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# An evening of immortality: The Phila. Orch plays Mussorgsky, John Williams, and more on a special night

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## **THE PHILADELPHIA ORCHESTRA**

Conductor Stéphane Denève and cellist Yo-Yo Ma clasp hands at the concert Thursday.

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by **[Peter Dobrin](#)**, Classical Music Critic

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At the start of *Pictures from an Exhibition* Thursday night in Verizon Hall, conductor Stéphane Denève gave the downbeat, and trumpeter David Bilger sat with the instrument silent in his lap while the strings played instead.

Anyone who knows this piece, and nearly everyone does, knows this is not the way things usually go. But this was a topsy-turvy Philadelphia Orchestra concert, studded with elements of delight that drew a roar of approval from the sold-out crowd of a decibel level that's rare.

Pictures was the theme, and reviving Stokowski's dazzling orchestration of the Mussorgsky piano piece - the opening trumpet solo was Ravel's idea, but Bilger shone elsewhere - seemed like a righting of history. This version has not been heard in subscription concerts since 1962, when Stoki himself led it.

Whistler's paintings inspired Debussy's *Three Nocturnes*, and Denève offered a concise view of the first two (the absent third, "Sirènes," would have required the addition of female voices).

The other pictorial sleight of hand came with the appearance on the program of John Williams, who inevitably evokes certain images. Anyone expecting to Jaws rising or an occasional alighting of E.T. in his *Cello Concerto* or *Tributes! For Seiji* might have been surprised to hear the film composer in a firmly serious concert hall idiom.

In some ways, the moderately dissonant concerto operates on a level of high-drama virtuosity, and the specificity of writing could be convincing only if played by Yo-Yo Ma, which, happily here, it was.

It's a piece that is oddly emotionally indirect flowing from the pen of a film composer. But the last few minutes are worth the wait. Like the best moments in concertos by Elgar and Walton, Williams crafts an incredibly tender section toward the end that both orchestra and soloist rendered in shadows and whispers. It stunned.

Everyone should hear the Stokowski *Pictures*, an important window into the orchestra's history. (Anyone can; while tickets to Sunday's concert are as high as \$203, the matinee will be aired live on WRTI-FM, 90.1). If Ravel sought to boldface Mussorgsky's lines tastefully and suggest a whole world of colors that work with one another - like, say, Monet's blues and golds - Stokowski created a Saturday morning cartoon. Not content with one orchestration for the duration of a phrase or idea, he often changed instruments midstream.

The degree to which orchestration (and other changes to the score) altered the basic character of the music was astonishing. Everywhere, nature: lightning and thunder from percussion, an icy chatter from violins, warm strings of sunlight. Stokowski's orchestrations sound like no one else's, though a bit of Tchaikovsky peeked through. The commonalities most obvious were with his other orchestrations - of pieces by Bach, Debussy, and Mussorgsky. All was in the service of theatricality, as was the deafening last chord that seemed to grow toward a brilliant infinity.

It was this one note, the last in a carefully paced emotional expansion, that made the audience explode, and for a few moments the air filled with immortality of a sort. It's been more than 75 years since Stokowski stepped down from his post in Philadelphia and four decades since his death, and here he was stealing the show once again.

Additional performances: Saturday at 8 p.m. (sold out), and Sunday at 2 p.m.  
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