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Review: Stéphane Denève Leads the Philharmonic in What Feels Like an Audition

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI FEB. 12, 2015

With the announcement last week from the New York Philharmonic that Alan Gilbert will step aside as music director in the summer of 2017, every appearance by a guest conductor is going to be seen as a tryout for the job. So it was on Wednesday night at Avery Fisher Hall, when the acclaimed French conductor Stéphane Denève made his much-anticipated Philharmonic debut.

Mr. Denève, 43, is a busy musician: chief conductor of the Stuttgart Radio Symphony Orchestra, principal guest at the Philadelphia Orchestra and, starting this fall, chief conductor of the Brussels Philharmonic. For his Philharmonic debut, he was impressive in Fauré's "Pelléas et Mélisande" Suite and even more so in the New York premiere of the Scottish composer James MacMillan's Piano Concerto No. 3, featuring the brilliant pianist for whom the piece was written, Jean-Yves Thibaudet. I had mixed reactions to his burly, blazing but somewhat overwrought account of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony after intermission.

The concert began beautifully with the Fauré — four pieces that composer wrote as incidental music for a performance of the Maeterlinck play of the same name. It was charming to see Mr. Denève, tall and imposing on the podium with wild curly hair, coaxing such subdued and refined playing from the Philharmonic for this lovely music, especially the mellow, warm string sound.

Before the performance of Mr. MacMillan's concerto, completed in 2008 and first performed in 2011, Mr. Denève gave an engaging and helpful talk about the piece, with Mr. Thibaudet playing excerpts at the piano. Mr.

MacMillan, 55, is a Roman Catholic of a liberal orientation whose music has long been informed by the mystical elements of his faith. Other influences include Scottish folk music and the modernist styles he was steeped in early on.

Titled “The Mysteries of Light,” this 25-minute concerto is written in five sections to match the structure, and ritual, of the rosary. The music explores miracles in the life of Christ, opening with an evocation of his baptism. A phrase of plainchant that becomes a theme for the entire work is first stated in curiously assertive bursts, and the piano plays dazzling filigreed flights and scrambling chromatic runs to depict the aura surrounding this event. The second movement evokes the wedding feast at Cana, with pummeling energy and fractured rhythmic complexity.

A slow movement turns meditative, thick with pungent harmonies and searching melodic lines over which the piano, in the upper register, plays Messiaen-like riffs meant to suggest raindrops. The next movement represents the transfiguration of Christ through music of gnashing, percussive intensity that leads to a cosmic version of a romping, stomping finale, which quotes a Zulu song as a theme.

For some, Mr. MacMillan’s music might seem a little eager to please and obvious in its effects. Still, remnants of avant-garde modernism float around like “flotsam and jetsam,” as the composer has said of his style, and the concerto has an incantatory, eclectic allure. The performance was so exuberant and inspired it was impossible not to be swept up in the work, at least for the moment. This was Mr. Thibaudet’s 27th performance of a piece he is understandably proud of.

Mr. Denève brought a strong interpretive stance to the familiar Tchaikovsky Fourth. His reined-in tempos enhanced the weight and breadth of the piece. Climactic moments had brassy sheen and slashing power. And yet, there was something ponderous about this approach. The Philharmonic’s sound in fortissimo blasts was visceral yet raw. The symphony has seldom seemed longer to me. But there was not one dull moment.

A version of this review appears in print on February 13, 2015, on page C3 of the New York edition with the headline: Showing His Stuff, From Mellow to Brassy .
