

Artist Management

Christopher Taylor

Performs the Schumann Concerto with the Madison Symphony Orchestra
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Well Tempered Ear, Wordpress.com

[Classical music review: Pianist Christopher Taylor and the Madison Symphony Orchestra triumphantly reveal the Classicism in Robert Schumann's Romantic piano concerto](#) | April 19, 2011 By Jacob Stockinger

Winston Churchill once pushed away a fancy dessert and remarked "This pudding has no theme." I feared that might be the case with the latest program of the Madison Symphony Orchestra this past weekend. Was it about orchestral fantasies (3 of the 4 pieces)? Or about coupling a modern 20th-century work with a 19th century Romantic work (2 plus 2)? Or about different kinds of love (3 of the 4 works)? I'm still not sure if there was some unifying principle, which seems as missing as critical agreement (see the reviews below). But I am no longer worried about it.

That's because I heard the best performance I have ever heard of the Robert Schumann's Piano Concerto –and that includes live performances, recordings and my own playing (at) some passages. The soloist was the University of Wisconsin pianist Christopher Taylor, who won a bronze medal at the Van Cliburn Competition and an Avery Fisher Career Grant among many honors and rave reviews.

Taylor, who spoke about the concerto on this blog last week in a Q&A, learned the work especially for the occasion. What made his Sunday performance so special – and the height of the local celebration of the Schumann bicentennial, as far as I am concerned — was two things.

First, it was absolutely propulsive in its energy. Taylor stepped on the gas and delivered a sharp, driven performance that proved irresistible. It showed why Romanticism took off.

Even more importantly, Taylor showed how beneath the arch-Romantic surface, Schumann had a thorough command of Classical-era techniques. So clear and precise was his playing, and so precise his articulation and voicing, even in passage work, that one could hear how Schumann — who was an important critic before he became a very important composer — used counterpoint and canons and other methods of J.S. Bach.

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Schumann sure knew his Bach. There is an album out showing the Bach and Schumann connection, and pianist Shai Wosner, who played with the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra two weeks ago and who played on this past Saturday's "A Prairie Home Companion," told The Ear he was looking at performing and recording a similar Schumann-Bach program.

In any case, the Schumann concerto had an absolutely lyrical and song-like slow movement rounded out by the fiery opening fantasy and the closing impetuous waltz rondo.

True, there were some off-moments where the piano and the orchestra didn't end on the same note – it was usually the Taylor who arrived there first—but they were very minor quibbles in an otherwise world-class performance that any major record label in its right mind would be smart to record.

The audience loved it and rewarded a Taylor with loud cheers and a standing ovation. One only wished Taylor had performed one of his piano rags or a short encore piece (maybe an excerpt from another work by Schumann, below, perhaps the "Scenes of Childhood") to acknowledge the affection bordering, on adoration and wonderment, he generated.

The program opened with the "Symphony of Psalms" by Igor Stravinsky. It is scored unusually without violins or viola but with two pianos and a harp. Some people find it an awkward piece. I found it engaging and at times riveting. I do think that the Madison Symphony Chorus could have used a bit more shaping of the vocal parts, especially in the dynamic and voice-leading of the slow last movement, which seemed just a bit too loud, and overwhelmed by the orchestra. The mysterious praise of God relies more on quiet. But it nonetheless was a convincing and moving performance.

The "Fantasy on a Theme of Thomas Tallis," by Ralph Vaughan Williams, is an absolutely beautiful use of a string orchestra with the kind of gorgeously lush but also austere beautiful plainsong sound that makes it a standout on any program.

It is deeply nostalgic and used older, pre-Baroque forms of harmony much like composers Arvo Part and John Taverner do today. It is always haunting – even if I somehow wonder where Charlton Heston is because it seems like an overture to some Cecile B. De Mille Old Testament epic, background music for panorama shots of a Holy Land desert.

Closing the program was a classic case of first-rate playing of third-rate music. The piece was the "Francesca da Rimini" Fantasy by Tchaikovsky, based on an episode in Dante's "Inferno" from "The Divine Comedy."

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As a showcase for the orchestra, it has its moments, including a beautiful love theme and a wonderful wind duet. But overall it is bombastic, sound and fury signifying almost nothing except the fires of Hell. If the Vaughan Williams recalls an epic, this drama that quickly turns into melodrama reminds one of some silent-era movie with people tossing their heads and clutching their breasts.

The piece was last played by the MSO in 1988, and despite a standing ovation and cheers – given, I prefer to think, justifiably more to the virtuosity of the orchestra and conductor John DeMain, than to Tchaikovsky's score — The Ear would not mind if this score was put away for another 23 years.

There is so much really appealing Tchaikovsky — the piano and violin concertos, the ballet scores, the major symphonies – one wonders why anyone would tackle anything but the best.

Now, here is another interesting aspect to this MSO concert. Rarely, I think, do the local critics disagree so strongly as with this particular program. What does that say or mean? I'm not sure.

So compare and contrast them for yourself, and then choose your favorite, the one you most agree with:

Here is Lindsay Christians' review in 77 Square and The Capital Times:

http://host.madison.com/entertainment/arts_and_theatre/reviews/article_f8c60398-6823-11e0-ba87-001cc4c03286.html

And here is a review by John W. Barker for Isthmus:

<http://www.thedailypage.com/daily/article.php?article=32975>

And here is a review by Greg Hettmansberger for Dane101:

http://www.dane101.com/music/2011/04/16/classical_connections_madison_symphony_plays_musical_chairs

<http://welltempered.wordpress.com/2011/04/19/classical-music-review-pianist-christopher-taylor-and-the-madison-symphony-orchestra-reveal-the-classicism-in-robert-schumann%E2%80%99s-romantic-piano-concerto/>