

## ***MSO: Madison musicians crowd the stage for a Christmas Spectacular***

The Capital Times

12/6/08

Lindsay Christians

John DeMain and the Madison Sympony Orchestra show the spirit of the season Friday at the casual and festive Christmas Spectacular. - Bob Rashid photo

Santa hats and festive ties flooded Overture Hall on Friday night, while carols echoed from the balconies and large, costumed characters — a snowman, a reindeer — roamed the lobby dispensing hugs, photo ops and candy canes.

This was clearly not your typical Madison Symphony Orchestra concert.

Maestro John DeMain took a break from conducting "Porgy and Bess" at the Lyric Opera of Chicago to return to Madison for this weekend's Christmas Spectacular concerts, which include three vocal ensembles and a handbell choir.

The mood was festive; angels flew suspended above the stage and holiday-themed spots illuminated the sides of the stage with wreaths, bows and snowflakes.

"Does it look like the picture?" DeMain joked, adjusting his Santa hat. (It did.)

He gave up his podium not once, but twice on Friday, a nod to the collaborative, inclusive nature of the show. It was a worthy exchange; we sacrificed the polish of a professional performance to see so many of our neighbors and friends (and their children) packed on the Overture Hall stage.

The Madison Area Concert Handbells, directed by Susan Udell, featured prominently in the first half, starting with "Bellsong Fantasy," a fine arrangement by John Wasson for orchestra, chorus and handbells.

Despite occasional synchronization problems, the 14 ringers coaxed an astonishing variety of textures from their instruments. "On this Day the Earth Shall Ring" cleverly arranged orchestra percussionists and bells under Udell's baton.

The Madison Symphony Chorus struggled on Givoanni Gabrieli's "Jubilate Deo" -- diction and pitch were problems -- but showed their strength on the ever-popular "Hallelujah Chorus" from Handel's "Messiah."

Soprano Jamie-Rose Guarrine lit up Handel's "Rejoice Greatly" aria with excellent embellishments and trills. Her lovely strapless red dress with its full gathered skirt reflected the beautiful delicacy and skill of her voice.

Tenor Gregory Turay, too, was a pleasure, giving a fine performance of Puccini's lush "Messa di Gloria: Gratias Agimus Tibi." He doesn't make the singing look easy, but the resulting sound is quite nice.

The girls of the Madison Youth Choirs brought a clear tone and bouncy feel to the mostly-unison "Donkey Carol," and the young male voices on "Ding Dong Merrily on High" are exuberant. The best, though, was the Caribbean carol, "Virgin Mary Had a Baby Boy," an upbeat, rhythmic number that showcased this expressive choir and its fine blend.

With such a variety of music in a single evening, it's hard to make comparisons. But if every concert must have a highlight, it was no contest — the title goes to Leotha Stanley's Mt. Zion Gospel Choir. Stanley is the gospel equivalent of a rock star. He arranged all of the pieces Mt. Zion sang and accompanied them on piano, crafting a well-balanced, rich, thoroughly infectious sound.

On "Little Drummer Boy," the arrangement is innovative and clever, melding the orchestra and choir with skill. Likewise, a medley of "What Child is This" and "Mary Did You Know?" was at once brilliant and an easy crowd-pleaser.

Stanley's fantastic interpretation of "Joy to the World" with all of the choirs, bells and instrumentalists on stage led into a group carol sing in the nearly-packed house.

The Christmas holiday, the orchestra seemed to say, is for all of us, young and old, amateur and professional, singing together to stave off the bitter cold.