



## CELLO

### Alignment of the Stars: A Review of a Recital by Cellist Zuill Bailey

by David Holmes

On November 7, the Music in the Park Series presented a sold-out concert at the St. Anthony Park United Church of Christ and featured a unique collaboration between several top-notch performers, a highly regarded composer and a patron of new music. In addition to solo Bach performed by cellist Zuill Bailey, he and the remarkable Lydia Artymiw presented the Brahms *Sonata in F Major* for piano and cello and the world premiere of the *Sonata for Cello and Piano: Pathways of Desire* by David Evan Thomas, a work commissioned by local piano legend Thelma Hunter.

The afternoon started with a half-hour public discussion between Bailey and Thomas, who gave an interesting and varied conversation for those of us who arrived an hour before the performance. Among the topics broached was the history of Bailey's Italian Gofriller cello, which was made in 1693 (when Bach was eight years old!), and is the same cello Mischa Schneider used during his tenure with the Budapest String Quartet. Bailey's Gofriller is known for its pear shape, which infuses its bass notes with a rich, booming quality. There is also a rose carved on this cello that is now covered by the fingerboard after it was lengthened at some point in the past. At Bailey's official website, it is easy to see the rose from certain camera angles, as he performs some solo Bach in a New Mexico performance venue. Bailey uses a French bow that he described as "brittle" but in a way that "wakes his cello up."

During the pre-concert discussion, Bailey also mentioned some issues with performing Bach, including the fact that most performers have "entrenched" ideas on interpreting Bach. He says some of his friends have said, "You can't play Bach like that!" Bailey believes, though, that Bach would have written similar music even if he had been a modern day composer who had had the modern instrument and performing practices in his ear. He also pointed out the absence of an original manuscript to the six cello suites, and the lack of tempo and

dynamics in the Anna Magdalena copy as reasons for flexibility in interpretation.

Composer David Evan Thomas has an



impressive resume. He has written works for the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, the Minnesota Orchestra, and has had his music performed by world renowned performers including Gil Shaham, Truls Mork, and Yefim Bronfman, as well as others. While Zuill Bailey was gregarious and extroverted, Thomas had a gentle, relaxed, intelligent and often humorous persona as he spoke on the process of composition. He said he usually starts with a melody with harmony and from that point the compositional process never goes where he originally thought it would. He went as far as to say, when introducing his sonata during the concert, that "I can't account for any of it," which got a well-deserved laugh. It reminded me of authors I've heard interviewed, who speak of characters they create heading off in unexpected directions as a work evolved. Thomas affirmed that tonality is essential to his work, but that variety is just as essential. He admitted to getting antsy when a composition doesn't modulate after about a minute and a half, which he confessed, is why he does not like minimalism. Bailey, as he was learning the Thomas sonata, said he found himself humming some of the tunes, and Thomas concurred that an essential ingredient was for "music to have a place in your head wherever you go."

Zuill Bailey has established himself as a leading cellist of his generation, with a rare

combination of performing qualities that include virtuosity, musical depth, variety, beauty of tone and charisma. All these aspects were present during the afternoon of November 7. The program had him starting with Bach's *Third Suite in C Major*, so I was surprised when he unexpectedly started with the prelude to the Bach's *First Suite* instead (he used the Anna Magdalena bowings, by the way). I even had the thought that he had mistakenly played the wrong piece! But alas, he explained that he wanted late seating to take place after the first piece, but that he didn't want to interrupt the *Third Suite* with a pause. I loved his Bach performance. It was so full of imagination, energy and beauty, but without romantic indulgence. (He has recently release the six Bach suites on the Telarc label). His playing exhibited a sense of spontaneity and excitement, which made me feel less uptight about my own rendition of the suites as I reaffirmed in my own mind that "It's in the expression, stupid!"

It was such a treat to hear Lydia Artymiw play with Zuill Bailey. She is the McKnight Distinguished Professor of Piano at the University of Minnesota and has an international career of the first rank. She won the Levintritt Competition in 1976, the Leeds Competition in 1978, has performed solo with over 100 orchestras worldwide and has received an Avery Fisher Career Grant as well.

The Thomas *Sonata* had much variety and depth, and I would love to hear it again so I could enjoy it even more. Bailey and Artymiw played both with abandon and precision throughout this new and challenging work. On the subtitle of the sonata, *Pathways of Desire*, Thomas explained, "The trail that leads diagonally across the park is a pathway of desire. So too, the mailman's snow track from house to house...I permitted the genre to suggest formal borders, but once inside, I allowed my spirit to range." The movements were titled: 1) Slowly—Flowing Smoothly, 2) Fast, 3) Rather Slowly—Moving Gracefully, and 4)

Bold—Spiritoso. In Thomas' own words: "The sonata begins with a meandering, soulful movement which takes its moody tone from the plaintive lowered sixth scale-step. There are three themes, and the style varies considerably throughout. Before the coda, the unaccompanied cello summarizes things, as it might in a concerto. Odd meters abound in the playful Fast movement, but the trio is more hymn-like. The slow movement comprises a songful tune, a chromatic wedge figure and an archaic-sounding progression that seems to suspend time. The close is luminous. After a couple of phrases 'quasi cadenza,' the cello launches the fugato finale by recalling the opening of the work in a jazzy voice. A seductive second theme

adds Latin rhythms, and spirits remain irrepressibly high to the end."

The Brahms *Sonata* was a special treat. To hear the piano part played with such power and control was remarkable. Occasionally, Artymiw's ponytail would become airborne as she launched into a passage, often synchronizing itself with Bailey's head motion. The second movement, Adagio affettuoso—one of the most sublime movements of all the cello literature—was rendered with tenderness and aching beauty.

During the recital I was reminded yet again of the power of music to inspire, refresh and astonish with that invisible but palpable connection between performer and audience. It was an afternoon I could not

help but surrender my heart to what I heard, which for me is the greatest compliment a performer can receive and the greatest gift an audience member can experience.

*David Holmes is currently a faculty member at the Augsburg College Suzuki Program and has been a guest clinician at Suzuki institutes in 9 states. In 2006, he presented a lecture on group class instruction at the SAA national conference. An active performer and free lance cellist in the Twin Cities, David is cellist in the Northern Lights String Quartet and has been principal cellist of the Minnetonka and Bloomington Symphonies. †*