Symphony opens with Williams

By MIKE KARCHMER
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The Houston Symphony Orchestra began its 51st season Monday evening. Now settled in its new home, the orchestra under the leadership of Sir John Barbirolli presented a generally satisfying opening concert.

Programmed were Sibelius’ beautiful tone poem “The Return of Lemminkainen,” the Symphony No. 2 of Ralph Vaughn Williams, and the popular “Emperor” Piano Concerto of Beethoven.

Easily the highlight of the evening was the Vaughn Williams symphony. It is a massive work of deep harmony and singing melodies. From the first movement’s playful folk-like themes to the rich viola solo which closes the last movement, the symphony is a real gem.

Sloppy Entrance

Sir John knew exactly what he wanted out of the score and he and the orchestra gave the work a magnificent reading. Only the occasional sloppy entrances in the soft sections marred an otherwise brilliant performance.

The last half of the program was taken up by the Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 5 and the soloist was the noted Chilean pianist Claudio Arrau.

Lively Sound

Although there was nothing really wrong with the performance, it wasn’t exciting or distinctive. Mr. Arrau is a fine technician and is as powerful as any pianist to play in Houston in quite a while, but his conception of the Emperor didn’t seem to be too noteworthy.

In fact, his playing in the second movement was a little harsh and in the third totally humorless. The first movement was unfortunately characterized by a bland accompaniment by the orchestra.

The improvement that the acoustics of the new Jones Hall make on the sound of the orchestra is nothing short of remarkable. The flatness of the old Music Hall is now replaced by the bright, lively sound of the new building.

Thank goodness!