

## ISTHMUS

### Clarinetist Joseph Morris is splendid in Middleton Community Orchestra's 2014 holiday concert

A seasonal commitment

by

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The December holidays mean the concert calendar is full of music no one would think of tolerating any other time of the year. Who wants to hear "Silent Night" or "White Christmas" in July?

Fortunately, there are a few local organizations that offer music that rewards and nourishes at any time of the year. The Middleton Community Orchestra has been one of these.

Unfortunately, on Monday, the orchestra's program began with a seven-minute hash, "A Christmas Festival," by LeRoy Anderson, which pastes together holiday "hit" tunes, run like a slide show. It was a last-minute addition, and at least it was brief. Once it was over, the real music could begin.

Mr. Anderson could (and should) have taken some lessons from Johannes Brahms, who demonstrated how a collation of traditional tunes could be welded into a true musical work. This was demonstrated in his "Academic Festival Overture," one of the composer's most popular orchestral works. Under conductor Steve Kurr, the orchestra pulled it off effectively, despite some less than polished passages.

The music of Englishman Gerard Finzi (1901-1956) has yet to be given the attention over here that it deserves. "Gentle" and "lyrical" are the words that come to mind in listening to his works. His splendid Concerto for Clarinet and Strings was the astute choice of soloist Joseph Morris, the dazzling young clarinetist currently gracing the Madison Symphony Orchestra. Morris proved a virtuosic but eloquent champion of this witty and imaginative work. He was properly assertive in the opening movement, and really swinging in the playful rondo-finale. But he was particularly appealing in the beautiful middle movement, in which the orchestra's string players demonstrated their progress as a handsomely focused ensemble.

There are not that many important clarinet concertos, much less great ones. But Morris and Kurr have allowed us to hear a great one, and one that should be placed up there close to Mozart's masterpiece. (Now, will someone at last give us Finzi's magnificent Cello Concerto?)

The biggest work of the night was Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, in line with Kurr's determination to challenge his players with lofty and familiar music. There were some blemishes, particular among the wind players. But Kurr made a point of favoring the winds in the orchestral balance, often with justly powerful effect. The total performance was a very committed and satisfying one, another feather in the Middleton Community Orchestra cap.