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Entertainment / Music

Toronto Symphony fantastique in French program — Review

With the right conductor, the Toronto Symphony Orchestra is as good as the world's best orchestras, proving it Wednesday night with an all-French program at Roy Thomson Hall.

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Stéphane Denève conducted an all-French program with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra at Roy Thomson Hall on Thursday night.

By: **John Terauds** Freelance Entertainment writer, Published on Wed May 01 2013

Toronto Symphony Orchestra

With guest conductor Stéphane Denève. Repeats Thu. & Sat. Roy Thomson Hall, 60 Simcoe St. 416-593-4828 (tso.ca)

There are still many doubters who have not heard the Toronto Symphony Orchestra recently. They need to know in no uncertain terms that, with the right conductor, this band is as good as the world's best orchestras.

They handed an enraptured audience the proof at Roy Thomson Hall on Wednesday night with the help of guest French conductor Stéphane Denève.

The maestro turned the hall into a petit Paris with an all-French program that put the spotlight on the orchestra's technical precision, impeccable co-ordination and unerring balance.

Best of all, Denève managed to saturate the already colourful and theatrical music with even more colour and imbue it with a master storyteller's sense of spontaneity.

The magic started with Claude Debussy's famous Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune, from 1894, which wafted by in a breath of fairy-tale languor.

That particular spell gave way to Francis Poulenc's riotously varied Concerto for Two Pianos, which dates from 1931. It is part music hall, part exploration of something exotically Asian and all show, challenging the two pianists in all sorts of ways.

Two French pianists, Eric Le Sage and Frank Braley, made impressive debuts with the orchestra as they negotiated the concerto with amazing aplomb.

Then came the pièce de résistance, Hector Berlioz's 1830 masterpiece, the Symphonie Fantastique, which lived up to its title.

This is one of those showpieces that really tests the mettle of both conductor and orchestra. It's a five-movement crazy quilt that requires a powerful vision to keep a coherent story running from beginning to end.

But that's the bigger picture. Denève also had a lot of micro-managing to do, through Berlioz's ever-shifting dynamics and tempos.

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In a mark of a great conductor, he had an iron grip on both aspects of this piece. The biggest revelation of all was how Denève managed to make the work sound fresh and in the moment. Throughout, he emphasized much detail in an overwrought score without ever losing momentum or musical meaning.

It's hard to imagine hearing this piece, or any of the others on this program, played any better. It would be a shame to waste the opportunity.

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