

For John DeMain, practice makes perfect

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Planning the perfect orchestra season means attempting the impossible: making every concert-goer happy.

John DeMain, the conductor of the Madison Symphony Orchestra, is entering his 16th season this year. Each year, he tries to carefully combine old and new, familiar and strange.

"We have the older part of our audience, the long-time, dedicated symphony-goer," DeMain said, "the sophisticated musician in the audience who wants to hear variety, and interesting programming.

"Then you have the first-time listener who wants to hear the pieces they've heard about, live - the Beethoven fifth, the Tchaikovsky piano concerto."

The result in 2009-10 is a season that includes marquee names, including Brahms' first piano concerto, Tchaikovsky's fifth symphony and Mahler's first symphony. But there's also more unusual work, such as "Four Seasons of Buenos Aires" by Astor Piazzolla and "Dawn" by Heino Eller, an Estonian composer.

"My job is to negotiate that minefield," DeMain said, "and make sure that there is musical interest for the more developed listener, and that there is really accessible music - warhorses, if you want to call them that, the stuff that we all fell in love with classical music listening to - that there's always a good percentage of that for the first-time listener."

The MSO normally performs once a month, but conservative budgeting led the group to cut its January program. A commissioned work by Edgar Meyer was planned for that concert, a concerto for horn. DeMain wasn't sure if that will be rescheduled.

Visiting artists this season include the return of violinist Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg in her fourth appearance with the MSO, violinist Pinchas Zukerman in his fourth appearance (his first was in 1974) as well as guest conductor Anu Tali, who led the symphony in November 2008 and will return to conduct Sibelius Symphony No. 1 in late February.

Conductor Patrick Strub will join the symphony in March, while DeMain is away in Vancouver conducting John Adams' opera "Nixon in China" for the Winter Olympics. (DeMain conducted the world premiere of "Nixon" in Houston in 1987.) Pianist Jonathan Biss will join Strub, playing the Mozart Piano Concerto No. 9, K271.

Pointing to the Brahms' Serenade No. 1, programmed in March, DeMain said, "I'm doing an unofficial survey of the music of Brahms. I did all the Beethoven symphonies, and now I'm doing all the Brahms works."

The Christmas program remains the least-subscribed but most popular event, with guest appearances from the Mt. Zion Gospel Choir, the Madison Youth Choirs and the Madison Symphony Chorus.

"This is one of our principal ways to get to new audience," DeMain said. "I've had people come up and tell me that because they had a child in the youth choir ... that it resulted in their children studying musical instruments. And it made them aware of the symphony.

"It's always important that the symphony do events that endear the citizenry of Madison to the orchestra," he added. "The people can feel that they identify with the orchestra and its importance to the community."

Selling season subscriptions to people whose lives are ever-fuller has been tricky for the symphony. The organization recently introduced flex tickets, which allow patrons to select the shows they're able to attend closer to the date of the performances.

"The best security we have is to have a core-subscribed audience," DeMain said. "With that, we can have interesting repertoire. And I don't even mean highly adventurous, but at least it can stay interesting."