

MSO welcomes the season
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One connotation of the word “spectacle” is sheer mass: bright lights, hundreds of people on the stage, thunderous blasts of sound. In this regard, the Madison Symphony Orchestra captured the hugeness of the holidays, with their joy, inclusiveness and wide appeal, in the annual Christmas Spectacular on Friday night. With three considerable choirs and a full complement of instrumentalists (including players of guitar, piano, organ and drum set), the MSO welcomed the holidays in a big way.

This year, Maestro John DeMain asked just one high-profile guest soloist to join the locals in Overture Hall – the delightful Sylvia McNair, an amiable, versatile performer whose voice fits well with the pop style.

McNair, with white blonde hair and earrings flashing at her collarbone, sparkled on a heartfelt rendition of “Mary Did You Know?” by Mary Lowry and Buddy Greene. Her tone was warm and inviting on “Let There Be Peace On Earth,” then took on a silvery quality in a lively arrangement of “Winter Wonderland.”

She wasn’t served quite as well on Daniel Clydesdale’s adaptation of “O Holy Night,” which felt at once oversimplified and overdone. But a brief solo with the Mt. Zion Gospel Choir on their brazen “Silent Night” was welcome, and her “duet” with the Madison Youth Choirs on “Gesú Bambino” by Pietro Yon was lyrical and simply pretty.

The level of sound was a consistent challenge for the groups on Friday, and some – Mt. Zion in particular – were poorly served by the sound setup. Leatha Stanley’s gospel choir, conducted by Tamara Stanley, seemed to be shouting “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.” There was no musicality to it.

The Madison Symphony Chorus, however, found a better balance than in past years. Beverly Taylor conducted a gorgeous rendition of Herbert Howells’ “A Spotless Rose,” with excellent young baritone Ryan Thorn on the solo.

It was a joy to sing along to the “Hallelujah Chorus,” clap to “Do You Hear What I Hear?” and quietly cheer the fine Youth Choirs in the sentimental “All is Well.” At the end, the audience sang together about bringing joy to the world and decking the halls, adding their voices to the MSO’s enthusiastic welcome to the holiday season.