

ZUILL BAILEY

CELLO

FRESNOMUSICCRITIC.com

CELLIST, ORCHESTRA MAKE GRAND STATEMENT

Philharmonic presents Tchaikovsky suite for the first time in its history

By George Warren - November 22, 2009

With expert bow technique and a genuine emotional sense of the material, cellist Zuill Bailey charged into Elgar's Cello Concerto Saturday at the William Saroyan Theatre with the Fresno Philharmonic, Theodore Kuchar conducting, and delivered a riveting performance.

The concert began with Mozart's overture to *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, a bright and cheerful bit that might have fared better with one more rehearsal and an extra set of ears in the hall to temper the bass drum. On the upside, Mozart's orchestra music sounds good and exciting even when one entire orchestral section plays just behind the beat. When the first theme group returned, all musicians agreed on the beat and the work ended well. The audience was ready for the featured soloist.

Elgar's Cello Concerto does not provide the soloist with a great deal of technical fireworks, this being a late work and one that is said to be the composer's last great composition. His muse perhaps turned to reflection and contemplation rather than pushing the limits of possibility. As a result, the soloist must earn his respect by delivering the richest tone the instrument will generate and a wide range of expression, both tall orders for anyone in live performance.

Zuill Bailey grabbed the ear with his beat, a triple stop, holding the bottom two notes long enough to register the harmony before bringing in the upper voice. That small detail spoke a great deal about what lay ahead. Here was a musician who had an idea about how to invite an audience into an abstract world of music that is not always edge-of-the-seat exciting but has great reward for the listener who loves the timbral and expressive possibilities of the cello.

Bailey focused on creating a warm and rich tone with Elgar's sweeping melodic lines, and he had both the technique and the instrument to do it. Mostly, long notes received a wide vibrato with the left hand while the bow coaxed the tone from the string. But the interesting moments for the close listener were when he played a single note without vibrato; suddenly, the whole voice of the instrument changed and put all the *bel canto* style into relief.

The orchestra matched the emotional tone of the soloist and provided a shimmering backdrop. In the first movement, there was no tension between the two, and the orchestral sections without soloist took over seamlessly. There was some disagreement on the beat in the second movement, but it was resolved over time. By the end, soloist and orchestra closed a very dramatic work and the applause was long and earnest.

A fitting encore for a work like Elgar might feature some technical brilliance, and Bailey had an answer. He chose J.S. Bach, music that demands an extremely high level of musicianship. First he played an arrangement of the C major prelude from Book I of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, followed by the Sarabande from the D minor Cello Suite. In both works he balanced the mechanical demands with his practical connection to his audience; he presented this music as something he thought a big audience would enjoy hearing. At the end of the Sarabande, he held onto the moment for a very long time, and his audience held on with him, in silence, until he let go and received his applause. Great musicianship never goes unrewarded in Fresno.

The final work, Tchaikovsky's *Orchestral Suite No. 3* in G major, Op. 55, was billed as its first performance by the Fresno Philharmonic. Likely, it hasn't been performed here because of some very difficult parts for soloists and a very challenging movement for the whole orchestra. Theodore Kuchar is the man to bring music like this to Fresno. He conducted from memory, and he worked his orchestra to his best ability.

Each movement seemed to follow a pattern in this performance: a tenuous opening resolving into a confident midsection and ending. In the first movement, the strings began well enough, but there were some early intonation problem. In the second movement, the rhythm did not gel until nearly midway through, and then the Tchaikovsky magic took over. The most difficult movement in terms of orchestral rhythm is the third, and by the end, it also sounded magnificent. The fourth, however, began strong, weathered some further intonation problems, and then never looked back.

One of the highlights of the fourth movement is the violin solo. Here, the concertmistress Aimee Kreston, performed a breathtaking solo over the orchestra, searing through her part with accuracy and flair. This virtuosic part requires a player to perform at a virtuosic level, as though playing a violin concerto, and Kreston had all the energy and technique required. Maybe one day we will hear her perform an entire concerto.

Colbert Artists Management

111 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019
www.colbertartists.com ~ 212-757-0782