

“MSO, Rachlin usher in the spring”

77 Square

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Spring was in the air all day on Friday, and the warm, hopeful mood carried into the concert hall with a verdant performance by the Madison Symphony Orchestra.

Led by Israeli guest conductor Yoav Talmi, the symphony welcomed violinist Julian Rachlin for his Madison debut on the Stravinsky “Violin Concerto in D”. It was an enjoyable, high-energy evening, consistent with the symphony’s fine offerings this season.

Borodin’s “Overture to Prince Igor” opened the concert with a lush, melancholy tone that segued quickly into fast patterns in the strings. Linda Bartley had a lovely, well-articulated solo on clarinet, as did Linda Kimball, who played a romantic horn solo. Though at moments the strings might have been a bit cleaner, it was a lively start to the night.

A smaller orchestra accompanied 34-year-old Lithuanian violinist Rachlin, who looked dashing with his Nehru-collared jacket, red handkerchief and frosted hair tips. He’s a dramatic player, so much so that if for some reason I couldn’t hear the sound (nor see the orchestra) I might have thought he was playing fiddle instead of classical violin.

Those who tend to watch the symphony with their eyes closed missed out with Rachlin—his facial expressions were part of the entertainment. He was expressive, articulate and passionate in his playing, fingering high on the neck of the violin, harmonizing with himself and dueting with concertmaster Tyrone Greive.

According to Michael Allsen’s program notes, this is the first time for the MSO playing Stravinsky’s concerto. The composer’s fondness for what one scholar termed “metrical irregularities” was notable in the third movement especially, when the orchestra sounds out of sync with the soloist.

Talmi’s conducting, concentrated high in his body, is careful and restrained, not as demonstrative as others have been but clearly in control.

Finally, Dvorak’s “Symphony No. 8” has long been a favorite (the MSO has played it three times before, most recently in 2000), and based on this performance, it was easy to see why. The orchestra seemed to visibly perk up for the lively work, which is full of folk-influenced melodies.

Stephanie Jutt brightened the opening with a pretty flute solo, followed by a lyrical melody passed among the winds. The trumpets were especially bright and victorious, and the trills in the strings give an almost visual texture to the Allegro con brio. This movement sounded noticeably sprint-like, including the wind, rain and gray skies as March turns to May.

The Adagio opened with a lush, full sound, and as Allsen pointed out, “The folk element is clear” in its pastoral tone. A trumpeter struggled a bit with air flow at the end of this movement, but made up for it later in a brassy fanfare in the closing Allegro.

In between was the delightful Allegretto, dominated by a charming, danceable waltz. Through Dvorak’s many variations, some haunting, some militant, the final movement then raced to the finish with a relentless coda—all told, quite beautiful, and a wonderful way to usher in the spring.