

ZUILL BAILEY

CELLIST



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A night of crowd pleasing

By **ROY C. DICKS**, Correspondent

There was no question about the audience's reaction to the N.C. Symphony's second "Crossing the Atlantic" concert Friday in Meymandi Concert Hall. The crowd loved it -- and with good reason.

Conductor Grant Llewellyn's two-part series, subtitled "The Groundbreakers," focused on English and American composers deserving the designation. Friday's offerings began with music by Henry Purcell, considered one of the great English composers even in his own short lifetime (1659-95) and noted for his inventiveness and sense of drama.

Llewellyn led a reduced orchestra (with two trumpets stationed above the stage in the balconies) in the overture and four short pieces from the 1692 theater piece "The Fairie Queen," based on Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Llewellyn gave them a gentle grandeur, properly subdued in the "Largo" section (with lovely lute work by Richard Motylinski) and crisply martial in the final "Allegro."

"Groundbreaking" might not come to mind for the works of Sir Edward Elgar, being mostly derivative of other 19th-century composers, as he freely admitted. But Elgar combined these influences in highly personal, deeply felt compositions, which reflected Great Britain's nostalgia for its glorious past in the face of an uncertain 20th century.

Elgar's 1919 Cello Concerto is not a virtuoso showpiece but rather a meditative rumination. The solo part seems to express fleeting and conflicting thoughts, sometimes melancholic, sometimes passionate, sometimes brooding. The young American cellist Zuill Bailey proved to be a master at expressing these changing moods, his firmly rounded tone moving easily from dark to light, from rich to feathered.

Llewellyn matched him with great subtlety and nuance, always sensitive to the ebb and flow, taking great care never to overwhelm the cello part. Bailey's greatly satisfying performance, along with pianist Joanna MacGregor's last week, seem to signal a new level for the symphony in matching the right soloist with the right material.

American Aaron Copland was indeed a groundbreaker, his spacious, directly appealing music greatly influencing hosts of American composers ever since. Symphony No. 3 from 1946, his largest orchestra work, contains all his signature elements: quivering strings painting misty dawns, folk-like melodies with simple charm, stirring outbursts of patriotic fervor.

Here Llewellyn showed he understands how to shade dynamics for variety and how to build a climax. The orchestra had a brilliant sheen, with many individual players proving their mettle, especially timpanist John Feddersen in his fiercely dramatic contributions. The performance lacked the full sweep and raucous edge that makes Copland so American-sounding, Llewellyn's tight rein on tempos and near-metronomic beat smoothing over some of the freer spirit. But the audience responded intensely to the polished playing and the music's pull.

Llewellyn and the orchestra continue to give proof to the slogan, "America's Next Great Orchestra."

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