Trudel's program Sunday, slated for broadcast and streaming on Saturday (at 7 a.m. Los Angeles time) was called "Eastern Pulse," with East, in this colorfully multicultural city, interpreted generously, meaning Eastern Europe, Iran, Puerto Rico, Quebec, Japan, Indonesia, wherever. It might be simpler to just think of it as Pacific Rim mixing pot.

Vancouver is also becoming well-known for its vibrant, improvising new music scene. So, for what was his second program as music director of the CBC Radio Orchestra, Trudel invited a central figure in that scene, a spectacularly versatile clarinetist who appears to have no limitations stylistically or sonically, as one of the concert's many soloists. Whether elegantly leaping through Witold Lutoslawski's Dance Preludes or astonishingly improvising on Iranian folk music, François Houle revealed himself as someone ready for the world stage in every sense.

The program included two world premieres. One, "Remembering Ornulf," was a likable double concerto,

full of lyrical evocations of Asian and Indonesian music, for flute and vibraphone, by John Wyre, who is a member of the outstanding Canadian percussion ensemble Nexus. The other premiere was "Looking East" by Amir Koushkani, an Iranian emigrant to Vancouver. The 10-minute score is a triple concerto for the Safa Ensemble, which includes Houle (a Quebecois), Koushkani on tar (an Iranian string instrument) and a Puerto Rican percussionist, Sal Ferreras, the orchestra's outgoing principal percussionist.

Koushkani's orchestral writing doesn't do much more than support the ensemble, but Iran and the West are not in conflict in such appealing music, and that is an accomplishment.

Trudel, who conducts without a baton, hands flat, Boulez style, but with great birdlike gestures as if trying to get the music to fly out of the hall, began the program with Bartok's Romanian Dances, light, lithe and danceable. Everything, when it came down to it, was light, lithe and danceable.

Some in Canada complain about the CBC's focus on commissioning only Canadian music these days. That was not always so. For example, on Friday night as part of the Vancouver New Music Festival downtown, there was a performance of John Cage's "Lecture on Weather."

Commissioned 30 years ago by the CBC, Cage asks for a dozen Americans who have become Canadian citizens to recite passages from Thoreau that sound shockingly relevant to our contemporary struggles with political power and the environment. But Wyre, at least, is an American in Canada. And no one could complain about the provinciality of the programming by the CBC Radio Orchestra on Sunday. The CBC Radio Orchestra may be a long-standing lone survivor on our continent, but it isn't a dinosaur.

mark.swed@latimes.com

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