

Rassegna stampa

What a Difference a Decade (or So) Makes -- Recitals by Violinists Hilary Hahn and Midori

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Hilary Hahn (violin)

Natalie Zhu (piano)

5 February 2004 - Villa Montalvo, Saratoga, California

Midori (violin)

Robert McDonald (piano)

6 February 2004 - Herbst Theater, San Francisco

Two of the world's best-known violinists have just given Bay Area recitals on successive nights. Artistically, they seemed to inhabit different universes, but maybe all that separates them is an age gap of less than 10 years. Hilary Hahn, 24, was all promise. Midori, 32, was promise fulfilled, and then some. Watching them one after the other was a little like seeing a time-lapse portrait of a young artist's development.

There wasn't anything wrong, exactly, with Hahn's Feb. 5 recital at Villa Montalvo's Carriage House in Saratoga. Obviously, she's hugely gifted. Just a few months ago, I was wowed by her playing as a soloist with the San Francisco Symphony on Stravinsky's Violin Concerto in D major, a whopper of a piece to pull off in front of 2,700 people.

But here she was, standing alone or with a piano accompanist in front of only 300 people in an intimate room, and the situation seemed to create a different set of demands that left Hahn exposed. She played melody sweet as bird song in a Mozart sonata - or slyly held back each note in a fast Bach dance passage, creating extra tension to drive the music forward. But as the night progressed, the music seemed like an accumulation of individual achievements - flawless double-stop sequences, perfect shifting, and listen to how beautifully she's shaping that passage! I'm the father of a violinist; so, on the one hand, I was cheering, but on the other hand, I was waiting for the music to really get started and grow into something whole.

Hahn seemed comfortable at fast tempos but a little baffled by the slow stuff. There's no more challenging single movement for a solo stringed instrument than the Chaconne in Bach's Partita No. 2 in D minor for solo violin. It's a cathedral made of sound. Hahn got all the notes, deftly conveyed the illusion of polyphonic interplay of voices at the outset and awakened to lacy, prayerful passages midway through. But after 15 minutes, it wasn't adding up. It felt drawn-out and a little shapeless.

And Hahn looked as detached as the music often felt. This gets tricky: Musicians don't have to rock and sway to play with emotion. You look at old film

footage of David Oistrakh, and the guy just stood there, rock-solid, violin shoved into his jowl, while he played with all the emotion and technical accomplishment imaginable. Still, Hahn looked uninvolved, and the music too often felt as if she hadn't quite discovered a way into it. By contrast, her piano accompanist, Natalie Zhu, seemed to melt into the keyboard, flooding the room with her end of the music. Maybe Hahn was having an off-night, but I couldn't help thinking that she seems young. We may have to wait a few years for her to get comfortable in the deepest waters of the chamber music repertory.

Watching her reminded me of what jazz musicians always say: It's harder to play a ballad than a flag-waver. A couple of weeks ago, I talked to saxophonist Branford Marsalis before a concert in San Francisco, and he mentioned that he has just recorded his first album of ballads. At 43, he's finally feeling comfortable enough to slow down and bring out the beauty of a song without overwhelming the listener with a million notes. Twenty years ago, Marsalis played with the great drummer Art Blakey, who used to feature one of his hot young horn soloists every set on a ballad: Sink or swim, buddy. Two decades later, Marsalis says, he's finally learned to swim.

Hahn will learn, too.

Midori knows how already.

Oh, man, does she. You see it in her physical relationship to the music: As her San Francisco Performances recital moved along Feb. 6, she grew ever more engrossed, her head pressed into the wood of her violin, as if she were listening to it speak. Midori was in complete dialogue with Robert McDonald, her longtime accompanist, so much so that she seemed at times to be playing more to him than the audience. She kept turning toward McDonald, which drew the sound of her violin away from the Herbst Theatre crowd. But the result was that you leaned forward in your seat and listened that much harder to the music.

All night, I kept thinking of fireflies: In slow movements, Midori would finish a passage, and the last notes would hang in the air, twinkling. In the Adagio to Beethoven's "Spring" Sonata for violin and piano, she made a great graceful structure of half a dozen descending notes. On faster movements, she played ramrod chords across the strings, and seemed to spear notes with her bow. How do you "spear" notes with a bow? Like any great artist, Midori has mastered technique and then moved past it into a free region where unexpected things happen.

She brought a shape and intensity to Janáček's Sonata for violin and piano that I had never heard before: Suddenly it was shot through with nostalgia, silence, melody ending on a thread of a note, barely audible. Another firefly.

After intermission, she performed Richard Danielpour's *As Night Falls* on Barjeantane, written only three years ago, and unveiled sonorities different from anything heard earlier in the evening: whistling notes that sounded piped by a reed instrument. At one point, she didn't fully sustain a note at the end of a long, whispery passage, but it didn't even matter. Danielpour's composition attempts to evoke twilight in the south of France, and Midori was playing the twilight.

The night finished with one of the most bravura chamber works for violin, Saint-Saëns's Violin Sonata No. 1 in D minor. Midori flipped the music on her music stand to the correct page, pressed it down with the tip of her bow, and

was off.

Soon she was flying through several minutes of cascading sixteenth notes and buzzing double-stops, executed with impeccable technique, her upper arm held stock-still. Yet Midori was swaying in place, eyes closed for much of this roller-coaster ride. The music rose in volume, then fell, then rose again - real pins-and-needles stuff - before the violinist went hurtling through one final twist and turn.

Was she playing like this a decade ago? Not quite. Will Hahn be playing at this level 10 years from now? Let's stay tuned.

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