

CONCERT REVIEWS

Stéphane Denève offers a program of love with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra

By Sarah Bryan Miller St. Louis Post-Dispatch Nov 11, 2018



Conductor Stéphane Denève conducts the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra on Feb. 3, 2018. Photo by Dilip Vishwanat/SLSO

Stéphane Denève has been making beautiful music with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra since his auspicious debut in the fall of 2003. Now the SLSO's music director-designate, his first concert in that role came Saturday night, constructed as an intense love note to the orchestra and the city.

Denève made his entrance with a greeting: “Good evening! Bon soir!” Then he got the audience to finish the line “What the world needs now is ...” with a little group vocalism. He introduced the works about to be heard before each half, and established a solid level of rapport with the crowd.

The carefully constructed program began with a fine reading of Part II of Berlioz’s “Roméo et Juliette,” which concludes with the spirited “Grand fête chez Capulet.” From there, he and his forces moved to Peter Lieberon’s “Neruda Songs.”

Pablo Neruda (1904-1973) was a Nobel Prize-winning Chilean poet and diplomat. The composer Peter Lieberon (1946-2011) set five of his love poems for his wife, the mezzo-soprano Lorraine Hunt Lieberon (1954-2006). The songs are sensuous, rich in metaphor and over-the-top romantic; this was the first time the SLSO has performed them, and they were a welcome addition to the repertoire.

They received a breathtaking performance from soloist Kelley O’Connor. She’s a true mezzo, with a rich, beautiful voice, and she invested each song with worlds of meaning. Denève is a splendid accompanist; he and the orchestra joined O’Connor in making the performance memorable. (It was helpful that the words were printed in the program as well as projected, for later consideration.)

In the second half, Denève opened with Richard Wagner’s Prelude to “Tristan und Isolde” and its longing harmonies. The orchestra went straight from that into Alexander Scriabin’s “Poem of Ecstasy,” more sexual than sensual, with a pair of climaxes and a riot of sound at the end.

The combination worked. English horn Cally Banham’s playing in the Prelude was essential to its effect; concertmaster David Halen, principal flute Mark Sparks and associate principal trumpet Thomas Drake were among the standouts in the Scriabin.

“Ecstasy” often seems to go on too long; Scriabin missed a couple of opportunities to end it before the final climax brings it to an end. It didn’t seem too long this time. This was the most engaging reading of it I have heard, with

Denève and his players completely involved in the music from start to finish. It was a triumph.

Denève will be back this season to conduct three more weeks with the SLSO, with two different programs in February and one to close the subscription series in May. We have a lot of good music-making to look forward to.

Sarah Bryan Miller

Sarah Bryan Miller is the classical music critic for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch; she has also written on a variety of other topics.