

Large Stage Live!

Wednesday, 14 March 2018

The Moscow Sound

Friday night I was at the new concert hall at the L. R. Wilson building in Hamilton's McMaster University, to hear a concert given by the Canadian cello-piano siblings, the Cheng²Duo.

I had not heard of this hall previously, and more's the pity because Hamilton has - in this venue -- a tiny perfect gem of a chamber music hall. Although apparently angular in appearance, the interior is a beautifully judged arrangement of wooden planes and surfaces allowing for a warm, rich, yet realistic sound. The stage is actually big enough to hold an ensemble of, at a guess, 40 players or so, making it far more useful to McMaster's School of the Arts than a smaller platform would be. Yet the audience capacity (without added seats on the stage) is barely 200, keeping the space intimate and friendly.

All of which makes it an ideal venue for the Cheng²Duo, which consists of pianist Silvie Cheng and cellist Bryan Cheng. The warm, rich tone they command is as much a signature mark of their style as their friendly, informal chats with audience from the stage -- and after the concert as well.

The programme was entirely made up of Russian works of the Romantic era and after. Before the intermission we heard Tchaikovsky and Prokofiev, while the second half was devoted to the music of Rachmaninoff.

The recital opened with Tchaikovsky's Pezzo capriccioso, Op. 62. The "capriccioso" does not refer to a playful mood at all, relating instead to Tchaikovsky's fanciful treatment of what is in fact a rather sombre theme. The piece moves in contrasting slow and fast sections, and the Duo allowed the sound and the rhythm plenty of space to expand and breathe in the slower passages. They then caught the fire and energy of the faster sections with great vigour.

The Duo then moved on to the well loved Andante cantabile from the first String Quartet, here in an arrangement which allotted the cello the singing melody that was originally carried on a violin. In a situation like this, balance can become tricky with the melody lying lower in pitch than the supporting harmonies on the piano. But the Cheng²Duo didn't put a foot wrong in that sense, and gave this repertoire warhorse a performance that was both beautiful and lovable.

Prokofiev's Sonata for Cello and Piano in C Major, Op. 119 came next. This work was composed in 1949, the year after Prokofiev was accused by the Zhdanov Decree of "formalism," the great sin of composers under the oppressive regime of Josef Stalin. The work had to be heard and cleared by both the Union of Composers and the Radio Committee before it could be performed.

Hearing this piece now, I suspect that the commissars didn't realize their legs were being pulled. The title page says the work is in C Major, but in reality many of the diatonic melodies are accompanied by harmonies that are certainly in some key, just not the same one!

The Cheng²Duo played the first movement, Andante grave, with a good deal of passion that was yet kept on a tight rein. After all, one mustn't confuse Prokofiev with Rachmaninoff. Here, there was a volume problem, which may have bothered some listeners more than others. At two points in this movement, Bryan Cheng dropped his cello sound to a mere thread of volume while playing an extended melodic line which (I think) was a significant line we had not heard before. For me, it was a case of a little too much of a good thing.

The more playful second movement, simply marked Moderato, brings the lion's share of the jokes with bass-heavy chords, emphatic pizzicati, and cadences that sounded -- in this performance -- not just jokey but distinctly sarcastic. In the final movement, the Duo created a satisfying synthesis, tying the whole work together and leading up to the strong conclusion.

After the intermission, we heard first Rachmaninoff's Vocalise, Op. 34, No.14. This justly-famous wordless song for soprano was here effectively transcribed for cello and piano, and both Bryan and Silvie Cheng gave it a caressing, affectionate performance.

The recital concluded with Rachmaninoff's grandly-scaled Sonata for Cello and Piano, Op. 19. This four-movement work resembles early Brahms chamber works in that the piano part can easily outrun and overwhelm the solo string instrument due to the heavy writing. Some passages certainly bring to mind the notorious wisecrack that Rachmaninoff wrote for piano calling for 12 fingers at a time -- on each hand! But the balance issues entirely vanished in the Cheng²Duo's performance of this masterpiece.

The first movement began with a beautiful singing legato from the piano in the slow lento introduction. Then, in the main allegro moderato, Silvie opened with sharply-edged chords while Bryan's cello took up the long singing melodic lines with real fervour. This was one of the few times I've ever been able to make the connection with the dictum that a cello sounds more like a human voice than any other instrument. That feeling came to me most of all with the lovely descending

theme of the second subject.

The Cheng²Duo treated the succeeding Allegro scherzando to a fire-eating performance full of sharply accented notes and chords, and with a languorous air to the contrasting slower middle theme. The final notes of the movement, although quiet, shot off the stage and around the hall with volume to spare.

The Andante then brought rich, warm tone that struck me as sounding quintessentially Russian, before the final Allegro mosso brought the recital to a resounding conclusion with a snapping account of the grand but abrupt final notes.

Best news of the evening: Bryan Cheng announced from the stage that the music in this recital would be included in their third recording, which is to be laid down in Berlin later this year and then (one hopes) issued sometime in 2019. On the strength of the performances we heard, this recording will be a must-have for lovers of the cello/piano combination or lovers of Russian music -- or both.

Posted by **Ken Stephen** at 05:16



Labels: **Cheng²Duo**, **classical music**