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A Cellist's Marathon

By John Lutterman

Bach's solo suites are an essential part of every cellist's repertoire, but they aren't found on concert programs as much as one might expect. This is intimate music, and performances in large public venues are inherently problematic. Matt Haimovitz has attracted a great deal of media attention for his approach to this problem. Like David Finckel, cellist of the Emerson Quartet, he has started his own record label, modeled on the "indies" of the pop music world. He has also managed to broaden his audience by taking to the road, often playing clubs and smaller halls not usually associated with concert music (he performs Wednesday night at Freight and Salvage in Berkeley). Of course, Bach didn't write the suites for concert performance, public concerts being a rarity in his day, and the culture of coffeehouses in which much of his music was performed was probably more like that of the clubs that Haimovitz has been playing than the modern concert hall.

Sunday's program in the Florence Gould Theater, a medium sized hall, was a more conventional concert experience. This was a marathon performance of all six suites, a taxing endeavor for performer and audience alike, and Haimovitz carried it off admirably. His memory and sense of intonation are impressive, with scarcely a glitch on either count. The audience was also impressive. The house was sold out, and though there was a bit of attrition toward the end, they remained attentive and enthusiastic.

The great Russian cellist, Gregor Piatigorsky, whose memoirs are filled with entertaining tales about mid-twentieth century performance culture, recounts his first meeting with Pablo Casals. Casals, who at that time was already an elder statesman, revered for his performances of Bach, asked to hear one of the solo suites. Piatigorsky was very nervous and embarrassed about how badly he had played, but Casals would hear no apologies. Pointing out several points in the score that he had found particularly interesting, he exclaimed that he had noticed several things for the first time, that he had learned something new and valuable. It is possible to learn something new from any performance, of course, but the very nature of Bach's music for solo instruments encourages this to an unparalleled degree. These are works with much to teach us, and one can spend a lifetime working with them and still always be able to find more. Nowhere in the canon is the pursuit of a definitive performance more pointless.

Tricky tasks

The suites are a wonderfully incomplete, open-ended collection of works. There are several paradoxes here. On one hand is the famous implied polyphony, the fact that Bach manages to suggest the essential outlines of several lines of music, often skipping back and forth between two, three or more voices, leaving the implications to be realized only in the listener's imagination. These implications can be satisfactorily resolved in many different ways, and allow the performer a great deal of freedom. Because it forces one to actively engage one's imagination in interpretation, this somewhat abstract character actually gives the music an intimately personal character. On the other hand, Bach was unusually specific in his notation of ornamentation, often writing out what other composers of his day would have left the performer to improvise at his or her discretion. Whether interpreting this written out ornamentation actually allows less freedom is a debatable point, but it certainly requires a keen sense of harmonic rhythm and the ability to give at least the impression of a spontaneous improvisation.

Aside from his choice of venues, Haimovitz isn't much concerned with “authentic” or historically informed approaches to this music — fans of Bylsma, Harnoncourt, Coin or Wispelwey would have been disappointed. That said, if taken on his own terms, there is much to be learned from Haimovitz's performances, albeit in the sense that there is much to be learned about Shakespeare from hearing Mel Gibson or William Shatner as Hamlet.

For better and worse, Haimovitz's playing shares many characteristics with his primary teacher, Leonard Rose, for many years the dean of cello gurus in this country. The better part of this influence is to be heard in his warm, full sound. The more unfortunate side is manifested in his rather limited range of articulation and in a number of mannerisms, the most distracting of which are a constant use of portato and a forced, nervous vibrato. He also has a habit of ending each section with a stentorian, triumphal ritardando. As a result, the underlying structure was often obscured and the sense of direction and flow was rather arbitrarily interrupted. These characteristics were most problematic when Haimovitz pushed the upper end of his dynamic range. Although he has made a point of seeking more intimate venues, on Sunday he sometimes seemed to be playing to the Hollywood Bowl, and much was lost in the process. At other times his playing was really imaginative and colorful.

Novelty and taste

Like most modern cellists, Haimovitz gave a fairly literal reading of the score — no thought of additional or alternative ornamentation here. But in the da capos of the *galanteries* he did take the opportunity to experiment with color. Most convincing were the pizzicato performance of Meneut I in the D-minor Suite; the use of a glassy *ponticello* in the first Bouree of the E-flat-major Suite; and the ethereal *flautando* treatment of the second Gavotte of the C-minor Suite. The final dances of the C-minor Suite were particularly well performed. The deceptively simple Sarabande was exceptionally restrained and slow, but Haimovitz managed to keep a clear sense of direction, and there was a collective sigh from the audience at its conclusion. The Gigue was also on the slow side, but was handled with a wonderful sense of poise, and the playful ending showed a mature harmonic sense.

The Sixth Suite, in D major, was written for a five-string instrument. Modern cellists often perform it on a four-string instrument, but this usually gives the work the character of an obstacle course to be overcome as a rite of passage. Haimovitz's performance was surprisingly persuasive. His handling of the technical challenges was impressive, and there is plenty of room in this suite for virtuosic bravado; but it was his thoughtful treatment of the more restrained moments that was most convincing. The Allemande is one of Bach's most densely ornamented works. A successful performance requires a sophisticated understanding of its structure and a lively, imaginative treatment of color and rhythmic flow. Haimovitz did very well on both counts, and the result was really eloquent — there is clearly a good musical mind at work here. He needs to extend the reach of this playful, imaginative understanding, and it would be great to hear him explore other means of expression, but I'm sure that he will continue to learn such things from Bach. Don't we all?

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