

Ohlsson's brilliance opens the new season
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John Aehl

John DeMain inherited a fair to decent symphony orchestra with obvious deficiencies when he arrived in Madison in 1994. Since then, with consistent improvement in constantly changing personnel, and with rigorous attention to detail, changes emanating from the music director's leadership, the Madison Symphony Orchestra has become an excellent regional orchestra that has attracted national notice.

Friday night's opening concert of DeMain's 15th "Signature" year demonstrated that the high quality of the orchestra's performances continue—as well as the appearances of world-class guest soloists.

Up front: Pianist Garrick Ohlsson was magnificent playing the Rachmaninov Piano Concerto No. 3.

When Ohlsson appeared here in 2002, he played the Brahms Piano concerto No. 2 with "controlled ferocity," yet with "lightness of touch and dexterity where applicable," I wrote in my review.

This time, in Overture Hall, Ohlsson cut his playing time to some 42 minutes, but not his exemplary effort, with the rambling Rachmaninov of many moods and widely varying intensity.

Apart from the simple, beautiful, and melancholic opening theme, subsequently repeated several times, the concerto's musical worth seems to be contained in abrupt tempo shifts and dynamic pianistic extremes. The attraction here is in appreciating the ability of a pianist to meet and overcome the great difficulties posed in the music.

Ohlsson's pianistic technique was superb. His firmness of line exquisite, his ability to project a big, rich sound unsurpassed (helped by the Overture [sic] Steinway), his agility in fast passages thrilling, his power in the fortissimo chordal passages impressive. Clarity was all. A triumphant interpretation, played with seeming ease. (It was especially apparent, and pleasurable to watch, if one had a clear sight line to his hands and the piano keys.)

While the orchestra accompaniment tends to be diffident, the strings surged and soared beautifully where required, and brass and woodwind fillips fit.

An encore, the well-known Chopin Waltz No. 7 in C Sharp Minor, Opus 64, No. 2, was played with elegance.

The orchestra had its best moments in the Respighi four-part "Pines of Rome," marked by a big, brassy, bright opening with imaginative and quirky orchestration, somber and serenely contemplative inner parts that included a recorded nightingale, and an explosive finale, all stops pulled out for a 90-piece orchestra that included nearly every percussion instrument imaginable.

While I am not fond of standing ovations, the Ohlsson and the Respighi received and deserved the salutation.

The opening Mendelssohn "Italian" Symphony, with its airy opening and rhythmic bounce, was played well enough, although with some lack of precision early, and overall lacked the buoyancy of a memorable performance.

The concert will be repeated at 8 tonight and 2:30 p.m. Sunday.