

## **MSO Rings Poe Bells, Roasts Tormé Chestnuts**

**Wisconsin State Journal**

**Sat Dec 6, 2009**

**John Aehl**

Beginning with the “tintinnabulation that so musically wells/ From the bells, bells, bells, bells,” to the driving rhythmic energy of a Gospel choir, and, finally, to a good, old-fashioned sing-along, all was right in the world - well, at least in Overture Hall - for a couple of hours Friday night.

With a grand total of 439 performers, not counting an appreciative audience, the Madison Symphony Orchestra’s annual Holiday Concert must be deemed a rousing success.

It was so good that it will be repeated at 8 tonight and at 2:30 p.m. Sunday. (Of course, those performances were already scheduled; tickets are still available.) “This is a celebration of the wonderful musical talent we have in Madison,” said MSO music director John DeMain, while wishing the crowd happy holidays and a happy new year.

His analysis was correct.

As a suggestion, tune in later this month to the holiday concert from Washington, and, probably, another from New York. In terms of quality, this Madison show will compare well.

A good variety of older and contemporary music was included in the 18 selections, plus the final seven carols. All were done impeccably, with verve and attention to detail. The orchestra was in excellent form.

The opener began with the sweet, gentle tones of the Madison Area Concert Handbells (Susan Udell, founder and director), 14 disciplined players with some 25 or so handbells, in a “Bellson Fantasy” by a modern composer, John Wasson. The bells built up delicate repetitive rhythms before the addition of Beverly Taylor’s 144-member Madison Symphony Chorus, and, finally, the full symphony orchestra, more than 90 musicians. The cumulative effect was mesmerizing, and exciting.

Of the many other works, let’s mention:

- \* A Handel aria, “Rejoice greatly,” sung with the appropriate coloratura soprano embellishment by Jamie-Rose Guarrine, whose brilliant red satin gown matched her bright, fresh voice.
- \* A John Rutter “Donkey Carol” that fit the youthful voices of the girls of the Madison Youth Choirs perfectly. (The entire 111-member choir, directed by Michael Ross, was fine in other music.)
- \* The “Hallelujah” chorus from “Messiah,” always a rouser for chorus and orchestra - and even some singers in the audience.
- \* Mel Tormé’s “The Christmas Song” (“Chestnuts roasting on an open fire”), given a slightly over-the-top interpretation by tenor Gregory Turay, in excellent lyric tenor voice.
- \* Last, but certainly not least, the rhythmic energy and hard accents of the 68-member Mount Zion Gospel Choir, with aggressive arrangements by its director, Leatha Stanley (and Tamera Stanley in one of them), of four Christmas songs that pumped up the audience for the final carols. I especially liked “The Little Drummer Boy,” with its fine soloist and captivating snare drum riffs.

“Another Madison treasure,” said DeMain, who obviously has an affection for the gospel choir. The audience agreed. Decorations added to the holiday ambience, with red poinsettias on stage, the ubiquitous (for this concert) two angelic trumpeters wired 50 feet over the stage, projections of snowflakes, wreaths, horns etc. on side walls, and constantly changing colors projected on the organ pipes at the back of the stage.

And, of course, as has become traditional, Santa caps for the orchestra for the carols - and Ross added to the ecumenical feeling by donning a Hanukkah cap for the final bows.

A heart-warming evening.