

## At Tanglewood, a bright import from France

By Andrew L. Pincus, Special to The Eagle Berkshire Eagle

Posted:

BerkshireEagle.com

---

Monday August 13, 2012

LENOX -- The crowd came for Yo-Yo Ma, of course. Crowds always come for Yo-Yo Ma.

For Boston Symphony Orchestra followers, however, the main attraction at Tanglewood Saturday night was conductor Stéphane Denève, who is pretty clearly a man to watch for the music director vacancy. His palpable rapport with the orchestra resulted in finely realized performances of three divergent works, culminating in a Shostakovich Fifth Symphony to drive a dagger into Stalin's heart, if he ever had any.

A big, burly, bushy-haired Frenchman, Denève, 40, appeared with the BSO in Boston in 2011 and earlier this year. Together with an appearance in Tanglewood on Parade, Saturday's concert marked his festival debut. He was tested in three ways: the world premiere of a BSO commission, "Music for Boston," by Andre Previn; an eccentric performance of the Elgar Cello Concerto by Ma, and the climactic 45-minute Shostakovich symphony.

Denève's musical ideas, clarity of textures without loss of weight, and ability to get what he wanted from the orchestra were remarkable. The only other debut conductor to have come up to that standard this summer was Asher Fisch in an all-Wagner program.

Nobody needs to be told that Ma plays the elegiac Elgar concerto soulfully. He did it that way here two years ago, and he did it again Saturday. This time, though, he seemed to go further, stretching phrases to the fullest extent of the law.

Was it beautiful? Yes. Was it exaggerated? Well, yes: that, too.

n

Denève loosed a few passions in the orchestra to counterbalance some of the swooning.

At the quietest, most soulful moment, a Tanglewood neighbor -- apparently a nearby resort -- loosed a barrage of fireworks lasting several minutes. Thanks, merrymakers, for spoiling the party for the rest of us.

The 17-minute Previn piece, ostensibly a concerto for orchestra, started off sounding like Shostakovich but soon became more like background for a bittersweet movie about love by sunlight and moon glow. Previn took a bow in the audience.

The Shostakovich performance was extraordinary, from the unearthly hush at the outset to the thumping march at the end (is it victory or is it defeat under crushing boots?). Shock value and extremes are implicit in the Stalin-era work. Denève and the BSO pulled them together into an overarching, inevitable whole.

It was just that sense of spontaneity -- of music jumping off the stage -- that was missing when Christoph von Dohnanyi returned Sunday afternoon to conduct Beethoven's Fourth Symphony and Strauss' "Till Eulenspiegel."

It wasn't the German maestro's ideas about the music that seemed wanting. He's right at home in this repertoire, and both performances were solidly crafted; energy and humor abounded. "Till" came together better than the Beethoven but in both, the playing seemed not quite to have settled in.

n

The best of the afternoon was English pianist Paul Lewis' BSO debut in Mozart's Concerto No. 23. The thoughtful performance was especially effective in shadowing forth the dark mystery at the heart of the adagio. In the finale, Lewis and the reduced orchestra teased out the jokes and capers that seem to banish the adagio like a dream.

In the annual attempt to reclaim the baroque repertoire from the early-music movement, the BSO on Friday night played a program of Bach's greatest hits with Pinchas Zukerman as star soloist and leader.

The upbeat program on a soggy evening consisted of three solo concertos and the third and fifth "Brandenburg" concertos. Without giving up a modern sound, a chamber-sized orchestra emulated the gazelle-like liveness of a period-instrument band.

BSO oboist John Ferrillo joined Zukerman in a reconstructed concerto for their instruments; concertmaster Malcolm Lowe joined Zukerman in the Concerto for two violins, and Zukerman took the Violin Concerto No. 1 alone. BSO flutist Elizabeth Rowe and harpsichordist John Gibbons were Zukerman's partners in the fifth "Brandenburg."

Zukerman was a suave, genial soloist and leader, even deferring to his fellow soloists. In the double violin concerto, Lowe stood out by a slight degree with his more pointed playing.

Ferrillo and Rowe brought cool elegance to their solo opportunities.

Gibbons, however, eclipsed everything for miles around with his long, lavish cadenza in the fifth "Brandenburg." It's an old specialty of his.

There were some lovely things, such as the aria-like adagio of the oboe-violin concerto. In the end, though, the evening had a slightly old-fashioned air, as if the 1950s Bach style were still in fashion.