

Cleveland Orchestra: a feast of Prokofiev with Stéphane Denève & James Ehnes (Oct. 27)

by Daniel Hathaway



French conductor Stéphane Denève and Canadian violinist James Ehnes proposed a multi-course repast of the music of Sergei Prokofiev for Cleveland Orchestra audiences the weekend of October 27-29. Happily, that Russian composer's music enjoys enough inner variety and contrast to make a well-balanced menu, especially when served up with equal measures of brilliance and nuance.

Suites began and ended the evening. First up, six excerpts from the fanciful opera *Love For Three Oranges* demonstrated Prokofiev's cheeky sense of parody and his fine ear for orchestral color. First staged in Chicago, the opera is long on Commedia dell'arte characters, which gave both composer and production designers ample material to stoke their imagination.

Rude gestures in the opening movement (concatenated from several scenes) give way to low broodings featuring the contrabassoon and raucous brass and percussion. The well-known March serves as thematic glue in the opera, while the Scherzo represents a brilliant orchestral storm. A calm moment for solo viola and strings yields to many incidental solos. Nervous strings in the final scene accompany an escape sequence later punctuated by portentous low brass. Denève and the Orchestra pumped up the more dramatic moments in the Suite to an ear-splitting ferocity.

According to his diary, Prokofiev intended his first violin concerto to be a lyrical and elegant work, and he certainly succeeded in the opening movement, where James Ehnes engaged in calm interplay with the Orchestra, often in an extremely high range. A pizzicato passage and a superb *pianississimo* in the solo violin led to a virtuosic spate of fiddling in the Scherzo, a march with snare drum underlay, and a disruptive comment

from the tuba. The soloist finally gets to sing a broad tune in the finale, and Ehnes took full advantage of the opportunity.



Prokofiev No. 1 is an eccentric concerto in many ways, but Ehnes put it across on Thursday evening with infectious commitment. He rewarded the cheering audience with a calm, expressive encore: the third movement of J.S. Bach's third violin sonata.

If the *Three Oranges* suite is full of ludicrity, the excerpts from Prokofiev's ballet *Romeo* are suffused with drama and tragedy. Choosing his own selection of movements from the trio of suites the composer extracted from the full score, Stéphane Denève led a breathtaking performance that sometimes verged on the deafening. (Winds and strings seated in front of the brass spent much of their down time fiddling with their earplugs.)

Solos figured importantly among the musical *dramatis personae*: cornet (Michael Sachs), cello (Richard Weiss), oboe (Frank Rosenwein), flute (Marisela Sager), contrabassoon (Jonathan Sherwin), violin (Peter Otto), celesta (Joela Jones), tuba (Yasuhito Sugiyama) and saxophone. Among other startling effects, the fifteen great orchestral strokes that attend Tybalt's death bettered those in Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* by four.

The only element that the *Romeo and Juliet* suite lacked — besides a little tonal moderation — was dancers to help provide context for some of the less pictorial music.

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