

Watts rejoins MSO for French concerto

Lindsay Christians

77 Square

April 4, 2009

For its April offering, the Madison Symphony Orchestra pulled out an old piano, tried out a new seating arrangement and welcomed back Andre Watts, who last played at the Overture Center's opening concert in 2004.

The opening work, the prelude to "Parsifal" by Richard Wagner, seemed an appropriately somber, sometimes ponderous choice for the weekend of Palm Sunday. It's a dramatic work, with long phrases and a fine blend in the strings.

The prelude was slower and sadder than the brighter opening pieces DeMain usually picks. The 1878 work is full of "potent symbols," according to the program notes, and leitmotifs that represent characters in Wagner's religious opera. J. Michael Allsen writes that it has "mystical beauty," and truly, the prelude is full of majestic overtones.

Maestro John DeMain was experimenting with a new arrangement in the orchestra, placing the basses on far stage right and the second violins opposite. The shift must have required some adjusting, but the orchestra's blend and timing still sounded spot-on under DeMain's energetic baton.

Watts was making his fifth appearance with the MSO, having previously played concertos in 1991, 2000, 2002 and 2004. He played Camille Saint-Saens's second piano concerto on the symphony's old New York Steinway, due to a wrist injury he did not want to exacerbate (the lighter action was easier on the muscles).

It's hard to believe Watts was physically affected at all, because his playing of the challenging concerto was fluid, expressive and articulate. Opening with an andante led by the soloist, Watts showed why Saint-Saens was so beloved as a French romantic master, playing clean, colorful arpeggios and skillfully trading themes with the winds and strings.

Watts, bedecked in a tuxedo that shone blue under the stage lights, was like a track runner running warm-up laps, only to take off into a full-on sprint in the second movement (*allegro scherzando*). He was clearly having fun, showing in his face and by tapping his feet his pleasure with the music.

The closing *presto* was brilliantly fast and simply delightful, like listening to a bear and a butterfly converse -- low chords and high, flitting trills.

It's easy to see why audiences took to Johannes Brahms's second symphony more readily than his fist. It's a bright, lighthearted work in many places, starting with a thoroughly entertaining *allegro non troppo*. The *adagio* was lyrical and melancholy, with a fine horn solo, and the third *allegretto grazioso* was pastoral in tone, perfect for summer dances.

The fourth movement (*allegro con spirito*) brought the work home with quiet, romantic moments alternated with bold and forceful ones. The orchestra slowed, only to spin into a new theme or reprise an earlier motive for a dramatic, enjoyable end to the evening.