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ARTS

SUMMER IN SARATOGA

Philadelphia Orchestra delivers rousing opening to season at SPAC

Geraldine Freedman/For The Daily Gazette | [August 4, 2017](#)



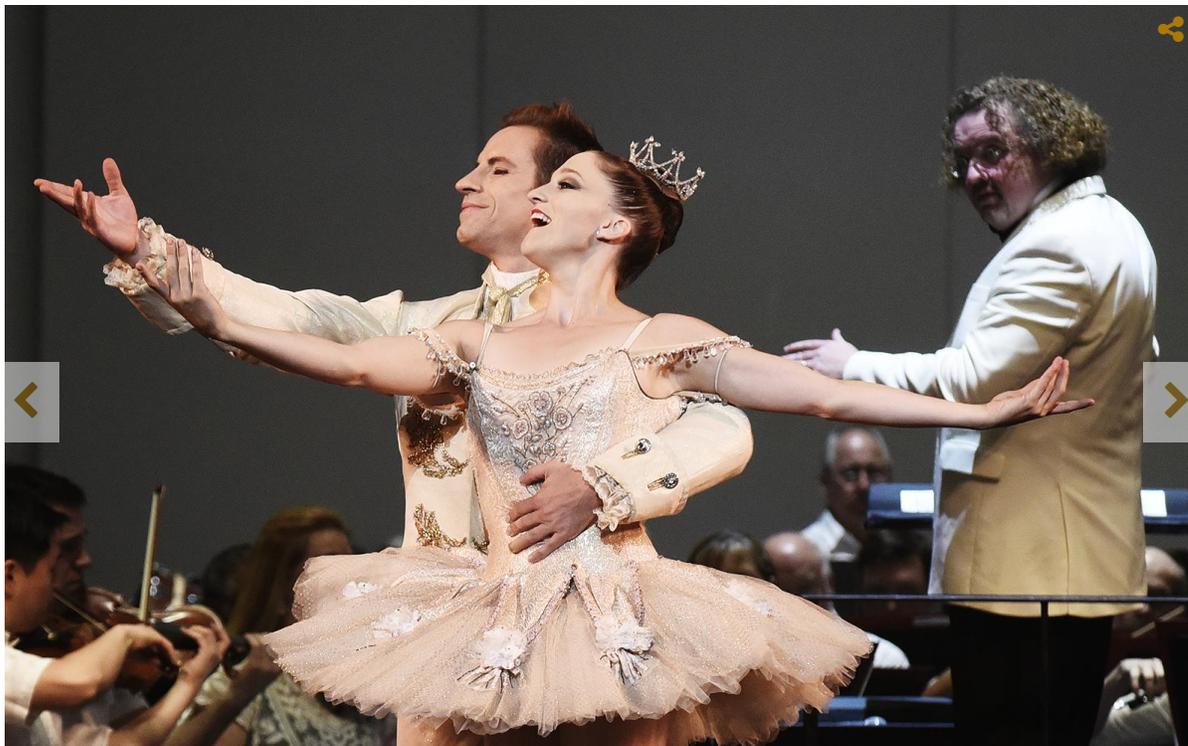
Opening night of the Philadelphia Orchestra with conductor Stéphane Denève at SPAC.

PHOTOGRAPHER: ERICA MILLER

SARATOGA SPRINGS — Cannons roared, ballet dancers thrilled and the [Philadelphia Orchestra](#)

ensemble work and lots of fun. Then New York City Ballet principal dancers Ashley Bouder and Andrew Veyette danced the pas de deux from Tchaikovsky's "The Sleeping Beauty." Their precision, matchless control and elegance were spellbinding. Seeing them work so close to the crowd on the extended stage in front of the orchestra allowed people to see the skills required to make it all seem effortless.

A selection from Mussorgsky's "Boris Godunov" also arranged by Stokowski showed off the orchestra in all its colorful glory and expertise. And Tchaikovsky's "Solemn Overture, 1812" sounded fresh in Deneve's hands. The crowd jumped to its feet. Fireworks gave a smashing finale.



1 of 28 - Wednesday was opening night of the Philadelphia Orchestra at SPAC.

On Thursday, the crowd was smaller but no less vocal for an all-Russian program and the sensational SPAC debut of 23-year old pianist Conrad Tao. There were plenty of fireworks to go around. Deneve first led the orchestra in a rocket blast reading of Glinka's Overture to "Ruslan and Lyudmila," which was characterized by tight phrasing, taut rhythms and melodies that floated.

Tao came out to play Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2. One of the great warhorses of the solo repertoire, Tao gave it an edge-of-your seat performance. A physical performer, he was rapt, passionate and intense, yet his strong sense of structure allowed him to push and pull at the phrases to create an almost rhapsodic interpretation. His playing inspired the orchestra and Deneve allowed them to dwell more on those gorgeous melodies. Tao's brilliantly electric technique, the wide range of dynamic levels all made the work sound new.

The crowd went wild and got an encore: Scarlatti's Sonata in A Major, K. 208, a spare, slow, melancholy piece that also got a standing ovation.

Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 (1937), a work that saved the composer's career, was accompanied appropriately here by thunder and lightning. The orchestra performed magnificently. Haunting melodies, huge climaxes, big brassy bold moments, anguish, irony, a memorable slow searching movement that ends with hope, and a finale that moves from splashy bravura to ominous voices before it builds to glory, all transfixed the crowd. Applause and cheers were long and loud.

Friday the Russian Festival wraps up with "Cirque de la Symphonie" and Saturday it's the film "E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial" with Deneve conducting.

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