

Cellist Ralph Kirshbaum brings grace, tenderness to MSO program

John W. Barker

For Isthmus

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Consistently excellent, if contrasting, music distinguished the Madison Symphony Orchestra's third concert program this season, Friday night in Overture Hall.

The true jewel, and the most coherently constructed, of Respighi's "Roman Trilogy" of four-movement symphonic poems, "The Fountains of Rome," launched the program. Ranging from delicacy to calculated grandeur, it posed a test that the MSO met beautifully, notwithstanding just a brief smudge or two.

There were more challenges in the vehicle brought by the guest artist, cellist Ralph Kirshbaum. Ernest Bloch's seething, sensuous evocation of the Biblical King Solomon—or "Schelomo"—in what he called a "Hebraic Rhapsody" was given a "Bloch-buster" performance by the orchestra, with Kirshbaum rising above it all in passionate, big-toned eloquence.

Kirshbaum brought a supplemental vehicle, the brief "Silent Woods" by Dvorák. Starting as one of six scenic piano duets called "From the Bohemian Woods" and titled "Klid" (in Czech) or "Silence," it was transcribed individually by the composer, first for cello and piano, then (under the title of "Waldesruhe") for cello and orchestra, the form used in our concert. It is a gentle, nostalgic, and lyric piece, quite in contrast to the Bloch work, and Kirshbaum played it with loving tenderness. As a solo encore, he added a brief movement from one of Bach's cello suites.

The second half of the concert was devoted to Tchaikovsky's "Symphony No. 5." It was last played by the MSO in 2003 under Vladimir Spivakov, who stressed its deeply Slavonic flavor. For all its many moments of melting beauty, the work is hardly a subtle one, and music director John DeMain quite frankly dispensed with subtlety. Yes, the songful interludes and the whimsical charm of the middle movements received due justice. But DeMain treated the work generally as a drama—as full-blooded, rich and just plain noisy as can be.

I could wish for a little more restraint from the trumpets and timpani, but if you share DeMain's vision of the score as lush and blazing sound, this is a performance for you. Certainly the orchestra gave him all the intensity and color it possibly could, and the new seating plan helped clarify a lot of details and balances in the strings. The prominent woodwind passages were beautifully handled, and Linda Kimball was predictably moving in her second-movement horn solo.

In all this is a performance that reminds us why this symphony is so popular.

High drama marks MSO's concert with emotive cellist

Lindsay Christians

For the Capital Times

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The Madison Symphony Orchestra's program Friday night featured all the drops and giddy heights found in a great roller coaster ride.

Maestro John DeMain opened the program with Ottorino Respighi's lighthearted pastoral "Fountains of Rome," an ode to the sculptures in what MSO music historian J. Michael Allsen calls "the eternal city."

The delicate opening seemed to approach from far away, tentative as the players eased into the piece. Textures in the strings were lush and lovely; one could almost hear the running water.

A blast of brass and a flurry of winds sounded like children splashing in the ancient fountains. Huge low notes in the organ vibrated over and around the players; later the sunset movement captured a contemplative tone with mellow bells.

Guest cellist Ralph Kirshbaum, a renowned performer and teacher, opened Ernest Bloch's theatrical "Schelomo" a wrenching, mournful tune. With swooning dynamics, Kirshbaum pulled phrases out of his instrument like strands of yarn. Kirshbaum's a masterful artist, notable for his expressiveness. In the "Schelomo," soloing over a menacing background from strings and brass, he breathed into each line as though the instrument was an extension of his body.

Kirshbaum responded to audience enthusiasm with two encores, one listed in the program: "Silent Woods," by Antonín Dvorák; the other a Sarabande from Bach's Third Cello Suite. The first was like a slow ballet, with a luxurious and lyrical feel. The latter, long and smooth with hints of a folk melody, allowed Kirshbaum to showcase his considerable skills as a musical colorist. It sounded like the musical equivalent of burnished bronze.

DeMain closed the program with Tchaikovsky's fifth symphony, which the MSO last played in 2003. Allsen explained in the program that the symphony treats the composer's "resigned, even relaxed...relationship with Fate." The opening bassoon and clarinet solos were low and silky, setting a dark a dark tone that exploded into more passionate, fiery passages later in the *allegro con anima*.

In the later movements of the Tchaikovsky, some players sounded out of step. The sound got muddy. But those are minor quibbles in what was otherwise an exuberant performance, as delightful as a thrill ride but immeasurably more moving.

John DeMain's journey from opera conductor to orchestra conductor now seems complete—and wows me

Jacob Stockinger

For The Well-Tempered Ear.com

11/24/09

When maestro John DeMain took over the reins of the Madison Symphony Orchestra 16 seasons ago—can it really be that long?—he was already a highly accomplished musician and widely respected conductor with world premieres, TV and radio appearances, world-class galas and a Grammy to his credit. Madison was lucky to lure him and smart to snatch him up.

But there is no denying that DeMain came here primarily as an opera conductor. Now if should leave here—and I, for one, hope that event is not soon on the horizon—he will leave as an orchestra conductor. Not that he has lost his touch as a first-rate opera conductor. Anyone who heard his performances of Bizet's "Carmen" with the Madison Symphony Orchestra and the Madison Opera earlier this month can attest to that.

But if you heard the MSO's most recent concert this past weekend, and particularly the high-octane performance of Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5—you can also attest to the fact that DeMain has grown. And I mean grown impressively.

DeMain arrived in Madison with the opera repertoire—from the big staples (Puccini's "La Boheme" and "Madama Butterfly") and the less frequently played classics (many Verdi operas) to some contemporary works (Leonard Bernstein and John Adams)—comfortably under his belt. That background prepared him for a lot, and especially for accompanying not just vocalists but also instrumentalists. (His talent to partner with others was also in ample evidence this past weekend when DeMain accompanied cellist Ralph Kirshbaum in moving performances of Ernest Bloch's "Schelomo," not an easy piece to hold together and Dvorak's "Silent Woods.")

And not for nothing did the once-pianist study conducting under Leonard Bernstein. But the purely orchestral works bore out the same impression I had when DeMain conducted Mahler, Beethoven and Brahms symphonies and concertos in recent years. (Tellingly, Brahms wrote choral works, but no operas.)

First, he raised the curtain with Respighi's brightly colorful tone poem "The Fountains of Rome" and it felt like listening to a painting—as it should. Then came Tchaikovsky's Fifth—one of that popular composers most popular works. I won't go through all the many fine points I heard. Suffice it to say that with such a fetching interpretation, you' do not mind Tchaikovsky's overworked compositional technique of penning a great theme—the composer clearly understood the importance of a wonderful melody to his listeners—and then throwing it around to every section in every possible permutation.

But under DeMain's at once intelligent and visceral direction—with his fine sense of balance and shading as well of tempo changes—the symphony always sounded exciting, never boring or tedious or repetitious. Strings, brass, winds, percussion—it was hard to find a weakness. And when they arrived at the finale, the march tempo exploded as it picked up and DeMain pushed the orchestra to full throttle, giving the piece all the juice he could muster. You found no “Song of the Volga Boatmen” trudging along in this reading. What began as a soulful lament ended up transformed into a victory march full of energy and triumph.

Bluntly put and shortly stated, I think John DeMain is taking more risks these days and has a sharper edge now than when he came. He knows the repertoire better, and more importantly, what he wants to do with that repertoire. DeMain never seemed a timid interpreter, but one senses a newfound and powerful confidence on his part.

That is no small achievement to arrive at in your 60s. It took hard work and a willingness to learn over time and through experience. So DeMain is to be praised for openness to growth and his desire to avoid cruise control at precisely the age when so many other people begin to rely on it.

Judging by the immediate and prolonged standing ovation and the bravos DeMain and the MSO elicited in the Tchaikovsky, and judging also by the comments I heard from other audience members as I left Overture Hall, I am not alone in my opinion in seeing this concert as an exciting event that makes great classical music sound vital and necessary rather than luxurious or optional. He makes the music sound as great as it is.

I have not surveyed orchestra players or other listeners, but I would like to hear from them both. I would like to know that my ears and my memory are not deceiving when I say that there has never been a better time to take in the Madison Symphony Orchestra. It's not by chance or coincidence, one suspects, that the MSO scored its most subscribed concert and best single ticket sales (for a total attendance around 5,000) so far this season with the Tchaikovsky concert, according to MSO marketing director Ann Miller.