

THE DAILY GAZETTE

JANUARY 8, 2007

MUSIC REVIEW

Finckel, Wu Han dazzle crowd with intimacy, fiery passion

BY GERALDINE FREEDMAN
For The Daily Gazette

SCHENECTADY — There's always a mood of excited anticipation when the husband and wife duo of cellist David Finckel and pianist Wu Han give their annual recital at Union College's Memorial Chapel as part of the International Festival of Chamber Music. Audiences know they're going to get music making of great elegance that's rendered impeccably and passionately.

The capacity crowd on Sunday afternoon couldn't have asked for more. The program of works by Schubert, Strauss, Rachmaninov and Grieg had some of the most lushly romantic and wonderfully written music. But romance is about communication and these two musicians know how to have a musical dialogue better than most.

CLOSE PARTNERS

Finckel, who played the entire program from memory, sat very near his wife but facing the audience. As they played, he'd look over his left shoulder and she'd lean toward him to be sure their entrances were together or to set a different tempo. That intimacy projected into the music, too.

They began with Schubert's Sonata in a minor that was written in

1824 for the arpeggione, which was like a bowed guitar invented in 1814 in Vienna. By the time the sonata was published in 1871, almost 40 years after Schubert had died, the instrument had fallen out of fashion. Because its sound was similar to the modern cello, however, cellists now play the charming work.

The three movements are filled with light joyous melodies that can be cheerful or bittersweet. Always Schubert's light and shadow play across the score like clouds passing over a sunlit lake. Finckel played with rich tones, an easy bow arm and spun out the long melodic lines with a contained intensity that was very concentrated but elegant. His control, pitch and varied articulations were immaculate.

Because the accompaniment is quite transparent there's always a risk to do too much with it. But Wu Han was light and sympathetic. Pacing was excellent and both used similar strong nuances throughout.

In Strauss' youthful, vivacious Sonata in F Major, they produced a bigger, more robust sound. The first movement flirts between mystery and brilliance which Finckel captured with an edgy, gutsy tone as Wu Han added a fiery exuberance.

They built the climaxes with care in the second movement's

love song and were virtuosic and boisterous in the finale with its high spirits and dancey elan.

Rachmaninov's serenely beautiful "Vocalise" of 1916 was perfect. Finckel's well sustained intensity floated in and out of the phrases as they ebbed and flowed. The duo played with exquisite tenderness, rich color and phrases that were so fluid they seemed to melt into each other. It was magical.

NORTHERN IMAGERY

Grieg's rarely performed Sonata (1883) was like a Nordic landscape of jagged ice floes, turbulent currents and serene fjords. The writing within the three movements had unpredictability as one would expect in viewing such a vista.

Lines were rough-hewn, harmonies were dark-edged, tempos were fierce and fiery or like a slow dance with flowers in one's hair.

It was exciting stuff.

Finckel played often with great urgency and always with passion. Wu Han showed much flair and gave great spring to her massive chordal passages.

Because the audience clapped and whistled so long, Finckel said, it got two encores: a very romantic but dramatic "Erotic Poem" by Grieg; and early 20th-century English composer John Ireland's sweetly lyrical "Cavatina."