

Classical music review: Madison Symphony Orchestra stands out in Piazzolla's 'Seasons', Mahler's 'Titan'

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The Well-Tempered Ear

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"I think it was one of the best concerts I've ever heard them do," said one very satisfied concertgoer after Sunday afternoon's performance by the **Madison Symphony Orchestra**.

She thought right.

Under the baton of **MSO music director and conductor John DeMain**, the orchestra turned in some first-rate performances of very difficult repertoire and gave listeners a concert that was breathtaking in its excitement.

The showcase centerpiece, at least judging by the enthusiastic standing ovation, was Astor Piazzolla's "Four Seasons in Buenos Aires," with **Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg** as the violin soloist.

It's great music, a postmodern pastiche that draws on, and even quotes, the original Vivaldi, but also brings in the bittersweet sensuality of the tango, that brothel-born Argentinean dance that the French composer and teacher Nadia Boulanger, who also taught Aaron Copland, once advised Piazzolla to pursue if he wanted to be true to his roots and become a great modern classical composer with his own distinctive voice. So Piazzolla wrote this music, patched together by an editor into a quilt of slow and fast movements. It had the poignancy and sexiness and torrid dazzle of the original taboo dance. And if the purpose of music is to communicate to the listener, Salerno-Sonnenberg showed she has few equals.

Her transfixing stage manner adds to her sense of connection to the audience. Sometimes she looked as if she were marching; sometimes as if she were dancing; and sometimes gyrating in a seductive swoon. But at all times she threw herself, her soul and her total body, completely into this sizzling work that is at once pyrotechnical, moving and ironic.

To the MSO's credit, the scaled-down string players matched her virtuosity with string snaps, glissandos and unusual sounds with a precision that was flawless. Karl Levine's lyrical cello solo was a stand-out, but the all-string, chamber orchestra-like ensemble was really of a unified piece. And it was terrific.

It all brought an encore from the soloist — "Bess You Is My Woman Now" from "Porgy and Bess" — most fitting to perform in front of a conductor who won a Grammy for his interpretation of Gershwin's iconic American opera.

The second half of the concert turned from south to north, from the spice of artifice and dance halls to the more sober world of nature, as Gustav Mahler heard it and used it in his Symphony No. 1, dubbed “The Titan.”

It is a great work that was performed greatly, and the MSO performance stood the test of the week by holding its own against the same work as performed on TV by Gustavo Dudamel and the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Only two minor flaws kept the Mahler from being as close to perfect as one gets. A solo by the principal string bassist seemed a bit shaky and scratchy pitch-wise – after all, how often do bassists get to solo? And one brass player seemed slightly off in a loud brass passage (and of course when 10 of anything are trying to perform in unison, you always hear the weakest one or the one that is slightly off.)

But those quibbles aside, the almost hour-long symphony was filled with energy and drive as well as carefully calculated dynamics and balance to say nothing of deeply felt emotion. The dance movement, based on the German peasant *laendler*, was robust and much less halting or plodding than in the earlier Dudamel performance. And there is little to say about the overwhelming and riveting climax of the final movement since it achieved that perfect blending of abandon and control.

In short, it worked. The magic happened.

I suppose it all might have been expected, since the MSO raised the curtain with a vigorous reading of Glinka’s *Overture to Russlan and Ludmilla*.” But that’s the secret to great music-making: the well rehearsed surprise, well practiced spontaneity.

And Sunday the MSO possessed that secret in abundance. It was a performance to long remember and savor.