

Tanglewood on Parade: Celebrations under moonlight

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LENOX -- In keeping with the summer festival's 75th anniversary season, the annual Tanglewood on Parade gala concert seemed especially celebratory under a moonlit sky on Tuesday night.

Credit the presence of four eminent, familiar conductors as well as a dynamic, relative newcomer on the podium as well as a choice of repertoire designed to showcase the Tanglewood Music Center's youthful players -- less than two weeks away from disbanding after the Festival of Contemporary Music and an Aug. 19 Shed matinee -- and the Boston Symphony, still up to a year away from a new music director but at the top of its game nevertheless.

In many respects, the 40-year-old French conductor Stéphane Denève's lithe, sinuous interpretation of Stravinsky's 1919 suite from his ballet "The Firebird" was the high flyer of the evening. A brawny presence on the podium, prone to sweeping and swooping gestures, he brought out the sometimes glossed-over inner lines of the soothing lullaby and the gentle Princesses' round dance.

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No surprise that the BSO's winds, brass and expanded percussion section (adding tambourines, xylophone, triangle, tubular bells, harp and piano to bass drum and timpani) responded with high-gloss polish and precision.

Denève is a rapidly rising leader worth close attention -- he presides over a major BSO program Saturday evening with the world premiere of Andre Previn's "Music for Boston," commissioned by the orchestra, Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 and Elgar's Cello Concerto performed by Yo-Yo Ma.

A pair of Tanglewood Music Center alumni (class of '52) bookended the evening. Christoph von Dohnányi, who has led some of the season's most authoritative performances, inspired the youthful TMC players in the opener, a reading of Beethoven's "Egmont" Overture that was exquisitely shaped, keenly balanced and properly propulsive. With his well-coiffed white mane and imposing yet affable demeanor on the podium, von Dohnányi, nearly 83, is among the small stable of stalwart maestros who inspire the BSO during its time of transition.

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Before the inevitable finale (skipped only once in 66 years of "Parade" with predictable pushback from disappointed patrons), Keith Lockhart led the Boston Pops in two movements of Ferde Grofé's picturesque and now rarely-performed 1931 "Grand Canyon Suite," once a staple of lighter-fare programming.

"Sunrise" soared from a hushed opening to a blazing sonority while "On the Trail" showcased Pops concertmaster Tamara Smirnova's jocular, virtuosic portrayal of a braying, recalcitrant donkey before the imaginative, clip-clopping trek begins into the depths of the national landmark.

After a section of his memorable score for "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," John Williams also led the Pops in the playful, fanciful "Duel" and "Sea Battle" from last year's "The Adventures of Tintin." The composer's 38-year collaboration with director and close friend Steven Spielberg bears more fruit with "Lincoln" due for release in mid-November and "Indiana Jones 5" recently announced as their next project. Williams, who turned 80 on Feb. 8, gets the full-dress Tanglewood birthday-gala treatment on Aug. 18.

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These days, Loren Maazel, the other '52 TMC alum, finds it necessary to put his personal, often idiosyncratic stamp on everything he conducts. So it was with Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture, with the combined BSO and TMC forces emitting a mighty blast from the stage, well-matched by precisely coordinated cannon fire from the lawn.

There were several exposed rough patches in the strings and the brass, and Maazel robbed the potboiler of some of its heat, forward momentum and visceral thrills because of dragging tempos and a stately, ceremonial treatment of a score that only needs to be played as written to make its desired effect. But the post-concert, vibrantly colorful display over Stockbridge Bowl compensated for some of the musical fireworks that were missing on stage.