

Review: Bach Festival artist-in-resident She-e Wu astounds with musicianship and dexterity on marimba

By Steve Siegel
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A span of nine feet may not seem so far, but just try hitting two notes in rapid succession separated by that distance on a marimba, while wearing high heels. That's just what marimba virtuoso She-e Wu was up against when she astounded the audience by both her musicianship and dexterity Saturday morning at Zoellner Arts Center in in Eric Ewazen's Concerto for Marimba and Strings.

Wu's stunning performance at the Ifor Jones Chamber Music Concert at the 2018 Bethlehem Bach Festival was just one of several virtuoso treats on the program. Bach Choir conductor Greg Funfgeld's mesmerizing performance on harpsichord in Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 5, joined by soloists Elizabeth Field, violin, and Robin Kani, flute, was another tour-de-force, as was the Bach Festival Orchestra's exceptionally buoyant take on Bach's Third Suite in D Major.



Ewazen's concerto, written for Wu, the festival's artist in residence, is one of the most popular works in the marimba repertoire, with good reason. It speaks in a lovely neo-romantic harmonic language, and its cinematic-like drama is especially evident when experienced live. Performing the work is a daunting task, requiring extraordinary accuracy and attention to detail. Wu excelled on all counts, executing flawless rapid arpeggios while extracting an amazing variety of tonal color.

Wu coaxed some amazing sounds from the mellow, resonant instrument, evoking everything from temple bells to gongs and chimes. Her precise and sensitive touch was evident everywhere, especially in her sympathetic conversations with the strings. Due to time constraints — the entire three-movement work would have run over 30 minutes — Wu skipped the second movement, and moved directly to the third.

The final movement was a truly impressive display of virtuoso fireworks. Yet what should have brought immediate applause brought only polite silence at first, since the confused audience had heard only two of the three movements listed in the program, and were unaware the performance had ended.

Although the fifth Brandenburg is scored for solo flute, violin, harpsichord and strings, there's no question that it is in fact a harpsichord concerto. Baker Hall's acoustics were exceptionally kind to the instrument, whose presence rang throughout the piece like gently falling raindrops. The sound rose to the surface in the long cadenza-like solo in the first movement, which Funfgeld performed with a dizzying display of hypnotic, virtuosic skill.

The second movement, aptly named *Affetuoso*, was a sweet and intimate three-way conversation between the solo instruments. Both Kani and Field, freed from the first movement's tension, engaged in a graceful interplay of musical lines with Funfgeld. This cooperative interplay posed an interesting contrast to the instrument's playful competition for visibility in the previous movement. The work's conclusion, a lively gigue, put a spirited end to an exuberant performance.

Bach's third orchestral suite, the best-known of the set of four, featured a full complement of the Bach Festival Orchestra, including brass and timpani. The performance was truly majestic, from the graceful formality of its French-style overture to its famous Air, its toe-tapping Gavotte, and an exceptionally fast-paced Bouree. The trumpet work in the concluding Air was especially rousing.

The Bethlehem Bach Festival runs through May 20. The first weekend's concerts are repeated May 18 and 19 and the festival ends with the Young American Singer Competition at Moravian College's Peter Hall on May 20. The Ifor Jones Chamber Music Concert will be repeated at 10:30 a.m. May 19 at Zoellner Arts, Center, Lehigh University, Bethlehem. Tickets: \$25. 610-866-4382, bach.org.

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