

Brahmsian fiddle, Baltic baton
Chang and Tali Shine with the MSO

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Isthmus

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Two visitors enlivened the latest Madison Symphony concerts. The hyped one was Sarah Chang, undeniably one of today's top violinists, who appeared in the "Violin Concerto in D" by Brahms. I risk stereotypes and cliché when I say I have long thought of Brahms' concertos as "masculine," reflecting his own burly playing style. Against that, Chang proposed a valid "feminine" perspective to this massive, challenging score.

Taking technical command for granted, she seemed determined to tame her role with understated and even delicate tone. She avoided ostentatious showiness, and she bypassed the confrontational approach of so many soloists, preferring to be noncompetitive, even content to allow the orchestra to roll over her sound at times. Her rendition of the first movement's thorny cadenza moved beyond razzle-dazzle to surprising expressiveness. The total achievement was one of musical encounter rather than artistic bullying. She enhanced her refreshing approach with charming indulgences in tiny dance steps at moments of excitement.

Not to be overshadowed, however, was the Madison podium debut of the Estonian Anu Tali. Deceptively petite, Tali immediately displayed the energy and personality of a Baltic fireball. With bold and broad yet precise gestures, she seemed to pull sound out of the orchestra, in complete command of the enterprising program's four scores. Her opener was Samuel Barber's "Overture to the School for Scandal," an example of youthful precocity that can easily become brittle. Tali fleshed it out with robust sonority, connecting its episodes smoothly.

Balancing that to open the program's second half was the "Overture No. 2" by her compatriot Veljo Tormis, now 78. Juxtaposing motoric rage with nostalgic gentleness from very loud to quite spare, this 1959 score might be placed stylistically somewhere between Sibelius and Shostakovich, but it really has a voice of its own. Clearly, Tormis is a neglected composer of whom we should hear more.

Tali closed with a relative rarity by Shostakovich himself, his "Symphony No. 9." One of his occasional "anti-monumental" symphonies, it was a postwar outlet for his gifts in sarcastic irony and wicked satire, and it got him into serious trouble with Stalin's regime. But its five short movements offer a kaleidoscope of clever whimsy. Here Tali showed her fullest mastery, to which the MSO responded with particular zest—and with beautiful solo displays by some of the first-chair wind players. For me, this performance was the ultimate triumph of a most stimulating concert.