

MSO's guest violinist nimble, charismatic
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Press materials for Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg refer to her image as the “bad girl of the violin.” Is this because she exudes confidence, at times plays with a wide-legged stance, and performs unusual repertoire?

Such descriptions of her presence the Madison Symphony Orchestra's second program of the season, in which she performed Astor Piazzolla's “Four Season of Buenos Aires,” are too easy.

Better this: Salerno-Sonnenberg is ceaselessly charismatic. Her nimble, adroit playing expressed weeping, ferocity, the warmest of songs and great emotional demands. And the audience was with her for every second.

People laughed at arranger Leonid Desyatnikov's witty insertions from Vivaldi's “Four Seasons” and some even resisted the unspoken classical music prohibition against clapping between movements.

The subset of string players who accompanied Salerno-Sonnenberg performed admirably, although there were a few passing moments in which especially wicked musical lines resulted in a slightly muddled texture. Karl Lavine's extended cello solo in the “Autumn” movement was especially lovely.

The Piazzolla was flanked by Glinka's overture from “Russlan and Lugmilla” on one side and Mahler's Symphony No. 1 on the other. The crowd-pleasing overture was sparkling and fun.

The huge orchestra of the Mahler was as agile as the smaller string ensemble of the Piazzolla. With its opening sustained chords giving way first to a mysterious melody and then a cuckoo that sets off a profusion of springtime chirps, the first movement builds to a brilliant, assertive ending.

The second movement is constituted by two dances—one rough and tumble, the other more genteel—and the third centers on a minor mode version of the children's song “Freres Jacques” that alternates with several wry burlesques. The orchestra's handling of the extreme dynamic and expressive contrasts of the final movement as it ebbed and surged toward its monumental ending was quite dazzling.