

A JOURNEY THROUGH MADISON'S CLASSICAL MUSIC SCENE

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## Classically Speaking

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# Peninsula Music Festival Goes Bold and Beautiful

BY GREG HETTMANSBERGER



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Victor Yampolsky, twenty-nine years and counting at the Peninsula Music Festival

Last summer when I experienced the [Peninsula Music Festival](#) for the first time, I was blessed to hear all three of the third and final week of closing concerts. This year—alas!—I could only attend concerts four and five, in the second week. My only recourse was to find my seat early, read Dr. Richard Rodda's cogent notes well before the downbeat, and be prepared to soak up every note.

The program was more traditional than [Tuesday's menu](#) of Bach and Stravinsky had been, as music director and conductor **Victor Yampolsky** tends to favor larger works from the later nineteenth and early- to mid-twentieth century. And why not? His orchestra of faithful returnees, many if not most of whom have played in Fish Creek's Door County Auditorium under his baton for a decade or two, seem to relish the opportunity to fill the hall with as much sumptuous beauty as the outer

environment of Door County provides at every turn.

But the evening began with another Thursday tradition, a short work led by one of participant's in the PMF's "Emerging Conductor" program. **Robert McConnell** had his five minutes of mini-fame (for now) in leading Dvorak's *Legend*, Op. 59, No. 2. The ten *Legends* abound in gestures, lacking the spunk and/or persuasive suavity of the better known Slavonic Dances. But McConnell managed to bring the muted colors to life with easy charm...sort of like meandering down a side road in Ephraim.

Yampolsky resumed his customary post but gave the spotlight to **Susanna Self**, who was the flute soloist in Carl Nielsen's *Flute Concerto* of 1926. Nielsen loved to imbue his wind parts with both what he perceived as the "personality" of the instrument as well as the human qualities of players he knew. As for Self, she is possessed of what can only be described as a "quiet" technique: Tall and commanding in appearance, she pours forth such beautiful oodles of notes and strings of pearly phrases that scarcely seem possible for the apparent economy of effort employed on stage. It is no wonder that she currently holds chairs in the orchestras of St. Louis, Baltimore and Charlotte. A further delight of the work is Nielsen's cheeky interruptive dialogue courtesy of the bass trombone.

### About This Blog



Years before I contributed my first classical review to the *Los Angeles Times* in 1988, I started a class in music appreciation for adults that had one aim: to put a few cracks in the "ivory tower elitism" I found pervasive in the classical music world since my boyhood days. Whether as a critic, program annotator or band director, that goal has never changed.

After all, Mozart and Beethoven and the gang wrote their music for people like you—not critics or professors!

After growing up in the suburbs of New York City, and spending twenty years in and around Los Angeles, the last twelve years here leave me more amazed than ever at the musical riches of Madison. I'm a cheerleader at heart, because I always think more people would become classical fans if they'd give it a chance—but I'm also quick to tell you when you're not getting your money's worth. Classically Speaking brings you as much news and as many reviews as possible, and I hope you'll join me for a fabulous musical journey.

— Greg Hettmansberger

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David Lussier handled that delightful task with spunk, and concertmaster Igor Yuzefovich and timpanist William Wiggins also reminded us of the great individual gifts that make up this special orchestra. Self easily earned her three vociferous curtain calls, and Yampolsky, showing his usual respect and admiration for his artists, stayed offstage for her to garner all the acclaim for the final two.

This year's PMF theme has been a mini Rachmaninoff celebration, and the second half of the concert consisted simply of the Russian master's *Symphony No. 2*. As Yampolsky waited for the audience rustling to fully subside, an almost imperceptible gesture elicited a whisper of a phrase from the string basses, gradually growing more audible until a woodwind choir joined like a celestial pipe organ, and finally imploring upper strings completely engulfed us. It took all of about two minutes for Yampolsky and his ensemble to demonstrate afresh what they do best: the passion and sweep of unabashed Romantic music making at its most convincing.

The second movement scherzo demonstrated that Yampolsky knows the difference between *forte* and *fortissimo*—and his orchestra knows how to deliver them. The sublime slow movement is justly celebrated for its ravishing clarinet solo, and Carmelo Galante spun gossamer threads of sound that made you want to hold your breath. The finale of the work is, to these ears, less convincing artistically, but by then it was more a matter of knowing that all too soon my PMF adventure would be over for another year...

But if you're in the area now or in the next couple of days, there are two concerts left: Thursday night offers the *Piano Concerto No. 1* of Tchaikovsky with soloist Gabriela Martinez, and Rachmaninoff's *Symphony No. 3*. The sixty-second festival concludes Saturday night with the first performance by the PMF orchestra of Elgar's *Violin Concerto*, with Elena Urioste taking the solo part, and ending with Rachmaninoff's final orchestral work, the scintillating *Symphonic Dances*. How I wish I could say "See you there!"

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