

MUSIC REVIEW

French conductor nods to Munch, brings rarities to BSO

By Jeremy Eichler | GLOBE STAFF NOVEMBER 30, 2012

Based on his skills, his career station, and his evident rapport with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the French conductor Stéphane Denève is rumored to be one of the candidates under consideration for the music director post. That said, with the details of these searches guarded like Kremlin secrets, it's hard to know exactly where any one conductor stands.

Denève has certainly been around a lot recently, leading the orchestra in Symphony Hall, Carnegie Hall, and Tanglewood. He is back on the BSO podium this week, and has brought with him a clutch of French rarities he admires, beginning with Berlioz's Overture to "Les Francs-Juges," last played in Symphony Hall four decades ago. With a boldly drawn performance, Denève made an eloquent case for hearing this very early work — the composer's Opus 3 — as a kind of capsule summary of future genius.

He closed the program with a Roussel's "Bacchus et Ariane," another work not played by the BSO in ages, despite its status as a kind of party piece during the tenure of Charles Munch. It would have been easier for all involved if Denève had programmed, say, music from Ravel's "Daphnis et Chloé" in this slot, and so his choice had a nice ring of intentionality to it, as if purposefully reconnecting the orchestra to an earlier era of its past. The performance itself was vividly phrased, full of color and vitality, even if the closing fiery Bacchanale gave off more light than heat.

Between the two came Saint-Saens's Piano Concerto No. 5, with soloist Jean-Yves Thibaudet, who played the work at Tanglewood this summer, once more folding great virtuosity into a performance bursting with atmosphere, refinement and debonair style. Denève and the orchestra matched him with particular success in the slow movement, where Middle Eastern modal harmonies float off on a cloud of French perfume.

In a welcome twist, Denève interrupted his own French reverie with a set of earthy

and theatrical Interludes from “The Sacrifice,” an opera by the Scottish composer James MacMillan. Addressing the audience from the stage, Denève explained his choice both on musical and personal grounds (he currently lives in Glasgow and has come to champion MacMillan’s music).

The performance was persuasive, and it also did not go unnoticed that, of the most closely watched conductor candidates, Denève is the only one to have programmed a single note by a living composer.

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