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Mellow Cello recital in Newtown

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By Jan Stribula

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Newtown – Anyone who enjoys chamber music can thank their lucky stars if they were able to hear cellist Soo Bae and pianist Ying-Chien Lin give an exceptional recital last Sunday afternoon at Edmond Town Hall, Newtown. Newtown Friends of Music President Ellen Parrella really hit the jackpot when she invited them to perform.

Their selection of compositions came from all over the globe, with works written from just last spring to well over a century ago. And the Bonjour Stradivari cello Bae performed on dates back to 1696. The Canadian Council of the Arts loaned the priceless cello to Bae for three years after she won a recent competition, and she's certainly making good use of it, to everyone's advantage.

They opened with "Elegie, Opus 24" by Gabriel Faure (1845-1924), a passionate supplication, with the resonant voice of the cello doing the praying. Lin provided a dreamy piano accompaniment in Faure's simple but moving piece.

Bae displayed her adventurous side with what she called Chinese rock and roll in "Four Fragments," written in 2006 by Huang Ruo, a young composer she met at Juilliard. The lyrical solo had oriental roots embedded in unusual tonalities. Building up in tempo and giving rise to extreme emotions, you could hear a pin drop as Bae gave an attention-commanding performance with a bonus piece no one was expecting.

Technically demanding, "Two Caprices for cello solo, Opus 25" by Alfredo Piatti (1822 – 1901) required tremendous delicacy and bow control. Bae was light as a feather and faster than greased lightning with her rapid-fire technique.

Quintessential romanticist Robert Schumann (1810 – 1856) "Fantasy Pieces", Opus 73) allowed Lin and Bae to have an extended dialogue, with flowing exchanges, developing variations on themes. The ripping piano and swooning cello fit together naturally, giving and taking, leading and following, evoking a feeling of another era.

Following intermission, they concluded with the turbulent "Sonata in D minor for cello and piano, Opus 40" by Dmitri Shostakovich (1906 – 1975). Bae's facial expressions showed intense concentration and consternation, reflecting the state of the world when the work was written, in the 1930s.

Dark passages were rumbling in the background with Lin's piano in this sensitive treatment of one of Shostakovich's more listener-friendly pieces. In the fiery Allegro, Bae and Lin were fully intent with flashes of neoclassicism exploring new ground, while playing some heavy Russian music. Lin exploded into cadenzas, and then returned to the lower registers, as Bae deftly tiptoed about creating an atmosphere of eeriness.

They were all smiles for their standing ovation. For an encore, Bae doodled around with variations on one of her favorite hymns, the Gospel tune "I Cast All My Care Upon You."

Bae had marvelously captured an incredible range of sound and emotion with the Stradivari cello, from sonorous sweetness to brash irreverence. Lin added warmth and depth with her accompaniment. Together they were delightful.