

Midori, Hahn make strings sing

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It was back in the 17th century that the violin first became a vehicle for celebrity-driven virtuosity -- the Baroque equivalent of the rock era's electric guitar -- and it's never quite lost that charismatic cachet. That much was clear over the weekend in dazzling back-to-back recitals by two of the violin world's most exciting stars, Midori and Hilary Hahn.

Not that either of them leaps about the stage or is even particularly demonstrative in outward demeanor. Hahn especially is an impassive presence, channeling fervency into the music.

But the two programs were a reminder of the emotional force that violin playing can exert at its finest, and of the way that the sound of this instrument -- whether throbbing with a warm rush of intensity or floating a soft, celestial high note -- can sometimes seem to link the human voice with that of the angels.

There could be no better musicians to make that link manifest than Midori and Hahn. These two are almost a generation apart -- Midori has been thrilling audiences for nearly two decades, while Hahn has only begun to reveal the range and profundity of her artistry.

Yet their approach, shares an emphasis on tonal purity, technical precision and the kind of dramatic power that comes from having every note in place.

Hahn's long Sunday night program in Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall, presented by Cal Performances, was the more magical of the two, though only by a fraction. Together with her longtime recital partner Natalie Zhu -- a nimble, dynamic pianist -- Hahn delivered crystalline, witty and elegant accounts of sonatas by Mozart and Ernest Bloch.

Most striking in the two Mozart sonatas that opened and closed the evening was the duo's ability to share the spotlight the way these pieces demand. It's a balance that can often bedevil star violinists and their less-famous accompanists, but when Mozart called for the violin to accompany the piano in the opening movement of the G-Major Sonata, K. 301 (293a), the texture was flawlessly judged.

Mozart's A-Major Sonata, K. 526, got an exquisitely pointed reading crowned by a expansive account of the slow movement, and Bloch's Sonata No. 1, with its ferocious outer movements framing a central reverie, emerged in sharp outline.

But the evening's high point was Hahn's rendition of Bach's D-Minor Partita, marked by rhythmic security, transparent voicing, flawless intonation and a monumental account of the Passacaglia. There were two encores, the Siciliana from Bach's E-Flat Flute Sonata, and Stravinsky's "Chanson Russe," done with plain-spoken charm.

Appearing in Herbst Theatre Friday under the auspices of San Francisco Performances, Midori and pianist Robert McDonald got off to a rocky start in Beethoven's "Spring" Sonata. McDonald sounded uncharacteristically unsteady, and there were several miscues.

But the remainder of the program was a showcase for Midori's wiry, responsive string tone and vigorous rhythmic command.

Janáček's Violin Sonata offered a combination of fiercely guttural outbursts and limpid grace, especially in the slow movement, with its keening high notes sounding as thin and clean as mountain air.

"As Night Falls on Barjeantine," a winsome little water color written in 2001 by Richard Danielpour, provided sweetly faceless melodies that Midori invested with even more stature than they seemed to merit, and for sheer showoff virtuosity there was Saint-Saëns' Sonata No. 1, with its breathless perpetual-motion finale. The encores were Carl Engel's song "Sea-Shell" arranged for violin by Efrem Zimbalist, and Liszt's "La Campanella."

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