

**Season opens with stomping soloist**  
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The Madison Symphony Orchestra is playing at high volume—bright! victorious!—when, seemingly out of nowhere, the triumphant strings are interrupted by an insistent blast of brass.

The strings persist, their playing brisk. The trombones intrude again. It's like listening to a fight. The tension builds.

Of course, Maestro John DeMain has warned us about this moment. It's the point where, in Richard Strauss' "Death and Transfiguration," the dying artist's mortality complicates his reveries of youth.

"It's his heart," DeMain explains. "It's interfering with his reminiscing."

Strauss composed the somber tone poem in 1888-89 when he was 25. The symphony hasn't played it more than 30 years.

To open the season, DeMain chose Beethoven's "Consecration of the House," written for a forgotten play called "The Ruins of Athens" in 1822. The initial strikes seem tentative, but the players (and the music) quickly coalesce, gathering energy as they pass themes among sections.

Peter Serkin takes a seat behind the symphony's splendid Steinway for the second half, Brahms' first piano concerto.

Serkin, a tall, thin man with large glasses and a mop of graying brown hair, shows his virtuosity in the 20-minute maestoso movement, proving himself a balanced and capable player.

The orchestra matched Serkin admirably; notably a solo horn (Linda Kimball) reiterates themes with grace, reminiscent of Brahms' second concerto.

The adagio is lush and romantic, but with hints of tension. One can imagine those brief moments relate to Brahms' tormented relationship with Clara Schumann, to whom the movement is dedicated.

Finally, the allegro non troppo lightens the mood with bustling arpeggios that bubble down the scale then march back up. Serkin races forward, then pulls back, stomping a foot through fugues and delight melodic contrasts.