

Concert review: Denève, SLSO take audiences on a profound journey

By Sarah Bryan Miller St. Louis Post-Dispatch Sep 28, 2019



Stéphane Denève conducts a rehearsal Wednesday at Powell Symphony Hall. Sept. 11, 2019 Photo by Laurie Skrivan, lskrivan@post-dispatch.com

The St. Louis Symphony Orchestra's new music director, Stéphane Denève, followed up last weekend's smorgasbord of Franco-American works with one massive masterpiece for this week.

On Friday night, Denève, a pair of well-matched soloists, the St. Louis Symphony Chorus and the SLSO gave an exceptional performance of just one composition, Gustav Mahler's inspired and inspiring Symphony No. 2, "Resurrection."

In mourning for his mother, who died in 1889, Mahler took his one-movement symphonic poem called "Totenfeier (Funeral Rites)," and made it the first movement of his new symphony. He wrote sketches and the second and third movements over the next several years. Then, at the funeral of conductor Hans von Bülow, he was inspired by hearing the poem "Die Auferstehung (The Resurrection)," by Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock. It's brief, just eight lines, but Mahler wrote more poetry of his own to fill it out.

The result, with Mahler's music, expresses a universalist view of eternal life. The work is complex but incredibly rewarding as it takes listeners through the final journey. The first movement depicts a losing struggle with death; the second, a graceful Ländler, carries memories of happy days. The third movement (reworking the tune of Mahler's song "Anthony of Padua Preaches to the Fishes") looks at life's futility. The last two movements are about resurrection, from childlike faith in "Urlicht (Primal Light)" to the victorious affirmation and conclusion of "Auferstehung (Resurrection)."

It was a good choice by Denève, who almost always chose ideal tempos. (He could have slashed a little more at the very end of the first movement.) He has a good rapport with both chorus and orchestra.

The SLSO, mightily augmented in the brass section in particular, hasn't performed this work in almost a decade; they gave a strong reading throughout. Many of the principals had the chance to shine in solo moments, particularly associate principal trumpet Thomas Drake, principal flute Mark Sparks, piccolo Ann Choomack and concertmaster David Halen.

The soloists were well chosen: soprano Joëlle Harvey sang with wonderful clarity and beauty. Mezzo-soprano Tamara Mumford, replacing an ill Kelley O'Connor, displayed a rich, dark voice; some of her German diction was a little odd, as when she pronounced "Leben" as "ly-ben." Both brought great meaning to the texts.

So did Amy Kaiser's well-tuned chorus, singing from memory. They began their section at a hushed but well-supported pianissimo, and built up to a triple forte, singing with conviction throughout.

Judging by the applause, it blew Friday night's audience away; it certainly did me. If last weekend's program showed something of Denève's wide range, this one showed his considerable depth. May he give us many more such moments.

St. Louis Symphony Orchestra: "Resurrection"

When 8 p.m. Saturday • **Where** Powell Symphony Hall, 718 North Grand Boulevard • **How much** \$15-\$83 • **More info** 314-534-1700 or slo.org

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Sarah Bryan Miller is the classical music critic for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch; she has also written on a variety of other topics.