

ZUILL BAILEY

CELLO

THE ROANOKE TIMES

RSO wows 'em at 'Heroic' season premiere

By Seth Williamson

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The Roanoke Symphony Orchestra knocked it out of the park at Monday night's season opener at the Roanoke Performing Arts Theatre.

In what was possibly the finest season premiere I've ever heard from this ensemble, Maestro David Wiley led his musicians through Beethoven's magnificent "Eroica" Symphony, plus **the magisterial Cello Concerto of Antonin Dvorak, with Virginia native and Star City favorite Zuill Bailey soloing.**

The Dvorak got an immediate and sustained standing ovation that earned two encores. The Beethoven deserved a standing O, though the audience remained seated.

One long-time observer of the symphony said, "They've never sounded better."

I agree.

The Beethoven was a muscular, shapely and well-considered account, full of brooding intensity and with luscious string tone. Wiley did not zip through the piece in the manner of some "early-performance" gurus but instead delivered a spacious and polished reading.

Especially notable was Wally Easter's amazing horn section, which was flawless all night long. Easter, his former student Abigail Pack and Charles Waddell did some of the finest horn ensemble work I've ever heard from the section.

Bailey is one of those intuitive natural musicians who, despite what must have been a lifetime of hard work, give the impression that no technical obstacles stand between their brain and their fingers.

His trip through Dvorak's great life-summing concerto was warmly empathetic and exciting. His tone was ripe, even opulent; his intonation was dead-on, and his expansive singing interpretation was lyrical and full of emotion.

The final moments, when the timpani "heartbeats" slowly die away and vanish (Dvorak's anguished tribute to his beloved sister-in-law after her death), the cello maintaining a sustained note, was a heart-breaking experience.

Coming after Opera Roanoke's excellent premiere with "Falstaff," this dynamite performance (with encores of the Thais "Meditation" and the Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby") signaled that fine arts music in Roanoke is in good shape indeed.

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