

The New Criterion

Dispatch March 06, 2020 11:26 am

A French Philharmonic

by Jay Nordlinger

Louis Langrée has spent more time in David Geffen Hall—formerly Avery Fisher Hall—than almost anyone. He has been the music director of the Mostly Mozart Festival since 2003. But, last night, he was making his New York Philharmonic debut. Monsieur Langrée also works in Cincinnati, having been the music director of the orchestra there since 2013.

His program with the Philharmonic last night was all-French, in a way. What do I mean by “in a way”? Well, the final piece on the program is commonly known by its French title: *Le Poème de l’extase* (“The Poem of Ecstasy”). It is by Scriabin, a Russian. Anyway . . .

Nationality is not destiny—not in music and not in other areas of life. Louis Langrée is a versatile conductor, and you would be hard pressed to find a better Mozartean. Still, it was clear last night that he knows his way around the Impressionistic repertoire of his homeland.

The first half was all-Debussy, beginning with the faun—the prelude to his afternoon. The New York Philharmonic sounded very French, I must say. There was Robert Langevin—a Quebecker—on flute. There was Leelanee Sterrett—not a Quebecker—on French horn. She played suavely. I’m not sure I have ever said this about a horn player. Sheryl Staples, serving as concertmaster, played exquisitely.

And who was that ringer on oboe? Dwight Parry, from Langrée’s Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. He was a standout all night. So were Langevin and Staples, incidentally. Repeatedly, they were called on for solo turns, and repeatedly they delivered.

Langrée handled the prelude with intelligence and *délicatesse*. It was a beautiful rendering. If I have one criticism, it is this: the rendering was a little cautious, a little tame. There can be more blood in this piece—more passion, and, frankly, more volume. Would that be un-French? I don’t think so, no.

The concert continued with Debussy’s three *Nocturnes*. Langrée was, again, sensitive and masterly. He was also transparent, meaning that every note was clear. You could practically have written the score down—down to the slightest pluck of a harp. Was this rendering, again, a little tame? Maybe,

but this is a matter of taste—and Langrée's, even if it is not exactly ours, is very good.

By the way, once you have technique, doesn't music-making come down to taste, fundamentally?

Making a very fine impression in the orchestra was Ryan Roberts, the English horn. And the orchestra had the services of a women's chorus from the Juilliard School, who were fitting sirens. (N.B. Debussy's third nocturne here is "Sirènes.")

When you have an evening of Impressionism, the air becomes gauzy. Sort of smoky, aurally. Much as I enjoyed the evening, I wanted to clear the air—cut the gauze—with a Bach chorale or something. How about that Bach chorale on steroids, Wagner's *Meistersinger* overture?

To begin the second half, there was Ravel, his *Shéhérazade*, that three-parter for voice and orchestra. Who was the voice? Isabel Leonard, the American mezzo-soprano. She is a very good French singer, as she proved at the Metropolitan Opera as Mélisande. (For my review, go [here](#).) In the early going of the Ravel, she committed some imperfect intonation—rare for her. But thereafter, she was more or less impeccable.

She was nicely direct and unfussy. She sang *evenly*. In emotion, she was not too hot and not too cool. She was just right. (It sounds like I'm talking about porridge, I know.) In Ravel's final part, "L'Indifférent," Leonard conveyed what I want to call contained sensuality. And the sorrow, the *douleur*, came through.

The principal horn in the Ravel was Richard Deane, who was first-rate. Gratifying.

Well, what about that poem, the ecstatic one? This piece is almost a trumpet concerto, and Christopher Martin did the honors, singing, as much as playing. There was not a hint of a blare or a glare in his sound. This was pure, beautiful singing. For a conductor, pacing is key in this poem. You don't want to peak too soon. Or too late. Langrée let the piece build naturally, capping a splendid evening.

Jay Nordlinger is a Senior Editor at *National Review*.

[His podcast with *The New Criterion*, titled "Music for a While," can be found here.](#)