

Kern sparkles in MSO's 'Feast of Beethoven'

Dexterous Russian virtuoso Olga Kern lights up the stage with her rendition of Beethoven's third piano concerto.

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Like an amazing three-course dinner that you vividly remember long after the plates have been cleared away, Madison Symphony Orchestra's triple-bill of Beethoven was both pleasurable and satisfying.

The symphony opened its Friday night performance of "A Feast of Beethoven" with the maestro's third version of the "Leonore Overture," (Op. 72A) a work meant to pair with his only opera, "Fidelio."

Michael Allsen explains in the program notes that the overture was eventually scrapped in favor of the "Fidelio Overture," but this "involved, explosive work dedicated to gigantic struggle" -- as yet another scholar describes it -- survived.

That's a lucky thing, because it's a wonderfully dramatic overture. Under the baton of MSO artistic director John DeMain, the orchestra contrasts a delicate opening and flute melodies that recall birdsong with the fiery flourishes for which the composer is perhaps best known.

Beethoven apparently meant to show the dramatic progress of the opera in the "Leonore Overture."

Without knowing the plot details precisely, it's still fun to imagine lovers in despair and the rescue of the hero as the overture moves from lyrical passages to a restatement of the original theme in triumphal brass.

Olga Kern, a slender, dexterous Russian virtuoso, lit up the grand piano at center stage with Beethoven's third piano concerto (Op. 37). With her blonde hair in an elegant chignon and a long, sparkly black dress that glinted when she moved, Kern made the piano sing like a coloratura soprano.

Kern, who won the prestigious Van Cliburn competition in 2001, sat demurely with her hands in her lap unless she was playing at that very moment. But when she lifted her fingers to the keys, it was like watching a bullet shot from a gun -- her fingers moved lightning-fast, impossibly, incredibly fast, with a delicate, precise touch that seemed almost magical.

In the second movement, the largo (which took her only 10 minutes), Kern took her time with the lyrical passages, showcasing a crisp, careful style. The final, playful rondo was a sweet, exuberant finish; Kern traded themes with the winds and moved her head in time to the orchestra themes. It felt like she was talking to the piano, or rather, through it, coaxing secrets from the keys and graciously allowing us to listen.

The audience felt the magic and responded with a near-immediate standing ovation, to which Kern responded with a brilliant, breathless little piece by Moritz Moszkowski, a German composer. It was called "Étincelles," or "Sparkles," and sparkle she did, on the keys and in her person.

The second half featured Beethoven's lush, joyful Symphony No. 7 in A Major (Op. 92). After a lengthy introduction, the allegro had a pastoral feel, recalling riders and horses and woods, like a musical foxhunt. Solo turns by flautist Stephanie Jutt and oboist Marc Fink were delightful, and DeMain was very obviously enjoying himself.

The second movement, an allegretto, opened with a somber theme and spiraled into rounded curves, no edges or angles. It seemed to invite dancers, swaying and sashaying to the music.

In contrast, the lively scherzo is like a burst of sunshine, like skipping, like sweet-tart lemonade. The imaginary dancers picked up the pace and their heels. (This is the movement you walk out humming).

The final allegro con brio was the most obviously heroic from this, Beethoven's "heroic decade" (1802-1812), during which Allsen says he was preoccupied with "dignity, heroism and freedom." The final themes recalled marching, riders and soldiers, and the passages of bright optimism would surely inspire a cadre of cadets.

These works, showcased only twice more by the Madison Symphony, prove why Beethoven is still revered 200 years after his composing peak. These melodies were made to last, and like a great meal, to linger in your mind.