



## Cleveland Orchestra guests prove to be brilliant 'French Connections' (review)

stephane\_Deneve Credit Drew Farrell .JPG

Conductor Stephane Deneve led the Cleveland Orchestra Saturday in a dashing French program at Blossom Music Center. *(Drew Farrell)*

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The French language isn't all Saturday's guests of the Cleveland Orchestra spoke. They also spoke French *music*, fluently.

Aptly labeled "French Connections" by the program's title, conductor Stéphane Denève and pianist Cédric Tiberghien treated Blossom Music Center to expert, scintillating performances of works by four French masters. That the crowd was small was no reflection of the concert's considerable value.

Tiberghien, for his part, made an astounding Cleveland debut. With an electrifying performance of Saint-Saens' Piano Concerto No. 2, the up-and-coming artist easily moved listeners on a chilly evening to drop their blankets and spring to their feet. He then rewarded them with an elaborate encore: Ravel's "Alborada del gracioso."

An apparent natural with Saint-Saens, Tiberghien had a lock on all the score's most fetching traits, channeling both its innocence and its volatility. To the work's playful skittishness, the pianist brought a fantastically light, spidery touch, and where the music turned dark and thunderous, Tiberghien too morphed into a brooding, rapturous poet.

Denève, meanwhile, made an excellent partner, punctuating Tiberghien's statements in the opening Andante with weighty, ominous marks. Elsewhere, by contrast, he simply supported his colleague, mimicking the soloist's weightlessness and whipping up a tempest in the Presto to augment the pianist's already ardent hailstorm.

Debussy's "La Mer" afforded even greater insight into Denève's artistry. That the conductor, former music director of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, recorded the work recently, along with the rest of Debussy's orchestral music, was abundantly clear from the insightful, engaging performance he elicited.

Much as Tiberghien relished his score's unpredictability, Denève immersed himself in Debussy's restless, ever-changing music. Certain elements were consistent: suavity, taut dynamics, exceptional refinement. But whether the musical currents ran strongly or gently, whether the waves were rollers or whitecaps, were moment-by-moment decisions.

If anything, the conductor might have used a looser, more lyrical hand, so as to inject a little stability. But about such a bustling, evocative reading, there can be few serious complaints.

Animation also was the calling-card of Denève's account of Berlioz's Overture to "Les Francs-juges." The opera itself never saw the light of day, but the Overture on Saturday received a crackling, dramatic performance marked by precipitous shifts in dynamics and resplendent proclamations by the trombones.

No French program would be complete without Ravel, and Saturday's was delightfully complete with "La Valse." Rounded out by the Kent/Blossom Chamber Orchestra, the ensemble under Denève literally danced the night away, sending off the crowd with a sumptuous performance that concluded in exactly the right spot: one step away from over the top.

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