



Denève Conducts a Choreographic Concert with the Philadelphia Orchestra

One of Stéphane Denève's greatest strengths as a conductor is his astute dramatic sensibility. Among his many accomplishments, Denève has led performances at the world's most prestigious opera houses. Though many conductors are not strangers to the opera house, Denève brings an undeniably operatic drama to works that he conducts in the symphony hall. He began his two-week residency with the Philadelphia Orchestra with a rousing concert of Stravinsky and Prokofiev. Also on the program, the Philadelphia Dance Company joined the Orchestra for a choreographed performance of Poulenc's *Aubade*.

The program featured suites of dance music extracted from Prokofiev's *Cinderella* and Stravinsky's *The Firebird*. Though no dancers were present on stage during these pieces, Denève's interpretations of the music are so vivid that the scenarios of the original ballets are easy to stage in your mind's eye. Musically, the most rewarding performance was the *Cinderella* suite. The movements are not arranged chronologically as they occur in the original scenario, and of this, I was initially very skeptical. However, it worked surprisingly

well both musically and dramatically.

“Cinderella’s Departure for the Ball,” for example, originally heard in Act I, was placed at the very end of the suite. But, this ended up having a rather rewarding effect. The bell representing the clock that strikes midnight gleamed in the back of the orchestra throughout the entire performance, tantalizing the audience like a musical Chekhov’s gun. When the bell finally sounded, along with the woodblocks representing the horses that whisk Cinderella away, it was all the more dramatic.

During *Cinderella*, the audience was vocally appreciative of the energy and enthusiasm that Denève gave the orchestra. One listener, seated in the upper balconies, enthusiastically exclaimed, “Yes!” upon the conclusion of the “Shawl Dance,” and the rest of the audience chuckled in agreement.



Stéphane Denève

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The Firebird was nearly as rewarding as *Cinderella*, the incredibly theatrical shift between “The Princesses’ Round Dance” and “Infernal Dance of King Kastchei” caused the entire auditorium to jump back in their seats, mumbling in surprise at their own fright.

This is what going to the symphony *should* be like. Hearing a live orchestra has the potential to illicit visceral reactions, to make your hair stand on end, to give you goose bumps, to make you teary-eyed. Based upon the roaring ovation that Denève received at the end of *The Firebird*, which concluded the entire program, Philadelphia seems to know how lucky it is to have him, even if only for a couple of weeks.

In the first half of the program, the orchestra performed Stravinsky’s *Dumbarton Oaks* and Poulenc’s *Aubade*. Because these scores only call for a chamber ensemble, there were moments when the music could not be fully appreciated, since some of the sound was lost in a hall designed to hold over 2,000. Further compounding acoustic issues was a chorus of constant coughing and the tremolo of rustling program books.

Luckily in the case of *Aubade*, the story about Diana and her nymphs was choreographed. Philadelphia Dance Company choreographer Tommie-Waheed Evans set the piece for five female dancers, making surprisingly smart use of his limited space on stage. The most memorable moment of the dance was during the Presto: “Diana Dressing”, the fastest movement in the work. Courtney Robinson and Lauren Putty White pranced playfully, occasionally incorporating choreographic gestures that harkened back to the roaring 20s when *Aubade* was composed. Robinson and Putty were nymphs turned flirtatious flappers.

As the program was titled “*Cinderella and The Firebird*”, *Aubade* was somewhat overshadowed by them. Still, the success of this short performance with the Philadelphia Dance Company and the Philadelphia Orchestra bodes well for

possible collaborations in the future, perhaps even programs in which dance is featured more prominently.

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