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# All the Colors of a Scriabin Rarity That's Meant to Be Seen as Well as Heard

By STEVE SMITH

NEWARK — No hard, fast rule dictates that an orchestra has to engage in elaborate sleight of hand when presenting an unfamiliar work; still, there is something to be said for creating a useful context. A unifying theme, however basic, can provide a starting point for appraising a new or uncommon piece. Surrounding it with familiar music that is in some way related allows the audience to discover and apply its own connections.

Jacques Lacombe, a French Canadian conductor now in his second season as music director of the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, has proved himself a shrewd programmer. During his inaugural season he introduced a new winter festival, Man & Nature: Exploring the Elements in Music, with a series titled Water, matching canonical works like Debussy's oceanic piece "La Mer" with fresher fare like Tan Dun's inventive, splashy "Water Concerto." More than just a series of concerts linked with an elemental gimmick, the festival included displays by New Jersey artisans and lectures by representatives of conservation initiatives.

On Friday night at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center here, Mr. Lacombe and the orchestra opened their second winter festival, Fire, with a program built around a relative rarity: "Prometheus: The Poem of Fire," by the Russian composer, poet and mystic Alexander Scriabin. The program, which was repeated on Saturday night in New Brunswick, N.J., and reviewed on Sunday afternoon at the center, offered what were said to be the orchestra's first performances of a Scriabin work.

Just presenting "Prometheus" was no small feat for this ambitious, neighborly ensemble, but Mr. Lacombe went further. Scriabin, who proposed synesthetic connections among specific keys, colors and temperaments, included in "Prometheus" a part for a color organ,

which would project colored lights during a performance. Mr. Lacombe engaged Al Crawford, the president of the lighting-design firm Arc3design, to make Scriabin's intent manifest.

Onstage next to Yevgeny Sudbin, a prodigious Russian pianist and a noted Scriabin advocate, Mr. Crawford triggered lights from an electronic keyboard. Projected on five circular reflectors hanging overhead, violet light saturated the stage during the work's low, rumbling opening chords. Throughout the piece beams of rose, green and white shone in restless permutations and complex fusions; the final bars, per Scriabin's instructions, came with a blinding white flash.

The display could have amounted to mere novelty, had the ensemble not delivered the goods musically. Unfamiliarity presumably accounted for a few isolated smudges, but on the whole the orchestra mastered this brilliant, diffuse and fitful music. Mr. Sudbin, making his New Jersey Symphony debut, played with elegance and vivacity.

The concert opened with a slightly underpowered but eminently characterful account of Wotan's Farewell and the Magic Fire Music from Wagner's opera "Walküre," meant to show where some of Scriabin's more potent instrumental notions originated. And in Stravinsky's ballet "Firebird" — like the Scriabin, a dazzling Russian piece — supple strings and brilliant contributions from the principal woodwinds and French horn compensated for occasionally shaky work from the brasses. Mr. Lacombe's agile, transparent and winningly energized conception made this one of the most exhilarating accounts of "Firebird" I've ever heard.

*The New Jersey Symphony Orchestra continues its winter festival, Fire, on Friday evening at the Patriots Theater at the War Memorial in Trenton, 1 Memorial Drive; (800) 255-3476, [njsymphony.org](http://njsymphony.org).*