

Large Stage Live!

Saturday, 26 March 2016

Germany, Russia and France with the Cheng²Duo

Last Sunday, I was in Port Hope, Ontario, for a concert given by the Cheng²Duo. I have heard this sister-brother partnership several times before, as my faithful readers will know.

This concert marked my first visit to the Capitol Theatre in Port Hope. Like many cities and towns, Port Hope has successfully rescued and repurposed a classic old vaudeville-era downtown movie house into a well equipped modern concert and theatre facility. The space is quite remarkable in appearance, with quasi-medieval stone walls along the sides and an arched ceiling dotted with lights like a starry sky overhead. Acoustically it's surprisingly good for an old movie house.

Louder sounds expand beautifully towards the rear of the hall but quieter sounds tend to get lost as the space is rather wide in relation to its length.

This program was a 50/50 split for me. The works on the first half were ones I had not heard before in live performance. The second half was a repeat of the repertoire I heard the Cheng²Duo perform last summer in Parry Sound.

Since both Bryan and Silvie Cheng plainly enjoy chatting up their audience both during and after a performance, I was impressed by how much more assured and natural their introductions to various works are sounding. They've plainly found the comfort zone for this kind of audience interaction, which is becoming more common and is plainly welcomed and enjoyed by most concertgoers.

The concert opened with Beethoven's *Variations on "Bei Männern, welche Liebe fühlen"*. The name may not ring a bell, but the tune certainly will with most music lovers. This is one of two sets of variations which Beethoven composed, based on melodies from Mozart's comedo-dramatic fable *The Magic Flute*. Quite sensibly, Beethoven mainly confined himself to a quasi-Mozartean style of writing in this music. With the exception of the penultimate variation, the stormy and vehement Beethoven so familiar to us all is notably absent.

Silvie Cheng therefore confined her playing to an appropriately lighter scale of tone on the piano, without letting it become too precious and delicate. This allowed Bryan Cheng to find all kinds of interesting light and shade in the cello part. Together, they captured the feeling of a joyful sunny day which is so much a part of this music. At the same time, that next-to-last variation was properly emphatic and aggressive without getting too far out of scale from the rest of the piece. I love these pieces, and was only sorry they didn't go on to play the **other** set of variations too!

The larger work in the first half was the op. 40 sonata for cello and piano by Shostakovich. I confess I am mainly familiar with this Russian master's symphonies, where any lyrical section is usually laden with darkness and doubt, albeit melodious. Here, though, in this relatively early work, we got a strong strain of melody less stained by fear or uncertainty. Of course, Shostakovich never wrote any work without throwing in a generous dose of acerbic discords, but even those were somewhat dampened down by the prevailing stream of melody -- especially in the slower first and third movements. In these movements, both players gave us a beautiful legato with true singing tone. The contrasting faster movements, # 2 and 4, bounced and danced along in characteristic folk rhythms, and here both Silvie and Bryan allowed a stronger, almost savage element to creep in -- entirely apropos in this composer's music.

After the intermission, the Cheng²Duo gave us a selection of the French music which will appear on their first recording, due out in October from the Audite label.

They began with a set of three pieces by Gabriel Fauré. Although not conceived as a set, these three short works travel very well together. First was an arrangement of *Après un rêve*, an early Fauré *mélodie* or art song. Bryan Cheng's cello line here very aptly approximated the sound of a human voice singing the song. Next came the *Sicilienne*, a pastoral dance from Fauré's music for a stage production of *Pelléas et Mélisande*. On the final repetition of the rising and turning melody, Bryan Cheng added the sordine (mute) on the cello but then played through several bars a little too quietly for the expansive space of the Capitol Theatre. It was the only balance difficulty I noticed.

The last of the set was the *Élégie*, Op. 24. As the title suggests, the music breathes an air of mourning but this performance even reached towards anger for a few moments -- and that emotion, too, is part of the mourning experience for many people.

The programme concluded with César Franck's *Sonata in A Major*, in the cello arrangement by Jules Delsart. This is truly one of the great masterpieces in the repertoire from the nineteenth century. It's long been a favourite of mine, and I welcomed the chance to hear the Cheng²Duo perform it once again. Perhaps as a result of their recording studio experience, their reading this time seemed to have a stronger sense of overall unity about it. The music flowed naturally within each movement, and also from one movement to the next. The third movement (*Recitativo-fantasia*) was especially notable for keeping that organic sense of flow through the numerous pauses. Balance throughout was impeccable, even in the heaviest passages for the piano or the passages where the cello dropped down into the lower register. Without isolating this or that detail, I would simply say that the end of the work came far too soon, and I wasn't sure where the time had gone.

I'm eagerly awaiting that premiere recording when it arrives!
