

The Power of Two: Zuill Bailey and Yuliya Gorenman in Edmonton

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By Morgan Luethe

Renowned American cellist Zuill Bailey and Russian-born American pianist Yuliya Gorenman played to an enthusiastic audience at McDougall United Church, on the evening of November 25th. In a recital of diverse repertoire drawn from a range of international sources and contrasting time periods, these two professionals combined their formidable musical expertise to produce an experience that was both highly enjoyable and informative for listeners.

First among the evening's musical offerings was a work with a complicated history. Boccherini's second Sonata for Cello and Continuo in C Major (G.6), a work of somewhat muddled authorship, was prefaced by Mr. Bailey for the enrichment of the audience's understanding. While the piece bares the name of Boccherini as its composer, the version performed by the duo of Bailey and Gorenman was really the work of acclaimed 20th century cellist Gregor Piatigorsky. A reimagined transcript of the original work, this sonata was the cause of some confusion and dismay when it first appeared, suddenly, as a competition piece in the 1970's. Effectively distilled through the minds of two of the cello's great proponents Boccherini and Piatigorsky, the resulting work is one of refinement and charm, and of considerable technical demands for the cellist. Zuill Bailey and Yuliya Gorenman brought the piece off with ease and their sensitive interpretation reflected a deep insight and appreciation shared by both performers. While, like much of Boccherini's output, the C Major sonata is largely unknown outside of specialized circles, hearing it played with such devotion and character made a case for more frequent appearances of it and other works of this composer.

The later and not oft-performed Sonata for Cello and Piano in C Major (Op. 102, No.1) of Beethoven was presented next. Forming part of the famous cycle of five duo sonatas that Beethoven composed over the course of his career, this work (the fourth) doesn't enjoy the same popularity of its siblings. Composed at the beginning of what was to become the composer's legendary late period, the C Major sonata bares the traits of Beethoven's growing tendency towards greater formal and harmonic experimentation that is so especially evident in his chamber music of this time. Structural innovation is coupled with a deeper, more developed understanding of the lyrical qualities of the cello and contrasts starkly with the imbalanced partnership-dynamic of his earlier duo sonatas. Here, the cello is raised to an equal footing with the piano and reflects Beethoven's own enlightenment to the instrument's expressive powers.

Shortest among Beethoven's cello sonatas, the C Major is arguably the most musically interesting, juxtaposing music of incredible calm with sections of great urgency and terseness. One can easily imagine Beethoven's capricious grin whilst writing the perky, dance-like music of the sonata's finale. Bailey and Gorenman gave a performance full of conviction and the buoyant energy that this music demands.

Piatigorsky's 1946 *Variations on a Paganini Theme* was the night's virtuoso showpiece. Based on the well-known 24th caprice of Paganini that inspired fiendishly difficult sets of variations from pianist composers like Brahms and Rachmaninoff, it was refreshing to see this familiar material tailored to the resonant dimensions of the cello. Like most showpieces for stringed instruments, the piano accompaniment was mundane and written mainly to fill out the background, but the pyrotechnics of the cello were more than enough to compensate for this imbalance. Zuill Bailey, as a performer, showed the audience things that most of us didn't even believe the instrument was even capable of. This piece ran the whole gamut of technical gymnastics and, with each of the fifteen variations also doubling as musical caricatures of Piatigorsky's friends and associates (names like Casals, Hindemith, Menuhin, Kreisler and Heifetz fall victim to the composer's biting wit), lighted upon the remarkably effective comedic and narrative powers of music, as well.

Following an intermission, the heaviest feature of the evening's program, Michael Daugherty's "Tales of Hemingway" (2015) was performed in a version for cello and piano. Originally conceived as a concerto for cello and orchestra with strong tone-painting tendencies (Richard Strauss' *Don Quixote* comes to mind as a predecessor), and with the solo part having been written specifically for Mr. Bailey, hearing Daugherty's work played proved an interesting and powerful listening experience. Zuill Bailey offered his first-hand personal account of the piece's conception and composition alongside his extensive collaboration with its composer which both informed and enhanced the audience's experience. Four movements bring to life four of Ernest Hemingway's most famous titles, which include *Big Two-Hearted River*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, and *The Sun Also Rises*. Evocations of these story's settings transport the audience to places in each of Michigan, Cuba and Spain, combining colourful orchestration with innovative solo writing that realizes the author's writings

in music. Mr. Bailey understands this work better than anyone else; it was composed to the specifications of his own playing. Supported by Yuliya Gorenman's commanding rendition of the transcribed orchestral part, Zuill Bailey gave an exhilarating account of Daugherty's concerto, combining visceral rhythmic drive with the fragrant accents of an alluring, modern harmonic language. This work stood out from among the rest performed during the evening, not only because of its newness, but because of the unique and exclusive relationship between its composer and the cellist who delivered it with palpable energy and feeling.

Another exceptional concert, then, for the Edmonton Chamber Music Society. Solid audience applause drew an encore from the performers which brought an evening of education and pure listening delight to a satisfying close. Zuill Bailey is a soloist and educator with the desire and ability to engage audiences, to help them see the music as *he* sees it. When partnered with a musician of equal talent and pedagogical ability, like Yuliya Gorenman, the result is a powerful artistic experience for all who are fortunate enough to be present to hear it. Let's have them back in Edmonton before too long.