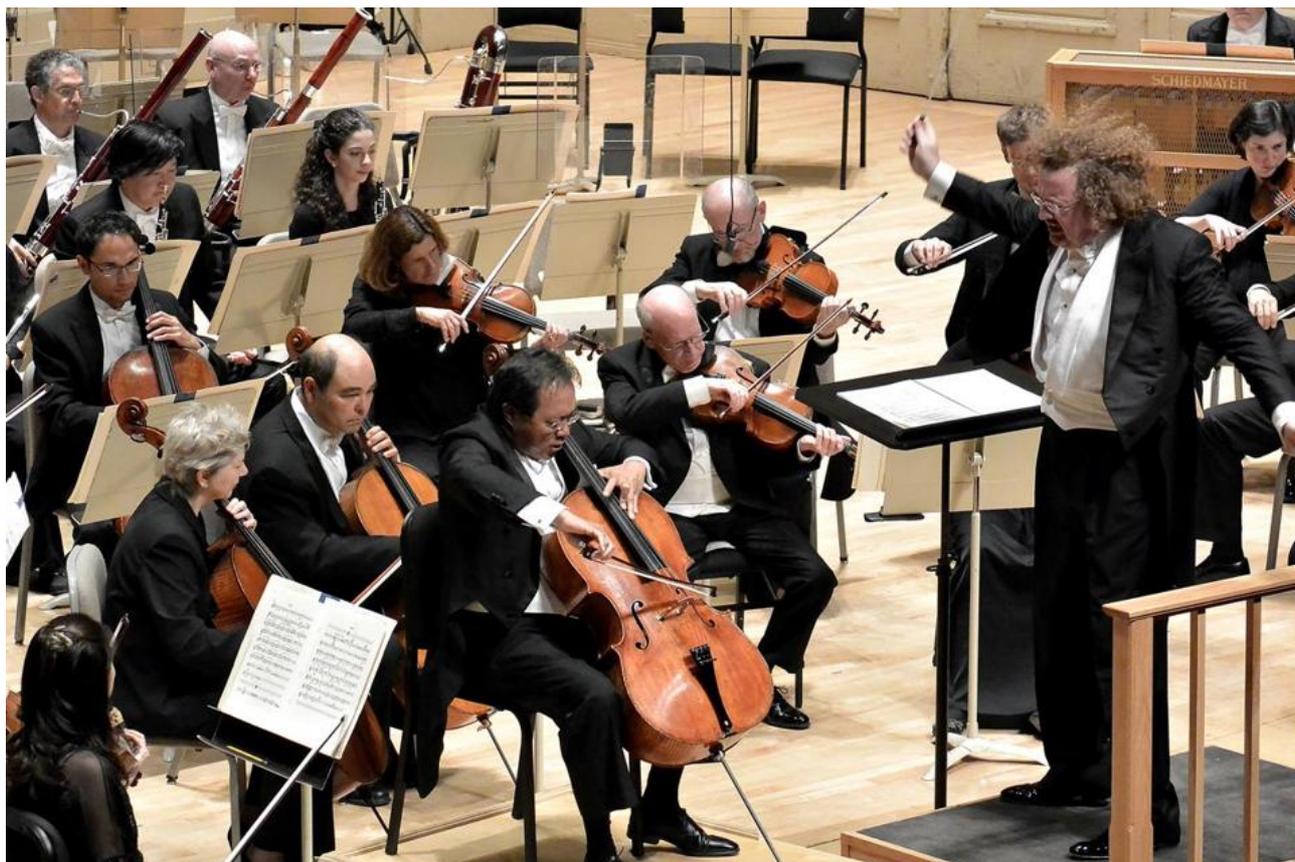


MUSIC REVIEW

A surrealistic, playful Prokofiev, reprised 87 years later at BSO

By Jeremy Eichler | GLOBE STAFF OCTOBER 04, 2013

STU ROSNER FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Conductor Stéphane Denève and Yo-Yo Ma performed Shostakovich's Cello Concerto No. 1 with the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

In his recent visits to the BSO podium, the energetic French conductor Stéphane Denève has been peppering his programs with overlooked works by familiar composers. This summer he led the Tanglewood premiere of Poulenc's "Stabat Mater," and Thursday night he conducted the BSO in the suite from Prokofiev's surrealist fairy-tale opera "Love for Three Oranges."

The BSO under Koussevitzky actually gave the suite its American premiere in 1926, and a Globe review described the music's chilly reception. Apparently it never got a second chance as the orchestra did not reprise the suite in its entirety until, well, Thursday night.

That's an amazing amount of time given the resourcefulness of this score, full of music by turns tart, comic, and sharply ironic. Denève whipped up the orchestra into a controlled roar and brought out some of the playfully garish coloration in the first two movements. The third movement is a march that has detached itself from the opera altogether after becoming a hugely popular encore. You will probably recognize, even if you think you won't.

Prokofiev died in 1953 on the very same day as Stalin. Memory of the dictator still seemed to haunt Shostakovich six years later when that composer sat down to write his harrowing Cello Concerto No. 1, into which he embedded a satirical reference to Stalin's favorite folk song.

Yo-Yo Ma was on hand Thursday to give the Shostakovich concerto a performance of fierce lyricism and undiluted intensity, spinning out the first movement in a single long expressive arc. Some of the woodwind playing in the finale could have used more sardonic bite, but the elegiac slow movement came off masterfully. Ma's tone was hooded, dark, matte. Denève managed the crucial orchestral entrances with abundant care, Richard Sebring offered artful horn solos, and the duo scored for cello harmonics and celesta (Vytas Baksys) produced the requisite shiver.

After intermission, Denève and the orchestra gave a rousing and robust performance of Strauss's tone poem "Ein Heldenleben." The conductor led with enough vigor to send his baton flying into the first row at one point, but it was quickly returned. Among the many players given special recognition, concertmaster Malcolm Lowe deservedly received the biggest cheers. Lowe was back after a long medical leave, playing with tonal richness and an understated command of style.

Jeremy Eichler can be reached at jeichler@globe.com