



Stokowski comes back to the Bowl

BY TIMOTHY MANGAN

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Before he had conducted a note Tuesday night at the Hollywood Bowl, Stéphane Denève told the audience that being there was a “dream come true.” Denève had conducted at the Bowl before, so that wasn’t it.

The program looked ordinary, too ... but it had something up its sleeve. Namely, the wizardry of Leopold Stokowski.

Denève is a big fan. The French conductor programmed three of Stokowski’s sonorous orchestrations, including two from “Fantasia,” on the evening’s menu. The concert wound up with Stokowski’s rarely heard orchestration of Mussorgsky’s “Pictures at an Exhibition.” To each his own.

Stokowski, once the music director at the Hollywood Bowl, was an experimenter with sounds and orchestras (Denève called him a “sorcerer, a magician of sounds”). Some listeners, including this one, find his orchestral arrangements of questionable taste. They are, in a word, lurid. But if taken in the right spirit, they also can be kind of fun, like a campy old horror movie. This listener had a few chuckles Tuesday and was thankful for them.

The 42-year-old Denève is a rising star in classical music. He was recently named principal guest conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra (Stokowski’s old group) and is now a regular presence with many of the great orchestras including the Los Angeles Philharmonic, with which he has turned in a series of impressive performances. Tuesday was no exception. If Stokowski is his thing, I say let him do it.

Using large, emphatic motions, Denève laid into the Stokowski arrangements like a bear to his breakfast. It didn’t seem as if the musicians of the L.A. Phil had any choice in the matter, but they responded enthusiastically. The playing was vivid and compelling.

Denève opened with Stokowski’s most famous arrangement, the Toccata and Fugue in D minor by Bach. It’s sensational to a fault, but also a virtuoso challenge for the orchestra, and Denève hammered his way through it with the oratorical fervor of Al Pacino in a courtroom scene.

After intermission he offered the arrangement of Stokowski’s version of Mussorgsky’s “Night on Bald Mountain,” filled with a catalog of sound effects (the *col legno* – strings using the wood of their bows – was effective) that turned it into a Halloween piece for kids. (Well, OK, it isn’t all that deep anyway.)

But Stokowski’s pursuit of the sensational led him astray in “Pictures.” He supposedly found Ravel’s celebrated orchestration too French, and set out to make a more Slavic version (minus the “Tuileries” and “Limoges” movements, which he thought Rimsky-Korsakov may have written). But Ravel beats him at every turn at least partly because he focused on depicting the *character* of each of the pictures, rather than their atmospheric possibilities.

Ravel’s captures the promenades (the viewer strolling painting to painting) in apt contemplative moods; Stokowski goes eerie and ghoulish. Ravel’s ox-cart is a primitive thing, driven by peasants; Stokowski’s is a behemoth luxury vehicle. Ravel’s “Catacombs” is uncannily stark; Stokowski’s is a lush tourist site. And so on. In short, Ravel can’t be beat.

Still, it was fascinating to hear Stokowski’s take – once – and Denève and the musicians played it lustily, the conductor sculpting every bar while heeding the pace.

One could justly call it a spectacular night at the Bowl, caveats notwithstanding, especially since Marc-André Hamelin was on hand for Beethoven’s “Emperor” Concerto. Better known for taking on gnarly and little-known virtuoso challenges, the pianist is also a deeply intelligent musician. His carefully calibrated interpretation of the “Emperor” combined chiseled phrasing with graceful flow, poised voicing with thrusting accent. With Denève supporting heartily, it sounded like victory.

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