Orchestra Fails Despite Potential

By MIKE KARCHMER
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When the Houston Symphony Orchestra opens its season next fall in the new Jones Center for the Performing Arts, it will find itself in a cultural Astrodome.

But while this new auditorium will be “big league,” it’s disappointing, because while the Symphony is capable of better things, it will continue on its more or less mediocre course unless a few basic changes are made.

First, the musicians are terribly underpaid. Before talented young musicians can be attracted to Houston, salaries must be raised to the level of a full-time job.

Lose Barb

Second, the departure of conductor Sir John Barbirolli would greatly speed the Symphony’s growth. Barbirolli’s interpretations were generally turgid and often uninspired. All too often, the dynamics were false and exaggerated. Furthermore, pieces were presented in concert which were obviously under-rehearsed.

These faults must be attributed directly to the conductor.

A comparison of the Barbirolli concerts with those guest-conducted by Andre Previn and Jussi Jalas is revealing. The two concerts conducted by Mr. Previn were models of clarity and were full of life. Jussi Jalas’ all-Finnish program was breathtaking — musically the best concert of the season.

Should Be Recording

Houston is desperately in need of an energetic conductor who is willing to devote himself totally to improving the orchestra, instead of one who makes his job a well-paid vacation.

Houston needs a conductor who will fight for a recording contract, instead of one who conspicuously avoids doing so.

Potential Exists

The Houston Symphony picture is not all black, however. As mentioned before, anyone who heard the Jalas and Previn programs knows that the orchestra can be very good.

Even Barbirolli’s readings of the Mahler Fifth Symphony, the Bartok Concerto for Two Pianos and Percussion, and much of Handel’s Messiah, were impressive. Soloists John Browning, Gary Graffman, and Hans Richter-Haaser all presented brilliant performances with the Symphony.

The Houston Symphony can be outstanding. It’s only a shame that good performance must be the exception rather than the rule.