

Cleveland Orchestra with Vinikour & Denève (March 25)

by Daniel Hathaway



Sometimes the most interesting programs bring together pieces that wouldn't have met under normal circumstances. Sunday afternoon's Cleveland Orchestra concert on March 25 at Severance Hall under the direction of guest conductor Stéphane Denève was a case in point. Denève paired Poulenc's bizarrely charming *Concert champêtre* for harpsichord

and large orchestra with Rachmaninoff's gorgeously overwrought Second Symphony.

It's fascinating that in its centennial season The Cleveland Orchestra is taking up some pieces for the first time. Written for Wanda Landowska and premiered in 1929, the Poulenc concerto was meant to be played on the bulked-up instruments invented by Pleyel around the turn of the 20th century during the revival of the harpsichord.

They're scarce these days, so guest soloist Jory Vinikour presided over an instrument by William Dowd built during the *second* harpsichord revival in the 1970s. Gently enhanced by amplification, the instrument stood up well to a stage full of instruments, thanks also to Poulenc's sensitive orchestration and Denève's carefully managed balances.

The idea of a "rustic" concerto starring such a refined instrument is part and parcel with Francis Poulenc's musical aesthetic. He's quite happy juxtaposing a variety of

musical styles in a fast-changing environment, and no idea lasts very long in this piece.

It would have been fun to hear Jory Vinikour perform the work on a big, noisy Landowska-style machine with a few more registers to play with — especially the 16-foot stop that was most noticeably missing on this occasion. But he played the solo part crisply and with efficient virtuosity, creating witty dialogues with his orchestral colleagues and reacting chameleon-like to Poulenc's mood changes.

After a warm ovation, Stéphane Denève ushered Vinikour back onstage, pulled up a chair, and listened intently to the harpsichordist's encore — a cheerful performance of Domenico Scarlatti's tricky, hand-crossing *Sonata in D*, Op. 97.



Audiences may wonder sometimes what conductors actually do during a performance. The second work on Sunday's program gave a clear answer: the person on the podium isn't there merely to beat time — The Cleveland Orchestra scarcely needs that — but to pace and give shape to a performance that makes musical sense.

Rachmaninoff's Second Symphony is so full of musical opulence, so teeming with never-ending melodies that reach higher and higher, so replete with stunning climaxes, that someone needs to carefully manage its progress over its hour-long course lest sonic and emotional fatigue take over.

Denève was superb in his role as artistic overseer, masterfully calculating tempos and transitions between sections for optimum effect. The Orchestra was with him at every juncture, playing both flawlessly and with restraint — until it was finally time to let it all out at the end. The ovation was quite as overwhelming as the symphony.

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