

**Review****Canton Symphony and Andre Watts:  
Burnin' down the house (January 26)**

by Tom Wachunas



*Vive le Français* was the theme for the January 26 concert by the Canton Symphony Orchestra at Umstattd Hall, featuring works by Debussy, Ravel, Franck and Saint-Saëns. Maybe a more apropos title for the evening would have been *Vive le Watts*, as in the eminent pianist, André Watts. His return to Canton (the last being in 2010) begins a three-year CSO residency. The 2014-15 season promises to be especially momentous, when he will perform all of Beethoven's piano concertos with Maestro Gerhardt Zimmermann conducting.

In some ways, the concert brought to mind a twist on the old adage, "a watched pot never boils." For programmatically, this watched pot, so to speak, did finally bubble over, and explosively so, though only after a long, lingering simmer.

First on the program was Claude Debussy's symphonic suite, *Printemps (Spring)*, a lesser-known work from his youth in two free-form movements which, despite their largely derivative nature, foreshadowed some of the more memorable developments in the composer's later work. Here the orchestra was particularly fresh and tantalizing during the first movement's atmospheric string crescendos. And in keeping with the spirit of the work, which suggested a bursting forth of new life, the aural intensity of the more extroverted second movement was decidedly more pronounced.

The second program selection, *Ma Mère l'Oye (Mother Goose Suite)*, by Maurice Ravel, seems in retrospect a more substantial exercise in frothy orchestral textures and thematic whimsicality, with enchanting solo passages from the winds, violin, and viola, along with a splendorous fanfare in the finale. By now the water, as it were, was getting warmer.

Following the intermission, the much anticipated appearance of Andre Watts significantly raised the temperature, beginning with Cesar Franck's *Symphonic Variations*. The work has often and rightly been described as a superbly structured, colorful dialogue between piano and orchestra. And while it does not require any unusually frenzied virtuosity on the part of the soloist, Watts voiced his end of the scintillating conversation with passionate animation and clarity. Call it the last step prior to full-boil.

From the opening cadenza of the evening's final work — Camille Saint-Saëns' *Piano Concerto No. 2 in g* — with its solemn, muscular arpeggios, to the breathtaking rhythms of the exhilarating third movement, Watts exhibited astonishing stamina and flawless authority. It is after all the piano which establishes the overall thrust of this work. Watts greeted the task with fierce, riveting panache. So too the sparkling orchestra, responding in kind as a full partner on this remarkably powerful musical excursion.

At one point during the final movement I looked around the hall and saw rows of faces with eyes widened and jaws dropped in rapt attention. *Presto* indeed, Watts had completely immersed himself in a seemingly endless torrent of joyously cascading notes until the very last cymbal crash. Then, for a moment, he seemed to collapse, utterly spent.

But his apparent exhaustion was short-lived. He quickly stood up and smiled broadly at the clearly adoring audience, which just as quickly stood for a long ovation. No encore was forthcoming. None was needed.

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