

ZUILL BAILEY

CELLO

CLASSICAL REVIEW

Brahms blooms in Evanston

By Michael Cameron | Special to the Chicago Tribune

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At 12 years and counting, Evanston's Winter Chamber Music Festival is an important touchstone for area chamber music aficionados, appearing in full bloom just as most presenters are awakening from the holiday doldrums.

Nothing warms chilled bones like the music of Johannes Brahms, and this year's series of six concerts features several of the master's favorites. Sunday's affair at a near-capacity Pick-Staiger Concert Hall favored endearing performances of two of Brahms' most revered chamber works.

As in past years, most of the musicians were culled from the top ranks of area chamber players and augmented with a smattering of guest artists. **This program aimed its spotlight on a pair of rising young outsiders, cellist Zuill Bailey and pianist Navah Perlman.**

Bailey cultivated a breezy rapport with his audience, aided by amusing anecdotes. The sound he coaxed from his 1693 Goffriller cello was exceptionally creamy and seductive, if modest in volume. His warm, understated vibrato was enticing in lyrical passages in the lower and middle realms.

Brahms' Sonata in E minor unfolded with unusual flexibility, a natural response to its full-blooded lyric romantic impulses. Its classical structure received less scrutiny, a troublesome development for the sprawling first movement. The composer's tightly engineered pivotal signposts were scarcely telegraphed, and big moments were short on heft and edge.

Bailey pushed his instrument harder in the finale, injecting a raspy note into a sound otherwise notable for its palpable glow. Perlman drove the tempo hard, and if tonal sheen and clarity were compromised, an unyielding drive produced an infectious full-bore romp.

Debussy's late Sonata in D minor was spun out patiently, with an understated elegance that served the intimate work well in all but a few busy or grand moments. The pair were keen to defer to each other when necessary.

After some uncertain opening bars, six of the area's premier string players settled in for a richly hued account of Brahms' Sextet in G Major.

Solo turns can get submerged in Brahms' unremittingly thick textures, but cellist Stephen Balderston effortlessly projected a burly sound through the dense undergrowth. The finale found the group cultivating the sextet's rustic peasant roots. Violinists Ilya Kaler and Blair Milton, violists Yukiko Ogura and Lawrence Neumann, and cellist Kenneth Olson completed the splendid ensemble.

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