We in Wisconsin are privileged to call Christopher Taylor one of our own. A musician of exceptional intelligence and creativity, Taylor is the featured performer in the Madison Symphony Orchestra's “Piano Genius” concerts happening at Overture Hall this weekend.

Taylor appears twice in the concert, first with J.S. Bach's Clavier Sonata No. 4 in lieu of an overture, then again with Liszt's Concerto No. 1 for Piano. Through their striking differences the two pieces showcase Taylor's exceptional range as a musician.

Bach's clavier concertos were the result of his directorship of Leipzig's Collegium Musicum, a group of talented musicians that met weekly to play secular music. Number four was likely first composed for oboe as the solo instrument, a lineage that is audible in the lyricism of the soloist's line, especially in the middle movement.

Taylor is already known as a gifted interpreter of Bach, and this performance bolsters that reputation. With his right hand, he played floating melodic passages with a flexible sense of his time, while his left hand played the more traditional role harpsichord role of harmonic and rhythmic anchor, a tough expressive balance to hold within a single body.

The third movement of the concerto is the cleverest. The music twists and turns through an ever-changing landscape of wit, urgency, and rapidly unfurling passages. Taylor's playing was quick and supple, never rushed or stressed, and his musical expression was just as deft.

The orchestra's role in this piece was tightly constrained, and they sometimes felt a bit limp in that position. In the second movement, for instance, the soloist's lines are especially lyrical, while the accompaniment maintains a spare, pulsing rhythm. At times the orchestra rested too much here, as if the lack of thematic content left them unsure of how to play with vitality.

The Liszt piano concerto was unquestionably the concert highlight for soloist and orchestra alike.

The fundamental musical tension in the concerto is between a galloping, almost ominous
theme that opens the piece and repeatedly returns throughout and the several other more romantic themes that appear in each movement.

The soloist's part has its flourishes and difficulties, to be sure—lightening fast runs, endless trills throughout—but both the composition and Taylor's performance of it resist the impulse toward slathering things with flash just to be impressive. As with the final movement of the Bach, Taylor's intellectual and expressive approach to the music was as supple as his technique. The resulting performance was intense yet intimate, deeply emotional but never stagey.

The orchestra, too, was in fine form. Numerous soloists deserve attention, most notably clarinet chair Joseph Morris, whose affecting solo in the first movement was like a song coming through the fog.

DeMain maintained a special kind of focus that I have rarely witnessed before. It was evident in the thoughtful and beautiful performances he drew from his musicians, but also in the way he held concentration and focus between movements. No paper shuffling or coughing, just staying with the energy of the music. The audience responded to that focus—several people started clapping before the last chords of the music sounded, as if they just couldn’t hold in their appreciation any longer.

The concert concluded with Bruckner's Symphony No. 7, a giant of a piece and his first real success as a symphonic composer.

I will confess that I am among the ranks of those who don’t love Bruckner. For me, it’s just too much. Too much sound, too long, too much intensity just for it's own sake. In other words, the polar opposite of what I love about the particular drama of the Liszt and Taylor's performance of it.

This is not to ding the Symphony's performance of the piece. It was solid and passionate, and the brass sections performed especially well. One has to admire the musicians' endurance at the very least.

So, if you love Bruckner, this is a fantastic concert for you. And even if you don’t, go to hear the wonderful Christopher Taylor and give the Bruckner a try.

If You Go

“Piano Genius” will be repeated at 8 p.m. Saturday, April 11 and 2:30 p.m. Sunday, April 12. There will be a free pre-concert talk for ticket holders held one hour prior to each performance. Tickets are $16-$84 at the Overture box office, or for an additional fee at overturecenter.org or 258-4141.