

ZUILL BAILEY

Cellist

Charming cellist wows Lied Center audience

Monday, April 4, 2005

By Lisa Schmitz- Special to the Journal-World

Cellist Zuill Bailey may play an instrument that is hundreds of years old, but he exudes an appeal that is decidedly modern.

Bailey, who performed Sunday afternoon as part of the Swarthout Chamber Music Series at Kansas University's Lied Center, is a dazzling combination of emotive musician, skilled technician and Hollywood heartthrob.

In that order.

Reviewers tend to dwell on Bailey's good looks — the Juilliard grad does bear a strong resemblance to movie star Antonio Banderas and has a head of hair made for enthusiastic syncope — but to dwell is unfair.

Bailey is not classical-music lite: He is a gifted and ambitious musician.

And Sunday's performance provided evidence aplenty in support of that claim.

Wielding his 1693 Matteo Goffriller cello, Bailey opened the program with Felix Mendelssohn's Variations Concertantes, Opus 17. In a well-researched nod to the Swarthout series' rich history, Bailey planned his program as one might have 75 years ago. The Mendelssohn, he said, would have been a typical appetizer in the 1920s or '30s.

The piece, which is sadly underrepresented in the recorded catalog, featured some lovely musical interplay between Bailey and pianist Robert Koenig, Kansas University assistant professor of piano and chamber music. The two musicians exchanged melodies and snippets of color seamlessly and with obvious enjoyment.

Returning to his analogy of the program as a fine-dining experience, Bailey introduced the afternoon's second piece — Beethoven's Sonata No. 3 in A Major, Opus 69 — as the "meat of the meal." This masterwork is notable for its fully realized cello part, a departure from Beethoven's Opus 5 sonatas. And in a welcome celebration of this deviation, Bailey and Koenig played the well-loved composition with all of its repeats intact.

Typically, a recital's second half would begin with a contemporary piece. And in the 1920s, Claude Debussy's Sonata in D Minor would have been just that, Bailey said when introducing the next selection. This sonata has a distinct, upbeat mood running throughout, but gloomy interjections serve to keep the listener wondering if all will end well.

Though Bailey and Koenig were nothing short of impressive during each piece, the performance's closing composition — Camille Saint-Saëns, Concerto No. 2 in D Minor — was simply a cut above everything else. Deemed "unplayable" by its own composer, the concerto is often avoided by musicians.

"It's a circus for the cello," Bailey said, laughing.

He then proceeded to make it all look easy — from memory. From the opening allegro moderato to the elegiac andante to the allegro's final return, Bailey displayed his sense of tasteful dynamics, controlled yet vibrant technique, love of leading tones and willingness to challenge a wicked cadenza with a winning smile. The audience loved it, and it seems likely Saint-Saëns would have, too.

The recital had few faults and to nitpick would be reaching. Koenig handled the piano's somewhat testy tuning like a pro, and Bailey's passionate style simply obscured any little slips.

But still, the best kind of disappointment lingered when all was said and played: Two hours and an encore left everyone full but hungry for more all the same.

Colbert Artists Management Inc.

111 West 57th Street, New York, New York 10019
(212)757-0782 - Fax (212)541-5179 - West Coast (858)794-0182
E-mail: NYColbert@ColbertArtists.com