

ZUILL BAILEY

CELLO

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ENTERTAINMENT

Morgan selects the right works

By Herman Trotter NEWS MUSIC CRITIC EMERITUS February 17, 2008

Whether by design or coincidence, the three works chosen by Michael Morgan for his current guest appearance with the BPO were all written in the six years from 1895 to 1901. Either way, they make congenial concert partners and include two masterpieces in quite different realms.

Elgar's 1901 "Pomp and Circumstance March No. 1" is known to almost everyone who has ever attended an American graduation ceremony because its glorious main theme has become ubiquitous at such events.

Morgan may have been looking past the work's brisk opening statement, which had a few rough edges. But he and the BPO got the "big tune" right. It was grandly stated, well developed.

Dvorak's 1895 Cello Concerto is full of memorable melodies and is the undeniable flagship in its field. Cellist Zuill Bailey approached this masterpiece with appropriate passion but without flamboyance, his tone tending to be mellow rather than overly rich. In the first movement there were some balance problems, with the orchestra occasionally seeming more competitive than supportive.

But everyone found common ground in the incomparably beautiful slow movement, with the cello's warm, introspective voice profoundly penetrating the music's inner thoughts. The cello-flute counterpoint was captivating, but Bailey was most eloquent in the quieter passages, creating a magical atmosphere at the end.

And in the joyous Finale, the folk-rhythmic impulses were crisply emphasized while the cello's communicative control of the lower dynamic range remained nothing short of transcendent.

Dvorak's Cello Concerto was a product of his full maturity. But when Sibelius wrote his 1899 Symphony No. 1, even though he was already internationally acclaimed, he was at age 34 a composer who had found his artistic soul but was still looking for his mature musical voice. Consequently the symphony contains moments of a raw dramatic quality that can easily slip across the line into excess melodrama.

Happily, Morgan seems very close to the symphony, and did not allow this to happen. His development of the line in the brooding first movement was excellent, with fine woodwind playing and good sectional clarity, while he infused the slow movement's nostalgic folk character with a very amenable tenderness.

Despite the exciting, timpani-ignited bombast of the Scherzo, Morgan still main-tained a fine clarity of texture and the contrasting trio section was sensitively paced and phrased. In the Finale, which is most susceptible to excess, the performance emphasized the restatements of the first movement's main theme and the climaxes were achieved with good emotional effect, sans melodrama. It was a very satisfying performance.

Colbert Artists Management

111 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019
www.colbertartists.com ~ 212-757-0782