

MUSIC AND DANCE

Cleveland Orchestra strikes musical gold with Deneve, Vinikour (review)

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Conductor Stéphane Deneve is back on the podium at Severance Hall this week, leading the Cleveland Orchestra in a program of Rachmaninoff and Poulenc. (Uwe Ditz)



By Special to The Plain Dealer

By MARK SATOLA

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- What a pleasure to hear Poulenc's "Concert champetre" in Severance Hall.

Poulenc, the most insouciant member of "Les Six" in France in the 1920s, has been under-represented in the Cleveland Orchestra's concerts of late, and Thursday night's performance of this lively concerto for harpsichord and orchestra, with American harpsichordist Jory Vinikour, is hopefully a harbinger of a change.

The concert also marked the return of conductor Stephane Deneve, music director designate of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra and music director of the Brussels Philharmonic and principal guest conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra. His performances of the Poulenc concerto and Rachmaninoff's second symphony Thursday night are a good indication of why his Brussels and Philly appointments were recently extended.

Poulenc wrote his "Rustic Concerto" for harpsichordist Wanda Landowska, whose giant Pleyel harpsichord was still no match for the large orchestra the composer arrayed behind it. Poulenc demonstrated great cunning in his deployment of his forces so that the harpsichord is never overwhelmed, but Deneve added an extra layer of



sonic security by discreetly amplifying the two-manual Dowd instrument (on loan from the Baldwin Wallace Conservatory of Music).

Vinikour proved a fleet-fingered and stylish performer, fully inhabiting Poulenc's witty sound world in which musical bon mots share air time with surprisingly profound musings. He tackled Poulenc's technical challenges with ease and, especially in the finale, great speed.

Deneve managed balances perfectly, keeping the 100 or so players reined in where necessary but also allowing them the satisfaction of letting the fortissimo passages have their full strength. Between the two artists, Poulenc's wide emotional range -- traversing wistfulness, high spirits, humor and profundity -- was shown in its very satisfying entirety.

After the intermission, Vinikour popped up to the dress circle to listen to Deneve's reading of the Symphony No. 2 in E minor by Rachmaninoff. He must have known something special was in the offing.

And something special did indeed happen. Deneve conducted, as is now the fashion, the uncut version of Rachmaninoff's massive score. He also brought one minor innovation into play, based on Rachmaninoff's own handwritten note in the Cleveland Orchestra's score. The composer, when consulted by the first music director of the Cleveland Orchestra, Nikolai Sokoloff, corrected the Scherzo's initial metronome marking from 126 to 160 (in layman's terms, from fast to crazy fast).



The effect was wholly different from what is usually encountered, creating a much more intense experience. Good thing it was the Cleveland Orchestra playing, because the pace might have been too much for a lesser ensemble.

The real achievement of the performance, however, was that the work was given a solidly definitive performance of the score. Deneve was one hundred percent in the moment at every moment, guiding the players through the music's mountainous climaxes and deep valleys of gloom, and maintaining the dramatic tension needed to corral the uncut version's waywardness as it climbs to its triumphant pinnacle in its final bars.

Cleveland audiences will have to wait another year before Deneve returns to Severance Hall. He's back in 2019 to conduct Jennifer Higdon, James Macmillan and Scriabin. It would be nice if we could have him again sooner.

REVIEW

Cleveland Orchestra

What: Stephane Deneve conducts Poulenc and Rachmaninoff.

When: 7 p.m. Friday, March 23; 8 p.m. Saturday, March 24; and 3 p.m. Sunday, March 25.

Where: Severance Hall, 11001 Euclid Ave., Cleveland.



Tickets: \$21-\$165. Go to clevelandorchestra.com or call 216-231-1111.

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