

**ISTHMUS**  
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**MUSIC**

**MSO'S SEASON BEGINS**

*Pianist Ohlsson climbs Mount Rachmaninoff*

**By Sandy Rucker**

The Madison Symphony Orchestra celebrates John DeMain's 15<sup>th</sup> year on its podium with a rousing season opener this weekend, Sept. 26-28. Has it been that long since the maestro conducted his first concert here of Mozart, Bernstein and Mahler? How time flies and how things have changed for the MSO since the Oscar Mayer Theater days—new hall with a magnificent organ, new Steinway, new repertoire, new level of musicianship, expanded programming and on and on. With unflagging community support and dedicated musicians, DeMain's tenure has been a golden age for the MSO, and not many orchestras today can make such claims.

The celebration begins with Felix Mendelssohn's "symphony No. 4" (Italian), a salute to John DeMain's Italian-American heritage. This is a charming work in four movements conceived during Mendelssohn's visit to Italy in 1830. The opening is sunny with a festive air. The second movement is overcast with dark orchestration, but a lighter mood prevails in the minuet-like third movement followed by a saucy saltarello. Delightful as it is, Mendelssohn was critical of the symphony and refused to publish it. His friend, Ignaz Moscheles, found the heavily revised score after Mendelssohn's death, made the final edits and sent it to the publishers.

The concert continues with Ottorino Respighi's "Pines of Rome," a 1924 tone poem dedicated to the pines that grew near his apartment. Respighi paints vivid sound pictures of pines around the Villa Borghese, at the entrance to a catacomb, on the ridge of the Janiculum, and standing guard along the Appian Way. Sergei Rachmaninoff admired Respighi's orchestration, but their similarities in musical tastes weren't coincidental. Both composers studied with Rimsky-Korsakov, whose colorful influence shines in both "Pines of Rome" and Rachmaninoff's "Piano Concerto No. 3."

Pianist Garrick Ohlsson returns to the MSO to tame the "Rach3," the ultimate test of endurance, the K2 of the piano repertory. "The concerto is beautifully balanced and monstrously difficult," says Ohlsson. "I learned it 45 years ago when I was 15, partly because my teacher, Sascha Go rodnitzki, wanted me to learn it while I was young and unafraid. It was like a special class where I encountered every possible difficulty that I might find in a piece of music. Since then I've practiced, rehearsed and performed it hundreds of times, and now it's in my muscle memory and brain cells forever."

The Rach 3's reputation for finger-twisting acrobatics and prickly polyrhythms goes back to its New York premiere in 1909 with the tall, gaunt Rachmaninoff at the piano. "For a few decades Rachmaninoff was the only pianist who played the concerto because it was considered too difficult for anyone else," says Ohlsson. "Horowitz later did a very good performance of it, and Gieseking followed, but it wasn't until the 1970s and '80s that it started being played more often.

Ohlsson likes wrapping his fingers around monsters like the Rach 3 and Brahms' Second Piano Concerto, which he played with the MSO in 2002. A large hand span gives him an edge on loaded chords that rock the piano at quadruple forte, but he can also play soft as the rain, and despite its pyrotechnics, the Rach 3 often calls for a gentle touch.

Excitement fills Ohlsson's voice when he talks about the Rach 3 and what it means to him. "The concerto is part of me," he says. "I can't be alive and not know this piece."