

ZUILL BAILEY

CELLO

THE STATE

Philharmonic's rousing performance a crowd-pleaser

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By GREGORY BARNES

In the early 19th century Beethoven cheered liberty in pre-emperor France. The bloody battle for equality had started over two centuries earlier in the Netherlands, and Beethoven's friend Goethe famously immortalized one of its heroes in his drama "Egmont." Beethoven later composed incidental music for that play, including the Overture that the S.C. Philharmonic played Saturday night at the Koger Center. Guest conductor Laura Jackson led a rousing performance of that heroic music.

When they came to the master's Seventh Symphony, Jackson, a former assistant conductor in Atlanta, again handsomely achieved the rousing part, with excellent contrast and shading of dynamics (lounds and softs). The Seventh is especially notable for distinctive rhythmic motifs specific to each of the four movements, and the orchestra had some trouble articulating the fast ones cleanly, especially the first and last.

In his Sixth Symphony, the "Pastoral," Beethoven had constructed a musical narrative from extra-musical subjects: birds, bubbling brook, storm and sunshine. In the Seventh he returned to what scholars call the "symphonic ideal," the purely musical building blocks of the form. Jackson and the orchestra gave a stirring, crowd-pleasing performance, noticeably more rewarding at climactic points than transitional or tension building passages. The louder destinations were hugely satisfying, the journeys not so much.

But when cello soloist Zuill Bailey joined for Tchaikovsky's "Variations on a Rococo Theme," all parties were splendid. If ever Tchaikovsky wrote sunny music, this is it, not a cloud in sight. Take "rococo" as meaning the "old" 18th century style to 19th century ears. Bailey impressively reeled off dizzying fast trills and shiny harmonics (those whistling sounds up high) from his appropriately rococo 300-year-old instrument. His approach was more thoughtful than showy, making this fine performance all the more special.

Jackson coordinated with great precision, drawing an appropriately plush string sound for Tchaikovsky.

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