

OHLSSON ROCKS THE RACHMANINOFF IN MSO SEASON OPENER

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If programs have personalities, then Madison Symphony Orchestra's season opener is the symphonic equivalent of a drama queen.

Not that that's a bad thing. In fact, far from being emotionally draining, the evening is an invigorating one, full of big brass, great swells and fantastic virtuosic playing from guest artist Garrick Ohlsson.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. To start, conductor John DeMain (who, if you hadn't heard eight times already, is celebrating his 15th season with the MSO) chose Felix Mendelssohn's "Italian Symphony," a piece that premiered in 1833 and remained unpublished until 1851, four years after his death.

Also known as Symphony No. 4 in A, Mendelssohn was inspired to write it during a trip to the Mediterranean, and one can almost feel the breezes in the delicate opening passages. The first "Allegro vivace" is immediately recognizable and exciting, with layers of activity and lush tones.

DeMain, conducting with his whole body, pulls the drama out of the second movement and emphasizes some lovely passages featuring the winds in the third. The final movement, a jumpy "Saltarello," swirls in bright red and orange tones. One can almost see the dancers.

The second piece in the program, Ottorino Respighi's 21-minute "Pines of Rome" symphonic poem, overflows with tinkling, sparkling notes in the opening, recalling snowflakes or (more appropriately for autumn) falling leaves.

The first movement, "Pines of the Villa Borghese," sounds like tumbling down a hill, rolling headlong toward the second movement, when it drops suddenly into the catacombs.

A clarinet solo is haunting, and DeMain coaxes smooth, evocative melodies from the cello and bass, building intensity to the end of the movement. The music cycles and spins underground until emerging into "Pines of the Janiculum," which contains such romantic swooning it recalls an excessively floral, overwhelming perfume.

Flamboyant? Perhaps, but delightful all the same, especially in the final piece of the "Pines" puzzle, "Pines of the Appian Way." In this, brass players blow from the balconies to give the feeling of being enveloped in sound, and DeMain doesn't miss a chance to pump up the drama. Even though the recorded chirping birds in the third movement are awfully trite, that final movement is so exciting, it's quickly forgiven.

Finally, after intermission, comes the work we're waiting for -- Garrick Ohlsson's guest turn with Sergei Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3, that dramatic, fantastic piece that still strikes fear into the hearts of young pianists almost 100 years after it was written. Ohlsson has been to Madison three times in the past eight years, most recently playing with the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra in 2006.

Everything about Ohlsson is understated, from the way he touches the keys to his unassuming manner onstage. The familiar strains of the "Rach 3" sound carefully considered, then sweet, then purely incredible as he blazes through difficult passages with nary a blink.

With a pianist of this caliber, there is little DeMain and the orchestra need to do except keep up, which they did gamely. The speed and precision of Ohlsson's playing is a marvel to behold, like watching an Olympic gymnast flipping or a prima ballerina spinning.

Ohlsson flies over the keys, bringing polish to each cascade of notes but never seeming flashy. Sometimes his hands seem independent of each other; other times it sounds like he's playing two instruments. His playing is frantically fast, frenetic at points, but always controlled, dynamic and thrilling.

Diabolically difficult, indeed.

The opening night audience was immediately on its feet at the last note, cheering unashamedly. So Ohlsson gave a little treat before he left: Chopin's Waltz in C sharp minor, a delightful ender that seemed as sweet and light as strawberries and cream.

Come back soon, Garrick. Madison could use a lot more of you.