

# Second Concert Report

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The overture to *Die Meistersinger von Nurenburg*, one of Wagner's less than typical operas, began the 2006 MITSO season to what could very well be one of MITSO's less than typical years. Transitioning from the permanent directorship of Dante Anzolini to Paul Biss, an interim director, must certainly have a significant effect on the returning players, and even newcomers. Despite this Biss has a season of heavy hitters lined up, including Beethoven's 5th, Mahler's 5th, and Tchaikovsky's 5th, along with works by Mussorgsky, Wagner, Shostakovich, and Bartok not to mention the Dvorak's 8th and Hanson's 2nd on this concert.<sup>1</sup> While Anzolini certainly drew from the core repertoire for symphony, he certainly never attempted this many large symphonic works within one season, especially with respect to the brass and wind section. It will be interesting to hear throughout the season, how MITSO handles these pieces, with a new director, but if the first concert is any indicator of things to come it looks like MITSO is in for a good season.

*Die Meistersinger* is what I would consider to be Wagner's third most famous piece, falling behind *Walkurenritt* (Ride of the Valkyries) and the overture to *Der Fliegende Hollander* (The Flying Dutchman). Sandwiched between these two great works of Wagner, *Die Meistersinger* departs from the typical fantastic settings of Wagner and enters the real world town of Nurenburg, with the main subject of the opera, die Meistersinger, being a real group of musicians and poets.<sup>2</sup> Not only does the subject matter deal with the real world, but the opera is Wagner's one and only comedy! Dealing with a typical (non-epic)<sup>3</sup> love story, the plot is similar in fashion to *The Barber of Seville* or *La Boheme*. Atypical<sup>4</sup>, for many reasons, *Die Meistersinger* also departs from many Wagner's musical conventions

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<sup>1</sup>Midway through summer Professor Biss sent out an email to the mit-musicians list, which is why I know what he is planning to play. The repertoire that he was planning on hitting almost stole me away from Wind Ensemble, until I realized that Beethoven's 5th, while being the first symphony to use trombone, really did not use trombone all that much. I still would have loved to play with MITSO this season, but I just don't have time. Maybe I should drop my physics major...

<sup>2</sup>*New Grove Musical Dictionary*

<sup>3</sup>By non-epic I mean that the story deals with normal people, having normal everyday problems, instead of dealing with gods falling in love with humans and epic love fueds involving people being smitten by gods, etc. Not that I do not disapprove of these stories at all, but this is a huge departure for Wagner

<sup>4</sup>The story and style may be atypical, but it is still typical in Wagnerian length coming in at over five hours.

and introduces the use of arias and recitative, along with ballet. In many ways this opera almost seems like it is an opportunity for Wagner explore many of the operatic devices that so vehemently opposed.

Listening to the overture, without knowing the composer to be Wagner, one could mistake it as an overture to some tragic opera, but certainly not a comedy. Comparing it to other Wagnerian overtures however, makes *Die Meistersinger* seem downright lighthearted. Wagner as usual makes use of the brass, but restrains them much more than usual, using a much less edgy tone, and counterbalancing them with use of the woodwind section and the string section. The beginning, rather than opening with a full brass fanfare, begins rather with a full string fanfare, which is tempered by use of the horn section the tubas<sup>5</sup>, and the timpani. As the piece moves forward the opening fanfare transitions into a lyrical section and back to the fanfare theme, this time with the help of trombones and trumpets. However the tone at this point still has no edge, which was especially the case in this performance by MITSO. The music transitions back into another more lyrical section and goes through a series of variations between the lyrical theme and the fanfare theme. One of the more interesting variations of the fanfare theme comes after a large build up in the strings, to what one would expect to be the return of the brass with the fanfare. Instead the clarinets and flutes enter with a very quiet and intricate variation on the fanfare in an almost fugue form.

I remember first hearing this piece as a freshman in high school, sight-reading it in Wind Ensemble (a version arranged for Wind Ensemble of course). We went on to play *Die Meistersinger* at a concert, and it was by far my favorite piece on the program. One of the things that drew me to it was its excellent use of the trombone section.<sup>6</sup> Needless to say, in ninth grade I played these great trombone lines with a lot of exuberance without listening to a recording of the piece. In hindsight it would seem that I may have used a little too much of a brassy edge, but then again my director never told me to play more quietly. This leads me to what I consider to be one of the most difficult aspects of this piece: intensity and tone balance. In my experience, symphonies, even professional symphonies, lose intensity as edge is taken off the sound, in both the strings and the winds. This edge on the sound is most prominent in the brass, but is also noticeable in the other instruments. The beginning of this piece is almost certainly meant to be intense, but without a noticeable edge.<sup>7</sup> In this regard MITSO did a great job. There was a high intensity at the start, and

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<sup>5</sup>Wagner's use of the tuba has always fascinated me, especially his use of the Wagner Tuba which no longer is commonly used. The Wagner Tuba was only used briefly by Wagner, and not in this opera.

<sup>6</sup>Maybe that was just from the arrangement but it seems to me that in the original scoring by Wagner, the trombones also have a pretty cool part. Wagner was always very good with the way that he used trombones.

<sup>7</sup>I am entirely basing this assumption off the fact that the piece is a comedy and from listening to the recording by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, directed by Sir Georg Solti. The low brass section of the CSO is considered to be one of the more aggressive low brass sections in the world of professional symphonies (it certainly blows the BSO low brass out of the water!), and in the opening of the recording, they are using almost absolutely no edge. Maybe my analysis here is flawed, but when it comes down to

the edge was minimal. Unfortunately, as the piece progressed, the intensity was lost at a rather alarming rate. The piece does use the same theme over and over, which can be taxing on the players, but makes keeping the intensity up that much more critical. By the time the intricate fugue section in the winds appeared it was lack-luster because so much intensity had been lost by that point. By the end of the piece I was hoping that the intensity might come back with the help of a little edge from the brass, but neither came.<sup>8</sup>

Hanson's *Romantic* symphony was the complement to *Die Meistersinger* for the first half of the program. Interestingly enough the *Romantic* was commissioned by the BSO for its fiftieth anniversary and was premiered in 1930. This puts it well outside the accepted time period for the Romantic era of music, but here is what Howard Hanson has to say about it himself:

It was a genuine expression of romanticism and a protest against the growing Schoenbergism of the time the cold music and I wanted to write something that was warm and young, vigorous and youthful.<sup>9</sup>

While the piece is a far cry from Schoenberg, it is also certainly not Romantic yet is still Romantic in nature. Use of winds, especially of the horns, provides many of the introductions of the themes in the first movement. This reflects the trends of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century composers of shifting the emphasis in the symphony from dominant strings to equal footing for both strings and winds. The use of high principle trumpet in this seemed to be extraordinary taxing (especially judging from the grimaces that the principle player was making), and the use of low brass was at times very Wagnerian<sup>10</sup>. My first impression of this piece was that it was a very early predecessor to a film score written by John Williams or Hans Zimmer. I think that in actuality many film scores take the ideas of the Romantic era and imitate them, but with more emphasis on wind lines, and the concept behind this symphony was similar.

What surprised me was the fact that Professor Biss used a score for this piece while, not using a score for the Wagner or Dvorak. While this is understandable, since I am sure he has directed the Wagner and Dvorak many times before, it gave the impression that the Hanson was less rehearsed than the Dvorak or the Wagner. In reality I do not think that this was the case, but I think that it might have given many people that impression. In the end I felt that the Hanson was performed very well. I do think that it might have been wiser to place it before *Die Meistersinger* so that the trumpets would have been fresher, but I think that musically it was logical to place it after *Die Meistersinger*. In any case, the intensity of this piece, along with the musicality was much better than *Die Meistersinger*.

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how to play low brass orchestral excerpts, I feel the CSO low brass is the best example out there.

<sup>8</sup>In the CSO recording the end has quite a bit of edge. Of course it is rather unfair to hold MITSO to the standards of the CSO, and Biss to the standard of Solti, but still, I think it can be useful.

<sup>9</sup>S. Smith, Liner Notes to *Music of Howard Hanson*, [1998]

<sup>10</sup>On a side-note I found the opening of the second movement to be very very similar to the opening of the overture to *Der Fliegende Hollander*.

The dynamic contrast led to a more emotive piece, and I felt that some very good solo work on various instruments motivated the symphony to greater levels of musicality.

Dvorak's *Symphony No. 8* came after the intermission and constituted the entire second half of the concert. Of the three pieces performed, this, in my opinion, was by far the most Romantic of them all. Since Romantic is difficult to describe, as we found out on the second day of class, I can not give very many specific details as to why I feel this way, but rather just vague ideas. The entire piece (at least the first movement) is much less rhythmically driven than *Die Meistersinger* and many parts of the *Romantic*. The contrasting dynamic themes and use of rubato<sup>11</sup> made the entire symphony seem very emotional, much more so than *Die Meistersinger*. This is also possible because it seemed as if the symphony enjoyed playing this work more than the other two, and put more emotion into the piece. In general I felt that the strings and woodwinds put much more effort into this piece. This was most apparent to me in the first movement, where the theme is quietly stated in the flutes and is answered in direct contrast with a forte violin line. The brass on the other hand seemed as if they were tired (which is quite possibly the case considering the lineup for the concert). At the end of the *Allegro ma non troppo* the low brass seemed to have completely run out of steam and was not able to match the exuberant horn runs. I did find the horns did an excellent job at the end, raising their bells and producing a massive wall of sound (albeit slightly out of tune wall of sound, although for the volume they were playing at the intonation was very impressive). This was not matched in the trombones or the trumpets, which is somewhat unfortunate since it left the ending a little lopsided.

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<sup>11</sup>I could not tell if the rubato was written into the music, or was conducted. It seemed like it was conducted, but then again, many conductors do not just beat strict time.