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The Baltimore Symphony Expands Its Territory

By DANIEL J. WAKIN

NORTH BETHESDA, Md., Feb. 6 — Imagine the Philadelphia Orchestra setting up shop in Montclair, N.J., a quick commuter ride from the New York Philharmonic.

That is pretty much what the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra has done here, near Washington. The symphony has taken up a prominent residency in Montgomery County, a Maryland suburb of the capital. It will be playing at the new Music Center at Strathmore, which celebrated its gala opening on Saturday night, and lies 19 miles from the Kennedy Cen-

ter for the Performing Arts, home of the National Symphony Orchestra.

The Baltimore orchestra is scheduled to play about 25 concerts a year at the center, which will present a wide range of other concerts, dance performances, pop shows and educational offerings. It is a rare case of a major American orchestra having homes in two metropolitan areas.

For the Baltimore Symphony, suffering from deficits and poor ticket sales, it is an attempt to find new audiences, plow new fund-raising territory and gain a lure — the nation's capital — to dangle before famous soloists and guest conductors. It could also be a risky move financial-

ly and artistically.

The orchestra is taking on additional costs to play at Strathmore. It is also establishing a second acoustical home, which risks compromising its sound, a characteristic shaped by the hall in which an ensemble performs night after night. And there is that fascinating subplot: will the center draw audiences away from the National Symphony?

But Saturday was a time of celebration and self-congratulation.

Before Maryland's Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr., other politicians and a full house, Yuri Temirkanov, the music director, and the Baltimore Symphony offered a tapas bar of music:

selections from Tchaikovsky's "Nutcracker" and Bernstein's "Candide"; Villa-Lobos's "Bachiana Brasileira" No. 5; Shostakovich's "Festive Overture"; and Bruch's "Ave Maria" and "Kol Nidrei," with Yo-Yo Ma as the cello soloist.

"Arraché" by Michael Hersch, commissioned for the occasion, was a nod to the orchestra's onetime tradition of playing new American music. Originally scheduled to open the program, it was deemed too serious, so Mr. Temirkanov bumped it in favor of the Polonaise from Tchaikovsky's "Eugene Onegin."

The \$100 million center, built most-

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Ron Solomon

The new Music Center at Strathmore, in North Bethesda, Md., is the second base for the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra.

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ly with state and county money, sits just outside the Beltway on the Metro's red line. It was built and is owned by Montgomery County, home to nearly a million people, corporate headquarters and wealthy suburbs like Chevy Chase and Silver Spring. The center is designed to attract Washington commuters who forgo cultural trips downtown, the large number of residents who work in the county and Washingtonians who can hop on the Metro to get there.

The architects William Rawn Associates of Boston designed the center. Kirkegaard Associates of Chicago did the acoustics. Kirkegaard also worked on Meyerhoff Symphony Hall in Baltimore, the Baltimore Symphony's principal home, and the much-praised Ozawa Hall at Tanglewood, also designed by William Rawn Associates.

The center is a glass-and-stone construction of undulating lines set into a hillside on a rare green patch amid the area's malls and commercial strips. The hall's interior is oblong, lined with red birch and uncarpeted. It has the adjustable features typical of many new concert halls — chambers behind the walls with curtains that can be lowered, and adjustable panels over the stage. The seats have an expansive 36 inches of legroom, a reflection of Mr. Rawn's

6-foot-8 frame. The hall seats 1,976, compared with the Kennedy Center's 2,442-seat Concert Hall.

After the concert, Mr. Temirkanov said that Strathmore's acoustics sounded a "little brighter" than those in Meyerhoff Symphony Hall, but he called them wonderful. The orchestra still has to adjust, he said.

As for any competition between orchestras, officials of the Baltimore Symphony and the National Symphony swore up and down last week that they were not rivals, and that Strathmore would only increase sales for both organizations. But it is hard to square those protestations with the fact that as with most major American orchestras, attendance is suffering at both. The National Symphony says its attendance is about 80 percent this year. Baltimore has an abysmal rate, in the low 60 percent range, said Michael L. Mael, a vice president of the orchestra.

Leonard Slatkin, the National Symphony's music director, said of the competitive threat: "Some people of course are feeling that. But I'm not going to change the course of what we're doing because Baltimore is next door."

The orchestras have different profiles, Mr. Slatkin said. The National Symphony focuses on 20th- and 21st-century music and American composers, and presents a broader variety of repertory. Mr. Temirkanov is strong in the Romantics and Rus-



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The Baltimore Symphony reaches into the Washington suburbs, above, not far from the National Symphony.

sians.

But that calculus will change. Mr. Temirkanov is leaving after next season, and Mr. Slatkin in three years. Both are respected conductors. But the extra excitement the Baltimore Symphony hopes Mr. Temirkanov will generate in Montgomery County could leave with him.

Mr. Slatkin pointed out that halls help define great orchestras, like the Boston Symphony and the Vienna Philharmonic. "These orchestras created their personalities because of the hall they play in," he said. "The question will be which sound reflects the sound of the Baltimore Symphony."

Rita Shapiro, the National Symphony's executive director, said she had no worries about audience theft, even though a third of the National's 16,500 subscribers come from the Maryland suburbs. "This is an enormous metropolitan area with an ex-

tremely sophisticated and cultivated audience," she said. "I think there's ample room for both wonderful orchestras to continue to thrive."

She noted that her orchestra was celebrating its 75th anniversary next season and acknowledged that she would "not be unhappy" if the hoopla stole some of Strathmore's thunder. "But," she quickly added, "we are focusing on our own artistic profile and our own product."

Baltimore Symphony officials, whose city is a tough fund-raising market for the arts, acknowledge the risk of the venture: they will have to spend money to raise money, sell tickets, rent the Strathmore hall and transport the orchestra. Washington is a more expensive advertising market than Baltimore. Philip English, the symphony's chairman, said it would be spending about \$3 million during the next two years to play in Strathmore. But they said they were

confident of success.

As for having two halls, Baltimore Symphony officials said that competing with the National Symphony and the great orchestras that pass through Washington would only raise their ensemble's level. "The orchestra will be more flexible, more adjustable," Mr. Temirkanov said.

Orchestra officials said that starting afresh in Montgomery County was a way to reinvent the Baltimore Symphony. Strathmore would be a laboratory for testing ways to connect with audiences, they said.

At Strathmore the orchestra will come out on stage all together, as European orchestras do. A player will introduce the program. There will be surprise opening pieces and encores.

As Mr. Mael, a former marketing executive in the private sector, put it, "We have a chance to create a brand from scratch."