

Madison Symphony Orchestra is relentless with violin soloist Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg
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Friday night in Overture Hall, the Madison Symphony Orchestra opened its second concert program with the ebullient overture to Glinka's opera *Ruslan and Ludmilla*. The well-drilled string players brought off their fiendishly fast parts triumphantly.

The main event, filling the second half, was Mahler's Symphony No. 1, in a sentimental return for music director John DeMain, who performed it in his first MSO season, in 1994.

In his hands, each movement was allowed its distinct individuality. The first, taken with unusual deliberateness, built steadily to a massive finish. DeMain captured the second movement's immersion in both the lustiness and the lilt of the laendler, the Austrian dance style that infuses so much of his music. The various moods of the sardonic third movement were deftly characterized, showcasing the wind sections to particular advantage.

The immediately following finale is essentially a relentless march of often raucous and explosive character, but with contrastingly plaintive inner sections. DeMain forged these as a cumulative progress toward a massively powerful climax. A rousing performance!

Oh yes, and there was a soloist: Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg, the recklessly efficient violinist, a popular visitor in her fourth appearance. Unfortunately, she has renewed her propensity for vulgar gyrations, perhaps prompted by the music she chose to play.

I must admit forthwith that I cannot understand the fuss made of late over the Argentinian musician Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992). He supposedly revitalized his country's national dance, the tango, writing music for his own instrument, the bandonéon, or big-button accordion, usually as part of his dance band. For all his initiative and imagination, he produced little more than pretentious nightclub music. And we rarely hear it as he wrote it, since it is usually served up in arrangements made by others since his death.

Thus as set of pieces for small band called "Four Seasons of Buenos Aires," recreated by arranger Leonid Desyatnikov as a set of four concertos for violin and strings. The arranger's model was, naturally, Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" concertos, to which oh-so-clever allusions were made along the way—I counted three—plus even a quick reference to Pachelbel's Canon. For all its relentless energy, it contains little musical substance. Aside from a segment for solo cello, the violin soloist gets most of the work, which Salerno-Sonnenberg did with the exuberant grace of a cowboy fiddler. Beyond subordinate whirring, chords, and jabbing punctuations, the reduced strings have little to do. Only in the "Autumn" concerto did something melodic appear, with an actual feeling of the tango.

This waste of time and talent is what gives "contemporary music" a bad name.