

Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra sheds light on Debussy's modernist colors

By Andrew L. Pincus, Special to the Eagle Berkshire Eagle

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LENOX -- This is the centenary of Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" premiere and its famous riot in Paris, but there is another Diaghilev ballet of the exact same vintage that sounds just as revolutionary today, though nowhere nearly as familiar.

The Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra performed it Monday night: Debussy's "Jeux."

The two works achieve their effects by opposite attacks on audience expectations. Stravinsky flings barbarism in your face. Debussy gives you the heebie-jeebies. No wonder "Jeux" is so seldom played.

"Jeux" was one of four works on an all-Debussy program presided over by French conductor Stephane Denève. In a French-accented talk to the audience, he described the student orchestra as a "virtuoso" aggregation. That it was, though the description would come as no surprise to anyone who heard it in Shostakovich's Symphony No. 11 a week before.

Still, the clarity and confidence of the playing came as a revelation in this music. The performances not only wandered the mysterious ways of "Jeux" but also brought out the sheer originality and even idiosyncrasy of "La Mer," a work often taken for granted by orchestras and audiences alike.

The podium duties were divided between Denève and two student conductors who benefited from his coaching. The orchestra was seated in period style, with the violin sections divided.

Denève took "Jeux" and "La Mer." Alexandre Bloch, who is also French, led "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Fawn." Stilian Kirov of Bulgaria did "Dances Sacred and Profane." Two outstanding student soloists were featured: flutist Matthew Roitstein in "fawn" and harpist Annabelle Taubl in "dances."

But back to "Jeux."

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Premiered by Diaghilev in Paris just two weeks before Stravinsky's "Rite," Debussy's "games" are based on a scenario (as the program notes handily put it) "concerning tennis and a moonlit menage a trois." Strange harmonies, slippery rhythms and indefinable hints set up a chain of unsettling events. "Jeux" and "La Mer" also show the influence of Wagner in their use of orchestral color and, in "La Mer," heaving swells of sound.

With Denève's French sensibility and generous spirit toward his players, "La Mer" emerged not as misty washes and masses of sound, but as a work of modernist daring. So the instrumental detail stood out instead of blending into an impressionist haze? So some moments sounded like Mahler run off the tracks?

So what? This was "La Mer" not just as tone painting, but as symphony.

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"Fawn" and "dances," deliciously played, sounded at once voluptuous and chaste in their sensuous appeal. Heard close-up and vivid in Ozawa Hall, both also revealed a modernist origin.

Perhaps it was "fawn," with its woodland setting, that ushered in rain that fell all through the evening, scattering part of a good-sized lawn audience. Though Denève didn't mention Andris Nelsons, word of the Boston Symphony director-designate's injury and not yet announced cancellation spread through the audience.