

Culture Club

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Music review: Brilliant contrasts from Denève and the SLSO

By Sarah Bryan Miller St. Louis Post-Dispatch Mar 11, 2017



Stéphane Denève. Photo by J. Henry Fair

This weekend's program by guest conductor Stéphane Denève and the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra offered a piano concerto by the youthful Beethoven and the final tone poem by the mature Strauss, each performed superbly.

Denève, in his seventh week with the SLSO since 2003, is always a welcome visitor to Powell Symphony Hall. With a gift for managing large forces, as well as smaller ensembles, he had an excellent opportunity to demonstrate his range.

He's certainly at home in the music of Ludwig van Beethoven. He and his longtime friend and collaborator Steven Osborne gave the audience an expressive, elegant reading of the Piano Concerto No. 1 in C major.

Osborne, dressed in a black suit and open-necked black shirt, was casual in appearance, but his performance was totally committed. He began the concerto quietly and delicately, and then expanded the sound expressively. There was nothing overstated in his playing; all was beautifully shaped and vivid, and he brought out the humor in the conclusion.

Osborne and Denève have the kind of partnership that grows with long experience, and the orchestra was totally on board with them. Osborne used his own intelligently composed cadenzas, in a really satisfying performance.

Summoned back to the stage for an encore, he announced, "More Beethoven!" to much applause, and played the Bagatelle No. 5, Quasi allegretto, from op. 126, with grace.

Before the start of the second half, "Eine Alpensinfonie (An Alpine Symphony)," by Richard Strauss, Denève took the microphone and greeted the audience with "Bon soir!" He gave a brief introduction to the massive work, pointing out that there were 112 musicians on the packed stage and some unusual instruments: the Heckelphon, a kind of bass oboe; Wagner tubas (invented for "Der Ring des Nibelungen"); a rank of cowbells ("There are never enough cowbells").

The "Alpine Symphony" consists of 22 episodes recounting a day's hike up a mountain and back over the course of a day, played without a break through its 50-minute length. Denève and Co. thoughtfully used projected surtitles to show what was happening in each one.

Strauss' gift for tone painting was so highly developed that many of them needed no explanation, from the quiet start of "Night" and the brilliant sunrise to the cascades of "Waterfall" and those cowbells in "On the Alpine Pasture." The traveler makes his way through woods and moments of danger to the summit, and back down through a wild storm to ecstatic moments and the peaceful resignation of his journey's end.

The program represents more than its literal meaning, though; this is also a journey through a human life, and Denève explored it meaningfully and comprehensively. The expanded orchestra was fully on board with his vision throughout, from the many solo moments of the principal players to beautiful playing by sections and the responsiveness of the full ensemble, from stormy passages to the quietest moments of mystery.

Stéphane Denève and the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra

When 8 p.m. Saturday Where Powell Symphony Hall, 718 North Grand Boulevard How much \$25-\$111 More info 314-534-1700 or stlsymphony.org

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Sarah Bryan Miller is the classical music critic for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch; she also writes about visual arts and other topics in the fine arts.