

André Watts brings fireworks, delicacy to Madison Symphony Orchestra performance

John Barker

Isthmus

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I have long had reservations about André Watts: undeniable technique, but, I felt, a certain superficiality in repertoire and interpretation. His latest guest appearance with the Madison Symphony Orchestra in Overture Hall last weekend swept aside past doubts, however.

His vehicle was the “Piano Concert No. 2 in G minor” by Saint-Saëns. Though the composer is somewhat under-appreciated, this is one of his most popular works (especially among his five essays in this genre), and it is no stranger to Madison audiences. It offers great opportunity for solo virtuosity, which Watts displayed in awesome abundance.

But, with the opening cadenza, he also launched the first movement with unusual thoughtfulness. Delicacies flourished amid the fireworks, through the rippling middle movement and even the roof-raising tarantella-finale. I came to wonder if, perhaps subconsciously, Saint-Saëns had created in this score a kind of duel between the spirits of Chopin and Liszt, with the latter winning at the end. Watts gave us, I would say, not only a powerhouse performance but one of unusual insights.

The concert opened with the prelude to Wagner’s last opera, “Parsifal.” As a solemn unfolding of the main leitmotifs of this music-drama, the prelude is more rhetoric than entertainment, but it permits an orchestra to demonstrate a range of colorings, from delicate woodwind or string pastels to bold brass impasto. Maestro John DeMain set it forth in a leisurely yet carefully controlled fashion, founded on the orchestra’s diverse strengths.

The orchestra’s main event was Brahms’ “Symphony No. 2 in D major.” Its relaxed spirit and wonderful melodic inspiration, within some of the composer’s richest orchestral writing, make it a guaranteed audience-pleaser. DeMain’s interpretation was fluent and unfussy (with the repeat of the first-movement exposition omitted), yet fully alert to structural details.

The orchestra sounded magnificent, with no small thanks to a bold change in the seating pattern this time. Against practices common in America, the second violins, usually piled behind the firsts, all on the left, were shifted across to front right, before the violas, in European fashion. Composers have regularly given the second violins distinct roles of their own that can be fully appreciated only when seconds are spatially opposed to the firsts. Benefits of the opposition could be heard in the Wagner prelude, with its four-part divisions of the violins, and in the Brahms symphony.

Moreover, bracketing second violins with violas strengthens inner-voice writing, allows the cellos (where the seconds used to be) to face outward more boldly, and even accommodates moving the woodwinds forward for a more total integration of the overall sound. This experiment should become standard practice in future MSO concerts.