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Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's centennial gala hits all the right notes



Marin Alsop and the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra (here in an older photo) celebrated the orchestra's 100th birthday with a gala that showcased the ensemble's strengths. (Chris Lee)

By [Anne Midgette](#) Classical music critic/The Classical Beat February 12, 2016

When the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra was founded, 100 years ago on Thursday, it was as an arm of the Baltimore city government — to the tune of a \$6,000 budget item. It's the only orchestra in America that was founded as a municipal entity, and it's retained strong ties to its community ever since. Thursday's exhilarating birthday gala at Joseph Meyerhoff Symphony Hall, with remarks from mayors present and past, was punctuated by whoops and applause from an audience exuding a palpable sense of ownership that many other cities — including Washington — might envy. The BSO hasn't always had an easy time surviving in a city where funding and corporate sponsorship for a luxury item like an orchestra (now

costing considerably more than \$6,000 a season) are hard to come by, but it's achieved remarkable things, and its audience is on its side.

On paper, the concert program seemed to me slender, but that turned out to be a failure of my imagination. It proved a celebration tailored to the particular strengths of the orchestra and its musicians, with works that were a lot of fun and had substance. The suite from Bernstein's "West Side Story" for solo violin and orchestra, for example, turned out to be a wholly engaging vehicle for Joshua Bell, showcasing his lyrical and expressive gifts as it leapt from song to familiar song, piling up motifs almost willy-nilly and casting him in one different role after another, keeping him on his toes. I am not sure I've ever enjoyed Bell more, occasional slips and all.

While D.C.'s National Symphony Orchestra has labored, on and off over the years, to be seen as an American orchestra, the BSO has simply claimed the territory. David Zinman put the group on the map as a specialist in contemporary American repertoire, and Marin Alsop has picked up with her own kind of distinctive adventurous programming. The two American works on the program fit the ensemble like a glove. "Moxie," written for the occasion by the composer Kristin Kuster (one of 10 commissions spearheaded by the Alexandria-based travel agency Classical Movements for the orchestra's centennial), was literally tailor-made, and sounded it: At once energetic and melodic, it juxtaposed big full chords with an energizing pulse in the percussion and rapid string playing, all cresting into fanfare flourishes of brass.

"Mothership" — written by the Kennedy Center's composer-in-residence, Mason Bates, and played by the NSO in December — partakes of a similar catchiness, inflected by electronic overlays giving a sci-fi flavor, as well as solos by a saxophone and a cigar box guitar.

The opening piece, Gershwin's "Cuban Overture," was the weakest link: sloppy, with uncharacteristically bottom-heavy balances. And the final piece, Ravel's "Boléro," promised to be a routine ending to a diverting evening — and proved anything but. As the familiar music spread through the orchestra, the house lights came up and two lines of children marched in, playing their instruments: members of both the Baltimore Symphony Youth Orchestra and OrchKids, the program the orchestra has established in inner-city Baltimore schools that now offers intensive, five-day-a-week music instruction to about 1,000 children. (Before "Boléro," 13-year-old Keith Fleming spoke from the podium about the profound effect that OrchKids was having on his life.) The kids, some of them strikingly petite behind big flutes and trombones, took the stage and finished the piece with the orchestra. It was a wonderful message for a centennial, not even because it implicitly invoked the future, but rather because it demonstrated a present that offered everyone a lot to be proud of.