

Christopher Taylor

Performs the Schumann Piano Concerto with the Madison Symphony Orchestra

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Heavenly strings and strange psalms in symphony program

LINDSAY CHRISTIANS | The Capital Times |
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From pious psalms to the fires of hell, the Madison Symphony Orchestra presented a colorful if somewhat uneven program on Friday night in Overture Hall.

It's a busy time of year, and the great hall was as sparse as I've seen it this season. After hearing the opener, Igor Stravinsky's plodding "Symphony of Psalms," I began to wonder if the usual occupants of those empty seats knew something I didn't.

The Madison Symphony Chorus, directed by Beverly Taylor, sounded like a large, well-trained church choir, well-balanced and solid especially in the higher octaves. But the piece seemed a strange choice, ill suited to the text of the psalms. The celebratory Psalm 150 (a chorus of laudate, or "praise Him") was delivered like a denunciation.

The situation did not immediately improve when the MSO rolled out the Steinway. Madison's own Christopher Taylor held the spotlight well, but Robert Schumann's only piano concerto sounded all the more repetitive and simplistic next to the tedium of the Stravinsky.

Then, thankfully, **Taylor let fly with a brilliant cadenza at the end of the first movement. On the romantic Intermezzo: Andantino grazioso, Taylor was virtuosic without being showy, hunching over the keyboard in intense passages as if to focus more clearly.**

Taylor's playing was impassioned and expressive, the crispness of his articulation echoed in the winds. Toward the end the orchestra and piano fell out of sync, but maestro John DeMain pulled both together for a climactic close.

Easily the highlight of the evening was Ralph Vaughan Williams' gorgeous "Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis." Last performed by the MSO in 1973 (all but the Schumann hadn't been performed since the '80s), this work showcased the depth and clarity of the symphony's strings. This "fantasia" was simply gorgeous. Vaughn Williams brought the melody down to a solo viola, then a violin (concertmaster candidate Naha Greenholtz), then a small quartet at the front of the stage. Behind the orchestra, a group of nine strings provided shimmering distance - a gimmick, but effective....



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