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Stéphane Denève leads Phila. Orchestra, from Debussy to Gershwin

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Had most guest conductors foreseen this Thanksgiving would arrive in the wake of a hurricane, a contentious election, and the orchestra's bankruptcy, the Philadelphia Orchestra's annual holiday weekend concerts would have been more solemn, maybe with Richard Strauss' *Death and Transfiguration*.

As it was, the ebullient Stéphane Denève turned out to be what was needed at the Kimmel Center concerts (I heard Friday's), in a medium-to-lightweight program probably devised a year ago that showed the orchestra at its luminous best: Debussy's *Images*, followed by the vernacular-fueled high spirits of Poulenc's *Les Biches* and Gershwin's *An American in Paris*.

Each piece was given its own sound envelope. Denève tapped into the minute details of Debussy's sprawling orchestral descriptions of Spain, Scotland, etc., giving the music an almost 3D physicality, though not with the usual soft-focus Impressionist lens. Strings had a raw edge; this music isn't merely pretty.

Originally commissioned by Ballets Russes, *Les Biches* appeared in a concert suite without its original choral movements. Strings had the dry, urbane elegance of the 1950s French orchestras Poulenc knew well.

The music gleefully switched channels from Baroque dance to jazz to German cabaret to Stravinsky's *Pulcinella*, leaving the orchestra a bit breathless. But how often is Poulenc played by such a high-charisma ensemble?

An American in Paris is as close as Gershwin came to writing a four-movement symphony, though he was having too good a time to do anything more than wave hello to more strict classical music forms.

Denève's relaxed opening tempo kept the piece from climaxing too soon, but he also supplied the loose-limbed funkiness that later passages needed. His great revelation is that the music isn't very French. Aside from using local taxi horns, Gershwin's musical street traffic was just a tad less rhythmic in Paris than the cityscapes portrayed in *Delicious*, the 1931 New York film he scored.

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