

Symphony's debut a brilliant start

By JAMES ROOS
Herald Music Critic

The New World Symphony, America's answer to foreign competition in brilliant youth orchestras, played its world debut at Miami's Gusman Center for the Performing Arts Thursday night, with Michael Tilson Thomas at the helm, and it was just about everything it was cracked up to be.

It is a dynamic, fiercely energetic orchestra of 85 fledgling

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virtuosos from top-notch U.S. conservatories, and its often super-charged playing of Brahms, Bartok, Beethoven, plus a newly commissioned work by American Charles Wuorinen, was amazing, considering the musicians played together for the first time less than a month ago.

Wuorinen, often characterized as a brash, abrasive composer, has written an exhilarating, festive, six-minute tour-de-force for large orchestra titled *Bamboula Beach*. It is a compact, complex, powerful essay in darting counterpoint and syncopation, with Latin folk and Miami college tunes interwoven in its dense yet transparent fabric.

The score has a faintly Stravinsky-ish flavor, but its swift shifting of focus from section to

section, with rapid alterations of strings, winds and brasses, is pure Wuorinen. The piece's uproarious impact is terrific, but for all its querulous harmonic clashes, it ends on a triumphantly tongue-in-cheek A-major chord.

The orchestra and Thomas brought it off with rare verve and vitality, with the percussion section particularly in stellar focus on marimbas and steel drums. But from the moment Thomas walked on stage to open the concert with the national anthem, the orchestra sounded all of a piece, and the direction signs were out when it began with Brahms' *Academic Festival Overture*.

It was a young performance, full of vigor and raw edges, but it had breadth and high-spirited characterization from Thomas. What it lacked, besides finish, was the brusque, inimical quality that is the backbone of Brahms. What came next displayed the orchestra far better.

Thomas took hold of Bartok's *Concerto for Orchestra* as if he found its complex subtleties a natural means of communication. He understood its fascinating malaise of intensity under pressure, its interesting timbres, its eerie sounds and, above all, its deeply Hungarian flavor.

The orchestra responded instantly to the conductor with

sweep in the strings — especially incisive unanimity of attack in the violins — and there was some superb solo playing from clarinet, flute, oboe and trombones. Unfortunately, there was also some spottiness in the trumpets and horns, and some other passages were less than perfection.

But Thomas captured the pungent lyricism of the score, its poetry and mystical beauty. It was a virtuoso success. Still, the evening's best performance came with Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, which is a force of nature. It had that engaging touch of the brusque that the Brahms overture had missed, and the orchestra was in full spit and polish. The cellos cut into the score with shadowy depth of tone, and the violins had authority and agility.

Thomas' interpretation, too, had that inner urgency never felt in a performance overbalanced or overreached. He put his heart into the slow movement, but his conducting had the powerful drive and climactic intensity without which it wouldn't have been Beethoven's Fifth. At the end, you knew that this orchestra is on its way up, with a leader of rare imagination and ability.