

Cello-piano duo charms Vanguard patrons

Burt Sidel



Vanguard Concerts brought a cello soloist, Armenian-born Narek Hakhnazaryan to the stage of the magnificent Renaissance Auditorium of the Dayton Art Institute. Dayton was a welcome sight after being delayed many hours in New York awaiting visa clearance.

Young Hakhnazaryan, barely 21 years old, didn't let the post-midnight arrival deter him. He and his charming and mega-talented pianist, Noreen Polera, spent the day at two schools, Stivers School for the Arts and Fairmont High School. There, they received enthusiastic welcomes from the student musicians and music lovers.

Another enthusiastic audience greeted them at the Art Institute on Saturday evening. The duet looked like a musical beauty pageant. Narek is tall and handsome and Noreen a real beauty.

The pageant wasn't about beauty,

it was about music. The program contained works of great difficulty and appeal. Schumann, Beethoven, Rachmaninoff, Tchaikovsky and cello master Rostropovich all were waiting with musical challenges.

Hakhnazaryan plays a Jean Baptiste Vuillaume instrument dated 1860. If you recall, last Vanguard concert featured the Modigliani Quartet playing a matched set of Vuillaume instruments of wood from a single tree.

The recital opened with the stunning *Fantasiestücke* of Robert Schumann. The three movements originally scored for clarinet and piano is most often heard with violin and piano. Somehow, the deeper voice of the cello did not enliven the special sound which is unmistakably Schumann. Polera's piano accompaniment compelled the ear with its lightness and effervescence. The cello sounds seemed to be somewhat homogenous rather than a panoply of color.

The next work, Beethoven's Sonata No. 3, had somewhat the same effect. Narek's cello, deeply intoning the complexities of Beethoven, seemed overshadowed by the brilliance of the piano.

After intermission, Rachmaninoff's 1901 cello sonata

fared better. The dark melodies of the first movement, the percussive effects of the second and the arioso sounds of the final movements gave both strings and piano expression and fulfillment.

The concert closed with a trio of encore pieces. A familiar Tchaikovsky melody and an almost acrobatic display of virtuosic runs on the cello during *Humoresque* by Mstislav Rostropovich displayed the richness of the music and the deft technique of young Hakhnazaryan. Watching his fingers fly up and down the frets while his bow was both arcing and slapping at the strings could have given this piece the title "Rostropovich's Revenge."

Narek and Noreen treated the audience to a final encore, a charming Armenian dance with brilliant displays on both cello and piano. The devoted Vanguard audience must wait until March to hear another exciting visitor, Israeli pianist Ran Dank. Let's continue this truly international season.

Dayton Playhouse

Dayton Playhouse never avoids a risk. Their plays are a combination of mainstream and avant garde with no apology for either genre.

The third production of the season following an amazing *Cabaret* and a fine *The Miracle Worker* by Terrance McNally. The very name is controversial. Such an examination of basic Christian beliefs conjures up images of protests and diatribes.

To prepare myself, I asked a noted Dayton theater person who had not seen but had read the play. His response was, "It is a very well written play." This is like describing the unattractive girl in high school as, "She has a nice personality."

The experience at Dayton Playhouse went far beyond a well-written play. It was a creative use of the acknowledged Greatest Story Ever Told, the Gospels of Jesus' ministry and death. Synthesized with the pain of overt homophobia and the malignant prejudice of societies such as Corpus Christi, Texas, it was a riveting encounter.

The characters, all actors baptized on stage into the Apostles, examined the life of Jesus. His growth into a mesmerizing preacher and advocate of universal love was

intertwined with the pain of gender selection and peer pressure.

The set, by Chris Harmon, began visually as a meaningless hodge-podge of graffiti and crude spaces. The action made it take on clear meaning and strong effect. The cast, many veterans and a few newcomers, was simply superb. Under director Michael Boyd, scene blended into scene and meaning blended into greater meaning.

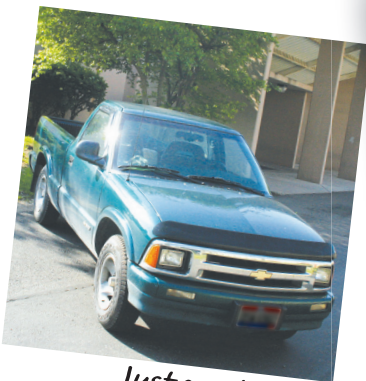
An unseen character (Jesus was plainly visible) was Matthew Shepard, the gay youth brutally attacked and left to die tied to a fence in Wyoming in 1998. This presence, death without Resurrection, was a sharp contrast to Jesus' journey into a universal icon of faith and love.

The cast members - Peter, John, Matthew, James, Andrew - you know the rest, took on fully rounded personae as played by Chuck Larkowski, Mark Diffenderfer, Sean Frost, Franklin Johnson, Matthew Smith and Robb Willoughby and their fine supporting colleagues.

We entered the playhouse through a friendly gamut of poster-bearing protestors. We left with some new understandings.

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