

Music Academy Festival Orchestra

There's something about the French!

Review by Daniel Kepl / VOICE

IN FINE MUSICAL FORM ALL SUMMER, the Music Academy Festival Orchestra has come together as an ensemble of superb peers. Under a host of world-famous conductors, the ensemble has quickly acquired a delicately honed and carefully balanced arsenal of orchestral color, imagery, and flat-out thrilling finesse in performance.

The pleasure of hearing the full orchestra in all its sonic glory last Saturday at the Granada Theatre, especially considering its well-deserved imprimatur this summer for gorgeous romantic orchestral sound, was enhanced not just in dollops, but ladles of crème fraîche by guest conductor and French music specialist, Stéphane Denève. Music Director of the St. Louis Symphony and Brussels Philharmonic, Principal Guest Conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra, and Director of the Centre for Future Orchestral Repertoire, Denève is cutting edge and offered a lush musical cocktail of compelling early to mid-twentieth century romantic impressionism; a comingling of programmatic sense and sensibility that puzzled and satisfied, simultaneously.

Sergei Rachmaninoff's *Symphony No. 3 in A minor, Op. 44*, composed near the end of the composer's life in 1935-36 opened the concert. *The Second Orchestral Suite (1913)* by Maurice Ravel from his "symphonie choréographique," *Daphnis et Chloé*, was the only other work on the program, intensifying the passion and audience palpitation levels considerably. There was a brief break between the two works, but no intermission.

Of Rachmaninoff's three symphonies, the *Second Symphony* is performed most often and is revered particularly for its several cascading waterfalls of luscious tunes, tethered resolutely to the composer's famously rich orchestrations. The first and third symphonies have not fared so well over time. At 40+ minutes, the four movements of the *Symphony No. 3* rolled out promisingly Saturday night, with an immediately engaging tune in the first movement, *Lento - Allegro moderato - Allegro*. Truth is, the remaining three movements, despite their lush orchestrations and sometimes interesting emotional pivots, simply don't get off the ground melodically; the soaring tunes of the *Symphony No. 2* are AWOL in the *Third Symphony*. Some suggest old age, exhaustion, depression, or the approaching world war as distractions.

So why program this symphony? The answer is both simple and disarming. Denève, grounded in French repertoire, re-examined before our eyes and ears, Rachmaninoff's late-late Russian romantic masterpiece at least partially from an impressionist's interpretive perspective. Unable to soar as successfully as the composer's earlier symphony,



Photo by Zach Mendez

The Music Academy Festival Orchestra led by Maestro Stéphane Denève

the *Third* is nevertheless worth at least occasional dusting off for its rich orchestrations, if not its currency in 1936 European compositional innovation.

Exploring the good, the bad, and the inadequate mechanisms of this puzzling Russian work proved advantageous for both the musicians in the orchestra and the audience; an enabling musical dissertation from Denève to the young virtuosos of the orchestra – with his hands. Determined to find something to save in the chassis, the conductor spruced up the undercarriage, replaced some spark plugs and chrome, and found value in his re-tooling of the work, *à la française*. The *Symphony No. 3* still doesn't run seamlessly, but Denève's attempt to fix it, was fascinating.

The orchestra was deliciously tight in all departments. Strings were unforced and gorgeous in sonority throughout. Wind, brass, and percussion sections working together as co-conspirators in thrills, relished executing rhythmic and

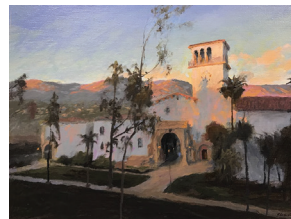
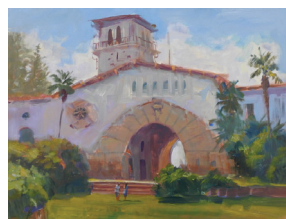
dynamic contrasts as they were intended – unexpectedly thrilling. Denève, a large man, was in mesmerizing control of all things, including minutia. The third movement, *Allegro - Allegro vivace - Allegro*, for example, was extraordinarily re-examined and codified on several levels by the conductor, while the last movement, *Allegretto - Allegro vivace*, particularly the fugue section, served up a satisfying sonic lush out in his hands, despite not having a single memorable tune.

After demonstrating a flair for Russo-French rapprochement with his Rachmaninoff interpretation, Denève let loose his inner Gaul for a magical performance of Maurice Ravel's, *Daphnis et Chloé Suite No. 2 (1913)*. The *Second Suite* is a pastiche of dance segments - *Lever du jour*, *Pantomime*, and *Danse generale* - from the full-length ballet composed for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in 1912. From its mystical opening bars - animist warbling in winds intimating a panhellenic nature idyl - straight through to its triumphant Dionysian finale of shifting rhythms and irregular meters, the *Second Suite* is an imaginative tour de force for orchestra, with one of music's most exhilarating endings – a sonic whirling dervish celebrating pagan love. The audience, quiet as church mice throughout the roughly 18-minute musical orgy, erupted in roars and hoots of delight after the last tsunami chord – an apt acknowledgement of an extraordinarily exhilarating performance.

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SUMMER FESTIVAL JUN 13 - AUG 6



CALENDAR

MOSHER GUEST ARTISTS
CONCERT SERIES:
Jessie Montgomery

- August 4th

SERIE DE CONCIERTOS
DE ARTISTAS INVITADOS
DE MOSHER: Jessie
Montgomery - 4 de agosto



Week 8

THU AUG 4

1:30 PM PERCUSSION MASTERCLASS | Michael Werner - HH

1:30 PM TRUMPET MASTERCLASS | Paul Merkelo - WH

3:30 PM BASSOON MASTERCLASS | Benjamin Kamins - LH

7:30 PM MOSHER GUEST ARTISTS CONCERT SERIES
Jessie Montgomery & Academy Fellows - HH

FRI AUG 5

1:30 PM SOLO PIANO MASTERCLASS SERIES | Conor Hanick - HH

1:30 PM LEHRER VOCAL INSTITUTE MASTERCLASS

Martin Katz 75th ANNIVERSARY LEGACY MASTERCLASS - LH

3:30 PM OBOE MASTERCLASS | Eugene Izotov - LH

7:30 PM PICNIC CONCERT SERIES | Academy Fellows - HH

SAT AUG 6

6 PM MEET THE CONDUCTOR @ Sullivan Goss - An American Gallery

7:30 PM ACADEMY FESTIVAL ORCHESTRA CONCERT SERIES

THE PINES OF ROME Speranza Scappucci conductor - GT

HH HAHN HALL LH LEHMANN HALL WH WEINMAN HALL LT LOBERO THEATRE GT GRANADA THEATRE

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