

Guest conductor Anu Tali, pianist Stephen Hough grace Madison Symphony Orchestra
Two guests visit for the latest Madison Symphony Orchestra program

Isthmus

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John W. Barker

Anu Tali drew from the orchestra a riot of brilliant sound in Sibelius' "Symphony No. 1.", which debuted Friday night in Overture Hall. After her splendid success last season, conductor Anu Tali made a most welcome return. As last time, she brought with her a work by a fellow countryman revered back in Estonia but little known outside: Heino Eller (1887-1970). His short but atmospheric symphonic picture "Dawn" was most attractive. One is tempted to listen for influences, and I think I might have spotted a few. But I was surprised to perceive a great closeness in Eller's music to the assertive impressionism of Frederick Delius.

The other visitor is Englishman Stephen Hough. One of the outstanding pianists of our time, he has technique by the carload but he also the intelligence and sensitivity that make a great artist. His recording of all the piano concertos of Tchaikovsky is about to appear, and he is clearly deep into this literature right now. For his appearance this time I wish he had chosen the sadly underrated and truly wonderful Second Concerto, instead of that roof-raising warhorse the First.

But that's his choice, and he played the socks off it. His bold energy and powerful sonority, plus crisp articulation, created a truly rousing performance of this crowd-pleaser. But he also recognized moments of genuine poetry in a score too often played just for sensationalism. My only concern is that, at least in the Friday evening performance, there were some tiny moments when soloist and orchestra were not perfectly in sync rhythmically. As an encore Friday night, Hough played a solo piano arrangement of Tchaikovsky's beloved song "None but the lonely heart".

After the intermission, the petite Baltic fireball of a conductor had the field to herself in the "Symphony No. 1" of Jean Sibelius. Already developing both his personal sound and a nationalist Finnish idiom, for his first full venture into the symphony (as also in the Second), Sibelius was still unable to transcend completely the Russian orchestral style against which he was patriotically rebelling, and above all that of Tchaikovsky. Bits of the truly Finnish and personal Sibelius peek out here and there, but under the cover of Slavic lavishness.

Tali clearly goes for color, drama, and loudness in her realization of this powerful score. That the results verge on blowsiness is mainly the composer's fault, but there is no doubt that Tali makes a valid case for her approach. No Baltic brooding for her, but a riot of brilliant sound is what she draws from the fully responsive MSO.

Guest conductor Anu Tali leads impressive, emotive performance

The Capital Times

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Lindsay Christians

Stephen Hough showed astonishing clarity on Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 with the Madison Symphony Orchestra on Friday night, Feb. 26, 2010. Hough last performed with the MSO in 2006. Anu Tali, guest conductor of the Madison Symphony Orchestra this weekend, led a warm program anchored by Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 and Sibelius' Symphony No. 1.

Tali, tiny and birdlike with an expansive conducting gesture, is an expressive maestro with or without her baton. Co-founder and head of the Nordic Symphony Orchestra, Tali appeared with the MSO just last year.

The opening piece, "Dawn," was a tone poem, a piece of music that aims to evoke a specific image. "Dawn" composer Heino Eller, whom Tali called "the father of Estonian music," wrote this piece in 1920, around the time of a national awakening in Estonia. Tali had said "Dawn" reflects well where she comes from — "totally wild and cold nature, where sunbeams come through mist in the mornings" — as well as "great hopes for a new nation." The orchestra's performance of it was rich and lovely, from a fine solo by oboist Marc Fink to passages that sounded like water dripping off an icicle.

Guest pianist Stephen Hough's thrilling Tchaikovsky performance was an emotional roller coaster. He showed astonishing clarity in the thundering octaves during the first movement, and his pedal technique was impeccable — everything was connected, yet each phrase was distinct. Hough is an eloquent performer, bringing out the lush, fiery character in Tchaikovsky's challenging work, then embracing its playful qualities. He revealed another, sweeter side in his own simple two-minute arrangement of Tchaikovsky "None But the Lonely Hearts."

The MSO has not performed Jean Sibelius' Symphony No. 1 in E minor (1899) for more than 25 years. The work was introduced to Europe as part of a concert tour for Sibelius, also the author of "Finlandia." The subtext of that initial tour was Finland's struggle against oppressive Russia, making this symphony an apt bookend to the Eller.

The MSO's performance showcased the dynamic range of the symphony. Booming bass drum and emphatic pizzicato (when strings are "plucked") gave way to moments delicate and soft enough to hear the solo harp. The symphony was strewn with small moments of brilliance, various themes and duets. It was almost disappointing that some of these lovely lines didn't last longer.

In his program notes, J. Michael Allsen wrote that parts of the Sibelius were "pure Tchaikovsky," and listening to the composers side by side with those furious string parts, it was easy to agree. That's the joy with such well-made programs. By putting works side by side, the symphony invites discussion that lasts long after the final notes sound.

Pianist Hough Dazzles MSO Audience

Pianist Played Tchaikovsky

Channel 3000

Feb 27, 2010

William R. Wineke

Pianist Stephen Hough plunged into Tchaikovsky's "Concerto for Piano and Orchestra" during Friday night's Madison Symphony Orchestra concert and kept the almost capacity audience spellbound for the next 32 minutes.

The Concerto is one of the most popular pieces of classical music ever written (you can Google "Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto" and hear a couple of renditions for free) and Hough made it his own, pounding the keys, smashing his feet into the piano pedals and, it seemed, even tossing his hair in time with the music.

The audience went wild, with good reason. Hough, who won a McArthur Fellowship (commonly called a "Genius" award) in 2001, brings an intensity to the music that Tchaikovsky must have intended. This was his third appearance with the MSO. He previously played the Madison concert hall in 1998 and in 2006.

But he was only one half of a great evening of music.

Returning to the MSO podium was guest conductor Anu Tali, a founder -- with her twin sister, Kadri -- of the Nordic Symphony Orchestra. She also conducted the orchestra in 2008 and is becoming a Madison favorite.

For those accustomed to John DeMain's appearance and podium dominance, Tali seems a bit surprising. She is petite -- well, to be honest, she looks a bit like a pixie who, when walking on stage with Hough comes up only to his shoulders -- and very blonde.

But when she starts conducting, she really takes over, seeming to make eye contact with each orchestra member as his or her parts, big or small, come up on the score. She has an expansive conducting style, so her arms seem always in motion, moving in great arcs as she urges the orchestra to action.

She concluded the concert by leading the orchestra in Sebelius's "Symphony No. 1 in E minor" and seemed to keep both arms waving above her head for the entire 38-minute performance. To understand that, just try raising your arms above your head for 38 seconds and then contemplate doing that for an entire symphony, all the while keeping track of 100 or so musicians. It's an impressive feat.

Tali also brings more than a bit of good humor to the stage. As the audience seemed determined to keep her taking bows at concert's end, she finally pantomimed taking a nap and walked off the stage to laughter.

So, it was another good concert and worth your while if you haven't yet purchased tickets.