

## Music review: Denève leads SLSO in a fine and varied program

16 HOURS AGO • BY SARAH BRYAN MILLER SBMILLER@POST-DISPATCH.COM 314-340-8249

In the decade since he made his debut with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, conductor Stéphane Denève has gone from strength to strength, adding to his interpretive abilities and building understandings with the players that deepen the effects of their joint music-making.

While he can be distracting to watch at times, with his constantly roiling mop of long red curls (if he let it grow just a little more, he could be Princess Merida's tall French cousin in a "Brave" sequel), the music he makes with the SLSO is consistently riveting.

For the second SLSO subscription week this season, Denève led an interesting and varied program: a 2011 work by a now-29-year-old composer (Patrick Harlin, "Rapture"), a classic Romantic concerto (Ludwig van Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor) and a masterpiece of the turn of the 20th century (Richard Strauss, "Ein Heldenleben").

On Friday morning he took the microphone as the concert began, to introduce "Rapture" as "extremely American, with its groovy rhythms." Harlin, a doctoral candidate in composition at the University of Michigan, introduced the work at the Mizzou New Music Festival International Composers Festival last year.

Eight minutes long, "Rapture" has minimalist roots, jazzy elements and strong hints of the "Dies irae." It grows from simplicity into complexity, with a boffo finish, and it got a smart performance from all concerned: groovy indeed. The composer was present, and seemed overwhelmed by his reception.

Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3 is a well-known quantity, but, in the right hands, a riveting one. German pianist Lars Vogt gave it an intense, effective reading both technically and interpretively, switching gears from the storms of the first movement to the delicate dreaminess of the second, then taking a breath and moving seamlessly into the the sun-dappled cheeriness of the third.

Denève and Vogt connected well with each other and with the orchestra. The tempos were spot on throughout, making for a satisfying reading.

Strauss' "Ein Heldenleben (A Hero's Life)" made for a full stage in the second half, with a total of nine French horn players stretched in a row across the back of the stage.

The hero in question is the composer himself, and he paints an epic portrait of his struggles. Strauss is a master of orchestral colors, and that makes for a formidable, complex score; Denève brought it all together, from the tone poem's quiet, lyrical moments to the big thrilling sections near the end.

If this wasn't quite a perfect rendition, it came close. Concertmaster David Halen provided sweet singing on his violin in the "role" of the hero's beloved.

Some of the new members of the orchestra are starting to make an audible mark.

Principal timpani Shannon Wood played all three pieces, working with taut effectiveness throughout. Piccolo Ann Choomack gave a stylish, accurate account; principal trumpet Karin Bliznik is already shaping the section's sound.

### **Stéphane Denève, Lars Vogt and the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra**

**When** • 8 p.m. Saturday

**Where** • Powell Symphony Hall, 718 North Grand Boulevard

**How much** • \$30 to \$108

**More info** • [stlsymphony.org](http://stlsymphony.org) or 314-534-1700

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