

Ô-Celli is beautifully unique

Question : How do you take 8 of the same variety of instrument and make them sound like a much larger ensemble? And which instrument do you choose? Few have the range and depth of sound required. Pianos are wonderful, but even 3 can become ponderous and cluttered , let alone 8. Perhaps French horns? Perhaps. But I think that what we heard from Ô-Celli proved that none could do it better than the cello.

In the hands of masterful players from five different nations, the "choir" of celli filled Kelowna Community Theatre with a warmth and breadth of sound far larger than a mere 8 instruments would suggest. The range of the cello (the largest range of stringed instruments) allowed for each musician to alternately play gorgeous melodic passages in one moment, then switch to deep, warm bass tones, supporting the melody handed off to another. (Incidentally, the curious switching of places by all the musicians was mostly to give variety to who gets to play what part, for the benefit of both the players and the audience). I used the word "choir" earlier quite intentionally, as the cello can take on an almost human vocal quality, and in the encore, a wonderful rendition of Queen's 'Bohemian Rhapsody', one could almost hear the voices coming from the stage.

The music was certainly varied, with an emphasis on classical repertoire in the first half and some more recent compositions later on in the evening. Right from the start I could hear the detail in the arranging, the time taken to practice . Pieces began with precision, cutoffs were as one, every crescendo and sforzando was matched. They even all wore red socks. Ô-Celli pays attention to detail and it was very apparent. The audience loved the third selection, 'Espana' by Emmanuel Chabrier, and I thought the fourth piece, the three movement 'Danzas Fantasticas', was a wonderfully visual composition, eliciting imagery throughout the performance. Perhaps the most challenging piece was 'Fa Do', a piece written specifically for Ô-Celli, which explored the limits of what a cello can do and employed some more modern harmonic ideas. Indeed, with the exception of some minor tuning issues in the first half, all selections, whether warm and melodic or fiery and percussive, sounded well balanced and Alexandre Beauvoir did an excellent and often humourous job of introducing the music and explaining the composition. (Oddly none of the other musicians said a word, even when Alexandre did a quite funny tongue-in-cheek introductions at the end).

I want to make special mention of the Kelowna Music School students who perform prior to Kelowna Community Concerts. This has been happening for a few shows now and it is a wonderful way for some young students to play for a discerning audience. I had a chance to hear 8 year old Ben Barbaza playing a challenging Breval piece with Sandra Wilmot, and before that Sam Shea was accompanied by none less than Rosemary Thomson. These young players work hard, so don't hesitate to come out and support them.

Ô-Celli is beautifully unique. 8 instruments, 8 individual styles, coming together to create a unified sound that is grander than the sum of its parts. Professional, personable, and just making excellent music, Yes, it's a lot of cello. But as they say, 'there's always room.....'

Neville Bowman, musician, actor, composer.