

ZUILL BAILEY

CELLO

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Cellist's deft touch melds beautifully with PSO's playing

CONCERT REVIEW

PORTLAND SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA, WITH GUEST ZUILL BAILEY, CELLO

By CHRISTOPHER HYDE May 7, 2009

PORTLAND — Fear of the swine flu made no noticeable difference in the size of the audience at the next-to-last concert of the Portland Symphony Orchestra Tuesday. The fact that the orchestra, under Robert Moody, performed three well-loved favorites might have had something to do with it.

Carl Maria von Weber's "Jubilee" Overture (Op. 56), which opened the program, may be too unfamiliar to be well-loved but contains a wonderful treatment of "God Save the King" (aka "My Country 'Tis of Thee") ornamented by one of the composer's more sprightly themes. Weber, who represents the transition from Mozartian classicism to Beethoven, is not heard often enough.

Cellist Zuill Bailey's playing of the Concerto for Cello and Orchestra in E Minor (Op. 85) made me reconsider my opinion of Elgar. Bailey and Moody conspired to provide an extremely delicate and nuanced performance of this classic, which at times seemed almost ethereal, while emphasizing its background of "ignorant armies that clash by night" during World War I.

The piece has the characteristic gentle melancholy of Elgar interspersed with surprisingly daring features such as loud and abrupt pizzicato chords, rapid pianissimo passage work on the cello and such careful control of timbre that the soloist could toss the theme to almost any other instrument without the change being abrupt or even particularly noticeable.

The concerto lost none of its effect, and was perhaps enhanced, by its intimacy and limited – for the most part – range of dynamics.

Playing an encore after a concerto is almost always a mistake, but one could forgive it during Bailey's interpretation of the Prelude from Bach's Suite No. 1 in G Major for Unaccompanied Cello. I have heard this live from Yo-Yo Ma and Matt Heimowitz, and Bailey's version, if not technically superior, was more enjoyable.

The great Brahms Symphony No. 1 C Minor (Op. 68) that followed intermission was also highly enjoyable. The finale was moving as usual, but the performance had several problematic moments, beginning with the timpani in the opening bars, which should be ominous without drowning out the rest of the orchestra.

Throughout much of the work, Moody had the problem that affects nearly all conductors of Brahms: the inability to choose ruthlessly among all of the enchanting possibilities. The result was a rounding off of what should have been sharp contrasts. Some tempo changes, on the other hand, were too emphatic.

The lovely melody of the fourth movement was well-handled and the horn calls were stirring and effective, but they didn't quite make the angel Gabriel weep in envy. Still, they were enough to earn a standing ovation.

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