

Pianist Andre Watts, symphony powerful in performance

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When Andre Watts burst into the opening cadenza of the Saint Saens Second Piano Concerto Friday night in Overture Hall, for a few minutes I wondered if I had been listening to the same concerto while preparing for this concert in the preceding several days.

This was a more powerful, measured beginning than I had been listening to (in several versions) — stately, even majestic for the first minute and a half, with clear, transparent sound.

It was a harbinger of things to come for the next 20 minutes.

Watts proved more than equal to the concerto's many demands for dexterity, precision, power and delicacy. The moderate tempo of the beginning six minutes erupted into a dazzling explosion of chords, played with almost frantic speed, yet fully controlled.

In the jaunty, rollicking second movement, with its syncopated moments in the most recognizable melody of the concerto, Watts and the Madison Symphony Orchestra, led by music director John DeMain, complemented each other beautifully.

And the presto finale, with more massive chords, was played with breathtaking dexterity, accompanied by the same almost frantic presto pace from the orchestra.

Inevitably I must recall the performance by Cecile Licad of this concerto with the MSO in November 2001, which, even with my memory a bit fuzzy after 7 1/2 years, was as explosively fine as any I have heard in nearly 50 years of reviewing concerts in Madison. (And pianist Valentina Lisitsa played the concerto wonderfully well in April 2005 with the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra.)

Watts exhibited the same technical skills, but he had the advantage of a superior instrument, the excellent Overture Hall Steinway, which has an open, warm tone to go with its impressive sound projection. This was the fifth appearance in Madison for Watts. He played the Beethoven "Emperor" Concerto at the MSO's formal opening night in Overture Hall in September 2004.

The Brahms Second Symphony was given a strong and masculine, yet supple performance by the orchestra. This is a work that must have a conductor controlling tempos because there is a wealth of inner detail that complicates melodic lines.

The goal is to avoid heaviness in the weighty textures of the first three movements, which DeMain worked hard at, almost entirely successfully.

Then he has to gear up the orchestra for a spirited fourth movement that culminates in final moments in which the brasses have a field day.

Things worked well.

Wagner's prelude to "Parsifal" was the opener. Serious stuff it was, with long, flowing, dirge-like lines and a parade of themes from the five-hour opera. Well played.