

# The Philadelphia Orchestra breaks hearts (and strings) with violinist Nikolaj Szeps-Znaider

by [Peter Dobrin](#), Updated: May 3, 2019



LARS GUNDERSEN

The ritual is as memorable as it is rare. A string breaks in the violin concerto and in quicksilver succession, the concertmaster hands her violin to the soloist, an associate concertmaster hands his violin to concertmaster, and so on down the section.

But this kind of musical murmuration didn't happen Thursday night when Nikolaj Szeps-Znaider broke a string in the first movement of the sprawling Elgar *Violin Concerto in B Minor*. Instead, the Philadelphia Orchestra came to a halt and our soloist went shopping for a new string among the orchestra violinists. He and conductor Stéphane Denève joked and chatted amiably with the Verizon Hall audience while it fell to associate principal second violinist Paul Roby to put a new E string on Szeps-Znaider's violin.

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Szeps-Znaider said by phone Friday morning he chose to stop the Elgar rather than take the concertmaster's violin because there was another 10 minutes or so to go on the first movement, and putting an unfamiliar violin under his chin might have been jarring both to him and the audience. "It's the E and the A string that break most often, since they are the highest and have the most tension," he said, adding that these two can snap unexpectedly and are as likely to give out in a Schubert sonatina as in more violent works.

In any case, playing any part of the piece on any other violin would have eliminated a bit of magic. His instrument comes with a pedigree as the 1741 Guarnerius on which Fritz Kreisler premiered the Elgar concerto more than a century ago. Here, in a way that doesn't happen often, violin and concerto are a matched set.

The violinist is special, too. Szeps-Znaider cultivates an old-world sound, and it doesn't come merely by way of an old Italian instrument. He has made a specialty of this concerto, and all of the expressive techniques he used added up to some of the most gorgeous violin playing anywhere.

You also didn't have to strain to hear it. Szeps-Znaider puts across enormous presence and charisma. The impact comes from how naturally and subtly he has integrated certain techniques — the carefully judged slides between notes, the move from non-vibrato to vibrato on a single note, the changing colors, and the incredible depth of his sweetness.

Much of Elgar's concerto comes as a longing sigh, but in the more pastoral stretches, the sense of peace is complete. Hearing this violinist play the second movement of this concerto with this orchestra was a high point in this long listening career — as was the moment in the last movement where memories of music from earlier in the piece emerge. No one lands on pangs for the way things used to be the way Elgar does, and you feel it whether or not you ever stepped foot on British soil.



DREW FARRELL  
Stéphane Denève

The concerto is long, and so the only counterweight to it needed was a symphony: Tchaikovsky's *Fifth*. Have we heard this piece an awful lot? Do we really need to hear it again? Yes and yes.

The Philadelphians slip it on like an old velvet glove, stretching with each conductor but only slightly. Denève brought an individualized dynamic here and an unhurried cadence there. But basically this was about the orchestra — its power to speak as a single, unified force in the first movement, and the ability to hand phrases and ideas to one another seamlessly.

Solo voices were in fine form: hornist Jennifer Montone, oboist Peter Smith, and flutist Patrick Williams. The double basses and tuba player Carol Jantsch loomed large but remained refined. Timpanist Don S. Liuzzi's two quick punctuation marks at the end of the feathery string figure in the third movement were a delight.

Denève, too, may have had a light touch, but when sonic beauty is as lustrous as this, a light touch is all you need.

*Additional performance: 2 p.m. Friday and 8 p.m. Saturday, Verizon Hall, Broad and Spruce Streets. Tickets are \$10-\$158. [www.philorch.org](http://www.philorch.org), 215-893-1999.*



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