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IT'S THE WEEKEND

MUSIC REVIEW : Orchestra thrills crowd at SPAC season premiere

BY GERALDINE FREEDMAN For The Daily Gazette

SARATOGA SPRINGS — After a rousing "Star-Spangled Banner," the Philadelphia Orchestra under conductor Stéphane Denève opened its 48th season Wednesday night at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center.

The orchestra's breadth and depth of lush sound is one of the most famous in the music world, and throughout the evening's interesting and varied program, the musicians showed it off.

They were in top form. The concert opened with Sibelius' "Lemminkäinen's Return" from a suite known as "The Four Legends from the Kalevala" (1895). It was a vigorous, busy, multi-metered and very fast piece, full of color and a lot of work for the violins.

Denève conducted with his customary physically emotive style. The large crowd hooted its delight.

The star for the evening was violinist Gil Shaham, who was in exceptional form for Sibelius' Violin Concerto in D minor (1904).

The three movement work was gorgeously romantic, with numerous cadenzas and several sections in which the violinist had a lot to do while the orchestra held a chord or two. Lines soared, double stops were frequent and for the most part, it was non-stop playing.

Shaham's warm tone infused the lyricism even as his superior rhythmic clarity gave a tautness and brilliance to his technically flawless workouts. He paced his cadenzas with care and gave all of his phrases an inspired and musical sensitivity. The orchestra provided strong and balanced support, and Shaham seemed especially pleased with the result.

As a sweet aside: Before the piece began, the orchestra quietly waited while everyone, including the audience, could hear Shaham backstage tuning up. Suddenly, he appeared, all smiles. During the performance, he also often smiled. The crowd responded with a standing ovation and cheers and gave him many curtain calls.

Dvorak's Symphony No. 8 in G Major (1889) has four movements of marvelous lyricism infused with Czech folk songs and rhythms. Dvorak's signature way with harmony and instrumental color were inspired.

The flute, especially, is singled out with many solos. Principal flutist Jeffrey Khaner played them all with an enthusiastic eloquence.

Denève set tempos with great momentum and drama, which brought an expansiveness and lilt to the countless melodies. He also capitalized on the orchestra's ability to go from feathery delicacy to flexing its muscles at full throttle. Dynamic levels were large and subtle, and he didn't hesitate to push and pull at phrases.

Although everything sounded exceptional, the swirling dance of the third movement and the grand splash of the finale were pretty terrific.

Tonight's program commemorates 150 years of racing at Saratoga with a world premiere and Keith Lockhart at the helm.