

***Beethoven's 7<sup>th</sup> Symphony is highlight***

John Aehl

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Just when I had about committed to leading this off with comments about the lovely Olga Kern and her imported Yamaha piano, along came Beethoven's 7<sup>th</sup> Symphony, brilliantly played by the Madison Symphony Orchestra Friday night.

It was downright exciting.

A substantial part of the reason one goes to an MSO concert in Overture Hall centers on the hope that an orchestral performance will transcend the merely enjoyable to attain a high, exemplary level of excellence.

The 7<sup>th</sup> reached that level, especially in the irrepressibly paced 7 minutes of the final movement, which music director John DeMain, with energetic body and baton, kept careening from frantic moment to frantic moment, in swift propulsion and great rhythmic variety, but never out of control. The musicians seemed caught up in the moment—actually 37 minutes. Details of the music were brought out, becoming apparent in a visible live performance, such as the syncopated trumpet sonics and the drone of the cellos in the first movement, the deep and mellow sound of the basses, cellos and violas at the beginning of the second movement. And more and more, presenting Beethoven's rhythmic and melodic genius beautifully.

This was a memorable performance.

But Olga Kern, a slim young woman in a shimmering black gown and stiletto heels (about four inches, I would guess) had her own right to prominence as soloist in the Beethoven 3<sup>rd</sup> Piano Concerto, with playing that was fluid, unmannered, tonally attractive, and technically secure. Instead of the Overture's Steinway, Kern played a Yamaha piano brought in from Milwaukee, an instrument that has a brighter sound (not necessarily better) that she obviously prefers. Particularly impressive was her almost ferocious, powerful attack in the three-minute Beethoven cadenza in the first movement.

The concerto is an advance from Beethoven's first two compositions in this field. The orchestra becomes very much a partner, not just an accompanist. There is stature and sweep in the orchestration.

Curiously, the orchestra did not have one of its best evenings in this work. Little tonal misses and some awkward entries, not one of them major but cumulatively damaging, intruded.

In this all-Beethoven concert, the opener, the Leonore Overture No. 3, received a good but also slightly flawed reading.

DeMain, as is usually the case, got his tempos right in a 14-minute wonderfully orchestrated piece that has many moods and wide tempo and rhythmic variations. The opening, for example, flowed slowly but smoothly at just under two minutes into the flue entrance, unlike the often seemingly interminable 2 ½ minutes or even longer of other interpreters. The seconds to make a difference. The dynamic changes were well defined, and the off-stage trumpet calls were effective. However, small missteps marred the overall performance.