

CONCERT REVIEW

Music review: Stéphane Denève and the SLSO return to Powell Symphony Hall

By Sarah Bryan Miller St. Louis Post-Dispatch
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Stéphane Denève conducts a chamber concert at Powell Symphony Hall, Oct. 16, 2020. (Photo by Dilip Vishwanat)

Dilip Vishwanat

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It's not the best time to seek out orchestral performances, particularly in the spacious halls they generally occupy. Many orchestras have canceled their seasons in all or part, including the New York Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Boston Symphony Orchestra. But as of Thursday night, music director Stéphane Denève and the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra returned to Powell Symphony Hall for a live concert.

It's on a small scale, of course. After a team of medical experts, working with the staff, decided that the hall (which seats 2,700) could safely accommodate as many as 300 people, management decided to go with just 100 in the audience, carefully spaced, and chamber ensembles performing. Everyone must be masked, for safety's sake, from audience members to staffers

to stagehands to the musicians. (Wind players wear theirs except when they're playing.)

The thought of socially distanced musicians is concerning; they are used to listening to each other and adjusting their performances accordingly. For the orchestra players, shared music stands are a thing of the past. For now, each has a separate stand and turns his or her own pages. The SLSO is such a fine ensemble that it didn't matter: On Friday morning, they were as together as they always were. The only minor distraction was the occasional swish of pages being turned together in the violins, a tribute to just how good the acoustics are in Powell Hall.

These concerts are abbreviated; this one was just an hour long, with no intermission. But it incorporated an awful lot of fine playing.

The concert-opener was a video recording of the four members of the SLSO trombone section performing "Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman," by Joan Tower, a onetime composer-in-residence here, while distanced on an otherwise empty stage. They're a tight group and played the complicated score perfectly.

A live string orchestra next performed "Starburst," by Jessie Montgomery, a New York-born violinist and composer with a distinctive voice. "Starburst" depicts a galaxy in which new stars are being rapidly created. Montgomery, said Denève in a brief introduction to the concert, "is a bright new star in our musical sky," and he and his forces proceeded to prove it. The piece got a solid, committed performance from Denève and the strings.

Then came a familiar work, Beethoven's Symphony No. 3, "Eroica." The orchestra was close in size to what the composer would have expected. It received a stirring, accurate reading throughout, from the first movement, Allegro con brio, to the second's funeral march, bright scherzo of the third and the inventive variations of the finale. Denève did some things a little differently than the usual and kept things moving right along. It all worked splendidly.

The horns were flawless, and the other wind players were right with them; the strings maintained their excellence. It was a performance to cherish and not just because we've been waiting so long.

Additional performances will be at 7:30 p.m. Saturday and 3 p.m. Sunday at Powell Hall, 718 North Grand Boulevard; visit s Iso.org or call 314-534-1700.

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