

ZUILL BAILEY

Cellist

The Capital, Annapolis
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ASO superbly executes a very diverse 'Passion'
By DAVID LINDAUER For The Capital

Last weekend the Annapolis Symphony Orchestra presented "Passion," an enchanting program of diverse musical works which, as advertised, demonstrated the orchestra's passion for excellence.

As Jack Nicholson once observed (Quickly: Which movie?), "Passion without precision is chaos." I am happy to report guest conductor Robert Moody guided the ASO through a program that was as well-performed and precise as it was ingeniously designed.

There was plenty of passion, but plentiful too was the harmonious interrelationship between conductor, orchestra and soloist, cellist Zuill Bailey. The aggregate result was as delightful an evening of music as the Annapolis Symphony has presented to its listeners in many months.

The program under Mr. Moody's able leadership commenced with the "Danzon No. 2" by Mexican composer Arturo Marquez. I was prepared for the well-played and efficient nature of the performance by the ASO. What caught me by surprise was the sense of fun with which the orchestra and its conductor negotiated the piece.

This is "new music" (composed and premiered in 1994), but with its infectious melodies and delightfully syncopated rhythms, it could emanate from any time in the past century. In fact, Mr. Moody's leadership served to accentuate the very classical foundation of the piece, and illuminated its relationships with the music of composers such as Aaron Copland and Kurt Weill.

The ASO negotiated the piece with all of the flair and flavor of a Vera Cruz dance salon band without ever losing sight of its inherent classicism. Throughout, Mr. Moody's sure hand maintained excellent control on the unexpected dynamic changes and tricky rhythmic variations. The audience was treated to great solo work as well, of a caliber that exceeded nearly every other ASO concert I have attended.

In Tchaikovsky's delightful "Rococo Variations" (or, more properly, "Variations on a Rococo Theme for Cello and Orchestra"), the ASO's level of excellence was at least matched and very likely surpassed by Mr. Bailey, an astonishing young cellist.

The Tchaikovsky piece is fairly short and generally lighthearted, but it presents challenges of execution every bit as formidable as those exhibited by any of the cello concertos in the orchestral repertoire. Mr. Bailey met every one of those challenges with panache and superb execution. Under his talented fingers, the cello sang, groaned and communicated every aspect of joy, humor and pathos envisioned by the piece's great composer.

If I have to cavil about any aspect of this performance of the Tchaikovsky work, it is that the soloist pretty much left the orchestra in his wake, both sonically and interpretatively. That may not be a bad thing, though. After all, the "Rococo Variations" is a work calling for a high order of instrumental virtuosity by the soloist, so it may be preferable to have a highly visible soloist with a strong orchestral accompaniment that doesn't call too much attention to itself than the alternative - a pallid soloist overwhelmed by the orchestra.

This minor issue aside, Mr. Bailey and Mr. Moody treated us to a great performance capped off by a delicious encore, the Meditation from Massenet's opera, "Thais," transcribed for cello solo. The encore was a beautifully shaped and evocative rendition of this lovely piece, and Mr. Bailey dedicated it in memory of his late mentor, Stephen Kates.

For all of its fame as one of the great Romantic symphonies, Sergei Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 2 is a hard piece to perform well. The diversity of moods among the four movements is such that performances tend to shine in one or the other movement, while not fully capturing the spirit of another.

With that in mind, I have good news and bad news: The good news is that, under Mr. Moody, the ASO very nearly accomplished the ideal of communicating Rachmaninoff's intentions in every one of the movements. The bad news is that such an accomplished level of performance glaringly exposed the shortcomings and unevenness of the symphony itself, and left me wondering if, based on the evidence of this symphony (the terrific Third and Fourth movements aside), Rachmaninoff wasn't truly a composer of very limited inspiration after all.

The slow and passionate Third Movement, with the most recognizable theme from the symphony, was handled lovingly and received every bit of the attention it deserved. The Second and Fourth movements were fleet and exhilarating, with the ASO beautifully negotiating the change of tempo that introduces the third statement of the Second Movement's main theme. But I'm afraid not even Mr. Moody's treatment of the First Movement could conceal its essential dullness and what seemed an interminable duration.

In sum, it was a very impressive concert: well-executed and featuring an astonishing array of virtuosity, both by the ASO and by Mr. Bailey. The entire musical impact of the concert, coupling innovative programming with exemplary musicianship, made this concert one of the musical highlights of the season.

(P.S. The Jack Nicholson movie is "The Witches of Eastwick" in which Mr. Nicholson has a devilishly good time seducing Cher, Susan Sarandon and Michelle Pfeiffer.)

David Lindauer, a lifelong student of music, reviews classical *music for The Capital*.

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