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# Cleveland Orchestra displays breadth, abundant animation on all-Prokofiev program (review)



Conductor Stephane Deneve, music director of the Brussels Philharmonic, returned to the podium at Severance Hall Thursday to lead the Cleveland Orchestra in a program stocked with works by Prokofiev. (*Uwe Ditz*)



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CLEVELAND, Ohio – Concert programs need not feature multiple composers to be diverse, broad-based, or compelling. Sometimes, one name is all it takes.

Consider this week's Cleveland Orchestra program, for example. Playing only Prokofiev, the orchestra and conductor Stephane Deneve Thursday night at Severance Hall crafted an evening without not only dull moments but any moments less than scintillating.

To be fair, a third name also figured prominently. By way of contrast to opera and ballet scores, Canadian violinist James Ehnes offered the composer's Violin Concerto No. 1, treating the work to a thrilling account balancing grace and aggression.

If any composer penned enough to stock a solo program, it's Prokofiev. Both prolific and relentlessly inventive, the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Russian master constitutes a musical world unto himself, a colorful, tangy realm boasting everything from the tiniest of solo keyboard gems to enormous operas.

Of that place, Deneve is plainly a skilled navigator. Thursday night, the music director of the Brussels Philharmonic and principal guest conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra demonstrated a clear fluency in Prokofiev, sifting out the essence of every passage and leading with a generally crisp, refined touch.

Start where the program did, with the suite from Prokofiev's opera "The Love for Three Oranges." Here, at the night's outset, Deneve and the orchestra seized tightly on the score's absurdist spirit, prancing through its taxing pages with both pristine technique and over-the-top senses of wit and drama. Stagings of the opera are rare here, but with such evocative performances of the suite to tide us over, one almost doesn't mind.

Prokofiev's "Romeo and Juliet" ballet, by contrast, is played with some regularity, in both staged and concert versions. Not that this fact made any difference Thursday. Performances as animated and vivid as that delivered by Deneve and the orchestra are welcome at any time.

Familiar though it is, the music came to fresh life much as the title play can be reanimated by a strong band of actors.

To its many depictions of conflict and intractable opposition, the orchestra brought enough swagger, plodding weight, and manic energy to convince even the most jaded of listeners. Love and death scenes, meanwhile, benefited from tender lyricism and organic pacing. If, at times, these calmer portions were almost too smooth, the climaxes and finale suffered not a jot.

Ehnes also represented the complete Prokofiev package. What the artist did by the Violin Concerto No. 1 wasn't merely justice. Wielding virtuoso technique and exquisite lyricism, Ehnes ensured for the work a resounding triumph.

Ehnes is an introspective, mild-mannered performer. Whatever he eschews in showmanship, however, he makes up for in care, detail, and passion. Every note Thursday, whether stand-alone or in a series, received his close attention.

Melodic passages he treated with loving delicacy, and Prokofiev's jagged frolics he brought off with hard, poignant force. But the most staggering feat came in the final Moderato, where, playing one stratospheric trill after another, Ehnes called to mind a hummingbird, fluttering intensely but with the greatest of ease.

That would have been enough to secure a place in the crowd's heart. Ehnes, though, went two steps further, ingratiating himself permanently with both an encore (the Largo from Bach's Violin Sonata No. 3) and a cheer for the Cleveland Indians. Which the audience liked better may never be known.

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