

Deneve's return to CSO marked by pretty fantastic Berlioz



French conductor Stéphane Deneve leading the Boston Symphony Orchestra at Carnegie Hall. (Hiroyuki Ito/ Getty Images / March 9, 2012)

John von Rhein

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The Chicago Symphony Orchestra is relying on a handful of familiar guest conductors to take charge of subscription concerts through the end of the calendar year. None of these returnees is more welcome than Stéphane Deneve, who is making his first podium appearances this weekend at Symphony Center since his memorable CSO debut in 2011.

The Frenchman, chief conductor of the Stuttgart Radio Symphony Orchestra and active just about elsewhere else, is an energetic figure on the platform. Fortunately he employs this energy to illuminate the inner and outer life of the music rather than himself. His beat is clear, his keen ear misses nothing, and his articulate left hand signals instrumental details other conductors tend to gloss over.

He had the CSO musicians sounding at the top of their game on Thursday night, or at least pretty close to it, given the absence of several players in key woodwind chairs.

Deneve's program took as its centerpiece that most revolutionary of French Romantic masterpieces, Berlioz's "Symphonie Fantastique," a masterpiece that clearly speaks to his temperament and his ability to get an orchestra to live on the knife-edge right along with him. By happy coincidence, Thursday's performance took place on the exact date of the work's premiere 183 years before in Paris.

Berlioz invented an utterly new kind of music here, and Deneve's reading brought our modern ears close to what the Parisian public of 1830 found so startling and, yes, crazy, about that music. Although the conductor didn't observe repeats or use "historical" instruments, he did employ low-pitched bells in the "Witches' Sabbath," and his reseating of the orchestra according to the classical seating plan paid dividends in textural clarity.

Deneve applied adrenalin where Berlioz wanted it to be applied. If the sound he drew from the orchestra lacked the refinement of Riccardo Muti's "Fantastique" here in 2010, it was

undeniably robust and its colors were vividly drawn. The second movement, "A Ball," waltzed with an ingratiating lilt, its four harps answering each other in pairs stationed at opposite ends of the stage. Scott Hostetler's English horn and Lora Schaefer's offstage oboe blended nicely in a sensitive "Scene in the Country" marred, to an extent, by faulty intonation in the flutes.

The lower brasses brought a saturnine sonic depth to the "March to the Scaffold," which Deneve treated like an actual march, rather than like a polka, as Pierre Boulez once wittily observed about how some conductors play the fourth movement. The final section fairly crackled with demonic color and energy, from which Gregory Smith's E flat clarinet emerged like a holdover from Halloween.

I am looking forward to hearing the weekend "Beyond the Score" presentation CSO creative director Gerard McBurney has built around the Berlioz.

Audience attention was primed by a first half that began with a full-blooded reading of Weber's rarely-heard "Ruler of the Spirits" Overture, never before heard on the subscription series; and closed with an impeccably played account of the Shostakovich First Violin Concerto by the remarkable James Ehnes.

The Manitoba-born, Florida-based Ehnes is an artist I've long admired and it was easy to understand why the audience, orchestra and Deneve himself applauded his Shostakovich so heartily: You won't hear this music played more skillfully than here. The soloist drew you into this 1948 masterwork with the silken tone and poised elegance he brought to the opening Nocturne, and he had the crowd jumping to its feet following the giddy Burlesque finale, which he took at a death-defying clip without missing a note.

Dazzling violin playing, to be sure. But did it fully plumb the emotional depths of this music? I wasn't so sure. Other fiddlers – most memorably, Maxim Vengerov, with Mstislav Rostropovich conducting, at the CSO's Shostakovich Festival here in 1999 – gave us much more of the music's gravity, poignancy and inwardness than I detected in Ehnes' playing, fine though it was. Deneve was closer to the mark with his biting attacks and rapt, withdrawn strings in the brooding Passacaglia.

Sounding not the least bit spent, Ehnes also brought along an encore, the Largo from J.S. Bach's solo Violin Sonata No. 3 (BWV 1005). It came across as a gentle sigh after the rambunctious gallop of Shostakovich's finale.

The program will be repeated at 8 p.m. Saturday and 7:30 p.m. Tuesday. The Tuesday concert will substitute Shostakovich's Cello Concerto No. 1 for the Violin Concerto, and Gabriel Cabezas will be the soloist; \$32-\$241. "Symphonie Fantastique" is the subject of the season's first "Beyond the Score" presentation, which will be given a second time at 3 p.m. Sunday; \$24-\$251. Symphony Center, 220 S. Michigan Ave.; 312-294-3000, cso.org.

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