

Bernstein music enlivens night at

SPAC

By Joseph Dalton

Published 4:49 p.m., Friday, August 3, 2012

SARATOGA SPRINGS – Was there a Bernstein boycott or something going on? The composer's music has been conspicuously absent at SPAC's concerts of the Philadelphia Orchestra for at least the past decade.

While the numerous repetitions and weird oversights in the repertoire choices are too big a discussion for here, I'll add that Aaron Copland has been almost as neglected.

Anyway, conductor Stephane Deneve and the Philadelphia Orchestra made up for lost time on Thursday. Bernstein's Overture to "Candide" opened the night and set the tone for a program that was colorful and energetic from start to finish.

The boisterous and charged nature of the "Candide" Overture and the Dance Episodes from "On the Town," which followed, are ideal material for the mighty Philly, as well as for easy enjoyment on a warm summer night. Conductor and players delivered all the jazzy solos and crashing climaxes with style and dispatch.

Pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet was the soloist in not one but two works, the pair of concertos by his countryman Maurice Ravel, which came before and after intermission. It's hard to imagine a better match of composer and performer.

The Piano Concerto in G Major continued the evening's flavor with more than a hint of jazz. Its take on big city life is more old world and genteel than Bernstein's ventures in the Big Apple. Deneve and Thibaudet struck the right balance of elegance and verve.

It was the Concerto for the Left Hand that added some soulfulness to the proceedings. It's got martial and militaristic passages, somberness and grief aplenty, as well as extraordinary technical demands for the soloist.

Viewing Thibaudet's masterful playing on SPAC's big video screens was compelling and kind of discomfiting, too, since his resting appendage brought to mind the tragic genesis of the piece. But close the eyes and the music warms a bit as attention goes to the fullness and beauty of the keyboard writing.

And what should follow but Gershwin's "An American in Paris"? The orchestra could probably play this one in its sleep, but Deneve kept the pacing lively.

Joseph Dalton is a freelance writer in Troy and can be reached at Dalton@HudsonSounds.org.

Concert review

Philadelphia Orchestra

When: 8 p.m. Thursday

Where: Saratoga Performing Arts Center, Saratoga Springs

Length: Two hours, one intermission

Highlights: Bernstein's Overture to "Candide," a pair of Ravel concertos

Attendance: 2,042