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# Opening Night at SPAC, with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Stéphane Denève, with Garrick Ohlsson, Piano

By [Michael Miller](#) • August 7, 2012 • [Print-Friendly](#)



Stéphane Denève. Photo Drew Farrell.

Saratoga Performing Arts Center  
Wednesday, August 1 / 8:00 PM

## Opening Night

The Philadelphia Orchestra  
Stéphane Denève Conductor  
Garrick Ohlsson Piano

Tchaikovsky – Piano Concerto No. 1 op. 23, B-Flat minor  
Rachmaninoff – Symphony No. 2 op. 27, E minor

The Philadelphia Orchestra's season at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center, a distinguished tradition which has continued since its opening in 1966, began most splendidly with a Tchaikovsky-Rachmaninoff program led by Stéphane Denève with Garrick Ohlsson joining him for Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto. This was my first visit to SPAC, so I'll have to discuss what I heard in the context of the Center's remarkable acoustics. Designed to seat 5200 people, the Center is slightly larger than the Music Shed at Tanglewood, but it has a surprisingly intimate feeling to it, as one traverses the grounds and descends the grassy slope, where the picnicking crowd can sit and hear the music very well—without amplification, as far as I could see or hear. It is only when one actually enters the hall and sees the orchestra dwarfed in the two-story space that one realizes just how vast it is. The stage is deep, and that has its own effect on the sound, making for a sense of spaciousness and, well, depth, which creates a rich semi-independent back-space for the winds, brass, and percussion. This interacts most impressively with the forward wave of the strings. In general the sound is bright and clear on the top without ever seeming harsh or wiry. On the other hand, the sound of the lower strings is not especially open. The violas, cellos, and double-basses blend naturally, which is a virtue for many conductors, while others must make an effort to bring out details in those sections—or that was my impression. Stéphane Denève seemed entirely comfortable with the sound, as this resourceful and technically masterful conductor must be in a variety of acoustics.

The Philadelphia Orchestra, recently called the “sexiest” of the great American orchestras by **Steven Kruger in his review** of their appearance at Davies Hall in San Francisco, is great in many other ways as well. When I lived in New York City in the 1990's, after a steady diet of Cleveland, the New York Philharmonic, and—more distantly at that time—Boston, I was always seduced by the musicality of the Philadelphians' playing in all sections and the beauty of their phrasing and sound at Carnegie. I once made the pilgrimage down to hear Sawallisch conduct Beethoven's Ninth at the Pennsylvania Academy of Music, where the Orchestra should clearly have stayed. The Academy has the shorter reverberation time of an opera house, but the resulting dryness, I found, was amply compensated by the fine balance of the sound from top to bottom. One musical legend claims that Stokowski devised the common American arrangement of placing the second violins at the left, behind the first violins, in order to enrich the Philadelphia strings in the Academy of Music. At SPAC, with the same arrangement, the orchestra sounded as wonderful as ever.

The Tchaikovsky concerto opened the program—not one of his better compositions, and with two piano concerti by Mozart, one by Beethoven, and Tchaikovsky's great Fifth and Sixth Symphonies fresh in my memory, this was more apparent than ever. Moreover, Garrick Ohlsson, who is renowned for his musical integrity, is not the man to tart the concerto up with gratuitously sensual pianism or forced technical fireworks—although Richter and Van Cliburn could bring it off and still hold their heads high. Ohlsson played it with commitment and precision (with only one false start or memory lapse as an exception), but his straightforward approach was not about to hide anything. M. Denève seemed entirely in sympathy with him, and, as a team, they seemed almost to read each other's minds. Although the execution could not have been finer, the problems of structure and proportion in the first movement were as apparent as ever. Tchaikovsky's orchestral writing is really quite dull in this movement. He begins to make up for it in his far more interesting slow movement, in which the piano dialogues very prettily with solo cello, flute, and oboe in a chamber music relationship. This was exquisitely phrased by Mr. Ohlsson and the Philadelphia soloists and showed everyone's musicianship at its best. In the final movement Tchaikovsky gets us to the desired rousing conclusion efficiently enough. Denève steadily followed the structure of the succeeding sections with due attention to their contrasting moods, keys, and textures. He saw his chance to work up some special fire in the manic *ff* tutti with its repeated phrase just before no. 40 and its return in the final section—ample proof that there was nothing tepid in his approach to the old blockbuster.

I happened to leave for the break without waiting for an unexpected encore, a Rachmaninoff

Prelude nobly played by Mr. Ohlsson. By that time I was on the path behind the slope, and I was amazed and delighted that I could hear the solo piano perfectly, with no sign of amplification.

There followed a rich, flowing reading of Rachmaninoff's Second Symphony. The Philadelphians virtually own this repertoire, not only because of the connection of the composer himself with the orchestra, but because Stokowski, Ormandy and Dutoit have been such great exponents of his music. The Second Symphony is one of his greatest works, organically written, in spite of its apparent meanderings. (It is hard to believe that it was once common to play it with substantial cuts.) A sympathetic performance will show an understanding of how it fits and flows together, and Denève's was one of the best in this respect and in others. The linear flow of tension and relaxation was never broken. Without pushing the tempi unduly, Denève kept it moving, while giving his solo players plenty of room for expression, as well as himself, in this affecting, passionate performance. A few months ago I heard a fascinating analytical performance by the BSO in Boston under Jaap van Zweden. This was satisfying and instructive in its own way, but not as idiomatic as Stéphane Denève's, with the rich string sound Philadelphia is famous for, powerful brass, and elegant wind sonorities—and just the right amount of inner detail. The orchestra played with concentration and energy, and he made the audience hang on every phrase, if the rapt silence in the hall was any indicator. Steven Kruger and I agree that Denève's conducting reminds us of Charles Munch, and that he would be an excellent catch for the BSO in their search for a music director. Underneath his charm and passion Denève is a serious craftsman as a conductor. Boston would not suffer for a return to French musicianship of this high order.

Concerning Stéphane Denève, I should add that two unexpected events gave him an opportunity to speak to the audience. First he wanted to express his amusement at how the piano cover was prematurely raised, inspiring Garrick Ohlsson to volunteer to play the opening "Star-Spangled Banner" with the orchestra—which he did with great spirit. Secondly, there was a power outage, leaving orchestra and audience in the darkness for a minute or two before the generator cut in. Here Denève turned to the audience and explained that the musicians play from the heart but not by heart, showing a nice Gallic sense of word-play in English.

SPAC also provides close-ups of the orchestra on two enormous video screens. Apparently some musicians ask to have them turned off, and the management will oblige. I was very happy to observe the maestro's stick technique and gesture on them. Everything is to the point, and he constantly engages the musicians through eye-contact. Still, on the whole, the screens are a distraction. Beyond Maestro Denève's technique all I learned was that some of the Philadelphia rank and file play with exceptional concentration and enthusiasm, and that Philadelphia hairdressers and barbers are vastly inferior to their colleagues in Boston and New York. What a contrast to the magnificence of Denève's flaming red mane! That was the only fault I could find with this glorious ensemble. It wouldn't hurt if the spiffed themselves up a bit, even in summer.

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