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ASO benefits in new venue from clean, bright acoustics

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Here's your chance to hear the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra literally as you have never heard it before. The orchestra kicked off a new Masterworks season in a new venue Saturday, along with a new 7:30 p.m. starting time, at the Maumelle Performing Arts Center, its home away from home while Robinson Center Music Hall undergoes a two-year renovation that is supposed to include a complete acoustic remake.

“Pianist Andrew Staube blew out the room... in an awe-inspiring performance with the orchestra.”

The Maumelle facility seats roughly half of Robinson's former capacity of 2,500, but the wonderful sound of the hall makes up for a lot. Whatever Robinson eventually becomes, the clean, bright, brilliant, live acoustics in Maumelle's center make it possible for the audience not only to hear individual instruments no matter how far apart the players and audience are -- the brand-new sound of the brass, the clarity of the clarinets, the full boom of the timpani, the eight cellos that sounded like 20 in the second movement of Johannes Brahms' *Symphony No. 2* -- but also for the musicians to hear *each other*, a chronic problem on the Robinson stage.

Pianist Andrew Staube blew out the room -- and some of the lower pitches on the piano, unfortunately -- in an awe-inspiring performance with the orchestra of Sergei Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No. 2*. He and conductor Philip Mann collaborated on some brisk tempos and eschewed, to the performance's benefit, the mushy, gooey, self-indulgent uber-Romanticism that frequently burdens this piece. (The microphone stuck into the guts of the piano, I'm told, was for the orchestra's archival recording and not for amplification.)

Mann and the orchestra made nice work of Brahms' sunniest symphony and provided a delightful curtain-raiser: the *Promenade Overture* by ASO Composer of the Year John Corigliano, who puts Franz Joseph Haydn's "*Farewell*" *Symphony* in reverse by having the musicians march in, instead of depart, one section at a time to a charming tune.