

Tanglewood: Happy birthday, and farewell

By Andrew L. Pincus, *Special to The Eagle*

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LENOX -- And so, farewell to Leonard Slatkin.

If he sticks to his plan to retire from the summer festival circuit, the conductor's 70th-birthday concert Friday night was his adieu to Tanglewood. And a fond sendoff it was, half devoted to the American music he loves, half given over to an affectionate, expansive performance of Elgar's distinctly English "Enigma" Variations.

In a preconcert interview, Slatkin said he was having fun matching his friends up with the friends Elgar portrayed in the 14 variations. So, during the Boston Symphony Orchestra performance, the question popped into mind: Which variation did Slatkin match?

Was it "Nimrod"? Slatkin's lingering over this poignant, often excerpted adagio suggested an identification. Or, at 70 (on Sept. 1), was it the rousing finale, a grand summation of Elgar himself in a life lived in music?

In any case, the BSO came through handsomely for a man who has led three American orchestras -- St. Louis, National (Washington) and now Detroit -- and also remains at the head of the Orchestre National de Lyons, France.

Slatkin opened the program with "Circus Overture: into the eighth decade," a birthday commission by the BSO from his longtime friend William Bolcom. The Pops-like clowning, plus a bit of razzing, lived up to the title's promise. Composer and conductor joined onstage in a hug and a bow.

Slatkin reached back into the immediate pre-World War II era for two works representing a school of American composers whose fortunes he'd like to revive. Both works came from the conservative end of the spectrum.

Wayne Barlow's "The Winter's Past" (1938) featured principal oboist John Ferrillo against a string orchestra in an attractive, atmospheric tone poem. As soloist in Samuel Barber's Violin Concerto (1941), Gil Shaham delivered soaring melody, a romantic glow and razzle-dazzle in the finale. Slatkin and the BSO joined in the plunge into unabashed sentiment.

Saturday's program wandered off the beaten track to include the first Tanglewood performance of the 1933 Violin Concerto No. 2 by Karol Szymanowski. Violinist Leonidas Kavakos, a deeply thoughtful musician, and conductor Stephane Deneve teamed in exploring the Polish composer's modernist raptures, which extend to a fiendish cadenza.

Kavakos played a mystery piece as a solo encore. It turned out to be an arrangement of Francisco Tarrega's guitar piece "Memories of the Alhambra."

Szymanowski's thickly orchestrated work had the misfortune to follow Debussy's "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun," with BSO principal flutist Elizabeth Rowe in the solo role. Where Szymanowski's music is passionate and heaving, Debussy's is languid and diaphanous -- qualities enhanced in this performance.

It wasn't only Rowe's elegant playing, plus the BSO's support of one of its own, that made the difference. Removing the haze that usually cloaks the orchestral part, Deneve allowed the piquant harmonies and

sonorities to come through in all their modern yet timeless intricacy.

Deneve, who is French, insists he isn't just a conductor of French music. He proved it with a blazing performance of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony as the finale.

He was a steady hand at the controls, allowing the drama -- and there is a lot of it here -- to emerge from the music rather than a conductor's add-ons. The BSO's fiercely committed playing led to an all-out Cossack charge at the end. The sounds echoed off the hills. The brass section was in its glory.

Another huge audience -- officially, 14,209 -- came out yesterday for Yo-Yo Ma, delaying the start of the concert because some orchestra members were stuck in the traffic jam.

As in his packed Brahms recital with Kavakos and pianist Emanuel Ax, the superstar cellist played with luxurious freedom of phrase and expression. This time, he devoted his artistry to two lightweight Tchaikovsky pieces, the andante cantabile (arranged from the String Quartet No. 1) and the "Rococo" Variations. There was some amusing byplay with the orchestra. Rhythms were so supple that they sometimes disappeared into the ether.

Another veteran American conductor, David Zinman, was on the podium for the all-Tchaikovsky program. He put the BSO at the service of Ma, but the Polonaise from "Eugene Onegin" and the "Pathetique" Symphony displayed an orchestra that had been through a long, hard week. The audience's usual premature ovation and exodus occurred after the third movement.