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Music

National Gallery of Art Orchestra in peak form under direction of Philippe Entremont



By **Patrick Rucker** October 13 at 5:28 PM

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The National Gallery of Art Orchestra was in peak form Sunday night under the direction of Philippe Entremont. Thirty years ago, Entremont, now 80, added conducting to his career as an internationally recognized concert pianist. In terms of conventional baton technique, few would consider Entremont a natural on the podium. But as this compelling program of French music amply demonstrated, there is no question of his ability to get results from his musicians.

Debussy's "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun" sounded a bit deliberate at the outset but quickly found a natural ebb and flow that perfectly suited the sensual colors and textures of the orchestration. The languorous flute solos that establish the mood of the piece were excellently played by Sara Nichols, and the live acoustics in the West Garden

Court seemed to enhance, rather than obscure, Debussy's luxurious washes of sound.

The evening's novelty was a transcription of Saint-Saëns's Sonata for Clarinet and Piano, a new arrangement for clarinet and string orchestra by Franck Villard that was being performed for the first time Sunday. Distinguished French clarinetist Michel Lethiec delivered the solo with a creamy tone and almost uncanny agility.

After intermission, the full ensemble took the stage for Bizet's youthfully ebullient Symphony in C. Entremont's interpretation of this sunny piece combined deft balances with sharp focus, all maintained with a light touch. The symphony's finale, a sort of mad roller-coaster ride in perpetual motion, was exhilarating.

Rucker is a freelance writer.

Conductor Philippe Entremont. (Pascale L.R.)

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