

# Kavakos on Fire in Familiar and Profound

**I** [classical-scene.com/2014/08/14/kavakos-deneve-bso/](http://classical-scene.com/2014/08/14/kavakos-deneve-bso/)

Janine Wanée

**August 14, 2014**

by **Janine Wanée**

Last Saturday Stéphane Denève led a satisfying Tanglewood BSO program of Debussy, Szymanowski, and Tchaikovsky, each piece seeming effortlessly to spring from the others.

Stéphane Denève had chosen a familiar friend in Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*. Flutist Elizabeth Rowe proceeded to play the opening solo with whispering subtlety, even while the audience found it difficult to stop fidgeting. But the enchanting, mesmerized piece always pulls us in, especially in the hands of Boston's finest playing together with exquisite stealth.

Denève did not just facilitate an accurate performance, but also brought out Debussy's magical dreamscape, to be enjoyed through every instrumental nuance, while maintaining impeccable ensemble throughout the impressionistic wash of sonorous watercolor. This prelude was not intended originally to stand alone, but to the modern listener, it functions 'affectively' as a Mallarmé-inspired tone poem. Marc Mandel's program notes describe it:



*Immediately following that opening melody, suggested by the indolent flute-playing of Mallarmé's faun, glissandos in the harp and distant, evocative horn-calls conjure a dreamlike woodland atmosphere heightened by Debussy's avoidance of clear-cut harmonies: an atmosphere to which the colors of rustling strings, cascading woodwinds, blossoming outbursts from the full orchestra, and, near the magical close, antique cymbals, all prove themselves ideally suited.*

Denève brought out all these qualities, poignantly. In the program note, the French conductor is said to have an affinity with music of his homeland, and this watery, moonlit jewel certainly seemed to be in his cherished box.

The Violin Concerto No. 2 by Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937), with Leonidas Kavakos soloist was the highlight of the evening. Entered stage left, he gave a cordial European kiss on both cheeks to the female first violinist, and to Denève a warm hug. One might think this was Greek demonstrativeness, except the following afternoon Yo-Yo Ma gave everyone of either gender a both-cheeks European kiss. Classical-music stage decorum clearly has changed with the times; it was heartening, to this reviewer anyway, that a coldly professional handshake appears to be no longer the norm among established colleagues.

With the very first notes wafting from his violin, one was immediately struck by the sweetness of Kavakos's tone. Beginning quietly like a mysterious lullaby with shimmering vibrato, his sound rose into the stratospheric register, yet he a songlike sweetness was sustained throughout piano passages, blending back in with the orchestra as it moved into a stormier rhythmic down-bowing.

It is said that Szymanowski's influences were Chopin, Scriabin, and Debussy, but even an uninitiated listener could hear strains of Bartok and Berg running through this three-movement but through-played piece. Steven Ledbetter notes explained:

*In all of Szymanowski's concertos... the solo instrument is not projected as a creature set apart, but rather enclosed within the body of the orchestra as a special sonority of leading importance, a discussion leader, perhaps, but not a dictator... In the case of the Second Concerto, the subdivisions are defined sharply enough to become four separate sections played without pause and linked at the midpoint by a huge cadenza.*

Kavakos's execution of the cadenzas was fiery; in many heated moments he would asimilarly flare brilliantly with impeccable intonation. His aural sensibilities were dead on, arriving on a double-stop in perfect tune with the orchestral reentrances. His drama was equal to his lyricism, which ardently did justice to the profundity of the composition.

After generous applause, Kavakos proceeded to play an encore, which he did not announce but which took everyone's breath away. Those in the audience familiar with guitar repertory recognized it as Francisco Tarrega's Recuerdos de la Alhambra



Stephane Deneve leading the BSO (Stu Rosner photo)

('Remembrances of the Alhambra'). Traditionally it is played with tremolo as the melody and thumb producing

accompaniment, but Kavakos performed a seemingly simple yet astoundingly difficult adaptation using ricochet/jeté bowing for both the tremolo and the accompaniment without any pizzicato. To anyone who has seriously attempted to play the violin, and perhaps those who have not, how anyone could possibly do this, and do it as well as he did, is a truly confounding mystery.

The finale to a stunning concert was Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 4. The brass were in high form, each instrument impeccably balanced and songful; the pianissimos performed with outstanding subtlety. Denève encouraged their production of harmonic distinction, ranging from subtle nuance to vibratory fullness that could be sensed corporeally. Despite Tchaikovsky's repetitiveness, Denève was able to evoke surprise and un-milked lyricism.

The programmatic arc began with a feminine quality of watery dreamtime, reaching a middle altitude of sizzling vigor before concluding with a struggle and ultimate surrender to indomitable fate. This writer experienced a journey profound and complete.

**Janine Wanée holds a BM from USC, an MM from BU, and certificates from the BU Opera Institute and summer Acting Shakespeare course at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London.**