

## Philadelphia Orchestra burnishes its storied reputation under Denève

By Lawrence Budmen



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Stéphane Dèneve conducted the Philadelphia Orchestra at the Arsht Center in Miami Thursday night.

The Philadelphia Orchestra has long been regarded as one of America's best symphonic ensembles. Over the past decade it has weathered upheavals in music directorship, financial problems and labor relations. Any doubt that the Philadelphians remain in the nation's elite orchestral league was dispelled by the ensemble's concert Thursday night at the Arsht Center. Led by the orchestra's formidable principal guest conductor Stéphane Denève, the program commemorated the 400th anniversary of William Shakespeare's death with familiar works by Berlioz, Mendelssohn and Prokofiev.

While the music was all well known, there was never anything hackneyed or merely phoned in about the performances. Berlioz's Overture to *Beatrice and Benedict* (from the composer's operatic version of *Much Ado About Nothing*) was replete with big contrasts of tempo, dynamics and instrumental timbre. Denève, who has conducted outstanding

concerts locally with the New World Symphony, paced the score with attention to its long arc, never falling into the choppiness to which some performances succumb. In the melodic moments, the lustrous string sound that made this ensemble legendary was in full bloom. The allegro sent sparks across the hall, the trumpets pealing through the orchestral fabric.

In Mendelssohn's Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Denève conjured up The Bard's world of fairies, comedians and entangled lovers with unbridled vigor. Instrumental textures were airy and lithe. He captured the subtly playful wit of the Scherzo, and, with a wonderfully transparent dialogue between strings and winds, the Nocturne brought out Mendelssohn's aura of magical romance. Even the famous Wedding March sounded fresh in Denève's robust reading, with gleaming brass.

The conductor's revisionist take on excerpts from Prokofiev's ballet *Romeo and Juliet* brought the evening's most remarkable performance. Eschewing overstuffed sonorities and heavily exaggerated romanticism, Denève restored the score to its balletic context. Playing ten movements in chronological order, this performance underlined the music's dance rhythms without glossing over the score's more raucous and acerbic moments.

Denève brought out the work's 20th century spirit rather than linking it to Russian ballet music of the preceding era. The crashing chords heralding the enmity between the Montagues and the Capulets rang out fiercely, followed by Denève bringing the sound down to a mere whisper in an impressive demonstration of orchestral control. The Minuet clanged with a modernist charge and incisive string attacks heralded the appearance of "Juliet at the ball."

While "Masks" emerged impish and playful with mellow brass playing at the softest volume, the dance of the feuding families had a dissonant edge. Jeffrey Khaner's silvery flute solos and the burnished richness of the lower strings propelled the protagonists' pas de deux.

While remaining true to the music's romantic essence, instrumental timbres were always bright rather than mushy. The terror of clashing swords came through in the slashing string figures and pounding percussive strokes for "The Death of Tybalt," the rhythm clipped and edgy. Pianissimo violins gave the reprise of the love music an almost eerie cast in the introduction to the final tragic scene, with the bleakness of the concluding bars deeply felt.

While South Florida audiences deserve the opportunity to sometime hear the orchestra under its dynamic music director Yannick Nézet-Séguin, the concert was a testament to the special artistic relationship between the terrifically gifted Denève and 'the fabulous Philadelphians.'

**The Arsht Center Classical series continues 8 p.m. March 17 with the Cleveland Orchestra under Giancarlo Guerrero playing the world premiere of Avner Dorman's *Sikión*, Mahler's Symphony No. 1 and Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 2 with soloist Jean-Yves Thibaudet. [arshtcenter.org](http://arshtcenter.org) (<http://arshtcenter.org>).**

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