

CLASSICAL NOTES

Denève raises the stakes for imaginative orchestral programs

By David Weininger | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT AUGUST 07, 2014



HILARY SCOTT

The French conductor Stéphane Denève follows a culinary ritual whenever he comes to Boston. The day after his arrival, he heads to Abe and Louie's, the old-school steakhouse on Boylston Street, for lunch. He can't remember exactly when he first ate there — understandable, perhaps, as he has been a frequent and welcome BSO guest since his first appearance in 2011. But it was cemented in November 2012, when he and pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet — a fellow Frenchman and steak fan — spent serious time there during a weeklong BSO engagement.

“We came here four, maybe five times,” said Denève. “You really can't find a good steakhouse in Europe.”

He said this, naturally, in the restaurant on a recent afternoon. He and his wife, Åsa, had flown to Boston the day before from Stuttgart, Germany, where Denève is chief conductor of the Stuttgart Radio Symphony Orchestra. He was en route to Tanglewood for concerts with both the BSO and the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra. After two weeks in the Berkshires, it will be on to Saratoga Springs, N.Y., for concerts with the Philadelphia Orchestra, where he will assume the title of principal guest conductor this fall. He will finish the month with the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Hollywood Bowl.

The peripatetic life is the conductor's lot, especially for someone like Denève, who is in increasing demand thanks to his energetic musicianship and imaginative programming. But it is one he accepts willingly. "To be honest, I'm living the dream," he said. "And that was not the life I was supposed to have. Ever since I was 18, 20, [when] I left my little town in the north of France, everything has been a bonus, unexpected."

Still, nothing ameliorates the rigors of travel like a good meal. So it seemed natural for a reporter to join the Denèves for lunch at Abe and Louie's. Over a New York sirloin and a margarita, the conductor talked about his new appointments, how to expand the orchestral repertoire, and what makes the Boston Symphony singular.

Asked about the last point, Denève smiled and said, "I think I can close my eyes and recognize them after one second." He can hear in its present sound its decades-long tradition in French repertoire, and cited its principal trumpet, Thomas Rolfs, as having a sound close to that of storied BSO trumpeter Roger Voisin: "a very immediate sound, very bright and ultra-clear articulation."

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Denève had an uncanny experience during his first Symphony Hall visit, in 2011, when he led Roussel's Third Symphony. During the slow movement, "I started this gesture which was not totally mine. And with all respect, I felt like I was doing some [Charles] Munch," the BSO's legendary mid-century music director. It was, he explained, "a kind of free, painting gesture . . . when you sort of forget about the pulse and start to draw the music, live. And it was quite astonishing that the orchestra itself will start to make me better, and give me a more accurate French type of rhythm."

That Denève can make an orchestra without this tradition sound convincing in French repertoire is clear from a fantastic 2012 recording of Debussy's orchestral music with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra. In contrast to many recent accounts of this music, which emphasize abstract clarity, Denève gets the sonic precision along with a sensuously full-blooded sound and visceral excitement.

Debussy's "Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune" is on Saturday's BSO program, along with Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony. The juxtaposition of those two pieces, which seemingly have little to do with another, actually points up something essential about Denève as a musician.

"My own culture is very much linked, Russian music to French music," he explained. "I found Russian music much more elegant and transparent than people sometimes think. And I found French music much more intense and lyrical and passionate and pathos than some people put it in."

One of Denève's most unusual new projects will begin next year, when he will become chief conductor of the Brussels Philharmonic and the inaugural director of its Centre for Future Orchestral Repertoire. The center will begin life as a website that will have comprehensive information, such as scoring and performance history, for every symphonic work composed since 2000. Relatedly, he will play at least one piece of 21st-century music on each Brussels program. (The Centre will exist independently of his programming.)

Denève said that "it's very strange to me that we are not more permanently panicked" by the fact that no work seems to have entered the orchestra canon since the middle of the last century. "All the other art forms have success with things of their time."

And the problem is not just audience acceptance; there's no systematic effort to take note of the few new symphonic works that are being heard consistently. He cited as an example "Blue Cathedral" by the American composer Jennifer Higdon. That piece has been played 567 times by 290 orchestras since its 2000 premiere, yet when Denève proposed bringing it to a prominent German orchestra, its director had never heard of it. "I thought, here we are in the most connected world, and we just don't have a flow of information about which piece is successful where," he said. One aim of the site is to provide exactly that set of data.

The point about audience response is an important one, Denève continued, and it's something he plans to make the center of his own programming in Brussels. "I want to have a new contract, a new trust, between myself and the audience there," he said. "What I'm trying to do is to give my knowledge: I want to say, 'This piece is a great piece of art,' and then say to the audience that they will be the ones who decide. We want to interact more with the audience, so they can decide what is played again and what is not."

More information:

BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Stéphane Denève, conductor

Music of Debussy, Szymanowski, and Tchaikovsky (Aug. 9)

Music of Beethoven and Prokofiev (Aug. 15)

At: Koussevitzky Music Shed, Tanglewood, Lenox

Tickets: \$10-\$94

TANGLEWOOD MUSIC CENTER ORCHESTRA

Stéphane Denève, conductor

Music of Berlioz (Aug. 11)

At: Seiji Ozawa Hall,

Tanglewood, Lenox

Tickets: \$11-\$53

888-266-1200, www.tanglewood.org

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