

ZUILL BAILEY

CELLO

THE FRESNO BEE

A rousing performance from the Fresno Philharmonic

By Donald Munro November 23, 2009

The Fresno Philharmonic this weekend was as sturdy and muscular as a body-builder. The challenging program showed off the orchestra's strong musicality. I went to Sunday's matinee, and I walked away with an added bounce to my step, as if I'd just been supercharged with brassy ions. At the point that conductor Theodore Kuchar closed his score and started romping through the final movement of Tchaikovsky's 3rd Orchestral Suite from memory, I knew I was in for a brisk, confident ride.

Cellist Zuill Bailey elicited an enthusiastic response from the audience, and part of me suspects that it wasn't 100% because of his superior musicianship. I could swear there was some mild swooning going on in the Saroyan. Bailey says sometimes when he's walking through airports carrying his instrument case he's mistaken for a rock star, and it's easy to see why: He's got the charisma, not to mention the hair. (Kuchar jokes that when he first invited Bailey back to play again by popular demand for his orchestra in Reno, some women patrons changed their seats closer to the front so they could see better.)

Bailey wasn't overly showy as he finessed his way through the famed Elgar Cello Concerto. His demeanor on stage wasn't overwrought or grandiose, just low-key intense. Simmering, even. It's a testament to the power of Hollywood that I'll forever associate the piece with a close-up shot of Emily Watson, portraying the legendary cellist Jacqueline du Pre, in "Hilary and Jackie," but Bailey had his own sense of drama as well.

He played two encores. The crowd cheered him on, wanting more.

Following the break, the orchestra tackled the Tchaikovsky with gusto. This piece was a Philharmonic debut, and it was a delight. The fourth movement, which is as long as the other three movements combined, offers a dizzying array of variations, none lasting more than a few minutes, and the effect is almost like TV channel surfing with sudden tempo and mood shifts and changing musical colors. The violins get a chance to hum along at breakneck speed, and at one point I was reminded of the hot, swirling embers of a brush fire leading to almost certain conflagration. When that big, rousing finale occurred, it exploded with force. Hot stuff, indeed.

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