

“Economy won’t foil MSO’s new season, DeMain says”

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There are world-class soloists: charismatic violinists Pinchas Zukerman and Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg, and four prominent pianists, including Peter Serkin. There is the usual slate of grand orchestra pieces intended to take full advantage of Overture Hall’s acoustic muscle.

In all, the Madison Symphony Orchestra’s just-announced 2009-2010 performances offer an enticing and adventurous season.

Recession? What recession?

Don’t be fooled. The MSO feels the pinch as much as any arts organization. It has cut its three-show weekends from nine to eight. And its snappy sneak-peek brochure to patrons made it clear: The MSO’s tickets sales fill 50 percent of its budget; donations form the rest (hint, nudge).

MSO Music Director John DeMain knows the economics of arts. He helped keep the now-defunct Opera Pacific in Orange County, Calif., afloat far longer than expected.

But the MSO is more established than Opera Pacific, which shut down last fall after 22 years. Now in its 84th season, the MSO “has roots that it can survive a crisis like this,” he said.

As Overture Center’s most popular tenant—the MSO’s Friday through Sunday shows draw between 4,500 and 6,000 ticket buyers per weekend—its attendance dwarfs all of the remaining Overture resident companies combined.

So DeMain and MSO officials didn’t waver at booking its next season.

It’s very important not to lose your artistic vision in this time,” DeMain said. “If you take away the standards that people expect when they buy tickets, you dig a hole deeper so when the economy turns around you can’t climb out of it.”

With two three-show weekends left this season, the MSO begins its push for the season-ticket renewals and continues courting new subscribers with 50 percent off the single-ticket price. Renewing subscriber prices range from slightly under \$60 per show for the best seats to \$12 per show in the upper balcony.

DeMain’s zeal turned into unabashed cheerleading when he described forming the new season. Salerno-Sonnenberg will make her third guest appearance with the MSO because DeMain saw her perform Piazzolla’s Four Seasons of Buenos Aires and wanted to bring her back to Madison.

“It’s exciting,” DeMain said. “It’s crossover tango, baroque, a very difficult piece that she has a great flair for.”

DeMain also plans typically big symphony pieces, ranging from Saint-Saens’ Symphony No. 3—which showcases Overture Hall’s massive organ—to Brahms’ Serenade No. 1 (“absolutely gorgeous,” DeMain said, “and it never gets played”).

DeMain also booked pianist Jonathan Biss, 29, a rising star.

“He’s an interesting debut artist for us,” DeMain said. “This is not somebody from a concerto competition in a college. This is a major new-generation pianist.”