



Narek Hakhnazaryan

"Mr. Hakhnazaryan's intense focus and expressive artistry never flagged."

— *The New York Times*



Narek Hakhnazaryan, cello
2023-2024 Biography

Since winning the Cello First Prize and Gold Medal at the XIV International Tchaikovsky Competition in 2011 at the age of 22, Narek Hakhnazaryan has performed with most major orchestras across the globe. The “dazzlingly brilliant” (*The Strad*) cellist also frequently performs in recital and chamber music settings, for which his playing has been described as “nothing short of magnificent” (*San Francisco Chronicle*).

Most recently seen as part of a trio in residence at the Wiener Konzerthaus and as a soloist with the Royal Philharmonic and Barcelona Symphony Orchestras, Hakhnazaryan opens his 2023-2024 season playing chamber music of Beethoven, Mozart and Elgar with the Camerata Pacifica in venues throughout California. Abroad, he performs with the Vienna Chamber Orchestra, Gran Canaria Orchestra, and Aalborg Symphony Orchestra. Alongside pianist Zhang Zuo and violinist Esther Yoo, he tours China and Europe as the Z.E.N. Trio.

Hakhnazaryan has enjoyed a global career since his rise to fame in 2011, playing with orchestras such as the Orchestre de Paris, London Symphony, London Philharmonic, Rotterdam Philharmonic, Berlin Konzerthaus, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony, Pittsburgh Symphony, Sydney Symphony, Seoul Philharmonic, Wiener Symphoniker, The Deutsche Nationaltheater und Staatskapelle Weimar, the Frankfurt, Finnish and Vienna Radio Orchestras, and NHK Symphony. Of his debut with the LA Philharmonic, the *Los Angeles Times* exclaimed, “His command of the instrument is extraordinary.”

The cellist has performed under conductors including Gergiev, Koopman, Alsop, Lintu, Sokhiev, Robertson, Honeck, Noseda, Netopil, Hrůša, and Juanjo Mena. He has toured Spain with the WDR Symphony and Saraste, the US with the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra under Neemi Järvi, and Japan with the Czech Philharmonic and Bělohlávek. A former BBC New Generation Artist, he has performed with all of the BBC orchestras and made a sensational debut at the BBC Proms, with *The Guardian* lauding his “technically impeccable and distinctively personal” performance with “an outstanding display of musicianship.”

An eager chamber musician, Hakhnazaryan has performed at festivals worldwide and in halls across Europe with various chamber partners like Nikolai Lugansky, Nikita Borisoglebsky, Maxim Rysanov, Nikolai Lugansky, Georgy Tchaidze and Lucas Debargues. With the Z.E.N. Trio, he toured the US and China and released two albums on Deutsche Grammophon:

Brahms and Dvořák in 2017 and *Burning Through the Cold* – works by Shostakovich, Babadjanian, Khachaturian, and Rachmaninoff in 2020.

Hakhnazaryan recently toured California playing a bird-themed program that included Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite*, Respighi's *Fountains of Rome*, and *Ascending Bird* by Siamak Aghaei and Colin Jacobsen. He has also toured southeast Asia, performing the complete Bach cello solo suites in Taipei, Seoul, Tokyo and Kyoto; and has played with Daniil Trifonov at the Verbier and Rheingau Festivals and throughout the US, including at Carnegie Hall. He recently enjoyed a four-concert residency at London's Wigmore Hall, and has appeared at Boston's Jordan Hall, Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Cologne Philharmonie and Madrid Auditorio.

Mentored by the late Rostropovich, Hakhnazaryan received an Artist Diploma from the New England Conservatory of Music where he studied with Lawrence Lesser. Prior to this he studied at the Moscow Conservatory with Alexey Seleznyov and at the Sayat-Nova School of Music in Yerevan with Zareh Sarkisyan. Hakhnazaryan has received scholarships from the Rostropovich Foundation and the New Names Foundation, and his prizes include First Prize in the 2006 Aram Khachaturian International Competition in Armenia and First Place in the 2006 Johansen International Competition for Young String Players. As First Prize winner in the 2008 Young Concert Artists International Auditions, Hakhnazaryan made his debut in Washington, DC, and at Carnegie Hall. In September 2017 he was awarded the title of "Honored Artist of Armenia" by the President of Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan.

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Narek Hakhnazaryan

Critical Acclaim



“Mr. Hakhnazaryan’s intense focus and expressive artistry never flagged.”
The New York Times

“Hakhnazaryan had what few other cellists can boast: the power to stand up to such a wall of dark, overpowering Estonian sound... Even his grandly shaped lyrical phrases had the quality of mowing down anything in his way. His tone is as gorgeously sure as it is huge. Hakhnazaryan is clearly on his way to a big career.”

Los Angeles Times

“Hakhnazaryan took on Tchaikovsky’s brief, lyrical Nocturne in D minor for Cello and Orchestra and then “Variations on a Rococo Theme,” in a revelatory performance that combined an exquisitely rich singing tone with lyrical grace and a spectacular technical prowess that made even the most elaborate of the variations seem effortless.”

St. Louis Post-Dispatch

“Hakhnazaryan is the real deal.”

Baltimore Sun

“Hakhnazaryan's performance was nothing short of magnificent...He's an artist to watch out for.”

San Francisco Chronicle

“His tone was rich, his control immaculate and his performance stunning.”

Kansas City Star

"Hakhnazaryan launched into Tchaikovsky’s Variations on a Rococo Theme with a tone whose beauty shone all the more brightly for its restraint. Every nuance of this subtle work was lovingly observed, and when he did let rip it was with blazing virtuosity.”

The Independent

“When Narek Hakhnazaryan becomes a familiar name - and it will - people will think back to his Hong Kong debut recital, in which the young Armenian-born cellist enchanted the audience with his impeccable technique and luminous tone.”

South China Morning Post

“This cellist is without a doubt a major presence on the international stage.”

The Strad

“The cellist combined elegance and simplicity with a rare and enticing kind of vulnerability...An enthralling performance.”

Thoroughly Good

“Playing with complete technical command and musical freedom, Hakhnazaryan gave an extraordinarily communicative performance.”

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

“As soon as he put bow to string the beauty of the sound was striking – rich, mellow and highly expressive. Variations on a Rococo Theme allowed him to display elegance and virtuosity, both qualities that he has in abundance.”

The Advertiser



March 15, 2021

Narek Hakhnazaryan offers impassioned playing in Yerevan recital

By Sam Jacobson



Presented by the Shriver Hall Concert Series, Sunday's recital with cellist Narek Hakhnazaryan and pianist Armine Grigoryan was pre-recorded not at the organization's usual venue in Baltimore, but from a rather more distant locale — the beautiful Khachaturian Concert Hall in the duo's native Yerevan, Armenia. Following formative studies with Rostropovich, Hakhnazaryan rose to prominence after capturing the Cello First Prize and Gold

Medal at the 2011 Tchaikovsky Competition at the age of 22.

Schumann's *Adagio and Allegro*, Op.70 made for a captivating opening. Originally scored for horn, the composer authorized versions for both cello and violin. The *Adagio* was of languid melancholy as encouraged by Hakhnazaryan's burnished tone. The quick-fingered *Allegro* that followed offered ample contrast while being no less lyrical than its predecessor as passions swelled. Though Beethoven would certainly go on to write more profound sets of variations, his *Seven Variations on "Bei Männern, welche Liebe fühlen"* – Pamina and Papageno's duet from *The Magic Flute* – nonetheless serves as a lovely tribute from one musical giant to another. A stately enunciation of the theme saw the source material function just as effectively as duet for cello and piano, and the subsequent variations ranged from the sprightly gossamer to the deeply felt.

The largest work on the program was Franck's *Violin Sonata in A major*, of course presented in its not-infrequently heard transcription for cello. Introspective beginnings showed the piece to be well-suited to the lower instrument in its brooding romanticism. The dense accompaniment of the second movement *Allegro* made great demands on Grigoryan which she surmounted with ease and powerful delivery. The skeletal beginnings of the *Recitative* gave way in due course to music of searing passion, an ethos only further compounded by the blistering finale. This was a performance of powerful impact, and conclusive evidence of the duo's seamless communication.

To conclude, attention was turned to a pair of 20th-century Armenian composers, not terribly well-known outside their home country. Edvard Baghdasaryan's *Nocturne* was a touching discovery, a gorgeous, easily appealing gem of a piece. Alexander Arutiunian gained some international currency by way of his 1950 Trumpet Concerto, still heard with some regularity. His all too brief *Impromptu* was a vivacious affair, stylishly drawing on folk tradition. As a postscript, a lively Q&A followed between Hakhnazaryan – in this case, calling in all the way from Irkutsk! – and executive director Catherine Cochran. An enjoyable capstone to a memorable recital.

Narek Hakhnazaryan

THE  TIMES

November 18, 2019

**BBC Scotland Symphony
Orchestra/Volkov, City Halls, Glasgow**

By Simon Thompson

★★★★☆

Richard Strauss's tone poems are miracles of musical narrative and orchestral colour. In Don Quixote he re-tells the tale of Cervantes's distracted knight using an ingenious set of variations and a dazzling spectrum of orchestral colour, with a virtuoso solo cello for the part of the Don. It's one of Strauss's most humane works but it's also one of his least performed, perhaps because the cello's role puts it in an uncomfortable halfway house between a purely orchestral work and a concerto.

All the more reason to rush to a performance when there is one, then, especially when it's played with such warmth and individuality as in this concert. The cellist Narek Hakhnazaryan played the Don's part with bluster and élan when needed but, admirably, he was willing to disappear into the orchestral texture when required. His beautifully understated solo in the vigil music was matched with dynamic flourishes in the battle scenes, and he was partnered by a bumbling squire from Scott Dickinson, the principal viola

who kept Sancho Panza's music on just the right line between comedy and poetry. The BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra matched every episode expertly and Ilan Volkov, the conductor, brought each scene to life while maintaining some symphonic unity, culminating in a meltingly sweet death scene.

Volkov's typically inventive style of programming gave us two other rare treats. Prokofiev's Chout was an early ballet score which, while undeniably accomplished, is just a little nasty as it tells the archetypal Russian folk tale of the wily buffoon who outwits his enemies. The orchestra played it with a sense of anarchic urgency, with Volkov giving it weight.

Myriam Marbe's Eine Kleine Sonnenmusik, on the other hand, pays tribute to Mozart with chirruping of melody that grow out of a dark bed of strings. It's jagged in places but, with its surround use of spatial effects, this performance made it fresh and exciting.



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Narek Hakhnazaryan

the Strad

December 14, 2020

Sentimental Work: Narek Hakhnazaryan

Tchaikovsky's Variations on a Rococo Theme has been with me almost since I started learning the cello. I was around six or seven when my father came home with a videotape of Yo-Yo Ma playing the piece with the Leningrad Philharmonic under Yuri Temirkanov. It was the first time I'd ever watched a performance like that – it was a special gala concert for the 150th anniversary of Tchaikovsky's birth, with Itzhak Perlman and Jessye Norman also in attendance – but I'd never seen anything like Ma's playing before. Even though I was so young, I could sense his freedom of expression, creativity and the way he responded to Temirkanov; it was shocking and impressive in equal measure and I knew then that playing the cello in this expressive way was how I wanted to spend the rest of my life.

I like to think that my own interpretation is fairly free and imaginative, too. As with all themes and variations, it's a diverse piece and allows for a lot of creativity from the player. It's also quite divisive, in that cellists either tend to see it as a predominantly Russian work, while others view it as 'rococo', in its elegance and joyfulness. The way I see it, Tchaikovsky's achievement was unique in that he managed to combine his mastery of the rococo style with a distinctly Russian soul. The second and fourth variations I see as quintessentially rococo, while the third and sixth could be nothing if not Russian!

There are so many different interpretations of this piece, I think it's essential to go back to the score and see exactly what the composer wanted, the words he used and the tempo markings. This has to be at the core of any performance, and only after you've absorbed it can you bring in your own ideas. It's a hard thing to do, given the popularity of the Rococo Variations; it would be almost impossible to avoid all the available performances on YouTube, but with any new piece I always try to find my own interpretation before listening to someone else, if I feel I need to.

When I was preparing for the final round of the 2011 International Tchaikovsky Competition, I remember thinking about this dilemma. I had two choices: either give a very traditional 'by the book' performance, which the jury members might be expecting and would probably mark more generously; or play the way I wanted to, which would make me feel more comfortable on stage. It was a very difficult decision for me to make: obviously I wanted to give myself the best fighting chance of winning, but in the end I stayed true to my own interpretation and reasoned that the jury might like to hear something new.

I can still remember shaking backstage before my time came to go on – but not through fear. That morning I had come down with a terrible fever, and my temperature was almost 40C. Right up until I had to go on stage, I didn't know if I could make it through the 20-minute piece. But when I sat down and started playing, it was as if the fever just floated away. I felt perfectly healthy and played just the way I wanted to. When I came offstage, the fever returned but was much less severe than when I went on. This is how I know that music really does have the power to heal; and nowadays, when I feel as if I'm coming down with something, rather than go and lie down, I'll pick up the cello and start playing. It always improves me, mentally and physically. And, as it turned out, the jury were none the wiser and awarded me first prize, proving I was right to play the way I wanted.



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Narek Hakhnazaryan

The New York Times

February 24, 2022

5 Classical Music Albums You Can Listen to Right Now

Henze: 'Nachtstücke und Arien'

ORF Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra; Marin Alsop, conductor (Naxos)

The conductor Marin Alsop has just ended her tenure as the music director of the Baltimore Symphony, the first woman in that position at one of the largest American ensembles. But she's hardly through innovating, as in this powerful take on works by Hans Werner Henze.

Henze, commonly programmed in Europe, is not often played in the United States, where his reputation is unsteady; he also paid for his wide aesthetic range. "Nachtstücke und Arien," in which tonal melody coexists with dense abandon, scandalized radicals like Pierre Boulez when it premiered in 1957.

With her Vienna orchestra joined by the soprano Juliane Banse, Alsop has the measure of its mournful beauty; in the first movement, early melodies for the winds have a relaxed, lounging quality, often set against nervier string writing. But this reading is still plenty severe in the movement's moments of massed-pitch frenzy. All of the Henze pieces on this set — which also includes "Los Caprichos" and, with the cellist Narek Hakhnazaryan, "Englische Liebeslieder" — have been well recorded in recent years on the Wergo label. But some of those crisp takes can sound as though they're still trying to redeem Henze for Boulez's starker ears. As Alsop makes clear, that's not the only way to hear him. SETH COLTER WALLS



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March 9, 2022

Henze: Nachtstücke und Arien; Los Caprichos; Englische Liebeslieder - Narek Hakhnazaryan; Juliane Banse; Radio-Symphonieorchester Wien; Marin Alsop

By Pamela Margles

**HENZE**
Nachtstücke
und Arien
Los Caprichos
Englische Liebeslieder
Juliane Banse,
Soprano
Narek Hakhnazaryan,
Cello
ORF Vienna Radio
Symphony Orchestra
Marin Alsop



Right from the start of Hans Werner Henze's long and productive career, performers and audiences have connected viscerally with his music – some of the most lyrical, complex, passionate, committed, literate, uncompromising, provocative, confrontational and powerful of its time. Today, ten years after his death, it speaks to us just as directly as ever.

The works on this recording were never among Henze's best-known pieces, compelling though all three are. The one I find most moving is *Englische Liebeslieder*. This collection of love songs is based on poems by Shakespeare, the Earl of Rochester,

Joyce and Graves. But the texts are never actually heard. Instead, they are interpreted by a solo cello. With cellist Narek Hakhnazaryan's open-hearted lyricism, and the responsiveness of the ORF Vienna Radio Symphony under chief conductor Marin Alsop, the effect is uncannily intimate – and utterly ravishing.

In *Nachtstücke und Arien*, the arias are sung, to exquisite poems by Ingeborg Bachmann. But here the three dreamy instrumental movements work better than the two wistful arias. Soprano Juliane Banse captures the essential theatricality of Henze's style. But her shrillness and pronounced vibrato dampen the mystery and magic for me.

Los Caprichos transports us to the world of foolishness and folly depicted in Goya's series of 80 etchings of the same name. Under Alsop's insightful direction the orchestra captures Henze's brilliant characterizations, shapely phrases and delightfully clear textures, making this a disc well worth seeking out.



Narek Hakhnazaryan

The West Australian

July 8, 2019

WASO and Narek Hakhnazaryan play Shostakovich and Tchaikovsky

By David Cusworth



A moment of calm between two Russian firestorms stilled the hall when Narek Hakhnazaryan began to sing; a lone voice over multiphonic cello by turns a lament, a call to endless wilderness, a dance first slow then frantic, and back to lament.

Hakhnazaryan has used Giovanni Sollima's *Lamentatio* as a cry of defiance for his Armenian homeland; here, as an encore, it was balm to a restless soul.

Before, Shostakovich's Cello Concerto No.1 put the soloist on trial; a lone voice beset by orchestral inquisition; a fiendishly difficult test for cello, yet handled with a sure, ever-tuneful touch.

Estonian conductor Hendrik Vestmann might have been the benign judge; clearly directing each moving part with deft tonal and dynamic control.

A simple, signature theme came through as a plea, sometimes surrounded by full strings, yet supported by David Evans' ethereal horn in dialogue; part-advocate, part *amicus curiae*.

Other voices among the pared-back woodwinds also engaged, but the central pairing ran through.

All were a perfect foil to a more mellifluous cello in the second, *Moderato* movement; solo lilting and haunting, swan-like in surface composure, ever-striving beneath.

Sight unseen, this could have been a Romantic violin rather than 20th century cello tune, especially among high harmonics, weaving around celesta and clarinet.

Pin-drops in the cadenza set a meditative mood, rising and falling in intensity before summoning the



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ensemble for the Allegro con moto finale; intricate and energetic to the last rousing cadence.

A lengthy overture in Esa-Pekka Salonen's Nyx had set the scene; a massively orchestrated piece of mood swings and mythic imagining that tested the cohesion of band and conductor.

Both passed, fit to face the concerto and the main course; Tchaikovsky's Symphony No.5.

Here was full-on Romantic expression, Allan Meyer's clarinet weaving its fatalistic magic, perfectly synchronised with strings; a deft transit from Andante to Allegro con anima unleashing brassy fire and brimstone.

From there, music making shucked off its solid state to ebb and flow like water: wistful cloud to scurrying stream to ocean's swell and roar.

Another ethereal horn for the gorgeous Andante cantabile — newcomer Jose Rozer — drew woodwind and string complements; dynamic and tonal control operatic in its impact.

The folkloric third movement lightened the mood before plunging back to Tchaikovsky's fatalistic first theme.

Strings surged in counterpoint with plangent brass, fading to narrative interludes and back; Vestmann a wizard with a cauldron of sound.

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

April 21, 2018

Tchaikovsky shines with Hannu Lintu and the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra

By Sarah Bryan Miller

The big selling point for this weekend's concerts by guest conductor Hannu Lintu and the St. Louis Symphony Chorus and Orchestra was the inclusion of the original version of Modest Mussorgsky's "Night on Bald Mountain." The other big draw was Sergei Rachmaninoff's "The Bells."

At Powell Symphony Hall on Friday night, though, the best part of the program turned out to be a pair of works by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, featuring a terrific young soloist.

That was Armenian cellist Narek Hakhnazaryan, in his memorable SLSO debut. Hakhnazaryan took on Tchaikovsky's brief, lyrical Nocturne in D minor for Cello and Orchestra and then "Variations on a Rococo Theme," in a revelatory performance that combined an exquisitely rich singing tone with lyrical grace and a spectacular technical prowess that made even the most elaborate of the variations seem effortless.

Rewarded with a well-deserved ovation, Hakhnazaryan performed a striking encore, Sicilian composer Giovanni Sollima's "Lamentatio," for solo cello. "Lamentatio," which sounds folk-influenced, calls on the soloist to sing as well as play in a spectacularly virtuosic fashion. Keep an eye on this one.

It was instructive to hear Mussorgsky's original 1867 version of "Mountain," although it sounded more like a first draft than a finished product; indeed, Mussorgsky played with the piece for years, even incorporating it into his opera "Sorochinskaya yarmarka (Sorochinsky Fair)," where it proved an awkward fit. (His friend and colleague

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov doesn't get enough credit for the work he did to save Mussorgsky's scores.)

This first draft was less tuneful and less exciting than the final one overall, with a murky orchestration that obscures many of Mussorgsky's better ideas. Lintu and the orchestra made the best possible case for this version of the piece, which received its first SLSO performances with these concerts, but it's mostly interesting for its illustration of one composer's evolving vision.

"The Bells" is Rachmaninoff's 1913 setting of Edgar Allan Poe's poem of the same name, freely (and, when translated back, almost unrecognizably) rendered by the Russian poet Konstantin Balmont. Rachmaninoff took further liberties with the words; the final product strays far from the original.

Written for soprano, tenor and baritone soloists, with a large chorus and orchestra, "Bells" rings the changes of human life, from "The Silver Sleigh Bells" to "The Mellow Wedding Bells" through "The Loud Alarm Bells" to "The Mournful Iron Bells." The moods vary accordingly, from the cheery and hopeful to terror and then grief. And, of course, the "Dies irae" makes an appearance in the orchestrally rich score.

Tenor Zach Borichevsky brought full-throated singing to the first movement; soprano Pelageya Kurrenaya has a beautiful, golden-hued instrument, while bass-baritone Nathan Berg handled the gloom of the final movement well. Amy Kaiser's chorus was in excellent voice and sounded idiomatically Russian throughout.



Narek Hakhnazaryan

The Washington Post

February 26, 2018

A childhood dream to perform 'Meditation'

By Grace Jean

Sometimes a little violin envy can go a long way, even for an award-winning cellist such as Narek Hakhnazaryan, whose admiration for the smaller string instrument elicited his best playing during a recital Sunday afternoon at the National Gallery of Art. Before launching into his own arrangement of the "Meditation," originally written for violin, from Jules Massenet's opera "Thaïs," Hakhnazaryan told the overflowing audience that performing it had once been a childhood dream. Hakhnazaryan's rendition soared tenderly as he played with conviction, demonstrating his mastery of the lyrical line.

Hakhnazaryan is a compelling artist who performs with an ease that belies his technical prowess. The immediacy of his sweet, soulful playing, coupled with the tonal purity of his 1707 Joseph Guarneri cello, made for gorgeous phrases in Schumann's Adagio and Allegro, Op. 70. With pianist Noreen Cassidy-Polera, Hakhnazaryan tamed the West Garden Court's notoriously reverberant

acoustics in Brahms's Cello Sonata No. 2 in F Major, Op. 99. As the piano created an intricate tableau, the cellist carved out his melodic lines in meticulous detail. Applying a quick vibrato in the second movement, Hakhnazaryan achieved an anguished edge and then dazzled with fastidious finger work in the third movement.

Exploring timbres in Sulhan Fyodorovich Tsintsadze's "Five Pieces on Folk Themes for Cello and Piano," Hakhnazaryan sounded like a plucky guitar in "Tchonguri" and evoked rustic Georgian instruments in "Sachidao" and "Dance Tunes." But it was in "Villain's Song on a Carriage," and "Nana," with its haunting melodies and harmonies, where he excelled.

Isaac Albéniz's rhythmic "Asturias" and Rodion Konstantinovich Shchedrin's "Imitating Albéniz" inspired bravado bowing, while a robust encore of Paganini's "Variation on One String" made a fine chaser for Hakhnazaryan's celebratory take of Gaspar Cassadó's "Requiebros."



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October 27, 2017

BSO shines with Strauss; cellist makes notable debut

By Tim Smith

Last weekend, the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra memorably performed sumptuous music of Richard Strauss with guest conductor Jun Markl. It's doing so again this weekend with music director Marin Alsop.

There's another connective thread between the two programs — impressive cello playing.

It came last weekend from the BSO's principal cellist Dariusz Skoraczewski, tackling the hefty solo part in Strauss' practically cinematic masterwork "Don Quixote." This time, it's from guest artist Narek Hakhnazaryan, making his BSO debut in a gem by Tchaikovsky, "Variations on a Rococo Theme."

The orchestra began Friday night at Meyerhoff Symphony Hall sounding less polished than the week before. Still, Mendelssohn's Overture to "A Midsummer Night's Dream" flowed by pleasantly.

Things really got going after that with the Tchaikovsky piece. Alsop ensured a tight mesh between the ensemble and Hakhnazaryan, drawing sensitive playing to complement the soloist's refined artistry.

The 29-year-old, Armenian-born Hakhnazaryan is the real deal.

He demonstrated the prowess you'd expect from an International Tchaikovsky Competition gold medalist (that was in 2011). His articulation was clear even in the score's wildest dashing and darting. And, a brief slip aside, he

maintained tonal purity in the many soft, high notes that give so much character to the work.

But the more important distinction was the cellist's superb sense of style. He caught the sweetness in what is basically Tchaikovsky's homage to the spirit of Mozart, but also the melancholy strain woven into the music. Those darkly poetic moments were phrased exquisitely.

Responding to a demonstrative reception, Hakhnazaryan offered a mesmerizing encore that has become a specialty of his — "Lamentatio," a 1998 work by Italian cellist and composer Giovanni Sollima.

It calls on the performer to vocalize wordlessly over the cello's solemn drone several times; contrasting episodes, passionate and almost percussive, add to the tension. Hakhnazaryan made every note, sung and played, communicate on a deep, personal level.

On the second half of the program, Alsop and the BSO clicked beautifully.

Debussy's "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun" worked its evocative magic. Alsop's spacious sculpting allowed the musicians to luxuriate in the sonic haze. Emily Skala delivered the flute solo with a subtle radiance; her colleagues in the woodwind section likewise excelled. The strings sounded downright sensual.

The Strauss feast came in the form of the Suite from "Der Rosenkavalier," the

composer's 1911 opera about love — young and old, foolish and wise. Strauss didn't prepare this suite; an uncredited colleague prepared it. All the wonderful highlights from the opera are included, but the arrangement's seams show. And, most unfortunately, it closes with a waltz from the score and a tacky coda, rather than the opera's original and perfect orchestral ending.

That said, Alsop conducted masterfully, bringing out the lush lyricism with great flair (though I sure would have loved a slower tempo for the beyond-sublime Trio) and giving the waltzes lots of nuance. The BSO seemed to have a blast. Pristine technique was matched by such electric phrasing that I'd welcome more Strauss every week.

October 29, 2019

Striking sensitivity and intelligence in Brahms and Shostakovich from Z.E.N. Trio in Vancouver

By Geoffrey Newman

Given the number of young piano trios and string quartets that spring up these days, it was natural to have some trepidation about the Z.E.N. Trio, who came together as BBC New Generation artists in 2015 and recorded their first CD for Deutsche Grammophon within only a year. Vancouver had already seen these exceptional artists on their own and recognized their quality – but might it not take a little more time for the group to achieve full synergy? Yet the early praise for this ensemble is completely warranted: they play gorgeously, really think with one mind and provide readings of striking thoughtfulness and sensitivity. Pianist Zhang Zuo is always bringing home structural contrasts and changes in mood through adventurous accents and varied dynamics. Violinist Esther Yoo and cellist Narek Hakhnazaryan listen to each other intently, and the former's resilience of line superbly plays off the latter's plasticity and tenderness.

These performances of Schubert, Brahms and Shostakovich were special, demonstrating a natural absorption of the composers' emotional worlds and revealing obvious thought in achieving balance and continuity of line in each work. Since it is always a source of intrigue, the trio's name is based on the initials of the member's first names and, to add even more colour, Zhang Zuo plays the piano barefoot.

Schubert's brief *Notturmo* can be difficult to bring off: if played with full romantic weight, its big tune may wear out its welcome, and the work can seem rather sentimental and repetitious. The

solution here was perfect. The Z.E.N. Trio started very softly – as if in a dream – and then proceeded with the true improvisatory spirit of a Schubert 'fantasy'. There were moments of energy and thrust, but the important thing was that the recurring dominant theme was taken quickly and lightly, never belaboured, so there was no overbearing feeling. Dynamic control was distinguished throughout, and the sense of longing in the piece was placed in a personal and intimate context. At points, Zhang Zuo wove almost gossamer textures.

The Brahms Trio No.1 was equally satisfying. It moved forward with a lovely autumnal glow, both violin and cello fully invested in the composer's melancholy and long lyrical lines, while the piano's slightly angular phrasing added an interesting complexity. The feeling was quintessentially Brahmsian, naturally expressive and always opening out a broad interpretative space for the artists to develop their dialogue. I enjoyed the patience in this exposition and the refined beauty and feeling which flowed from each voice. Cellist Narek Hakhnazaryan's response to the lyricism was very special, but the tonal integration between him and Yoo was equally noteworthy. Zuo was adventurous in the way she selectively added staccato emphasis and rubato to her phrases and spontaneous weight to the climaxes. At speeds slightly below the marked *allegro*, and with the exposition repeat included, the opening movement turned out to be a long journey indeed. Except for a few



moments towards the end where the ensemble seemed slightly uncoordinated and Zuo's piano got a little splashy, and a few other instances of intonational insecurity, it was a concentrated and rewarding experience. The transitions always seemed naturally motivated, and there was balance and cohesion throughout.

The *Scherzo* was superbly articulated though it might have been slightly too robust and angular for some tastes (it could have been more will-o'-wisp), but the radiant *Adagio* brought all the feeling back. Yoo and Hakhnazaryan entered the shadows with complete involvement, often choosing deliberate tempos to establish a consuming stillness. The *Finale* completed the story admirably, again with fine detailing and a keen rhythmic sense, adding just the right amount of passion at the end.

I liked the performance of Shostakovich's Second Piano Trio most of all. Its narrative cohesion was really stunning, especially from the elemental piano chords of the passacaglia to their quiet return at the end. This work receives a lot of demonstrative performances that aim to unearth all the visceral dimensions of the composer's burning pain and mental torment under Soviet rule. The Tetzlaff Trio gave us one which was pretty all-out just last year. But that is not the way of the Z.E.N.; they seem to explore a more inward consternation and, perhaps, the encroaching numbness that Shostakovich felt. It's not to say they play down the manic, out-of-control

moments; they simply make the work speak more through its inner voice and the careful balancing of structural elements than through outward cinematics.

The technically-demanding opening movement, with all the unearthly high notes for the cello, was beautifully done, withdrawn in fabric but always searching in its paleness. The dance movement had great unity and energy, even if the Z.E.N. did not project the sliding leaps of the strings with as much drama as some groups. It was after the imposing piano chords, where the bizarre little march theme can be hammered home so insistently, that the differences became clear: Zuo hit hard with the first statement, then immediately backed off. It was the sheer balance and natural sense of motion that the group achieved throughout the whirling extremes of this klezmer fantasy – full of feeling but avoiding histrionics – that made the music's structural ingenuity and emotional reach stand out so clearly. There was genuine catharsis when the piano declamation returned in softer form, perfectly ending the story.

I can think of few finer young piano trios. The Z.E.N. has remarkable sensitivity and intelligence for an ensemble of this age, and the artists collaborate so knowingly while maintaining their own personal voices. Given the demands on each member as an international soloist, let's hope the group keeps together.

October 21, 2019

The Z.E.N. Trio Makes an Auspicious Debut at Herbst

By Catriona Barr



The Z.E.N. Trio made their San Francisco debut on Oct. 18 at the Herbst Theatre. Performing classic works by Schubert, Brahms, and Shostakovich, the group displayed a unique blend of virtuosity and unity.

The group combines the talents of three superb young performers to form a cohesive whole. Their name, Z.E.N., is an acronym for their first initials but also symbolizes their selfless approach towards chamber musicmaking. Pianist Zhang (Zee Zee) Zhou, violinist Esther Yoo, and cellist Narek Hakhnazaryan met as BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artists in 2015 and have cultivated impressive careers both as soloists and as a trio.

The strength of the performers was unmistakable in lyrical, sustained passages. Throughout each piece, these

sections shone with intensity and emotion. The evening began beautifully with Schubert's Notturmo in E-flat Major, Op. 148, D. 897. This relatively short piece opens with the violin and cello playing in thirds over rolled piano chords, interspersed with the piano taking the melody over pizzicato accompaniment. Yoo and Hakhnazaryan achieved a wonderful tonal blend in their melodic sections, clearly communicating the appassionato marking and the lyricism of the material. Schubert developed his opening theme endlessly, weaving it through variations and arrangements that continuously shift its meaning. The piece came to a sighing conclusion with a repeat of the strings' initial song, showing the beauty and quiet ease of simplicity.

This was highlighted again during the Brahms Piano Trio in B Major, Opus 8. The Brahms suffered from issues of intonation and a lack of forward motion, although it certainly contained some lovely moments. The Adagio movement was intimate and vulnerable and created the biggest reward for the trio. Their sensitivity shone in this sustained and slow section, as it had in the Schubert. The trio clearly knows their strengths, as their encore was a luxurious arrangement of Rachmaninoff's *Vocalise*, with plenty of emotional excess and romantic yearning as required by the piece.

The other movements, although strengthened by Brahms's exceptional command of melody, felt somewhat lost. Persistent intonation issues between the strings, especially in unison melodies, tainted the Allegro con brio and Scherzo, which also showed a notable lack of energy. The final movement returned vitality to the work, moving from anxious to determined and striding confidently toward its close. Zhang Zuo's powerful, driving piano arpeggios suitably pointed the audience toward what was to come in the Shostakovich. Strikingly different from the previous works, Shostakovich's Piano Trio No. 2 in E Minor, Opus 67 brought a welcome change of pace. Although his works may not sound as lyrical or pleasant as

Brahms's, he is certainly never boring. The trio featured some very characteristic gestures from the composer in its ominous low lines, endless rhythmic ostinatos, and insistent strings reiterating the melody. The fascinating Andante featured Hakhnazaryan playing the entrancing melody entirely in harmonics, with the violin supporting below. The piano then took over, playing at opposite ends of the keyboard, with the strings dictating a bouncing ostinato. These combinations created an eerie effect, reminding one of an otherworldly, slowly winding river.

Shostakovich, of course, developed this material rapidly, creating vastly different textures: The Allegro con brio contained qualities similar to Saint-Saëns's *Danse macabre*, but was worlds away from Zuo's commanding piano dictating the beginning of the passacaglia in the Largo. Once again, Hakhnazaryan shone with a heart-wrenching solo in this movement that created an emotional apex. The musicians were clearly giving it their all, and their emphatic playing created many remarkable moments throughout the evening.

Zuo, Yoo, and Hakhnazaryan appeared especially sensitive to the passion and complexity of their program and make an incredible team.

Narek Hakhnazaryan



October 3, 2017

Z.E.N. Trio open Classical Concert Series from Cambridge Corn Exchange

By Jude Clarke

The Z.E.N. Trio is made up of pianist Zhang Zuo, Esther Yoo on violin and Narek Hakhnazaryan on cello: three young, gifted musicians who all have thriving careers as soloists and were all BBC New Generation artists. They have just recorded and released their debut album, and tonight's performance was the opening night of what is to be a whistle-stop world tour, taking in Liverpool, China and Hong Kong. They are all – judging by the pre-performance talk hosted by series sponsors Miller's Music – witty and inspiring artists, and great friends.

And that friendship, and the seemingly instinctive understanding of each other's playing, has clearly benefited their work as a trio. With a musical chemistry that was, at times, almost more like alchemy or extra-sensory perception, each of the three is a bold, imaginative and inspiring performer: never eclipsing their colleagues but each frequently, at points throughout the programme, dazzling in their own right.

They opened with Haydn's Piano Trio No 10 in E flat major, Hoboken XV:10, with Zhang Zuo's elegant piano trills immediately stamping her authority on the piece, while the strings seamlessly harmonised. As each piece progressed, the emotions of the music being played

were reflected in each player's facial expressions, from the melodic yearning moments in Brahms' stunning Piano Trio No 1 in B major, Op 8 through to the intensity and power of its later stages, even the silences between notes heavy and charged with meaning.

After the interval we were treated to Dvořák's Piano Trio Op 90 'Dumky Trio', perhaps the evening's highlight. This piece really saw Esther Yoo – this season's Classical Concert Series Artist in Resident – come to the fore, her quick, exuberant, playful and deft performance capturing and expressing the full range of feelings and moods that this wonderful piece demands.

The trio, whose name comes from the combination of each of their first names' initials, had joked before the performance that it was somewhat ironic, as their playing was not at all the kind of laid-back style that the word "Zen" might normally suggest. After the concert it was easier to see what they mean. Passionate, intense, gifted, as they encored with a fast and furious take on Brahms' Hungarian Dance No 6, this engaged and inspirational trio of young musicians opened what promises to be another superb season at the Corn Exchange in a manner that might prove hard to follow.

November 2, 2017

Astounding young cellist to make return visit to Wharton

By Ken Glickman

In 2013 the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra under Neemi Jarvi appeared at Wharton Center and they brought along an astounding young cellist. A 25-year-old Narek Hakhnazaryan performed the Dvorak Cello Concerto and thrilled the Lansing audience with his passion and explosive technique.

Now, we are fortunate enough to see and hear Hakhnazaryan again, this time performing the Schumann Cello Concerto with the Moscow State Symphony Orchestra with their highly regarded conductor, Pavel Kogan.

The cellist last appeared in East Lansing only two years after he won the Cello First Prize and Gold Medal at the International Tchaikovsky Competition – maybe the most prestigious competition in the world.

Describing the contest that changed his life, Hakhnazaryan said, “We started with about 150 cellists, then it was paired down 50, and the final round was six. It took about 15 days. Was I nervous? I lost a lot of weight in that two weeks.”

Although Hakhnazaryan had been playing since the age of 6 in his native Armenia, his career did not really accelerate for him until after the Tchaikovsky win.

“After the Tchaikovsky, I signed management agreements with firms in Europe, the US and Asia. It was a big boost.”

In 2011 he moved to Boston to receive the Artist Certificate at the New England

Conservatory. Currently he lives in Vienna. “I love the lifestyle of Vienna, and now I am learning my fourth language, German.”

Both of his parents are musicians and they slowly became aware that their son had a special talent. When he reached the age of 11, his piano professor mother quit her job so her brilliant son could study at the legendary Moscow conservatory, about 1,000 miles away. A few years later, after he began playing concerts, the young cellist was able to support his family and his father moved from Armenia to join his wife and son.

“I learned that there are three types of cello styles. The St. Petersburg style is more European. It’s elegant and less expressive.

“The Moscow style is more passionate and enthusiastic.

“And now I have learned that there is an American style – more freedom and imagination – not tied to the Russian styles. I hope that I’m a mix of all three”

Over the past few years Hakhnazaryan has played with orchestras all over the world and has also made time for chamber music. “Chamber music feeds me musically and emotionally. It’s important to work closely with very talented peers.”

While he has performed in New Zealand, Australia, Hong Kong, China, Japan and Europe, his career is still building and he feels that this US tour is very important. He debuted last week with the Baltimore Symphony with a glowing review in the Baltimore Sun



("Hakhnazaryan's the real deal."). This year he'll play about 70-75 concerts per year.

His East Lansing performance will be the first of four concerts on tour with the

Moscow musicians. "We will be rehearsing together at Wharton Center for the very first time. Our concert will be that night."



March 12, 2017

Soul Music: Narek Hakhnazaryan “unwraps” Russian and Armenian cello repertoire at King's Place

By Mark Pullinger

Many ascribe the cello's popularity to it sounding the closest instrument to the human voice, encompassing the range from *basso profundo* to soaring soprano. It's also an instrument one has to practically embrace in order to play. No wonder people love it. And no wonder King's Place year-long “Cello Unwrapped” series is proving such a success, with inventive programming and starry names to draw audiences. Narek Hakhnazaryan may be a less starry name for now – and a tricky one to pronounce – but on the basis of this recital he is destined to join the cellists' firmament.

His programme with Kazakhstani pianist Oxana Shevchenko was titled “Russian Soul”, though “Armenian Soul” would have been just as apt, with a trio of works in the first half drawn from Hakhnazaryan's homeland. Framing the recital, the Russian part paid tribute to the great cellist Anatoly Brandukov who, as a child, saw Berlioz conducting Beethoven, yet lived to witness the emergence of Shostakovich and Prokofiev in the 1920s. Brandukov studied with Tchaikovsky, who composed his *Pezzo capriccioso* for him, as well as arranging his piano *Nocturne*. Sergei Rachmaninov's Cello Sonata was dedicated to Brandukov, cellist and composer giving the première in December 1901.

Hakhnazaryan seems a quiet, modest young man. From the first bars of Tchaikovsky's *Nocturne*, he immediately struck a calm, composed manner. Eyes closed most of the time and leaning right over his cello, he wasn't anxious to force his sound, relying instead on restraint and a beautiful cantabile line to draw us in. Vibrato teased out a myriad of colour and even in the most *furioso* section of the *Pezzo capriccioso*, his bowing was incredibly deft and light. In the Armenian section, Hakhnazaryan caressed in the familiar Lullaby from Khachaturian's ballet *Gayane*. Unfamiliar fare came via Alexander Arutiunian's *Impromptu*, where vigorous spiccato and steely pizzicatos made up for a slightly scrambled start, and Adam Khudoyan's emotional sonata for solo cello. The latter premiered in 1961 and commemorates, in its mournful second subject, the 1.5 million Armenians killed by Turkish forces between 1915 and 1923. Staying solo, Hakhnazaryan then pulled out his party piece to conclude the first half – Italian composer Giovanni Sollima's *Lamentatio*, where the cellist has to sing as well as play. Intoning in a high baritone, like a cantor, he lulled us in before launching a dazzling display of cello pyrotechnics: skating glissandos and furious bowing, causing loose bow-hairs to fly as if Hakhnazaryan was casting a fishing rod.

Striking in a scarlet dress, Oxana Shevchenko played just as important a role in the recital's success. Crouching low at the keyboard, she drew variegated tone, especially in the Khachaturian, where the chromatic, sinuous introduction adds the Armenian local colour. Shevchenko shaped Rachmaninov's long phrases tenderly in the sonata, creating the atmosphere of wistful melancholy beautifully at the start of the *Andante* third movement, closing it with a trickling cascade. "Cello Unwrapped" title aside, it would have

been wonderful if she'd been given a solo number in the programme.

The Rachmaninov was superbly played, from its musing, questioning opening, through its *Allegro scherzando*, scuttling like a malevolent gnome, to the passionate finale, where Hakhnazaryan drew muscular tone and walnut darkness from his 1707 Guarneri. The encore was easy to predict, but perfect – Rachmaninov's *Vocalise* drawing further comparisons to the human voice. And why not? This young Armenian makes the cello sing.

Narek Hakhnazaryan

The★Star
THE KANSAS CITY STAR

February 12, 2017

Exuberant Jun Märkl leads KC Symphony in dazzling program

By Ruth Crafer



Color, contrast and buoyant energy marked Jun Märkl's return to the Kansas City Symphony as guest conductor. He and cellist Narek Hakhnazaryan dazzled the audience at the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts on Saturday with an expansive, multifaceted program of nationalistic flavor.

Märkl excels in German and French repertoire, and the program of Anton Webern, Claude Debussy, Camille Saint-Saëns and Felix Mendelssohn was a mix

of 20th century invention and 19th century Romanticism.

Music is used both deliberately and subtly to influence an audience's emotional state, often evoking nationalistic styles defined through distinctive timbres, modes and rhythms to provoke or to cheer. In this concert, both Debussy and Mendelssohn quoted the Lutheran chorale "Ein Feste Burg" ("A Mighty Fortress Is Our God") but with the intent to convey very different connotations to their contemporary audiences.

Märkl was eager, nearly leaping onto the podium to lead Webern's Passacaglia Op. 1. The subtleties of the pizzicato opening statement were lost in the shuffling of latecomers, unfortunately, though the spare grounding of the piece set up a surge of prismatic timbres from the winds and muted brass. The primary motif was thrown round somewhat chaotically between principal voices, underscored by tremolo and colliding sforzandi.

Debussy's "En blanc et noir," originally written for two pianos, was orchestrated by Robin Holloway. His treatment drew out the distinct attitudes of the three movements, as well as echoing the tone colors of Debussy's impressionist palette: shimmering, shifting, exotic. Written during World War I, this was one of his last works and indicates a stoic rage against Germany's infringement on France.



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The dancing cascades of the first movement opened with ringing exuberance. The solemn start of the second movement, Lent et somber (dedicated to Lt. Jacques Charlot, who died in action), was harshly interrupted, continuing with lonesome solo voices. The horns perpetrated a threatening statement from “Ein Feste Burg” against a clamorous fabric of martial snippets. Märkl pushed the ensemble all the way through the vivacious Scherzando for a rousing performance.

Hakhnazaryan was impassioned in the Gallic lyricism of Saint-Saëns’ Cello Concerto No.1, and he seemed to smile slightly during the rapid virtuosic moments. His tone was rich, his control immaculate and his performance stunning. Märkl kept the reduced orchestra in check, leaning to indicate attention, often animated but never with affected gesture.

Hakhnazaryan’s encore, on Giovanni

Sollima’s “Lamentatio,” was an absolutely captivating five minutes, with wordless singing over modal droning chords that led into a feverish display of technique as punk as anything, dissolving into harmonic smears.

Mendelssohn’s compelling Symphony No. 5 savored the expressive tendencies of the era. A sense of majesty and vast, yet subtle, gradations in dynamics marked this performance, as the strings achieved an incredibly full and lovely quiet. At turns terrifying, lighthearted or pensive, it was the finale that triumphed, from the flute’s introduction of the chorale theme and the imaginative iterations, through to the ensemble’s massive statement.

Enthusiastic applause and whistling met the concert’s conclusion, the audience and orchestra expressing appreciation for Märkl’s leadership. Saturday was, incidentally, his birthday. Alles Gute zum Geburtstag, Maestro.

Narek Hakhnazaryan

The Salt Lake Tribune

February 3, 2017

Young cellist rocks Abravanel

By Catherine Reese Newton

Each season, the Utah Symphony honors one young soloist or conductor with the Evelyn Rosenblatt Young Artist Award, underwritten by a fund honoring the late Utah arts philanthropist. It might be easy to miss the discreet mention in the concert program, but this award has turned up some outstanding musicians in the early stages of their careers. Twentysomething Armenian cellist Narek Hakhnazaryan is the latest of these, bowling over the Abravanel Hall crowd on Friday with his thrilling performance of Shostakovich's Cello Concerto No. 1.

The piece is one of the most athletically demanding concertos in the repertoire, and Hakhnazaryan tackled it with fearsome technique. He drew impressive volume from his 1707 Guarnerius, formerly owned by cello titan Janos Starker, yet the quietest passages were no less intense. A gripping duel with Utah Symphony hornist Edmund Rollett and an incisive dialogue with clarinetist Erin Svoboda added interest. Hakhnazaryan put on a textbook demonstration of left-hand pizzicato and other technical feats in the spellbinding cadenza. To the amazement of the crowd, the cellist capped this marathon with the equally dazzling "Lamentatio" by Giovanni Sollima, spiced up with vocalizations and percussive techniques.

Conductor Thierry Fischer bookended the evening with Brahms: "Academic Festival Overture" and Symphony No. 2, whose friendly melodies piled one on top of another in a big, comforting blanket of sound.



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May 22, 2017

NZSO, Pathetique - Tchaikovsky & Dvorak

By John Button

Those who have the two Naxos recordings with the NZSO conducted by the young Singaporean conductor Darrell Ang would have known what to expect from this concert.

This young prize-winner (Besancon International) proved in Meyerbeer and the Grammy-nominated disc of music by Zhou Long and Chen Yi that he was a very precise, direct, conductor who could draw a very big sound from his orchestra. And that is exactly what we got in this concert.

In the fabled Dvorak *Cello Concerto*, he supported the young Armenian cellist Narek Hakhnazaryan with a crisp, powerful approach. The brass were very direct, yet all of Dvorak's delicious woodwind writing was brought to the fore. And the young cellist was superb; always completely unruffled and possessed of a poetic instinct that made

the slow movement especially memorable.

The emotionally laden Sixth Symphony *Pathetique* by Tchaikovsky was similarly direct. But it was also completely sympathetic and, although other performances may have been more personal, Ang's directness really got to the heart of things. The first movement development section exploded into life with brass again very exciting, and the March caught the faux high spirits to perfection, but it was the dark resignation of the Finale that set the seal on this very fine performance.

Earlier, the concert opened with *Embiosis* by David Grahame Taylor, a young New Zealander studying in San Francisco and after setting quite an impressive mood with dark glissandos, it stopped – after only a brief five minutes or so.



Narek Hakhnazaryan

The New York Times

October 24, 2008

A Prize-Winning Cellist Opens Young Artists Series

By Steve Smith

Narek Hakhnazaryan, an Armenian cellist who turned 20 on Thursday, has already won enough prizes to fill two paragraphs in his professional biography. Among the latest entries is first prize in this year's Young Concert Artists International Auditions. On Tuesday Mr. Hakhnazaryan reaped a major benefit of the award: a Zankel Hall recital opening Young Concert Artists' 48th season.

Mr. Hakhnazaryan, tall and wiry, projected intensity from the moment he took the stage. But rather than opening with fireworks, he started with Schumann's genial "Fantasiestücke." Mr. Hakhnazaryan's tone was lean but warm and supple, animating Schumann's lyrical phrases with grace. Noreen Polera, a pianist, was an alert, responsive partner.

Beethoven's Cello Sonata No. 3 (Op. 69) cast Mr. Hakhnazaryan and Ms. Polera as equals in a balancing act pitched between Classical elegance and Romantic expressiveness. They negotiated the sonata's capricious moods and quirky rhythms with compelling unanimity at a slightly subdued overall dynamic that made bold accents leap off the page.

Mr. Hakhnazaryan demonstrated his considerable technical prowess in the unaccompanied Sonata No. 1 by Adam

Khudoyan, an Armenian composer. The work, from 1961, packed folkish melodies, tricky combinations of simultaneous bowing and plucking, a passage in ghostly harmonics and more into a dense continuous span. Abrupt transitions made the piece seem restless and occasionally aimless, but Mr. Hakhnazaryan's commitment was persuasive.

In a commanding account of Shostakovich's Cello Sonata in D minor, the martial rhythms that interrupt the opening movement's melodic outpouring felt especially charged and brittle. Mr. Hakhnazaryan brought a daredevil verve to the intricate Scherzo and opened the stark Largo with an eerie, vibrato-free tone.

A gorgeous rendition of Rachmaninoff's "Vocalise" offered gentle relief, and the program ended with Paganini's flamboyant Variations on One String on a Theme by Rossini, transcribed from the original violin version.

A hearty response from the audience brought two encores: a gorgeous account of the Andante from Rachmaninoff's Cello Sonata and a rollicking romp through "Expromt," by the Armenian composer Alexander Arutiunian. To the very end, Mr. Hakhnazaryan's intense focus and expressive artistry never flagged.



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Narek Hakhnazaryan

San Francisco Chronicle

August 6, 2014

Narek Hakhnazaryan a solo standout

By Joshua Kosman



Chamber music is all about community and collaboration, so you don't necessarily go to a chamber music festival expecting to run across a solo artist of dazzling gifts and originality. But there he was during Tuesday's Music@Menlo concert: Narek Hakhnazaryan, a young Armenian cellist whose performance of Ligeti's Cello Sonata was the evening's thrilling highlight.

Hakhnazaryan, 26, has a respectable resume, including a 2011 win at the Tchaikovsky Competition and solo appearances with a few top-level orchestras. But none of that was enough to prepare a listener for the richness and beauty of his string tone, or the rhythmic and emotional clarity that he brought (playing from memory) to this

nine-minute work from Ligeti's early years.

Written in two movements, the piece is more accessible and emotionally transparent than many of Ligeti's later, more ambitious modernist works, but it retains his trademark qualities of formal clarity and subversive wit. The first movement is a rhapsodic treatment of a melody rooted in Hungarian folk strains, with interlocking dialogue reminiscent of Bach; the second is a fiery burst of nonstop energy.

Hakhnazaryan's performance was nothing short of magnificent. He shaped the first movement in particular with exquisite tenderness, bringing out both the delicacy of the melody and the close-knit structure of the counterpoint, and dispatched the second movement



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precisely but with an exhilarating sense of rhythmic freedom. He's an artist to watch out for.

The rest of the program at the Center for Performing Arts at Menlo-Atherton, devoted to a range of Hungarian composers, stood in Hakhnazaryan's shadow but still included plenty of fine music making. Erno Dohnányi's Piano Quintet No. 1, written in 1895 in almost slavish imitation of Brahms, made a splendid finale, in a vigorous performance by violinists Alexander Sitkovetsky and Nicolas Dautricourt,

violinist Paul Neubauer, cellist David Finckel and pianist Wu Han.

A more original creation, Kodály's 1920 Serenade for Two Violins and Viola, got an appealing and focused rendition by Sitkovetsky, Neubauer and violinist Benjamin Beilman. Beilman and pianist Gloria Chien began the evening with Liszt's dullish "Grand Duo Concertante," and Sitkovetsky collaborated with violinist Jorja Fleezanis for a wonderfully kaleidoscopic selection of 12 of Bartók's Duos for Two Violins.

Narek Hakhnazaryan

Los Angeles Times

July 10, 2014

Bringuier does Shakespeare; a young cellist impresses

By Richard S. Ginell

In his second appearance with the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Hollywood Bowl this week, Lionel Bringuier showed up Thursday night with a concept weighted on both ends of the evening by Prokofiev's and Tchaikovsky's impressions of Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet."

Bringuier could have made it an all-R&J evening by programming, say, excerpts from Berlioz's "Romeo and Juliet" or even Bernstein's "West Side Story" dances, but that wouldn't have left room for a guest soloist. And this guest soloist was worth making room for.

His name is Narek Hakhnazaryan, a 26-year-old cellist from Armenia who has all the equipment it takes to be a star. Hakhnazaryan may not be the easiest name to pronounce, but neither was that of his mentor, Mstislav Rostropovich, and that didn't stop him.

Just this April in Glendale, Hakhnazaryan made a formidable showing with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra in Saint-Saens's Concerto No. 1 – and if anything he was even more impressive at the Bowl in Tchaikovsky's "Variations on a Rococo Theme."

Over the loudspeakers came a big, fluid, elegant tone quality, always in tune, and the balance between the cello and orchestra was just right. He brought dramatic suspense to the line, tugging on it but never stretching it too far. And, written all over his face and projected on the Bowl's giant video monitors, he conveyed humor and the

sheer joy of being in command of his instrument.

As in Glendale, Hakhnazaryan's Armenian fans turned up in droves to cheer – and as he did on that occasion, the cellist dedicated a solo encore to this year's 100th anniversary of the 1915 Armenian genocide.

This one was Italian composer-celist Giovanni Sollima's "Lamentatio," in which droning passages accompanied by Hakhnazaryan's vocalise gave way to furious perpetual-motion whirlwinds, phenomenally and passionately played. Prokofiev arranged three suites from his evening-length "Romeo and Juliet" ballet, but these days conductors often prefer to assemble their own versions of varying lengths.

Bringuier's was a 34-minute survey that began with the jarring, dissonant blasts at the top of "Montagues and Capulets" and concluded with the quiet, haunting strains of Juliet's death at the tail end of the ballet. Bringuier did well here, maintaining a good, insistent rhythm in "Masks," whipping up "Death of Tybalt" with plenty of drive, keeping a firm, unsentimental hand on the big, singing lines elsewhere.

Likewise in Tchaikovsky's "Romeo," Bringuier brought fire and a lyrical bent that moved along without bathos. His command of this orchestra looks even more assured and expressive now than ever, and as the evening unfolded, the Phil's playing grew smoother and more polished without losing any heat.



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Narek Hakhnazaryan

theguardian

August 22, 2016

Ulster Orchestra/Payare – reminds us what a valuable cultural asset this orchestra is

By George Hall



For its visit to this year's Proms, the Ulster Orchestra and its chief conductor, Rafael Payare, brought a new work by the English-born, Belfast-based Piers Hellawell, who turns 60 this year. At 20 minutes long, *Wild Flow* consists of five pieces with faster outer sections framing a central slow movement.

Hellawell suggests that rather than developing organically, the result “offers a zigzag progression of mood and event”; he’s also distrustful of the notion of music being “about” something beyond its musical meaning. So if the piece itself registered as bitty – a sequence of diverse individual episodes without much sense of a larger picture – that was presumably deliberate, though there were certainly moments of striking character, colour and texture along the way, with sudden bursts of manic activity offset by moments of uneasy stasis – though rarely of calm. This premiere performance felt entirely assured. The big work in the second half was Tchaikovsky’s popular Fifth Symphony. Though the quality of playing was high throughout, reminding listeners what a valuable cultural asset to Northern Ireland this orchestra is, the performance could have done with a stronger sense of the music’s immediate and long-term goals.

The concert’s highlights came in the shape of Armenian cellist Narek Hakhnazaryan’s technically impeccable and distinctively personal account of Haydn’s First Cello Concerto, and with his encore – Lamentatio by the contemporary Sicilian composer Giovanni Sollima – in which his singing along to his own playing was just one remarkable feature of an outstanding display of musicianship.



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Thoroughly Good

August 21, 2016

BBC Proms 2016 / 47: Ulster Orchestra plays Haydn's Cello Concerto, Piers Hellawell's Wild Flow, and Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5

By Jon Jacob



The Ulster Orchestra is a plucky bunch. They returned to the Royal Albert Hall this afternoon still no surer as to their financial future but eager, hungry and defiant. This was a high profile gig for them, played to a near capacity audience with a conductor whose passion is reflected in his love of the art form and his gleeful attention to detail. I can think of no other concert this season I've enjoyed more.

This may have something to do with what else has been going on in the world

today. Team GB is celebrating a second place in the Olympics medal table. BBC News headlines with the 'Great Britain beats China'. The world is, thanks to the Olympics, standing up and taking notice of us (at least that's what we think). What the vast majority of people are overlooking is the extent to which that success is as a result of considerable commercial investment.

I don't deny us that. I'm not a completely cold-hearted bastard. Of course I recognise that Olympic achievement comes from hard work, dedication, passion and talent. But don't overlook the fact that it also needs money. And don't forget that, where some Olympic athletes and sportsmen and women are concerned, these people are now celebrities for their skill and accomplishment. We are basking in their achievement. In some cases we have assumed some of that triumph as though it is our own. It isn't at all. All we've done is watched from the other side of the world.

What the Olympics has done this year, I think, is highlight what can be achieved when considerable sums are invested in the development of individuals. At the same time it underlines those areas where investment is lacking. And where it is, in the case of the arts in general, and classical music in particular, the question asked then is, why?

We don't value our orchestras in this country. At least, I don't think we value



them enough. Orchestra concerts don't carry with them a tangible benefit of the kind that Olympic gold medals do. Funding gets cut. Education policies get down-graded. Generations miss out. I may sound a little whiny and boring, but that is how it is. And the more we celebrate the celebrity of sporting achievement, the more the chasm between the investment necessary to get to that point and that which is sadly lacking in the arts begins to show.

The Ulster Orchestra has had its local detractors. Local government there haven't been terribly forthcoming in their support (although I understand that this might be changing). Their management has gone through some dramatic changes too. The hard work showed in their concert this afternoon at the BBC Proms. The Ulster Orchestra shone in a way I've never seen before.

Piers Hellawell's *Wild Flow* – a BBC commission and world premiere deployed a fragmented compositional style to great effect. This was a hugely entertaining new work that conjured with exciting, inventive and immersive textures, particularly at the beginning of the second movement. *Wild Flow* had clearly been orchestrated with passion. The work was full of drama. I really connected with it.

Cellist Narek Hakhnazaryan's cello concerto by Haydn was a revelation. The cellist combined elegance and simplicity with a rare and enticing kind of vulnerability. The second movement in particular had a touching humility about it. Taut playing in both strings and the solo line helped maintain a breakneck third movement. There was urgency in the final bars. An enthralling performance.

The band's numbers swelled for the symphony. Tchaikovsky 5 may have seemed to some under-powered, but this was a resourceful interpretation, with distinctive twists – notably the horn solo at the beginning of the second movement. Here conductor Rafael Payare seemed to draw something special out of the orchestra. The wind ensemble work at the end of the second movement was stunning.

In the third movement Payare showed great panache; in the fourth he showed his cards. This was an impressive combination of grace and defiance with enviable boldness, making this a distinctive performance.

We need to stop thinking of orchestras and the works they perform as miracles or some kind of historical curiosity. It's about time we recognised that they are the product of hard work and lifelong passions. They sustain communities and livelihoods. They aren't better or worse than sport, they are part of our culture. They deserve more respect than they currently receive. And we might start by all of us making a conscious effort not to take them for granted.

The Ulster Orchestra's 2016 BBC Proms concert was a tangible demonstration as to why that's important. Under Payare they appear transformed. Hearing them play today, I'm reminded about how they – the only professional orchestra in Northern Ireland – deserve more than one Sunday afternoon gig at the Proms every year. They represent an important part of the UK. We should hear from them more.

Narek Hakhnazaryan

South China Morning Post

May 11, 2016

Narek Hakhnazaryan cello recital - impeccable technique, luminous tone

Those who witnessed brilliant young Armenian's enchanting debut will remember where they heard him first - this musician is going places

By Alexis Alrich



When Narek Hakhnazaryan becomes a familiar name - and it will - people will think back to his Hong Kong debut recital, in which the young Armenian-born cellist enchanted the audience with his impeccable technique and luminous tone in an all-French programme.

The first singing note from his cello, in Faure's *Élégie*, seemed to expand the concert hall itself. The lines were long and connected, the music romantic but restrained and elegant.

Hakhnazaryan had eloquent control of his bow arm and shaded the tones with endless variety. The pitch was as pure as ice water no matter how daring the leaps. Pianist Noreen Polera also drew

the audience into the piece's poetic world with her sensitive touch and timing.

Debussy's Cello Sonata demands a different, cooler approach. The delicate motifs sound best in a calm, still voice, and can't take much drama and drive.

In the *Finale* the fast passages were sometimes slighted, speed winning out over clarity and enunciation. Hakhnazaryan's exuberance will no doubt mellow enough over time to make these passages as beautiful as the more intense ones are now. But still, his interpretation was lively and interesting - pizzicato sections sounded wild and grotesque in a good way.



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Camille Saint-Saëns' *Allegro Appassionato* was ideally suited to Hakhnazaryan's personality. He gambolled through the music like a young colt, dazzling with his left-hand agility on the fingerboard as well as his dexterity with the bow.

Fauré's *Papillon*, or Butterfly, resembles Rimsky Korsakov's perpetual-motion *Flight of the Bumblebee*. Although it was almost too fast to hear the pitches, it was still fun.

The performance of Fauré's *Après Un Rêve*, a transcription of a song about a dream where lovers rise together toward a mysterious light, was flawless and breathtaking, the audience stilled as the cello soared up into the soprano range.

In César Franck's Sonata in A Major, originally published for violin and later transcribed for cello, Polera was more

than just support, she was an equal partner in the triumphant realisation of this formidable piece.

The opening movement was tranquil, an echo of the elegiac tone of the Fauré. The second movement, *Allegro*, was fast and brusque with phrases torn off at the ends as if blown away by the wind. The third movement married a great composition with magnificent playing that built to the intensity of stadium rock. The violin version arguably has advantages over the cello at some points in this piece, but here the cello won the day in power and eloquence.

The last movement combined lyricism and intensity in equal balance, with stirring octaves in the piano joining with impassioned cello strokes in a ferociously exciting performance.

The Advertiser

May 1, 2016

Exceptional cellist Narek Hakhnazaryan soars with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra

By Stephen Whittington

Narek Hakhnazaryan may not – not yet – be a household name, but he is certainly a cellist of exceptional ability and, given that he is still quite young, of even greater promise. For his first appearance here he chose Tchaikovsky, beginning with a charming, rather sentimental *Nocturne*. As soon as he put bow to string the beauty of the sound was striking – rich, mellow and highly expressive. *Variations on a Rococo Theme* allowed him to display elegance and virtuosity, both qualities that he has in abundance. He was ably supported by the ASO under Arvo Volmer. Giovanni Sollima's *Lamentatio*, which requires the cellist to sing as well as perform apparently impossible feats on the cello, was a stunning encore to this stellar performance.

The concert had begun with *Tapiola*, a tone poem by Sibelius, in which Arvo

Volmer's depth of experience with this composer was shown to great advantage. This is a more complex work than most of the symphonies, subtly orchestrated and requiring a fine sense of balance and rhythmic flexibility from the conductor. The orchestra responded to Volmer's confident and insightful direction with a rewarding performance. Volmer was still on his Baltic home ground with Carl Nielsen's *Fourth Symphony, 'The Inextinguishable'*, a mighty piece which requires a firm grasp of its overall form balanced by great attention to details of balance and phrasing. Once again Volmer's experience showed in a perfectly paced and well-shaped performance that reached a rousing climax with thunderous timpani.



April 1, 2016

Milwaukee Symphony explores friendly confines of Pabst Theater

By Elaine Schmidt

The Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra has taken up residence in the Pabst Theater for the weekend, showcasing music of Mozart, Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky.

The Pabst's stage is significantly smaller than the Uihlein stage, the orchestra's usual venue, as is the hall itself. Although smaller quarters make for a somewhat crowded experience for both audience and orchestra, the space also creates a far more intimate listening and viewing experience.

Playing to those differences, the MSO and guest conductor Ben Gernon opened the evening program with a crisp, colorful interpretation of Mozart's Symphony No. 31.

Nuanced phrasing, constant attention to delicate layering of instrumental timbres, as well as wonderful dynamic contrasts, from very soft to very full, were part of a delightful interpretation that worked extremely well in the old hall.

Gernon and the players moved on to Stravinsky's Symphony in C, mixing energy, sophistication and constant attention to structural and musical detail into a thoroughly involving performance.

Cellist Narek Hakhnazaryan joined the orchestra to open the program's second

half with a completely captivating performance of Tchaikovsky's "Variations on a Rococo Theme."

Playing with complete technical command and musical freedom, Hakhnazaryan gave an extraordinarily communicative performance.

Using an enormous dynamic range and huge palette of sonic colors, he moved from intense, driven passages to light, playful, almost teasing phrases elsewhere. He effectively reached out to his audience in some spots and pulled them in others, winning a standing ovation.

Gernon and the orchestra gave a highly supportive, sensitive performance of the piece's orchestra accompaniment, matching Hakhnazaryan's musical intent at every turn.

With an orchestra pared from the 50 players of the piece's first half to 35 players for the final piece, Gernon and the MSO closed the program with a delightful rendition of Mozart's Symphony No. 29, with lovely musical shapes and artful sonic contrasts.

Despite the sonic warmth of the hall, seating some players under or in front of the proscenium arch and the rest farther upstage, under the stage's acoustic baffles, created occasional imbalances in the ensemble's sound.







