

Deneve, Boston Symphony summon summertime spirit



HILARY SCOTT

Soloist Gil Shaham and conductor Stéphane Deneve during the Boston Symphony Orchestra performance on Thursday.

By Jeremy Eichler | GLOBE STAFF MARCH 18, 2016

A glimpse of summer in March? I'm speaking not of the weather per se, but rather the repertoire. Typically, the selections from the Boston Symphony Orchestra's regular season head west on I-90 in the summers, turning up at Tanglewood, where the sheer number of programs — often three per weekend — makes it helpful to have at least some recently rehearsed music

This week, however, the flow has been reversed, as a Tanglewood-style program arrives on the stage of Symphony Hall. The energetic French conductor Stephane Deneve is back on the podium reprising his success from this past July with Saint-Saens's "Organ" Symphony, which, if memory serves, uncorked one of the summer's most vociferous ovations in the Koussevitzky Music Shed.

Of course this is a work that rarely fails to make a strong impression on audiences, especially with its rousing final pages, in which Saint-Saens seems keen to overwhelm the senses (let alone those pesky proscriptions of taste) through the sheer power of his music's sonic exultation. But Deneve also clearly has this symphony's number. On Thursday night in Symphony Hall, his performance was masterfully paced for dramatic effect. He drew out the themes of the Poco Adagio with surpassing tenderness, and in the second movement, coaxed real heat from the strings as well as some spectacular playing from the brasses. James David Christie was the evening's expert organist, and in certain fortissimo moments, the entire hall felt like his instrument.

Before intermission, violinist Gil Shaham was on hand for John Williams's Violin Concerto, which dates back to 1974. It's an expertly crafted, full-bodied score that unabashedly evokes the ghosts of great Romantic concertos past. It also fits Shaham's warm-toned and sunny style like a glove, and he brought out its careful mixture of sinew and disarming lyricism. Stretches of the finale had a driving energy that called to mind the concluding pages of Barber's Violin Concerto.

Kudos also go to Shaham for his diligence in encore preparation. Plenty of soloists these days skip the encore altogether; others will trot out the same movement of solo Bach they have used on countless other occasions. Shaham, instead, told the audience he had been searching for something appropriate for St. Patrick's Day. He came up with the perfect answer:

“Molly on the Shore,” Percy Grainger’s take on traditional Irish reels, arranged with virtuoso flair by Fritz Kreisler. Beneath the whirl of notes, one sensed the simple generosity of an uncanned gesture.

The concert opened with a brief curtain-raiser, Jennifer Higdon’s “Blue Cathedral” from 2000, partly conceived as a moving memorial to her brother. Its sound world and its use of the orchestra made this score a fitting companion to the Williams concerto. Also, as Deneve pointed out in his spoken introduction from the stage, both works trace a similarly contoured expressive journey, from darkness toward light. He led the Higdon with a sure feel for texture and phrasing.

Leaving the hall, the audience seemed on cloud nine. One sensed the spirit of the summer music season a bit closer at hand — er, just in time for more snow?

BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

At Symphony Hall, March 17 (repeats March 18-19)

Jeremy Eichler can be reached at jeichler@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter at [@Jeremy_Eichler](https://twitter.com/Jeremy_Eichler).