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# Violin virtuoso Joshua Bell helps BSO start strong in Tanglewood opener

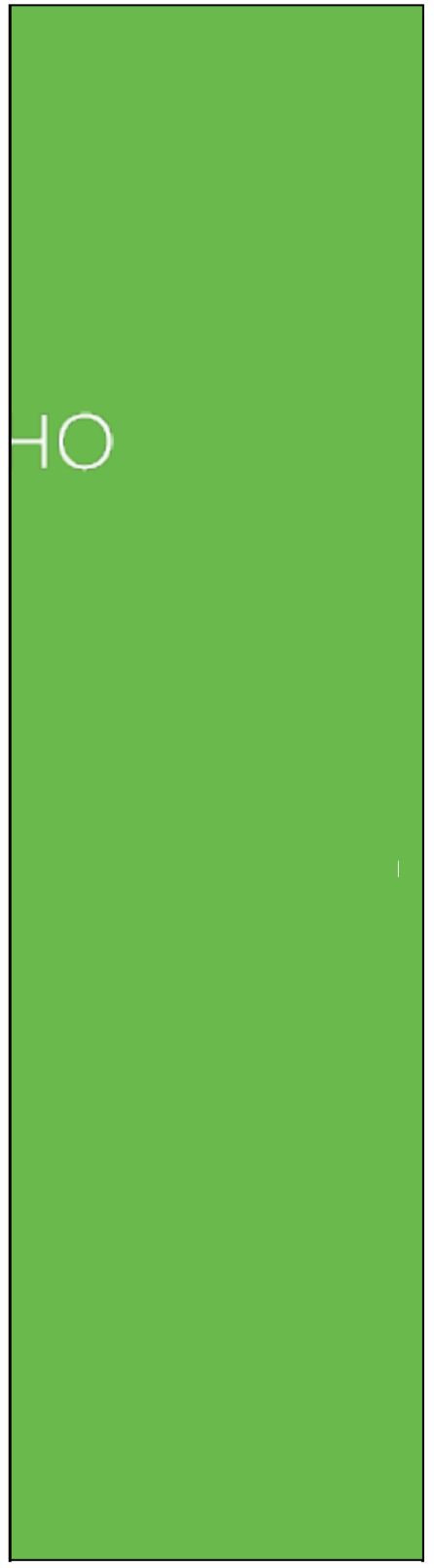


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The Boston Symphony Orchestra with violinist Joshua Bell and conductor Jacques Laco...  
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By **Keith Powers**

For **The Patriot Ledger**

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The weather was western-Mass. thunderstormy, but that's the reason they built the Shed in the first place. At least musically, opening weekend at Tanglewood was everything that summertime out of the city could be.

Friday evening's season kickoff featured the white-clad Boston Symphony Orchestra performing under the baton of Jacques Lacombe, along with violin soloist Joshua Bell. For Lacombe, it was his second straight year conducting the Tanglewood opener.

As for Bell, he's deep into his third decade – impossibly, given his still youthful energy and appearance – performing with the orchestra in its summer home. Since his debut in 1989, he's played nearly all the great violin literature. For this opener, he chose the third Saint-Saëns concerto – certainly not the most technically challenging work he's performed here, but one with great expressive possibilities.

The concerto builds an arch around the middle, slow movement, a gorgeous call-and-response between soloist and various members in the orchestra. Bell carved out the melody, which rises abruptly then descends a delicate scale. Various voices answer his call – flute, oboe, strings. The movement never abandons this gambit, but nobody could possibly mind.

Bell took every chance he could with the dynamics – reaching a point at the climax, which wants to disappear into nothingness, when it actually did. It was one

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of those moments that separate the great players from the good – Bell, slowing down and diminishing the sound, actually bowed a few notes of the melody that were inaudible. Breathtakingly so.

After intermission, Lacombe and the orchestra programmed Prokofiev's Fifth Symphony. Bumpy and contentious, the symphony – a late-WW II composition – seems more Shostakovich-like than most of Prokofiev's orchestral works.

Beautiful melodies, and surging, almost comedic interludes, are abruptly broken off for clashing, challenging dissonances. Just when you think it's safe to be optimistic, darkness intercedes.

Both the second movement scherzo, with sections straight from a Hollywood western, and the slow third movement, mix just enough bizarre music in to make the symphony feel alluring but ironic as well.

The playing was alert, although Lacombe seemed to be guiding the ensemble rather than inspiring them. The concert opener – Ravel's orchestration of his terrific piano work "Alborado del gracioso" – had no such shortcomings, with Lacombe exhorting the ensemble with energy. Bassoonist Richard Svoboda's elegant solo stood out.

Saturday's concert lacked an instrumental soloist, but the program still captivated in every way. Two French classics opened the evening: Debussy's "Afternoon of a Faun" and the second suite from Ravel's "Daphnis et Chloé." Principal flute Elizabeth Rowe shown as soloist in both, carving out a deliciously long solo line to open the Debussy.

After intermission, it was all sex and drinking. In Latin.

Carl Orff's "Carmina Burana" gathers the largest forces that will fit on a stage: complete orchestra, full chorus plus children's choir, and three vocal soloists. But its beauty lies in intimate pairings: piano and trumpet here, percussion and voice in other sections, small groupings taken from the enormous chorus in yet other moments.

The highlights were continuous in this engaged, humorous and theatrical performance. Baritone Stephen Powell had audience and performers alike laughing when he drunkenly wobbled to his feet to sing as the Abbot of Cockaigne. His comic abilities were complemented later by his musical acumen, reaching up out of his range into falsetto to sing "Dies, nox et omnia." Poor tenor Jean-Francis

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Monvoisin waits all evening to sing his one aria, and when he does he's a roasted swan, explaining his fate in comic falsetto. Soprano Nadine Sierra avoids the comedy, but sang with effortless lyric force, especially in her touching "Dulcissime." The Tanglewood Festival Chorus, prepared by Betsy Burleigh, and the child's chorus, prepared by Johanna Hill Simpson, both sang with exhortative enthusiasm. Lacombe, conducting without a score all evening, expertly kept his outsized forces on message.

The Tanglewood season runs through Sept. 3. For tickets and program information visit [www.bso.org](http://www.bso.org) or call 888-266-1200.

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