

DeMain and Serkin are not quite in sync at Madison Symphony Orchestra's opener

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Isthmus

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Friday night in Overture Hall, the Madison Symphony Orchestra opened its 2009-10 season with a distinguished guest, Peter Serkin, one of our finest pianists. His vehicle was the Concerto No. 1 in D Minor of Brahms—playing, by the way, a superb Steinway loaned by Farley's House of Pianos.

The work, one of the more grandiose in the repertoire, was first planned for an unrealized symphony, only gradually evolving into its final form, but leaving its symphonic scope evident. Brahms himself was an accomplished pianist, but he created solo difficulties that avoid flashiness while balancing power with lyricism.

In accommodating those elements, it seemed to me, Serkin was not always in accord with Maestro John DeMain. The latter appeared committed to steady monumentality, while Serkin sounded uncomfortable with the bold and burly passages, much preferring those that allowed him a Chopinesque freedom and delicacy. There were instants in the Friday evening performance when they sounded not quite in sync.

I was left feeling that Serkin, for all his brilliance and versatility, is nowhere nearly as much at home with Brahms as was his father, the great Rudolf Serkin. The result, in all, was an interesting performance, but one not coherent stylistically, to my ears.

The orchestra was fully committed in the concerto, In the first half of the program, it seemed slightly short of settling back into perfectly honed ensemble playing. Nevertheless, it sounded able and eager.

Beethoven's neo-Baroque "Consecration of the House" Overture is a romantically charged essay in rethinking the form of the French and Handelian theater sinfonia. It's an unusual bit if inspired antiquarianism from the composer's later years, and a great romp, delivered exuberantly under DeMain's precise leadership.

Richard Strauss's symphonic poem "Death and Transfiguration" conveys the struggles and vindication of an artist who could realize his highest aspirations only through his tormented passage to the next world. DeMain could not transcend the score's episodic character, but he paced it as sonorous melodrama, to magnificently powerful effect.

But the real news of the concert might have been missed by many of those attending. Finally escaping the standard American aberration of orchestral seating, DeMain has at last placed the second violins on the right, where they belong, opposite the firsts on the left. So much music was composed with that position in mind, one that reveals the regular interplay between the two sections, while clarifying the string part writing and inner textures. It gave me new enjoyment of our orchestra's sound. Let's hope this becomes a permanent change.