

MSO captivates with varied musical menu

Lindsay Christians

November 8, 2008

The Capital Times

It is possible that the works presented Friday night at the Madison Symphony Orchestra concert have never been used in a movie. But given the theatricality displayed at the performance, each of them certainly could be. In a concert conducted by Estonian dynamo Anu Tali, the MSO thrilled with four diverse and intriguing pieces.

Tali herself, a petite lightning rod, led the orchestra bodily, shaking her white-blond hair and occasionally abandoning the baton to gesture with wide sweeps of her arms. Tali is a founder, with her twin sister Kadri, of the Nordic Symphony Orchestra. As a guest conductor, she tours extensively, making her American debut with the New Jersey Symphony in 2005.

The first piece, Samuel Barber's "Overture to 'The School for Scandal,'" could be a fantasy movie soundtrack all by itself. From the lovely oboe and clarinet solos to passages that recalled a clipper ship cutting through the waves or a woman dancing in the woods, the work was a delight. Barber, an American composer, claimed in the 1930s that the 1777 British comedy by Richard Brinsley Sheridan inspired him to write this overture. The piece seems much happier (and thankfully so) than what one might expect from a play populated by gossips, scandal-mongers and profligates.

Guest artist Sarah Chang attacked the Brahms Violin Concerto Op. 77, handling the brilliantly fast technical passages with ease and artistry. The 27-year-old virtuoso embraced the drama of Brahms' gorgeous concerto, stomping her feet, tossing her hair, swaying with the music when she wasn't playing. Chang didn't make the Brahms look easy. She made it look awesome. Full of challenging double stops and intertwining floral melodies, Chang owned the piece from the lengthy, impassioned Allegro to the spirited third movement. The audience probably knew not to clap after the first movement, but Chang's playing was stunning. They clapped anyway.

To open the second half, the MSO gave a nod to Maestra Tali with an Estonian piece by Veljo Tormis, which the symphony performed for the first time. If Barber's overture was fit for a fantasy movie, Tormis' "Overture No. 2" would best fit a war epic. It opened with a fiery intensity and snare drum beats like gunshots, moving to sinister themes in the strings and bright brass colors toward the close.

Finally, Dmitri Shostakovich's "Symphony No. 9 in E-Flat Major, Op. 9" concluded the program with enthusiasm fit for a comedy, especially in the Presto movement. Though the composer thought "critics (would) delight in blasting" his "merry little piece," the five-movement work was pure fun. From Joanna Messer's delightful piccolo to the crooning of Cynthia Cameron-Fix's sonorous bassoon, this 1945 work was characterized by excellent playing. Linda Bartley's beautiful clarinet solo in the beginning of the Moderato movement melted into a duo with clarinetist Nancy Mackenzie before expanding into a woodwind choir. Shostakovich was clearly enjoying himself when he wrote this work. Every movement has a distinct mood. He was unhappy as a repressed artist in the Stalinist Soviet Union, and elements in this exciting, sometimes frantic symphony reflect that.

Chang's performance of the technically rigorous Brahms was dramatic and skillful, and Tali led the Madison Symphony in an expressive, varied evening of music. This is surely a performance not to miss.