



Concert review: Toronto Symphony in vividly fine form with James Ehnes and Stéphane Denève

BY [JOHN TERAUDS](#) ON OCTOBER 10, 2013 · [ADD COMMENT](#)



A cool, calm and collected James Ehnes with an excited Stéphane Denève at the Toronto Symphony concert on Thursday night (Josh Clavir photo).

It's too bad the full house that admired the Mariinsky Orchestra and conductor Valery Gergiev at Roy Thomson Hall on Sunday didn't return for the Toronto Symphony Orchestra's concert with maestro Stéphane Denève on Thursday night.

The musical results, delivered with the help of Canadian violin star James Ehnes, were just as spectacularly fine – even if the programme itself was a bit more subdued.

Over the past nine years of regular visits to Toronto, Denève has proven himself to be a reliably fascinating musical sculptor.

Thursday was no exception as he led a programme that consisted of an orchestral suite created by James MacMillan from the interludes in his 2007 opera *The Sacrifice*, the *Violin Concerto* by Benjamin Britten, who would have turned 100 this month had he not died in 1976, and the “Eroica” *Symphony No. 3* by Ludwig van Beethoven.

Ehnes and Beethoven were on the bill to ensure ticket sales, but even two golden surnames couldn't fill more than 60 per cent of the seats.

Those who attended were treated to spectacular musicmaking – nowhere more evident than in the Britten *Concerto*.

It's a pretty grim work, written at the outbreak of World War II by a pacifist composer who felt the need to abandon his British homeland, at least for a little while.

One hears melancholy, anger, loneliness and sarcasm in this music, which still manages to beguile with its elegance and economy. The solo violin part is, despite all this, a powerful technical showcase – and Ehnes didn't disappoint.

The violinist delivered long, graceful arcs one minute, and spiky exclamations the next. His most breathtaking work came during the extended second-movement cadenza, where the soloist is asked to play *pizzicato* and with bow at the same time.

Ehnes, ever calm, cool and collected, didn't even frown.

The violinist rewarded the boisterous ovation that greeted his playing with a touchingly simple performance of the Lento movement from J.S. Bach's *Sonata for Solo Violin No. 3*.

The Toronto Symphony players were as disciplined and as fine-sounding as the Mariinsky Orchestra throughout Thursday's concert. Denève, in turn, showcased his talent for underlining and colouring and adding texture to music that all too easily can turn leaden.

The Beethoven symphony is heard so often that a concertgoer might be forgiven for wondering if they need to hear it again.

But at the hands of a master like Denève, it sounded alive, relevant and riveting. The most beautiful thing was witnessing how an orchestra can capture a listener's attention and emotions as effectively with gossamer *pianissimo* playing as with ear-splitting *fortissimos*.

The whisper is an underappreciated tool in our noisy times – but Denève knows exactly how to use it.

The MacMillan opera suite is not a model of subtlety, as the composer underlines the progress of the tragic tale in *The Sacrifice* (here, the title really does say it all) with all manner of brass and percussion emphasis, much in the way heard in Hollywood blockbuster movies – but using much more interesting musical base materials.

On first listen, there appeared to be too much bombast here, but at least the music made sense and related clearly to the story it was meant to accompany.

This week's Toronto Symphony concerts with maestro Denève are not examples of light family entertainment; they are showcases of powerful musicianship, artfully applied.

You can find the details on Saturday's repeat performance [here](#).

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