



Sarah Ioannides leads cellist Zuill Bailey and the BPO through Haydn's Cello Concerto No. 1 in C Major. Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News

'Treasures' smolders with passion

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Updated: December 1, 2012, 11:40 PM Published: December 1, 2012, 11:40 PM

A taut, passionate concert is taking place this weekend at Kleinhans Music Hall. It's a kind of grab bag, but it holds your attention.

Guest conductor Sarah Ioannides begins the program with Mendelssohn's Overture to "A Midsummer Night's Dream," then continues with Haydn's Cello Concerto No. 1 in C, with the exciting cellist Zuill Bailey as soloist. By now many might be thinking: Mendelssohn, Haydn, taut and passionate? But it's true.

Mendelssohn and Haydn are sort of in the same boat in that they are perceived as masterly but not as hot-blooded as their contemporaries. In the right hands, though, this music can smolder. Saturday's concert proved that.

Bailey, a handsome devil in his early 40s, loves this Haydn concerto. He exploits it, and I mean that in the best sense, in that he digs into it and revels in what it has to offer.

He is playing an unusual instrument, a deep-voiced, oversized cello that once belonged to Mischa Schneider of the Budapest String Quartet, which was based for years in Buffalo. It was thrilling to hear the cello growling authoritatively right from the first bars of the concerto. This instrument was built when Johann Sebastian Bach was 8. By the time Haydn came along, it was already an antique.

So you had this feeling that you were hearing the ages. On the other hand, Bailey's approach was reckless and alive. Smiling at the audience, catching the eye of various orchestra musicians, he gave the impression of chafing at convention. His playing was imaginative. When a phrase repeated, it never sounded exactly the same. Heck, it never sounded anywhere near the same.

The music had volume and grit. The orchestra musicians, too, seemed to be alert and enjoying

themselves. This concerto is a group effort. In the Adagio, the phrases were romantically finessed. It's not like Mozart or Brahms – the melodies alone are not enough to tear your heart out – but Bailey and the BPO presented the music with an irresistible passion.

The real payoff came in the last movement. Bailey, irrepresible, joined the BPO cellos for the opening tutti. What followed was a kind of perpetual motion, everyone going full tilt. Bailey's brisk ascending lines cut like a knife. He and the orchestra strings played catch in breathless, whispery interludes. For a few fascinating moments, everyone's fingers were flashing, but otherwise no one seemed to be moving, not even the conductor. The music seemed to be powering itself.

Everyone in the audience, even those who had slept through the Adagio, were awake and on the edge of their seats. The performance got a standing ovation. I cannot imagine this music being as exciting in anyone else's hands. In the afterlife, Haydn owes all these people a beer.

The Mendelssohn that opened the concert also received more than its usual share of passion. Ioannides and the orchestra brought an explosive excitement to the sudden fortes. The murmuring strings had a crisp nervous energy – kind of like that Haydn finale, come to think of it.

The second half of the program is a mad mix: Schubert's valedictory "Unfinished" Symphony followed by the wild Polovtsian Dances from Borodin's opera "Prince Igor."

It required a lot of switching gears. To listen to the Schubert puts you in a different place, beyond time and space. But the first movement has its own nervousness. Ioannides took a good, spacious approach to the music, and the woodwinds and brass gave it richness and depth. The cellos, maybe inspired by the Haydn, did a beautiful job announcing the famous bittersweet theme. The slow movement was slow and sighing, with lovely Schubertian nostalgia.

I am not sure it was right to follow the "Unfinished" with the raucous Borodin dances. But as long as they were there, I was going to enjoy them. This kind of flash and dash is home turf for the BPO. The music started out kind of weak – you had to wait for the mist of the Schubert to dissipate – but once it hit its stride, it was a bacchanalian riot. It's fun to hear this sabre-rattling music live, the jangling percussion, the romantic cellos, the swirling melodies we all know inside out.

The concert repeats today at 2:30 p.m.

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