

Idiomatic, Stylish Command from Denève and Lewis

United States **MacMillan, Beethoven, and Rachmaninoff**: Paul Lewis (piano), Seattle Symphony, Stéphane Denève (conductor), Benaroya Hall, Seattle, 18.4.2014 (BJ)



MacMillan: *The Death of Oscar*

Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 3

Rachmaninoff: Symphony No. 2

This was a concert of massive proportions—with a full hour of music in each half—and, happily, of no less massive achievement. “I hope,” I wrote after his last appearance on the Benaroya Hall podium, “we shall hear Denève again very soon.” That was in 2007. This return engagement came by no means soon, but still to excellent effect.

I don't know whether the 42-year-old French conductor has a speciality, but two concerts-worth of repertoire have sufficed to demonstrate his versatility in several different styles of music. Besides his idiomatic command of the French and Franco-Spanish works he conducted last time, the present program displayed total assurance the contemporary idiom of Scottish composer James MacMillan and in the full-blown romanticism of Rachmaninoff; and though I haven't yet heard him in such touchstones as the symphonies of the Austro-German tradition, his work in support of Paul Lewis's Beethoven was no less convincingly stylish.

Last time, in praising Denève, I singled out “the sensitivity of his ear, his rhythmic intensity, and his unerring sense of style and emotional tone.” Those qualities were again amply in evidence, and they contributed to a performance of Rachmaninoff's spacious Second Symphony that did full justice to the awe-inspiring orchestral imagination of a work too often overlooked in surveys of the late-romantic symphonic repertoire.

The strings—whom it was a pleasure to see seated in the classical layout, with first violins on the conductor's left and seconds on his right—sounded positively gorgeous in tone (with fine solo work contributed by associate concertmaster Emma McGrath), and into their sumptuous embrace the other sections of the orchestra fitted like hand in glove. No less compelling was the performance of MacMillan's ten-minute tone poem, a co-commission of the Seattle Symphony, Denève's Stuttgart Radio Symphony, and the Royal National Scottish Orchestra, of which he served as music director for seven seasons.

On this Friday afternoon, the work itself, which had received its US premiere the previous evening, proved in its outer slow sections to be impressively eloquent and richly colored; the concluding threnody in tribute to Oscar, son of the legendary warrior-bard Ossian, was especially powerful, with an english horn solo full of noble sadness superbly played by Stefan Farkas, and with Michael Crusoe at the end providing extraordinarily crisp timpani strokes. The central fast battle scene I found less convincing. It was introduced by a fanfare for three trumpets that was certainly well played, but acquired a surely unintended comic quality from its insistent syncopations. Rather like Stravinsky at certain points in *Oedipus Rex* and also in the Symphony of Psalms, MacMillan seems to feel that dance-like rhythms can be used without reference to their traditional light-hearted connotations—but for most listeners those associations are very hard to forget about.

In the program's classical centerpiece, Paul Lewis—at 41 just six months younger than Denève—triumphantly lived up to the tremendous reputation he has garnered with his recordings of Schubert and Beethoven. My only previous acquaintance with his playing, by way of a Schubert disc, had not prepared me from the sheer expressive and technical power of his performance in Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto.

This was piano-playing in the grand manner. Tempi were perfectly judged, articulation was crystal-clear, and tone was magnificently warm and solid.

There was only one passage that I found slightly disappointing: in the little decorative group of grace-notes a few measures into the development section, there was nothing actively wrong with Lewis's phrasing—but it could not quite match memories of a performance by Claudio Arrau in Philadelphia many years ago. Arrau somehow contrived to give the three-note grupetto a sense of relaxed spaciousness, yet without damage to the prevailing pulse of the passage.

Still, not managing every little detail as well as the great Arrau is a pretty insignificant complaint to level at any pianist. This, too, was a great performance. Lewis is clearly the real thing, and anyone not yet familiar with his playing is urged to rectify the omission at the first opportunity.

Bernard Jacobson