

Denève brings an imaginative twentieth-century program to the SFS podium

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Violinist Isabelle Faust

courtesy of Arts Management Group

Last night in Davies Symphony Hall, Stéphane Denève, currently Chief Conductor of the Stuttgart Radio Symphony Orchestra and Principal Guest Conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra, returned for his third visit to the podium of the [San Francisco Symphony](#) (SFS). He prepared a program that fit into a surprisingly narrow time frame from the twentieth century, and circumstances were such that he played the three pieces in chronological order. Thus, the evening began with his leading the string section in Samuel Barber's arrangement of the second (Adagio) movement from his Opus 11 string quartet, composed in 1936. Violinist Isabelle Faust then came on stage for Benjamin Britten's Opus 15 concerto, composed in 1939. The intermission was then followed by Sergei Rachmaninoff's Opus 45, which he entitled "Symphonic Dances," completed in 1940.

The high point of the evening was the Britten concerto, which seemed to blend in with any dark resonances of Dmitri Shostakovich's Opus 65 (eighth) symphony in C minor from [Monday night](#) still remaining in the Davies space. (Britten would later form a warm friendship with Shostakovich.) Like Shostakovich's symphony, Britten's concerto was war-influenced; but in Britten's case it was the Spanish Civil War. Britten himself was a pacifist, but he had friends who traveled to Spain to fight with the Republicans. The victory of Francisco Franco's Fascists was a crushing blow; and Britten's concerto can be viewed as an early effort to compose a "war requiem." Britten had also recently heard the first performance of Alban Berg's violin concerto and its account of the tragic death of Manon Gropius (daughter of Walter Gropius and Alma Mahler and stepdaughter of Franz Werfel) at the age of eighteen.

The influence of Berg's work is most evident in Britten's cadenzas. Britten was clearly struck by how Berg had required the violinist to bow one string while plucking another in depicting Gropius' losing battle with death, and it served him well for a poignant reflection on the Republican defeat in Spain. However, Britten's concerto is very much in his own voice, beginning with his solid sense of tonality (first established by a hushed timpani solo) and his strong ties to traditional forms, most evident in the structure of the final movement as a passacaglia. (If his concerto foreshadows Britten's *War Requiem*, it also anticipates his use of passacaglia form in *Peter Grimes* during Grimes' walk down to his fishing boat with his apprentice John in what will be the last hour of John's life.)

Britten's concerto is as technically demanding as it is intensely expressive. Fortunately, Faust approached the concerto with a solid command of technique (as solid as the technical dexterity she brought to [her recording of the Berg concerto](#)). Equally, important was her chemistry with Denève, responsible for providing her with a context based on Britten's deep understanding of every instrument in a full orchestra. Denève also appreciated Britten's rhetoric of suspense, having the timpani sound those opening measures at the threshold of audibility to establish a tense anticipation of what would follow.

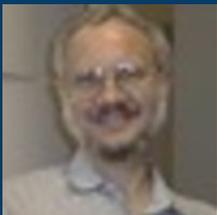
Denève's command of hushed dynamics was equally effective in his opening of Barber's Adagio. This movement was conceived as a large-scale arc, which slowly rises and then recedes along dimensions of both dynamics and pitch register, all expressed through the unfolding of a single sinuous melodic line. While I have always had a personal preference for the intimacy of the quartet setting, Denève's command of gradual change achieved almost that same level of intimacy even with the resources of a full string ensemble.

Curiously, the Rachmaninoff selection also began with an extremely hushed opening (although it took only a few measures for him to jump into much louder and far more energetic dynamics). Opus 45 was his final composition, and it is a curious one. Back in my student days it had a rather popular release on the Everest label on which it was coupled with Ottorino Respighi's *Roman Festivals* suite. Its popularity was due to the possibility that,

at the time, it was the loudest [classical music](#) recording every produced (even when compared with recordings of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture" using real cannon fire).

Apparently, Opus 45 was originally intended for a ballet entitled "Fantastic Dances." As I have [previously](#) observed, any connotations of dance in this work's three movements have been significantly distorted; and the middle waltz movement may even amount to a view of Tchaikovsky and his own ballet connections through a particularly bizarre kaleidoscope. The opening movement, on the other hand, could well be a recollection of the pagan foot-stamping that made "The Rite of Spring" so shocking at its premiere. Still, the final movement remains a puzzle, hurtling from one theme to another while the "Dies irae" plainchant insinuates itself, eventually taking over the whole orchestra.

If Opus 45 is not the most coherent of compositions, Denève certainly did his best in escorting the listener through its thematic ramblings. His command of orchestral resources was as impressive as it had been in the Britten concerto. Most importantly, however, he approached the Rachmaninoff score with a clear sense of where he wanted the climaxes to be (whether or not Rachmaninoff had given as much thought to this matter). The result may have been more like a thrilling roller coaster ride than a journey through a musical score; but Denève certainly knew how to keep his listening audience with him through all of those twists, turns, and loops. He certainly deserved the rousing round of applause dished out after the final measure.



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