

## Carpenter's flashy organ playing sparks BSO's French program at Tanglewood

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By Aaron Keebaugh

Organist Cameron Carpenter performed Friday night with conductor Stéphane Denève and the Boston Symphony Orchestra at Tanglewood.

On the surface, Friday night's Boston Symphony Orchestra concert at Tanglewood, conducted by Stéphane Denève, looked like a safe one, mixing Poulenc's sparkling Concerto for Organ, Strings, and Timpani with familiar repertoire by Barber and Saint-Saëns.

Yet there was nothing commonplace about the performance. From start to finish, Friday's program proved to be a spectacular and rewarding display of musicianship.

That was due primarily to the evening's soloist, who made his BSO and Tanglewood debut. Cameron Carpenter, the supremely talented Juilliard-trained organist, draws commentary for his Liberace-like concert dress and mohawk pompadour. His musicianship is just as flashy and extraordinary, and he proved time and again Friday night that he is an organist like no other.

Though his style can be off-putting to purists, there's much to like in Carpenter's approach to the instrument: the bold honesty of his unconventional musical interpretations and, not least, his jaw-dropping virtuosity.

That said there was nothing unconventional about his performance of Poulenc's concerto, except for, perhaps, the organ itself.

Carpenter played on the International Touring Organ, a digital instrument designed by the organist and built by Marshall & Ogletree.

One may have been worried about balance problems between the strings and the instrument, which was plugged into the Shed's ample overhead sound system. But those worries were soon dispelled as Carpenter controlled the five-manual behemoth with grace, swiftly maneuvering between register changes and shaping the soft passages of the concerto with subtle dynamic shading to match the sound of the orchestra.



Most impressive were the work's technical moments, where Carpenter's fingers were a blur on the keyboard. His interpretation of the earth-shaking chords that punctuate Poulenc's organ writing involved shifts in timbre that changed subtly with each utterance.

Save for fitful moments in the work's quick passages, the BSO strings answered with playing of commitment and energy. Timothy Genis lent sturdy support with meticulously played strokes on the timpani. And at the helm, Denève deftly handled the concerto's sudden shifts in mood with deliberation.

For an opener, Denève led the strings in Samuel Barber's famous *Adagio for strings*.

This most beloved of Barber's works is a shining example of the composer's romantic lyricism. The performance was gorgeous. Denève wove the strands of Barber's melody into a silky bed of sound and built the music to a shimmering climax.

Fine playing also characterized the main work of the evening, Saint-Saëns' *Symphony No. 3 in C minor*.

Nicknamed the *Organ Symphony*, the work is one of a handful of nineteenth-century French symphonies to have survived to the present day. It's easy to hear why as the piece is filled with colorful orchestration and stirring power and lyricism that recalls Beethoven and Schubert.

The performance, under Denève's clear-eyed direction, was astounding. The conductor mined the mystery from the opening *Adagio* and coaxed bubbly phrases from the ensuing *Allegro*, the strings and winds answering with precision.

The *Poco Adagio*, which draws the first of this two-movement work to a close, was beautifully rendered. Strings and solo wind phrases mixed together for a feathery tapestry, and Carpenter's soft chords at the organ hovered in the background.

The *Scherzo* that opens the second movement moved with urgency, and the ensuing trio section, which took off in fleet tempo, was played with crispness. The highlight was the finale, where the orchestral and organ lines fused together into blocks of powerful sound, bringing the symphony to a triumphant conclusion.

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Following the concert, Carpenter offered an impromptu recital comprising virtuosic works that gave listeners a chance to experience the full powers of the International Touring Organ.

The instrument is an orchestra unto itself, capable of shimmering wah-wah effects and percussion sounds that include cymbals and gong.

Carpenter's arrangements of Gershwin's *Strike up the Band* and the overture to Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* spotlighted the organist's incredible technique. He was at ease balancing several voices at once, weaving the lines of the music into thick textures.

The lines of Bach's *Toccatina in F-sharp major* were shaped with powerful crescendos, recalling the "Heavy Organ"

interpretations of Virgil Fox, and the *Star and Stripes Forever* proved a mesmerizing display of virtuosity, Carpenter's feet engaged in a nimble tap-dance on the pedals.

Carpenter has said in interviews that he doesn't see himself becoming "the grand old man" of the instrument. But his showmanship, in an unexpected but welcome way, returns the organ to its roots as an instrument of entertainment. Let's hope he has many years ahead of him.