

Philadelphia Orchestra hits exquisite balance in Kravis performance

ARTS By Ken Keaton - Special to the Daily News



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Once upon a time, there were five world-class orchestras in the United States: New York, Chicago, Cleveland, Boston and Philly. That time has passed: We now have many magnificent orchestras, each competitive on the world's stage. But our Palm Beach audience needed no confirmation that Philadelphia remains one of the world's great orchestras after its Kravis performance Wednesday afternoon.

The Philadelphia Orchestra was always known for its sheer beauty of sound, and that was evident Wednesday. They were led by Principal Guest Conductor Stéphane Denève, who not only had magnificent conductor's hair, but managed to control this thoroughbred stallion with compact but precise gestures — no dancing at the podium for him.

Ah, yes ... that sound! It was consistently beautiful, but what was fascinating was how the sound changed from piece to piece.

The first half was French — Maurice Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin* and Claude Debussy's *La Mer*. The Ravel was given an appropriately Gallic, neo-classic treatment. The orchestra glistened with clarity and restraint. Wind solos were outstanding, particularly those of the principal oboe player, Richard Woodhams. (A fun fact — the orchestra has had only three principal oboists — Woodhams; his teacher, John de Lancie; and his teacher, Marcel Tabuteau.)

But if Ravel glistens, Debussy shimmers. *La Mer (The Sea)* evokes its subject with astonishing power. The Ravel relies on specific sounds — wind solos, string themes — but Debussy reveals himself to be Ravel's equal in orchestration in the wildly imaginative ways he combines instruments, ways none had considered before him. And Denève and the Philadelphians understood this, and presented a very different sound world.

The climax of the first movement, *From Dawn to Midday on the Sea*, was overwhelming. The second, *The Play of the Waves*, felt like we had to wipe the sea spray off our faces. And the finale, *The Dialogue of the Wind and the Sea*, brought the first two together, making us feel not so much that we had returned from a sea voyage, but that we had somehow joined with the sea herself.

The second half was Ludwig van Beethoven, his *Symphony No. 7*. Save for the sheer beauty, this could have been a different orchestra. Now in Beethoven's world, rhythmic precision and exuberant energy was the goal, and tone was a servant to that end.

And, as with the French works, the orchestra played with one mind — no section, no player was dominant, but the balance was exquisite.

If anything is to be criticized, it might be that the scherzo was a touch too fast — the trio's noble call sounded prosaic, without a chance to breathe. But even here Denève had his plan, the reprise of that passage had just enough extra space to make its point. And the final, *Allegro con brio*, was a merry and wild race to the end — *con brio* indeed! A memorable and delightful concert.
