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Orchestra, guest conductor Krivine rise to Stokowski program

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The Philadelphia Orchestra is having another of its Leopold Stokowski awareness weeks, in which you never know if you're going to encounter the vision, the eccentricity, or the datedness of the great conductor who laid the foundation for what the institution is today. Guest conductor Emmanuel Krivine was game Friday for reproducing a characteristically top-heavy Stokowski program from the mid-1930s: Franck's weighty Symphony in D minor on the first half, with flashy Poulenc and Bach on the second - the reverse of how concerts are built in our time - all in various manifestations of D minor. Had it not worked, he could always have said, "Stoky made me do it."

Of course, compelling performances are what make a program, and this one came off just fine. As one of Europe's more interesting conductors, Krivine can be counted upon for fairly personal performances, which is what's needed for the problematic. Lacking the proper thematic invention to sustain its delusions of Wagnerian grandeur, Franck's symphony usually gets fast tempos and sharp edges in hopes that its Gothicism will carry the piece. Instead, Krivine expansively allowed long rhetorical pauses between musical paragraphs, which didn't shine a glaring light on the piece's inadequacies but rather, in the first movement, revealed chamber music-like interludes that other performances rush by. The second lacked the thematic strength to support this approach, but the third regained the piece's momentum, and the orchestra played superbly.

Poulenc's Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra can seem like the least of his concertos, but it made a smashing impression with Krivine's tight control over its sprawling musical references - cabaret music, silent-film scores, bits of Mozart - plus emphasis on its gutsy percussion. Also, the two-piano sister duo Christina and Michelle Naughton took the opposite tack of the better-known Labeque Sisters, playing with great sensitivity and nuanced interplay between their two instruments. Both were so captivating, one would want to hear them individually.

The famous transcription of Bach's Toccata and Fugue that ended the concert wasn't sensitive, nuanced, or thoughtful in the least, and wouldn't have been a bit of fun if it had been. Of course Krivine knew that. In Europe, he gives historically informed readings of romantic-era repertoire, and was able to do this concert with minimum guesswork, since it was, truly, an original-instrument performance.