

Tanglewood: Boston Symphony delivers powerful performances

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

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LENOX -- Revolution was in the air at Tanglewood.

The Boston Symphony Orchestra revisited Diaghilev's Paris over the weekend with back-to-back performances of two of his path-breaking ballet scores: Ravel's "Daphnis and Chloe" and Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring." With Charles Dutoit on the podium, the orchestra sounded right at home in the adventure, delivering two visceral, vividly detailed performances.

The ostensible occasion for the programming was the 100th anniversary of the riot-battered premiere of "The Rite." But "Daphnis" was premiered only a year earlier, and just two weeks ago the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra performed two other Diaghilev scores, Debussy's "Afternoon of a Faun" and "Jeux" -- the latter premiered almost simultaneously with "The Rite."

If not quite a Diaghilev retrospective, it added up to a healthy survey.

For good measure, each BSO offering was preceded by a short piece by the same composer: Ravel's "Pavane for a Dead Princess" and Stravinsky's "Fireworks" (the title tells it all). "Fireworks" actually introduced Diaghilev to Stravinsky's music.

Dutoit knows this repertoire about as well as anyone on the planet. Sunday, in Stravinsky's epic evocation of primitivism in his native Russia, the Swiss conductor sent waves of raw violence cascading out into the Shed. The effect was all the greater for the calm he brought to the quiet, ceremonial passages. The BSO's playing was spectacular -- perhaps most of all in the relentlessly pounding timpani.

On Saturday night, "Daphnis" was shocking and modern in a different way. There was plenty of heaving, panting ecstasy in the Tanglewood Festival Chorus' singing of its wordless part. But instead of the customary plush, impressionistic sound, Dutoit kept the hourlong score, which has its longueurs, taut and clearly characterized. Many unusual colors and effects emerged from Ravel's large orchestra. Opu-lence in the dawn scene counterbalanced the sheer nastiness of the pirates' dances.

Each program featured a celebrity soloist.

Before a lawn-filling crowd Sunday, Yo-Yo Ma brought a luxurious freedom and -- by turns -- fiery and soulful intensity to Dvorak's Cello Concerto. He has played this richly melodic work many times, but probably never before with such beauty of tone and phrasing.

On Saturday, Lang Lang, the fleet-fingered wunderkind of a decade ago, put himself on an opposite course in Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 1. He slowed it to a crawl and softened the youthful Beethoven's declaration to the world that he had arrived and it had better watch out. Amid a wild ovation, the pianist was accorded a solo encore, the Paganini-Liszt "La Campanella."

Friday night's program opened with BSO violist Cathy Basrak, in a talk from the stage, asking the audience's indulgence for out-of-tune playing caused by the chilly, rain-dampened air. Indeed, the playing went sour in the first piece, Strauss' "Death and Transfiguration." What followed needed no apologies.

French conductor Stephane Deneve, again proving himself a good match with the BSO, built the eclectic program around the idea of transcendence over death. Nevertheless, the two subsequent pieces, Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 (with its suggestion of Orpheus in the underworld) and Poulenc's Stabat Mater, were notable more for satisfactions of performance than programmatic intent.

As soloist, German pianist Lars Vogt offered an unusually insightful, inward look into the Beethoven concerto. The effect might have been what Lang Lang was after.

Though Vogt's playing had moments of brilliance, especially in the finale, it was broadly paced and free of pumped-up drama; the long first-movement cadenza ranged far and wide across many regions. From the bench in the finale, Vogt occasionally turned to the orchestra, urging it onward to greater heights.

The Poulenc work, never before heard at Tanglewood, is cousin to his more familiar Gloria. Deneve knows the work inside and out, having recorded it. The festival chorus and soprano Lucy Crowe joined him and the BSO in an austerely beautiful portrayal of the grieving mother at the cross.