

MSO opener an inspiring night
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You can do many things in 15 years: You could become a professional scuba diver or an expert in astronomy. You could even learn to rock climb or join the Peace Corps. Or you could do what John DeMain did and spend 15 years directing the Madison Symphony Orchestra.

With the opening of the 2008-09 season this past weekend, the 90 musicians who make up the orchestra are celebrating their 83rd anniversary with John DeMain.

The opening night began with a speech about DeMain's achievements and contributions to MSO and the Madison community by highlighting the MSO's free-of-charge education programs for children and underprivileged adults. DeMain, who grew up in Youngstown, Ohio, and attended Juilliard at the age of 18, also directs close to home in the Madison Opera as well as across the border with the opera and symphony of Mexico City.

To commemorate DeMain's 15 years of directing, the first two songs were both dedicated to his Italian-American heritage. DeMain started with Mendelssohn's "Symphony No. 4," which is a tribute to Mendelssohn's first tour of Italy (Mendelssohn was German), followed by Respighi's "Pines of Rome," a song celebrating the history and landscape of the Italian composer's hometown.

The third song was Rachmaninoff's "Piano Concert No. 3" with special guest pianist Garrick Ohlsson, who made his return appearance for the fourth time with the MSO. Ohlsson, who is from White Plains, N.Y., began playing the piano at age 8 and started at Juilliard when he was 13 years old. Ohlsson has received many awards for his musical excellence; he won the 2008 Grammy for Best Instrumental Solo Performance as well as the Avery Fisher Prize in 1994. And it was easy to see why. For over half an hour, Ohlsson's fingers ran up and down the piano keys even though the pianist didn't have a single sheet of music in front of him.

The MSO's Saturday night performance at the Overture Center was delivered to a packed house. The synchronization of the musicians was unbelievable. Their arms moved at the same time; the cellists all swayed the same way, and the positioning of the violin player's bows were all timed exactly. The entire stage was filled with the musicians and their instruments, complete with two grand pianos and a gong. Some trumpet players had even filtered out into the audience on the balconies during "Pines of Rome," creating a sort of live "surround sound."

If people had closed their eyes, they could have imagined an entire story from all the powerful music being played. The orchestra gave a stunning and beautiful performance leaving the audience breathless, and they even got an encore from Ohlsson. There will be another performance from the Madison Symphony Orchestra Oct. 17, 18 and 19 for all of those who are interested in hearing awe-inspiring music.