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Strauss performance contrasts composer's youth and age

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Just as the iconography of New Year's presents us with the old man and the baby, so does this weekend's middle program of the Minnesota Orchestra's three-week Richard Strauss festival show the composer as both a babe cutting his compositional teeth and a wizened elder bidding a sad farewell. You can experience both the exuberance of the confident wunderkind ready to conquer the world and the sage sadness of a much older man whose eyes have been opened to life's pain.

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It makes for a fascinating program, and Thursday's midday performance at Minneapolis' Orchestra Hall eloquently conveyed the contrasts of Strauss in youth and old age, particularly in how he viewed death at ages 26 ("Death and Transfiguration") and 80 ("Metamorphosen"). But between those dark meditations lay the youthful "Burleske," a stylistic smorgasbord of a piano concerto in miniature. With a gifted St. Paul product, Andrew Staupe, as soloist, it brought a welcome sense of fun to a program that could have been cast into darkness by death's shadow.

Staupe tackling a notoriously difficult work ["Burleske"] and deftly negotiating its many mood shifts. He drew listeners in with whispered softness, then thundered mightily on big crashing chords reminiscent of raging Rachmaninoff. Staupe's thoughtful, confident interpretation felt like a key stride forward in a career that's gathering momentum.

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