

ZUILL BAILEY

CELLO

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Cellist resonates in unusual program

By Loren Tice Posted on Sat, Nov. 18, 2006

If you came to last night's Lexington Philharmonic Orchestra's concert at UK's Singletary Center expecting pretty melodies to hum on your way out, you were grumbling instead.

But there were compensations, foremost among them, guest cellist Zuill Bailey. Bailey gets a lot of publicity for his sex appeal, which resides not just in a man's looks, but also in a man's manner.

You could blindfold yourself, listen to Bailey's cello, and know that you are in the presence of a very engaging human being. His playing was emotional but without excess, passionate but with well-calculated zeal.

Ernest Bloch's *Schelomo*, on which he partnered with the Philharmonic, is a difficult work to be zealous about. It often sounds like movie music (which is ironic since there weren't many movies around in 1916 when Bloch wrote it). Bailey's cello was the biblical King Solomon, continually in danger of being overwhelmed by his fractious people.

There were indeed a few frayed edges in the depiction of the harried multitude (the accompanying orchestra), but the cello always assumed true leadership, not by volume of sound, but by sorrowful, sure authority. By the end, there was solace as serene as a sunset.

The other major work of the evening, Dmitri Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 15*, has to be one of the strangest works ever to be so completely satisfying. (That is a minority opinion, even in my house.) But satisfaction requires that you give up any thought that it will hang together in anything like a normal way. Practically every instrument in the orchestra is given its 15 seconds of fame, each with its own distinct personality, almost always quirky, even clownish.

But it soon becomes apparent that below the surface there are gnarly beings scratching away. The unspoken reality is that those gnarly beings are the Soviet government that even in 1971 dogged every thought in Shostakovich's mind. Composing in those days was like dancing with knives. All these cavorting instruments are a reflection of his immense courage in exposing his truest self.

There was a kaleidoscope of sounds: from needling piccolo to a mound of delicately clattering percussion to dulcet paired flutes with perfectly matched vibratos to skittering solo violin. There was a time for mourning, too, in Susanne Blair's cello. That had to be daunting for her after Bailey's solo turn in the Bloch, but she more than held her own in the shaping of phrases.

The best solo ride was David Henderson's trombone. My, what a pure, clean, honest tone, not a bit hooded, not a bit blatant. If that tone were a person, you would believe every word he said without question. How nice a thought in cynical times.

The final compensation to lack of prettiness was Felix Mendelssohn's *Hebrides Overture*, a short work of tone-painting about those Scottish isles. Conductor George Zack has developed over the years an urgent, swirling beat pattern that sacrifices precision in continually changing works like the Bloch. But in the Mendelssohn, with its hurtling drive, his beat brings out the expressive best in a really superb orchestra.

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