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Nagano, Berkeley Symphony celebrate night of cellomania Highlight is performance of Beethoven's 2nd

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You couldn't swing a cat Tuesday night in Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall without hitting a cellist right in the bowing arm.

The concert by Kent Nagano and the Berkeley Symphony Orchestra was offered as a tribute to the cellist and musical polymath Laszlo Varga, an early mentor to Nagano and indeed to generations of San Francisco State University students. Varga was on hand to say a few appreciative words, and there was a nicely straightforward note of praise from his compatriot and peer, the great Hungarian-born cellist Janos Starker.

But the main order of business, of course, was musical, as no fewer than three cello soloists took the stage in works of strikingly varied character. Matt Haimovitz led off with Tchaikovsky's "Variations on a Rococo Theme," after which cellist Judiyaba played Elliott Carter's recent Cello Concerto. After intermission, Joan Jeanrenaud gave the world premiere of Karen Tanaka's soulful but slushy "Urban Prayer."

Yet when all this cellomania had run its course, the most consistently rewarding part of the evening was the concluding performance of Beethoven's Second Symphony (with Haimovitz and Jeanrenaud taking seats in the back of the cello section for the occasion).

Nagano and the orchestra have spent recent seasons making their way through the Beethoven symphonies together, and the results are always invigorating -- often, as in this case, overshadowing the more venturesome fare on the program.

In the Second Symphony, Nagano made it clear from the start that he wanted to strike a balance between the fleet-footed rhythms of the 18th century and a weightier, more imposing approach redolent of later periods.

That meant giving the first movement a taut but muscular profile, full of rhythmic zest and robust instrumental textures. It meant a slow movement at once tender and sturdy, and an especially vigorous rendition of the rondo finale, with its antsy, hiccuping main theme. The orchestral playing sounded rich and focused throughout.

The cello triple play, though ostensibly the point of the evening, turned out to be less enticing overall. Haimovitz's account of the Tchaikovsky was an engaging curtain-opener, marked by melodic suavity from both soloist and orchestra and by some exquisitely pointed top notes from Haimovitz.

But the recent music was rougher going. Tanaka's three-movement work turned out to be a compilation of plush, oversweetened harmonies with the cello offering arching soliloquies above. The first movement, oscillating among three simple chords, is watered-down Philip Glass, which makes it pretty darn watered-down; the central slow movement includes some touching interplay between the soloist and alto flute, but it never gets much beyond pretty sounds.

The entire score, in fact, is infused with a kind of awkward sincerity redolent of group therapy. The cello speaks from the heart -- and Jeanrenaud's playing was, as always, rich and warm and gorgeous -- but that doesn't mean it's easy to listen without embarrassment.

Carter's concerto, composed in 2000 for Yo-Yo Ma, is the opposite. Written in the composer's characteristically abstruse, jittery style, the score is certainly not the kind to change anyone's mind about Carter's music, either for better or worse.

It runs about 23 minutes, in a linked series of fragmentary, desiccated episodes that ostensibly have something to do with one another. Judiyaba played fiercely, and associate conductor George Thomson led the performance with what seemed to be astonishing clarity and precision.

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Celloist Joan Jeanrenaud performed "Urban Prayer" at Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall.



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