

ZUILL BAILEY

CELLO

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It's in the Jeans

A review of the South Carolina Philharmonic's Nov. 15 performance at the Koger Center.

BY DAVID LOWRY Nov. 19, 2008

For its third classics concert this season, titled "Beethoven, Blue Jeans and Zuill," cellist Zuill Bailey joined the orchestra as guest soloist and Laura Jackson was the guest conductor.

It is a consistent mark of fine orchestras to include at least one guest conductor each season. There is great value in this practice. The South Carolina Philharmonic found this out last year, when a continuous flow of guest conductors, seven in all, played a positive role in keeping the orchestra vigilant and constantly aware of its potential.

When Morihiko Nakahara was hired as music director for this season, there was already a conflict of dates affecting the Nov. 15 concert. Zuill Bailey was already booked as soloist. That's OK: It's worth the effort to have a guest conductor annually. It keeps all on their toes.

In the first two concerts of the season, Nakahara has already changed many things, reforming the orchestra into a greatly more musical and finer sounding ensemble. Laura Jackson took the podium as guest conductor for the third concert, taking the orchestra's fresh and gratifying awareness and adapting it to an even greater level of excellence.

Jackson was a perfect fit for this concert. The orchestra was confident of its recent achievements, the guest soloist was great, and the literature fit the bill. Did we mention an almost sold-out house? The average age of the audience Saturday night seemed about 20 years younger than usual. And it didn't hurt anyone to wear blue jeans or at least take his tie off.

Beethoven began and ended the show, with Tchaikovsky in between. **Tchaikovsky came with Zuill Bailey and his rich sounding 17th century cello. Having Bailey around is an event.**

Not only is he one of the world's finest cellists, but he is also well known as a caring human being. The nearly full house at the Koger was treated to a true class act with his performance of Tchaikovsky's Variations on a Rococo Theme, a work that demands virtuosity of the highest level and intensely sensitive musicality. Then a relaxing and mesmerizing Nocturne in C-sharp Minor capped the first half of the concert. A grateful house offered an extended ovation.

The Beethoven that began the evening was the Overture to Egmont. From the first bar, Jackson was conducting a crisp, articulate, commanding Beethoven orchestra. Those qualities were greatly demonstrated there and in Symphony No. 7 in A Major, the work that closed the program.

There is a new floor on the stage this season, one that is providing some much-needed projection of balanced sound, and apparently one that is allowing the orchestra to hear itself a little better. But the conductor must also work for balances. Throughout the symphony, the woodwinds balanced superbly with the strings. And the myriad of intricate working notes that Beethoven wrote — but are often unheard — were clear, articulate and exciting. Such clarity really helped the orchestra to express the Germanic qualities that it has often missed in years past with Beethoven.

As for Jackson herself, she is a conductor who knows her stuff. Her analysis of the details of the symphony were exceptional, and her ability to work with a soloist of Zuill's caliber was unerring. Both orchestra and audience followed her lead in loving a first-rate performance.

All this is most complementary to Nakakara's initial work in paving the way to a new orchestra. We trust management will work hard to keep the audience as large and as young as it was at this concert. With the fare we have coming up, it should be easier to do.

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