

# ZUILL BAILEY

## CELLO

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### San Diego Arts

#### Zuill Bailey in Cello Recital at Neurosciences Institute

*How to Woo an Audience* By Kenneth Herman Dec 04 2007

The pious mores of concert performance in the classical music arena, inherited from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, are slowly evolving. At the San Diego Symphony, for example, resident commentator Nuvi Mehta frequently takes the podium before the maestro comes out to lead a major work and delivers a few tightly-scripted program notes along with short illustrative musical examples from the orchestra (Mehta is a skilled conductor as you might have inferred from his illustrious surname). This quick-fix hit of music appreciation brings the audience members into the inner circle, gives them the “inside scoop” as it were, abandoning the notion that if you show up at a symphony concert, you already are in the know.

Sunday afternoon at the Neurosciences Auditorium in La Jolla, cellist Zuill Bailey chatted with his audience, providing some insights into cello repertory and sharing the reasons he chose the Beethoven, Brahms, and Debussy sonatas he was performing that afternoon. His manner was relaxed, conversational, and he even recounted a humorous anecdote about the first performance of the Brahms Sonata with the hapless cellist as the butt of the joke. Like stage actors who penetrate the fourth wall of the theater, younger performers like Bailey (he is 37 but could pass for 27) are inviting their listeners into the inner circle, which is not a bad strategy in an era when many of the audience members are likely to pull out their cell phones and start sending text messages if their attention to the music-making flags. Making friends with the audience is good psychology.

Now that I’ve established that Bailey is personable and possesses a good sense of humor, I should quickly add that he is a superb performer. His passionate, rhapsodic account of Brahms’ Cello Sonata No. 1 in E Minor, Op. 38, ably partnered by pianist Marc Neikrug, certainly places him in the first rank of contemporary cellists. He shaped the composer’s sweeping, symphonic melodies with uncommon grace and sensitivity and spared no heart-on-the-sleeve emotion on those aching, lyrical second thoughts that are Brahms’ trademark. (Ironically, Brahms always seems happier in the minor mode of deep resignation.)

Like most of Brahms’ sonatas, the E Minor is an evenly balanced duo, and Neikrug matched Bailey’s passion, fluency, and breadth of concept, although his palette of keyboard colors was less varied than the cellist’s wonderfully broad choice of sonorities, especially in the lower registers of the cello where his tone proved unusually rich yet cleanly focused. Bailey’s effulgent playing made the duo sound like a whole piano quartet.

Bailey explained that he chose Beethoven’s Third Cello Sonata, the A Major, Op. 69, because this was the first chamber work in which Beethoven saw the cello as the piano’s equal, but in this artist’s hands, the cello became the star attraction. He did not let a single phrase pass without his careful attention. It was as if he put the whole sonata under the microscope and examined every note for its maximum potential. In terms of clarity of texture and the ability to follow the composer’s vaunted motivic development, this was a wise choice. About two-thirds of the way through the sonata, however, I had the nagging suspicion that Bailey was too fussy and meticulous for the success of the piece. The microscope approach is great, but standing back to get the big picture is a necessary counter-balance. Bailey’s sophisticated account of the scherzo emphasized its tongue-in-cheek humor, and his soulful introduction to the final movement provided a moment of welcome tranquility. Neikrug seemed less engaged in the Beethoven, but all the notes were in their proper order.

The duo opened their program with Claude Debussy’s D Minor Cello Sonata, a bold choice. With the exception of his always well-received String Quartet, Debussy came to chamber music late in his career, and someone walking into the room without a program might not recognize the highly concise—at times pointillistic—music as Debussy. This episodic work leaves all of the mellifluous, lush thematic world of Debussy’s early piano and orchestral music behind. The Cello Sonata belongs to the aesthetic of Arnold Schoenberg’s “Pierrot Lunaire,” written only three years before the sonata, and the La Jolla Music Society’s program annotator Eric Bromberger noted that Debussy even considered calling the second movement “Pierrot Angry at the Moon.”

Bailey and Neikrug emphasized the radical nature of the sonata, cleanly articulating its dissonances and banishing any trace of impressionist haze. Here their precise attention to detail made the piece. Had I been in charge, I would have advised they forget the Beethoven and play the Debussy a second time to savor its arcane subtleties. But this is only one reason why programming choices should not be left to critics!

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