

Music Academy Festival Orchestra

## All Berlioz program—

# Beauty & the Beast!

Review by Daniel Kepl / VOICE

**A**LICHEMY, WITCHES, CAULDRONS, DEATH BY EXECUTION, summer nights both sanguine and otherwise; a Julia Childs masterpiece of sweet and savory sounds stirred up last Saturday's Academy Festival Orchestra program at the Granada Theatre. Featuring the Music Academy's Lehrer Vocal Institute co-chair, mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke, in a radiant performance of the composer's 1841 song cycle *Les Nuits d'été* (*Summer Nights*) Op. 7 and concluding – how could it have been otherwise? – with Berlioz' 1830 hallucinogenic opium trip, *Symphonie fantastique*, Op. 14, the concert left the audience spellbound and punch drunk. A glorious night!

French conductor Stéphane Denève chaired the first Festival Orchestra concert of the 2023 Music Academy summer season with, well, aplomb. Perhaps it was the maestro's atavistic kinship with the stunningly curated all-Hector Berlioz program Saturday that added a certain delicious insouciance to his manner? Maybe it was the professional performance level of this season's Music Academy fellows, gathered from around the world for their first rehearsals just days ago, that lit the flame of inspiration?

No matter. Maestro Denève offered his orchestra colleagues a masterclass in meticulous conductorial nuance and subtlety. Even the thrilling execution and witches sabbath movements of the *Symphonie fantastique* grazed the lower depths of orchestral color and the upper reaches of sonic apocalypse with an ever-present collective sense of taste and forbearance. How French! The orchestra delivered sound imagery to match each of Denève's dynamic shadings, emotional sighs, and explosive sound bombs. Berlioz' many-splendored chimeras came to life like vivid holograms from distant worlds.

Two-time GRAMMY Award-winning mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke, a 2002 Music Academy graduate, is enjoying her first summer season as Co-Director of the Academy's Lehrer Vocal Institute. Her public performance debut in the new position last Saturday was sublime for its understatement. Maestro Denève, acutely aware the original version of Berlioz' song cycle *Les nuits d'été* (1841) was for soloist and piano, reigned in the dynamics of the composer's later orchestrations (1843, 1856) last Saturday, creating a performance so hushed, reverent, and mystical, the full house at the Granada fell profoundly silent through the entirety of the six song cycle to poems from *La comédie de la mort* (*The Comedy of Death*) by Théophile Gautier (1811-1872) – *Villanelle* (*When the new season comes*); *Le spectre de la rose* (*The spectre of the rose*); *Sur les lagunes: Lamento* (*On the lagoons*); *Absence*; *Au cimetière: Clair de lune* (*In the cemetery*); and *L'île inconnue* (*The unknowable isle*).

A template of Berlioz' utterly unique orchestrating genius, *Les Nuits* are masterpieces of restraint, never covering the soloist, particularly in the lower reaches of the mezzo range. Maestro Denève brought the orchestra to a kind of meditative calm, the occasional swirls and currents in the darker poems controlled



Maestro Stéphane Denève



Mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke and Maestro Stéphane Denève



Photos by Zach Mendez

by the sensibility of the conductor's body signals. Understanding his duty to the original concept (piano), Denève coaxed colors from Berlioz' orchestrations that were complex yet gossamer, distant, feather light. Cooke's voice, sustained gently by her collaborators, was a balm of unstrained thus beautifully shaped, pure mezzo-soprano heaven.

As if making up for the restraints conditional to an artistically satisfying performance of *Les nuits*, the after-intermission performance of Berlioz' *Symphonie fantastique*, while beautifully crafted and shaped with elegance and refinement throughout, nevertheless gave everybody in the room what they wanted, a Music Academy E-ticket to glory! Conducting the massive five movement *Épisode de la vie d'un artiste* with a combination of intense focus on dynamic nuance and rubato (the first three movements) and flat out "off with their heads" fun – *March to the Scaffold* and *Dream of a Witches' Sabbath*, Denève seemed pleased to show off this summer's new batch of orchestral chops. Fabulous ensemble string cohesion that was lush and articulate; punchy winds capable apparently, of just about anything; a brass section to take home to mom; and a percussion battery capable of marching on Moscow. Wow!

Daniel Kepl has been writing music, theatre, and dance reviews for Santa Barbara publications since he was a teenager. His professional expertise is as an orchestra conductor.

For more reviews by Daniel Kepl visit: [www.performingartsreview.net](http://www.performingartsreview.net)

## VOICE

MAGAZINE

www.VoiceSB.com • CASA Santa Barbara, Inc.  
217 Sherwood Drive, Santa Barbara, CA 93110  
(805) 965-6448 • Established 1993

### Independent Community Journalism

Our mission is to provide accessible news for everyone along with a broad and inclusive perspective on our local community in both our FREE digital and print editions. If everyone who reads *VOICE Magazine* supports it, our future will be made secure.

Send a contribution today to: *VOICE Magazine*,  
217 Sherwood Dr, Santa Barbara CA, 93110



Mark Whitehurst, PhD  
Publisher & Editor  
[Publisher@voicesb.com](mailto:Publisher@voicesb.com)



Kerry Methner, PhD  
Editor & Publisher  
[Editor@voicesb.com](mailto:Editor@voicesb.com)

**Legal Advertising:** *Voice Magazine* is an adjudicated newspaper of General Circulation (Case #SP 20CV02756 dated: Oct. 27, 2020). We can publish Probate, Trustee, Name Change, Summons, and other notices. Please inquire about our rates: [Publisher@voicesb.com](mailto:Publisher@voicesb.com)

**Daisy Scott**, Associate Editor • [News@voicesb.com](mailto:News@voicesb.com)

**Payroll Systems Plus**, Bookkeeping

**Columnists:** **Robert Adams** • [Robert@EarthKnower.com](mailto:Robert@EarthKnower.com)

**Harlan Green** • [editor@populareconomics.com](mailto:editor@populareconomics.com)

**Isaac Hernández de Lipa** • [c/o Editor@voicesb.com](mailto:c/o Editor@voicesb.com)

**John Palminteri** • [www.facebook.com/john.palminteri.5](http://www.facebook.com/john.palminteri.5)

**Amanda & Richard Payatt** • [foodwinetwosome@cox.net](mailto:foodwinetwosome@cox.net)

**Sigrid Toye** • [Itssigrid@gmail.com](mailto:Itssigrid@gmail.com)

**Advertising:** [Advertising@voicesb.com](mailto:Advertising@voicesb.com)

**Circulation:** *VOICE Magazine* • 805-965-6448 or [Publisher@voicesb.com](mailto:Publisher@voicesb.com)



All advertising in this publication is subject to the Federal Fair Housing Act of 1968, as amended, which makes it illegal to advertise "any preference, limitation, or discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, handicap, familial status, or national origin, or intention to make any such preference, limitation, or discrimination." This publication will not knowingly accept any advertising which is in violation of this law.

#### Memberships:



California Newspaper Publishers Association



Hispanic-Serving Publication