

Fantastic Performance by Married Violinists

Quaint. Folksy. Simple and fun. Certainly not serious, certainly not as "valid" as *real* violin music from Europe. If anyone went into Saturday's KCCA concert with those types of impressions of American fiddle music, I cannot imagine how they could have not had their eyes opened by Mark and Maggie O'Connor. Virtuosi by any definition, they showcased traditional music of the Americas in all its complexity, diversity, and history.

When a musician walks onto a mostly bare stage, with just a single instrument, no flash, no other support, he had better be good. Mark O'Connor is good. Legendary type of good. His resume is truly impressive, from the names of those with whom he studied, to his accomplishments and accolades along the way, and while a resume is seldom a true indicator of any performer's abilities, within the first song it was apparent that he's earned his reputation honestly. The same can be said of Maggie O'Connor, an highly regarded violinist in her own right, who happens to be married to Mark. Both of these musicians displayed a technical ability of the highest level, with Mark on occasion pushing the physical limits of the instrument, and yet, when needed, portraying a delicacy and subtlety perhaps only equalled by the human voice. (Speaking of which, on a few occasions they sang along while playing, and Maggie in particular has beautiful pure sound, reminiscent of one of my favourite American singers, Alison Krauss).

The music selection was almost all from the Americas, from traditional Canadian and American reels, jigs and Bluegrass, to a lovely piece called Libertango by Astor Piazzolla of Argentina. The versatility of the violin was shown with some nice surprises, such as a real blues demonstration by Mark in the first half, and then (one of my favourite pieces) an improvisation on Bach to start the second half. Mark made a very generous point of praising Canada's contribution to fiddle music in our brief history, often playing pieces of Canadian origin or inspiration.

One thing I wish he could have cleared up is the definition of a fiddle vs. a violin. He probably felt it unnecessary, and used the words interchangeably a few times. For the curious, technically there is no difference. The physical instrument is the same. (Apparently some fiddle players would make modifications to allow easier playing of certain double and triple stops, but as fiddle playing has advanced, that practice has diminished).

Quaint, folksy, fun, seldom simple, and as serious and technically challenging as some of the best classical music out there. Mark and Maggie O'Connor handily proved that point last Saturday, and certainly opened my eyes and ears to much richer musical style than I had imagined. Hopefully, as he suggested, they return with their full band. Never know, there may be 700 KCCA members dancing in the aisles!

Neville Bowman