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Review: Gil Shaham and Stéphane Denève get playful with Bartók

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Violinist Gil Shaham performs the solo in Bartók's Violin Concerto No. 2 on Thursday with Stéphane Denève conducting the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Performances repeat at Disney Hall on Friday and Sunday, and in Orange County on Saturday. (Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles Times / April 24, 2014)

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By Richard S. Ginell
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Violinist Gil Shaham's career has been taking some very intriguing left turns lately. He came up with a terrific programming idea recently, recording as many of the worthy violin concertos written in the 1930s as he can lay his Stradivarius on – the standards and the obscurities – for his own label, Canary Classics.

There is also a curious new item where, in recognition of “research” on classical music's alleged repellent effect on teenagers, Shaham slapped together some excerpts from his recordings and packaged them in a CD with the title “Music to Drive Away Loiterers.” Of course, it was released on April Fools' Day.

All of this brainstorming seems to have invigorated Shaham. Certainly his performance of one of those 1930s violin concertos, the No. 2 by Bartók, with Stéphane Denève and the Los Angeles Philharmonic at Walt Disney Concert Hall Thursday night reflected the sheer pleasure he is getting out of re-exploring this music.

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Shaham had recorded the Bartók about 15 years ago with the redoubtable pairing of Pierre Boulez and the Chicago Symphony, but the Disney Hall performance was that of a changed man. At 36 1/2 minutes, Shaham took it a full four minutes faster than he did with Boulez – not quite at Bartók's

incredibly fast proposed time of 32 minutes (which no one observes anymore), but headed there.

More important, there was a sense of playfulness now in Shaham's Bartók that wasn't there before, shedding just the right bit of polished sheen in his tone at appropriate moments, reveling in the sound of surprise with bursts of power and the quietest of pianissimos.

With Denève poking around the score revealing all kinds of strange details that the Philharmonic executed with relish, this team brought out the weirdness of this music that often gets buried nowadays underneath super-slick virtuosity. When Shaham gets around to rerecording the Bartók for his 1930s project, Denève would be a good match for him.

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The majority of the evening's playing time was reserved for Rachmaninoff's expansive, irresistibly melodious Symphony No. 2, whose hyper-Romantic symphonic rhetoric launched a thousand film scores.

Denève chose to make it move, rumbling through the Scherzo with plenty of dash, giving the big tunes of the Adagio and that knockout lyrical passage in the Finale lots of room to breathe yet without exaggerating the built-in emotional payoff.

After all of the minimalist/maximalist modernisms of the previous weekend in Disney Hall, it was startling to realize that we were still dealing with music from the 20th century.

Los Angeles Philharmonic with Gil Shaham and Stéphane Denève, Walt Disney Concert Hall, 111 S. Grand Ave., downtown L.A., 8 p.m. Friday, 2 p.m. Sunday, \$62-\$195, (323) 850-2000 or www.laphil.com. Also Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall, 600 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa, 8 p.m. Saturday, \$35-\$250, (714) 556-2787 or www.scfta.org.

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