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GUEST CELLIST SETS SOLO SYMPHONY AFIRE

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The heat was turned up Saturday evening in the Performing Arts Center at Cal Poly.

We are not talking about the thermostat. The musical mood went from crackling logs warming the family hearth to a three-alarm blaze setting the room on fire.

The "blaze" was guest cellist **Zuill Bailey**, who ignited both the symphony and the symphony hall.

With his long, dark hair, and eyes that sometimes search the horizon like a ship captain's, Bailey creates a stirring presence on stage.

He has been described in other publications as "an athlete with the cello," which captures deftly the way he and the instrument interact.

The second half of the program was devoted to Bailey's performance of Dmitri Shostakovich's Concerto No. 1, in E-flat, Opus 107.

That concerto is based on short, memorable "motives" that appear throughout the work in various incarnations: some subtle, others more obvious.

The first movement sounds a bit prickly, as if we are chasing shadows in dark alleys. The French horn is featured prominently along with the solo cello.

In contrast, the second movement is much more melodic, at least in its early sections.

Bailey, with the nimble accompaniment of the orchestra, created a mood of plaintive solitude that ever so gradually became more fuming, more passionate.

The movement ends with an eerie timbre, with the cellist playing light, high harmonics accompanied by the chime-like celesta. We are back in those alleys, looking for ghosts.

The third movement, a "cadenza," or elaborate solo passage, was made for a charismatic performer like Bailey. The best cadenza performances sound as if they are in character with the rest of the work, but also hint at improvisation.

Bailey did not disappoint the audience: At times, both the hair on his head and on his bow were flying.

The concerto ends with an intense final movement that brings everything together into a glorious finale.

Where there's smoke, there's fire: A standing ovation awaited the musicians and conductor Michael Nowak.

Bailey graced Saturday evening's audience with an encore titled "Souvenir d'Amerique," by Henri Vieuxtemps, a lively theme and variations on "Yankee Doodle Dandy."

If the fire wasn't blazing before the encore, it certainly was afterward: Bailey received another standing ovation.

The first half of the program featured Mozart's Symphony No. 38, in D Major, K.504 "Prague", and Samuel Barber's popular Adagio for Strings, Opus 11.

The musicians played these two compositions with a familiarity that was warm, if not overly engaging.

As seems to be the trend, the symphony tends to save its energy for the second half, especially when accompanying a guest soloist.

The musicians, and conductor Nowak, should be commended for their ability to skillfully highlight such an exciting musician as Bailey.