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Review Dudamel celebrates a summer favorite to the beat of the USC marching band

Members of the USC Trojan Marching Band join Gustavo Dudamel and the Los Angeles Philharmonic for the "Tchaikovsky Spectacular" Friday at the Hollywood Bowl. (Francine Orr / Los Angeles Times)



Gustavo Dudamel conducted the Los Angeles Philharmonic in the annual Tchaikovsky Spectacular on Friday night at the Hollywood Bowl, an event that proved surprisingly and hugely satisfying. Music directors of major orchestras aren't supposed to conduct these things, you know. Tchaikovsky Spectaculars are supposedly beneath them. Music directors of major orchestras hand off such assignments, complete with their "1812 Overtures" and fireworks, to deputies.

But there was our resident maestro, in his penultimate Bowl appearance of the summer (the program is scheduled to repeat Saturday night), dressed all in black, no less, and apparently glad to be there. Dudamel conducted a great deal of the concert with a smile on his face, a cheerfulness that seemed to rub off on the orchestra. At the same time, he wasn't taking the assignment lightly, leading much of the music with a dead seriousness that paid significant dividends.



Gustavo Dudamel, Friday night at the Bowl.
(Francine Orr / Los Angeles Times)

Who knew, for instance, that the “Capriccio Italien,” which opened the concert, is a great piece of music? I did not. I had thought it was little more than a collection of dressed up organ grinder tunes with some empty bombast thrown in for good measure. Dudamel showed otherwise.

He proved it not by pushing and prodding it, not by milking it for the last ounce of sentiment and swoon, but, rather, by conducting with a light touch. The Italianate melodies were dispatched with slender curves, smooth and long-limbed. The brass proclaimed nobly, the oboes sang tenderly. The strings played with a compelling richness, and sounded like they meant what they played.

When the climax arrived, instead of bombast we had fire, the conductor and orchestra having bided their time wisely and pounced. It was a remarkable performance, and the audience seemed to know it.



American Ballet Theatre dancers Cory Stearns, left, and Hee Seo. (Francine Orr / Los Angeles Times)

And so it went. Next, on both sides of intermission, came a generous selection of music from “Swan Lake.” This included the appearances of four dancers from American Ballet Theatre, Hee Seo and Cory Stearns in the “White Swan” pas de deux from Act II, and Gillian Murphy and Alexandre Hammoudi in the “Black Swan” pas de deux from Act III.

These dances and dancers made all the more of an impression by being luxuriantly lighted in jeweled tones and by being set up with a number of selections performed by the orchestra and Dudamel. We were able to better appreciate the strengths of the “Swan Lake” music without visual distraction, as it



ABT dancers Gillian Murphy and Alexandre Hammoudi perform at the Hollywood Bowl. (Francine Orr / Los Angeles Times)

were, and then have the eye candy for dessert.

And what beauties are in this music. Dudamel took a minimalist approach in his conducting manner, nudging here, coaxing there, encouraging here, all with the smallest of motions and some slight swiveling of the body.

The “Opening Scene” from Act I was ebullient, precise and snappy. In the famous Waltz from same, the violins snuck in elegantly with the main theme, phrases were caressed, dynamic contrasts ever so subtle. In a nice touch, also subtle and not expected at the Bowl, part of the trumpet section used cornets, with a mellower sound, just as Tchaikovsky intended.

Then came the “1812 Overture,” with de rigueur fireworks and, also de rigueur here, members of the USC Trojan Marching Band to add that extra sizzle and pomp. This is where the musical connoisseur rolls his eyes, but the conductor (who we could see on the big screens) was so clearly having a good time, and the orchestra was not phoning it in but playing as if this were the “Pathetique” Symphony, and the fireworks (even Dudamel got to press a button to launch something or other) were so perfectly gauged. It was impossible to resist.



The USC marching band, adding its pomp to the annual program. (Francine Orr / Los Angeles Times)