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MSO KICKS OFF SEASON IN GRAND STYLE

Gayle Worland

Though he's best known for his work at the podium, Madison Symphony Orchestra music director John DeMain has played piano since childhood. And he was just 13 or 14 years old, he says, when he first heard a live performance of the piece that would become — to this day — his favorite piano concerto: Sergei Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3.

"It was one of the great inspirations of my life to hear that piece at that age," he says. "It was just overwhelmingly moving."

So DeMain has set the "Rach 3" as the spectacular centerpiece of the opening concerts for the new MSO season on Friday, Saturday and Sunday, Sept. 28 in Overture Hall. Performing it will be Garrick Ohlsson, who is "regarded as the finest American pianist, and is at the peak of his powers," says DeMain, adding that he didn't want to "under-cast" the keyboard for this performance.

"Many people regard the Rachmaninoff Third Piano Concerto as the most difficult piano concerto ever written," says DeMain. "The technical demands are extraordinary. One certainly knows that Garrick Ohlsson is one of the great pianists that possesses that kind of technique. Not every pianist that we admire and enjoy has the hands that can play the Rachmaninoff Third."

At 6-foot-4, Ohlsson has a reach of an octave and a fifth, and a biography even more far-reaching. He entered The Juilliard School at age 13 and was the first American to win the Gold Medal at the 1970 Chopin Competition in Warsaw. Known for his enormous repertoire, Ohlsson won this year's Grammy Award for Best Instrumental Solo Performance for his third volume of the complete Beethoven sonatas.

The program also includes Mendelssohn's "Italian" Symphony No. 4 and Respighi's "The Pines of Rome." In contrast to last season's opener, which featured lesser-known works for organ on the MSO's fine concert organ, "This year, I decided to open with three works that the audience knows very well," says DeMain. "So I think it will have a real gala feeling, like this is a real celebration to the start of the season for the Madison Symphony."