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MUSIC REVIEW

Sonically, a shell of its former self

By Mark Swed
Times Staff Writer

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Last fall, the Los Angeles Philharmonic oversaw the most successful American concert hall opening since Tchaikovsky came to New York in 1891 to dedicate Carnegie Hall. So with the Walt Disney Concert Hall triumph behind it, the orchestra surely knew what it was doing Friday night with the official debut of the new Hollywood Bowl shell.

The shell, the Philharmonic says, is the start of a new chapter in the 83-year history of the Bowl. It retains the iconic scalloped shape of the old one but is super size and high tech. Gone, though, are the charming makeshift Frank Gehry-designed acoustical spheres, replaced by a slick floating canopy that holds light fixtures and is meant to reflect sound so players can better hear themselves onstage. Large video screens flank each side of the shell for those who miss television when they go to concerts.

Opening night offered a little bit of a lot of different kinds of undemanding (at least to the listener) music poorly amplified even by previous low Bowl standards. It included tributes to 23-year-old violinist Sarah Chang, Beach Boy Brian Wilson and the late film composer Henry Mancini — this year's inductees into the Hollywood Bowl Hall of Fame — as well as an appearance by Josh Groban. John Mauceri conducted the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra.

Picnicking was, as always, elaborate and competitive. Celebrities appeared onstage and said some foolish things, which we heard many times over thanks to the new sound system's smokin' reverb. Actress Kathy Bates stated that because of the Bowl, great musicians planted their roots in Los Angeles (in fact, the likes of Heifetz, Rubinstein, Walter and Klemperer and other émigrés had to have their arms twisted to play outdoors). Director and comedian Rob Reiner insisted that Wilson was "one of the great composers of the 20th century." Friday was not, all in all, a particularly good night for music, and first impressions of this new Bowl chapter were only first impressions. Things will inevitably improve, perhaps even a lot.

This much seems clear: The way one experiences music at the Bowl will fundamentally change, and the visual and psychological effects of the new shell may prove as important in this respect as the sound system.

What one heard Friday when the orchestra began with the premiere of Elmer Bernstein's pleasingly "Magnificent Seven"-ish "Fanfare for the Hollywood Bowl" and Wagner's "Rienzi" Overture were

thumpy bass, muddy midrange and dull highs. Instruments did not display convincing individual timbres. The overall soundstage was flat, two-dimensional, without texture.

What one saw was the orchestra deeply recessed in the cavernous new shell, appearing smallish and feeling very far away, which only added to the impression that the sound itself was neither immediate nor tactile. We also now see what they want us to see. On the video screens, impossible to ignore, a giant Mauceri giantly emotes for a few seconds until the camera pans away to an oboist's puffed cheeks or a violinist's hairdo.

The Bowl's supposed magic was always, even under the best of circumstances, the product of a reluctant genie. But every so often, genuine musical character came through the speakers that seemed enhanced by the lure of a starlit night. Now, getting lost in sky or sonics is unlikely. Chang played Sarasate's "Carmen" Fantasy with supreme technical command, if little personality. Maybe, just maybe, the music might have set off the imagination anyway. But when the camera focuses on fast-working fingers and loudspeakers turn a violin into a factory whistle, a listener is pretty limited in ways of fantasizing about Carmen.

To be fair, this could not have been an easy concert for the sound engineers, and there were small improvements in all aspects of the amplification as the evening progressed. The program included standard orchestral music. Monica Mancini offered a bland rendition of "Days of Wine and Roses"; Andy Williams, a nostalgic one of "Moon River." Groban required a different sound for his updated sentimental pop, as did Robin Gibb and Wilson Phillips for their tributes to Brian Wilson. Wilson, himself, appeared with a pop band to sing a couple of old hits ("Good Vibrations" and "I Get Around") along with a new song ("Soul Searchin' ").

Pop may make more sense in the new Bowl than classical music. The close-up video is de rigueur for flamboyant rockers, and their sound needs less nuance. Groban, so out of place when he appeared at one of the Disney opening galas, fit right in at the Bowl, even if his presentability rose the highest when he stopped singing and spoke sweetly about music education.

Still, there is hope for orchestral amplification. In homage to the history of the Bowl, Mauceri wound up an old Victrola and played a 78 rpm recording of the "Rose Adagio" from Tchaikovsky's "Sleeping Beauty" made long ago at the Bowl. Suddenly, there was a sense of musical presence that only disappeared when the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra attempted to play along.

The new shell is, of course, fireworks friendly, and the concert ended with short, illuminated showers bursting over Dvorak's "Carnival" Overture. The new amplification competes with noisy pyrotechnics no better than did the old. But the sky asked for no music as it put on its dazzlingly beautiful face for a couple of minutes.



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