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**ARTS**

## **RACH STEADY**

*Symphony sticks to favorites for season opener*

### **Gayle Worland**

It's a diabolically difficult piece of piano music that many have only heard at the movies, during a pivotal scene in the 1996 drama "Shine."

But in a season bursting with the beloved and breathtaking, Madison Symphony Orchestra audiences will get to hear it live. Pianist Garrick Ohlsson, who has made appearances in Madison for decades, will close the MSO's debut program of the season with a performance of Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3, or the "Rach 3" as it has come to be known.

"I'm always thrilled to play a piece that's such a howling success with the public," Ohlsson said. "It's the most viscerally thrilling, literally exciting and orgasmic at the end."

"Howling success" is exactly what the MSO is hoping for in its 2008-09 season, populated by favorites and returning soloists. It opens Friday, Sept. 26, with works by Mendelssohn and Respighi in addition to the Rachmaninoff.

"I want the opening to sweep you off your feet," said maestro John DeMain, "really announce this season with great flourish and fanfare."

DeMain is celebrating his 15th anniversary conducting the MSO this year and he's chosen many classic crowd-pleasers, some of which have not yet been performed in the stellar acoustics of Overture Hall.

Cellist Alban Gerhardt will play the Elgar Cello Concerto in mid-October, part of a program including Holst's "The Planets" and Copland's "An Outdoor Overture." Gerhardt last appeared with MSO in 1999; this time Chosei Komatsu will guest conduct.

Other concerts to look forward to include "A Feast of Beethoven" in February, featuring pianist Olga Kern playing the Piano Concerto No. 3. What DeMain calls an "unabashedly Romantic" program in April will include Wagner's Prelude to "Parsifal," Saint-Sans' Piano Concerto No. 2 and Brahms' Symphony No. 2.

This weekend, the two opening orchestral pieces -- Felix Mendelssohn's "Italian Symphony" No. 4 and Ottorino Respighi's "The Pines of Rome" -- are very different, but mirror each other structurally. DeMain noted that each has four movements, the inner ones introspective, the outer more brilliant and technically difficult.

DeMain said the Mendelssohn reminds him of the tarantellas he loved growing up in an Italian-American family in Youngstown, Ohio, where he remembers his grandfather dancing to the 6/8 time.

"For me, that has a cultural relationship as well as a purely musical one," he said.

"The Respighi 'tone poem,' by contrast, swells with Debussy-like impressionism and recalls chants from Catholic mass," DeMain said.

“I’m fascinated by the influences of Gregorian chant,” he said. “The real thing is to try to create the mood and bring out these various colors in a very effortless way.

“It’s an exhilarating program,” he said.

“First you have the early Romantic and technically challenging Mendelssohn,” DeMain said, “and then you have the Italian impressionism in Respighi, with the big romantic orchestra, extra brass, all of the fun things people enjoy in a concert. You’re surrounded by massive sound and color.

“Then, why not put on the most difficult piano concerto ever written with someone who can play it like a piece of cake?” DeMain added.

Pianist Ohlsson was in Madison in 2002 to play the Brahms Piano Concerto No. 2 and again in 2006 to play a Mozart piece with the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra.

“He’s very serious,” DeMain said. “He’s just immaculate in his playing. He can get over the keyboard incredibly. I look forward to doing this piece with him.”

Ohlsson, who has appeared in recent years with orchestras throughout the U.S. and Canada, has won many competitions, including a 2008 Grammy for best instrumental solo performance, awarded for the third volume of his Beethoven sonata series.

Music scholar Michael Steinberg describes Ohlsson’s playing as: “His technique is complete, his tone large and unpercussive, though hard-edged. He is a musician with a modest manner and exceptional intelligence.”

The “Rach 3” is one of some 90 concertos Ohlsson has in his repertoire, a piece that’s been “with him” for 42 years.

Between gigs, Ohlsson, 60, lives in San Francisco. He is currently preparing some Beethoven pieces for performance, a piece by Russian composer Alexander Scriabin, and a 1916 nocturne by Manuel De Falla called “Nights in the Gardens of Spain.”

Ohlsson said he’d like to continue touring as long as he can. He’s heard that “retirement’s overrated.”

“I’m thrilled and I love doing what I do,” he said. “One of my heroes, Arthur Rubinstein, played into his late 80s.”

Ohlsson’s not slowing down and neither is DeMain, who in this anniversary season with MSO will be traveling to Chicago and San Francisco to conduct “Porgy and Bess,” as well as flying several times to Orange County in his role as artistic director of Opera Pacific.

While DeMain is out of town, Anu Tali will conduct “superstar” violinist Sarah Chang in the Nov. 7-9 concerts, where she’ll perform the Brahms Violin Concerto. Chang was in Madison in 2004 playing Dvorak’s Violin Concerto in A minor.

Other guest conductors during DeMain’s absence include American conductor Daniel Hege in January with a program of Mozart, Sibelius and Prokofiev, and Yoav Talmi, who will conduct a program of Borodin, Stravinsky and Dvorak in March.

“It’s amazing how fast the time goes,” DeMain said. “I’ve come to the point now where I actually enjoy the travel, and when I’m back, I just enjoy being home so much.”

DeMain called his weekend program “an irresistible opener.” He’ll soon see if audiences agree.