

Music review: Deneve, Thibaudet join SLSO in an exciting new work



4 HOURS AGO • BY SARAH BRYAN MILLER

You can tell a lot about an orchestra's music director by the quality of the guest conductors that she or he brings in. Clearly, David Robertson isn't worried on any count; the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra consistently gets fine leaders on the podium.

Saturday night's concert at Powell Symphony Hall was a case in point. Stéphane Denève is one of the most exciting conductors on the international scene today. With him came Jean-Yves Thibaudet, one of the world's great pianists, in a noteworthy new work.

The music of Scottish composer James MacMillan (born 1959) makes a good

introduction to contemporary music for those who think they don't like it after being scarred by the ugliness-for-ugliness'-sake academicians' music of the mid-century. MacMillan's work is complex and can be challenging in its own way, but it always rewards the effort.

His Piano Concerto No. 3, "The Mysteries of Light" (2007-08) is a case in point. MacMillan, a devout Roman Catholic, built it in five continuous movements around the five meditations of the Luminous Mysteries.

Added to the practice of praying the rosary in 2002 by Pope John Paul II, the meditations are based on the most significant events in the life of Christ: his baptism, the changing of water into wine at the wedding at Cana, his proclamation of the Reign of God, the Transfiguration and the institution of the Eucharist.

It's not really so much a piano concerto as a tone poem with a huge role for the piano. It's not liturgical in nature, and it's not necessary to be acquainted with the rosary (or, for that matter, Christian theology) to appreciate it. A recurring phrase of plainsong serves as a leitmotif, with other elements borrowed from sources ranging from the Renaissance to Scottish folksong to the sound world of Olivier Messiaen, all woven together into MacMillan's own satisfyingly beautiful and thoughtful whole.

Denève and Thibaudet provided a terrific words-and-music introduction to the piece (ending with a little piano four-hands excerpt) that put it all in context. Thibaudet performed the world première in 2011, and has continued to champion it; Saturday night was his 26th outing with the piece. It was a virtuoso performance, both intellectually and

emotionally, of a brilliant work that deserves to become standard repertoire.

Denève and the orchestra were outstanding colleagues in every way. There were notable contributions by virtually all the principal players, too many to mention.

The program began with Debussy's "Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun)." A sensuous, voluptuous piece of once-scandalous music, it showcased the gifts of principal flute Mark Sparks, whose playing was like liquid gold. Denève brought him out for a solo bow and a gorgeous encore, Debussy's "Syrinx."

The second half was a well-balanced performance of Dvorák's Symphony No. 8, with translucent playing by the strings and a wind section in good voice. Despite some slow moments toward the end that didn't seem completely meshed, it was a fine conclusion to the evening.