

James Ehnes Celebrates his 40th Birthday with the Edmonton Chamber Music Society

September 27, 2016 | by Isis Tse

Violinist James Ehnes and pianist Andrew Armstrong opened the 2016-2017 season as part of Ehnes's concert tour titled "James Ehnes @ 40". Ehnes, who turned 40 years old on January 27, is taking this year as an opportunity to tour Canada and rediscover his Canadian roots with his family. The pair played for a packed house at Robertson Wesley United Church on September 14.

The program opened with George Frideric Handel's Violin Sonata in D major; this was followed by

Ludwig van Beethoven's Sonata for Violin and Piano No. 5 in F major ("Spring"). These two pieces showcased Ehnes's warm tone, lyricism, and clean execution, along with his strong musical rapport with Armstrong.

The final work announced for the evening was the premiere of a new work by composer and Vancouver Symphony Music Director Bramwell Tovey, titled "Stream of Limelight." The piece was written specifically for Ehnes's 40th birthday tour, and featured lyrical lines and jazz influences.

Ehnes and Armstrong concluded the programme with a selection of virtuosic pieces which were announced from the stage. The first of these was Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumblebee", arranged for violin by Heifetz; other selections included Tchaikovsky's "Song without Words", Ponce's "Estrallita" (also arranged by Heifetz), Sibelius's "Lullaby", and Sarasate's classic "Introduction and Tarantella." Ehnes seamlessly transitioned from slow, sentimental pieces to virtuosic, exuberant showstoppers. The format of calling out pieces spontaneously from the stage was extremely engaging.

Following the concert, a reception featuring a Q&A session with Ehnes and Armstrong was held. The audience asked questions which drew reflective answers, as well as banter between the pair. Ehnes, looking back at his childhood, recounted that he knew he would be pursuing a career as a professional violinist at a very young age; growing up in a musical family with professional musicians, becoming a concert violinist seemed natural to him. The duo also described the rather strange circumstances which brought them together: out of the blue, Armstrong called Ehnes to perform at a gig with him at a rather questionable venue, and the two have been duet partners ever since. When asked about how they avoid injuries from playing, Armstrong responded with "mud baths and seaweed wraps."

Ehnes decided to treat the audience to one final piece, and left it up to the audience to make the selection. "Gigue from Partita No. 2," shouted one of the audience members, and Ehnes broke into his flawless, final encore for the evening.