

ZUILL BAILEY

CELLO



Soloist soars with 17th-century cello

By Ruth Bingham Special to The Advertiser
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Instruments, like people, are unique.

Cellist Zuill Bailey, guest soloist with the Honolulu Symphony this week, performed on a 1693 Matteo Goffriller cello that had an absolutely gorgeous tone.

"I found it in a shop one day in 1997," Bailey related. "It had the sound I'd always imagined a cello could make. I think it's one of the most spectacularly unique cellos."

Bailey borrowed it for the weekend: "I had to sign in blood. [The cello] has had only three owners in 100 years." The last owner was Mischa Schneider of the Budapest Quartet, who recorded most of his repertoire on it.

Bailey could not afford to buy the instrument but over the weekend, "a sponsor heard me play it, and bought it for me on the spot. I've been playing it ever since. It is such a privilege to play."

Bailey sounded as though playing is both privilege and joy.

His choice of music, Tchaikovsky's Variations on a Rococo Theme, Op.33, displayed his breadth of style. Much like blues in jazz, theme-and-variations pieces consist of a recurring framework for varied improvisation or invention.

Bailey played passionately, with Romantic abandon, using dramatic shadings – delicate, even fragile pianissimos, wild flights of virtuosity, aching melodies, fiery discourse. Musician and instrument were a good match, speaking clearly as one voice.

In encore, Bailey performed an arrangement of Jules Massenet's "Meditation for Thais," which was composed for violin, but as Bailey explained, "Everything sounds better on cello."

Maestro Andreas Delfs's choice of Shostakovich's Symphony No.10 for the second half was daring.

Shostakovich painted on large canvases: many of his symphonies, like No.10, last an hour or more, taxing the attention span of modern audiences. Clever, political, infused with multiple layers of meaning, Shostakovich's music is never easy, but always fascinating.

His music demands emotional as well as intellectual engagement – music not so much for listening as for living, for experiencing.

It is, as Delfs characterized it, "the music of the Russian soul."

In his music, Shostakovich expresses not just beauty, but the fullness of life, taking us through an emotional soundscape much broader than the lives most of us lead.

Symphony No.10 sketches a battle between Stalin, and all he represented, and Shostakovich, and all he represented. The second movement and sections of the first and fourth movements present an almost shocking characterization of Stalin: brutal, brutish, rigid, and crazy manic. The music is heart-pounding, adrenaline-pumping, and, as Delfs described it, "ruthless and relentless."

Of all the criticism written about Stalin, none as been so explicit, so condemnatory as this music. It is very effective, very expressive, from its somber and brooding opening to its triumphant close.

"I think there's no doubt at the end who wins," Delfs noted. After all, Shostakovich composed the symphony shortly after Stalin's death, ensuring that art got the last word.

In Saturday's performance, Shostakovich's colorful writing showcased many excellent soloists, most notably Paul Barrett (bassoon), Scott Anderson (clarinet), and Wade Butin (French horn), as well as several rarely heard, including Norman Foster (E-flat clarinet), Jason Sudduth (English horn), and Philip Gottling III (contrabassoon).

The most impressive "soloist," however, was the Honolulu Symphony as a whole: the orchestra played Delfs's committed, vivid interpretation well, and despite Shostakovich's demands on listeners, the audience received it enthusiastically.

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