Zlatomir Fung

"At his young age, Fung seems to be one of those rare musicians with a Midas touch: he quickly envelopes every score he plays in an almost palpable golden aura."

— *Bachtrack*

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Zlatomir Fung, cello
2025-2026 Biography

Cellist Zlatomir Fung burst onto the scene as the first American in four decades (and youngest musician ever) to win First Prize at the International Tchaikovsky Competition Cello Division. He has since garnered accolades, critical acclaim and standing ovations at performances around the world, becoming recognized as one of the preeminent cellists of our time. Astounding audiences with his boundless virtuosity and exquisite sensitivity, the 25-year-old has already proven himself a star among the next generation of world-class musicians.

Highlights of the 2025-2026 season include a recital at Carnegie Hall's Zankel Hall in March and a return to the Aspen, Ravinia and La Jolla Music Society Festivals. He appears with the Fort Worth Symphony under conductor Peter Oundjian and with the Nashville, Albany, Knoxville and Pacific Symphonies, Sacramento and Reno Philharmonics and Sarasota Orchestra. Appearances outside the U.S. include the Pohang International Music Festival in Korea and Guiyang Symphony Orchestra in China; Belgrade Philharmonic in Serbia; Melbourne Symphony; and a recital at Wigmore Hall in London.

In April 2025, Signum Records released Fung's debut album, *Fantasies*, a collection of opera fantasies and transcriptions for cello and piano to enthusiastic reviews.

Fung served as artist in residence with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in the 2023-2024 season, appearing in four London performances. Other recent debuts include the New York Philharmonic, Cleveland Orchestra, Orchestre National de Lille, and BBC Philharmonic, as well as the Baltimore, Dallas, Detroit, Seattle, Milwaukee, Utah, Rochester, and Kansas City Symphonies. He has performed at major festivals, including Ravinia, Blossom, Aspen, Bravo Vail and Grant Park in the U.S. and Verbier, Dresden, Leoš Janáček International and Tsinandali Festivals and the Cello Biennale Amsterdam in Europe.

In addition to demonstrating a mastery of the canon with his impeccable technique, Fung brings exceptional insight into contemporary repertoire, championing composers such as Unsuk Chin, Katherine Balch, and Anna Clyne. In 2023, under the baton of Gemma New and with the Dallas Symphony, Fung gave the world premiere of Katherine Balch's *whisper concerto* to great acclaim as the dedicatee of the work; he gave its UK premiere in February 2024 with the BBC Philharmonic, conducted by Joshua Weilerstein.

Fung has received many distinguished prizes and awards, including the 2017 Young Concert Artists International Auditions and a Borletti-Buitoni Trust Fellowship in 2022. As a participant in WXQR's Artist Propulsion Lab, he wrote *The Elves and the Cello Maker*, a radio play in which he also performed. Fung has been featured on NPR's *Performance Today* and appeared six times on NPR's *From the Top*. Fung joined the faculty of his alma mater, The Juilliard School, in 2024 as one of the youngest members of the faculty.

Fung performs on a circa 1735 cello by Domenico Montagnana, on loan from a generous benefactor, and the 1696 "Lord Aylesford" Strad, on loan from the Nippon Music Foundation.

Of Bulgarian and Chinese heritage, Zlatomir Fung was born into a family of mathematicians and began playing cello at age three. Fung studied at The Juilliard School under the tutelage of Richard Aaron and Timothy Eddy, where he was a recipient of the Kovner Fellowship. Outside of music, his interests include chess, cinema, and creative writing.

JUNE 2025. AT THE REQUEST OF THE ARTIST – PLEASE DO NOT ALTER THIS BIOGRAPHY

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Zlatomir Fung, cello
Critical Acclaim

"Zlatomir Fung, a young American cellist of Bulgarian and Chinese heritage, with first prizes in the Tchaikovsky and other major competitions, dispatched fearsome challenges with jaw-dropping brilliance."

Dallas Morning News

"At his young age, Fung seems to be one of those rare musicians with a Midas touch: he quickly envelopes every score he plays in an almost palpable golden aura."

Bachtrack

"His intonation was impeccable, his tone warmly expressive, his feeling for long-breathed phrases altogether sensitive."

Chicago Classical Review

"What stood out for me was Fung's careful attention to dynamics, emerging at the start and at later junctures too from the body of orchestral sound with a beautifully sustained high line, yet also exploiting the full range of his instrument with dazzling leaps of virtuosity and full-fat chords played on all four strings....there was a robust earthiness to Fung's playing, which never lost its burnished sheen, but also an impish delight in the mercurial shifts of mood, always respectful of the classical form yet making it glow from within."

Bachtrack

"We got a taste of another inspired young livewire last Sunday when fast-rising and award-winning 24-year-old cellist Zlatomir Fung gave an impeccably played recital with pianist Benjamin Hochman. Aside from stellar performances by both, the afternoon won ample points for left-of-standard programming."

Santa Barbara Independent

"The cellist showed a mastery of his instrument that was truly a thing to behold… He executed his pure talent, maneuvering the strings with exquisite control as he created his own musical mosaic."

Benicia Herald

"A rich, warm tone, impeccable intonation and thoughtful phrasing suggested a good future for the 17-year-old soloist. His appreciation for dynamic shading proved especially rewarding."

Baltimore Sun

"Zlatomir Fung established himself as both a poet and virtuoso of the highest order... Mr. Fung displayed clean, warmly resonant tone, a gift for dynamic finesse, and a depth of feeling that seemed remarkable in one so young."

Oberon's Grove

"Fung delivered hands down. This was a spectacular performance."

Performing Arts Monterey Bay

Features

the Strad

A CELLIST AT THE OPERA

For his debut album, US cellist Zlatomir Fung has delved into the world of the operatic fantasy – a relative rarity on the instrument. He speaks to **Peter Quantrill** about how making the recording has revealed new aspects of his musical personality

Janáček, Wagner, Rossini and Bizet feature largely on the debut album of Zlatomir Fung. You don't need me to remind you that none of these composers wrote a cello sonata. At a stretch, you could count Janáček's *Pohádka* – 'Fairytale' – which serves to underline the point that he and the others were most at home, most themselves, when telling stories with words, and on stage.

Fung has won a string of major prizes including the gold medal at the 2019 Tchaikovsky Competition in St Petersburg and, last autumn, at the age of just 25, he joined the teaching staff of his alma mater, the Juilliard School. But compared to most prodigious virtuosos, he has bided his time before committing himself to posterity with an album. In doing so, he has consciously not sought to place 'his' Brahms or Elgar before the public. Instead, he has assembled an array of operatic transcriptions and arrangements for cello and piano. Some of them are old, dating back almost to the time of the original operas, such as the Fantasy by François George-Hainl (1807–73), on themes from Rossini's *William Tell*. Others are quite new, such as the opening Fantasy on Janáček's *Jenůfa*, of Fung's own devising, and (bringing down the curtain at the other end) Marshall Estrin's 2022 *Fantasia Carmèn*, after Bizet.

What these pieces share is rarity value, obviously, but also – from the cellist's perspective – a particular relationship between performer and listener. 'You put yourself beneath the music when you're playing a Beethoven sonata. The music is the great exhibit,' he says on a call from his home in New York. 'But when you play an operatic fantasy, the idea of you as the performer, or the composer, in the case of the cellists who made these arrangements, is so inextricably tied with the music itself, that you place the performer on the same level as the music itself, if not even higher.'

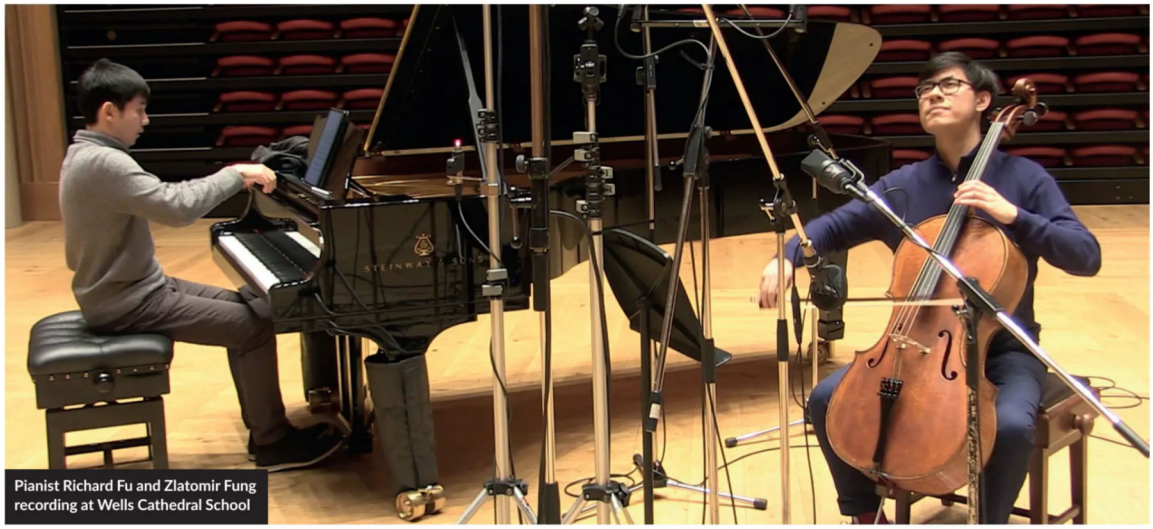
'IT'S ABOUT HOW THE CELLO CAN IMITATE A GREAT VOCALIST, AND HOW TO PROJECT ALL THOSE INFLECTIONS OF PHRASE AND GESTURE'

It should be said at this juncture that Fung is the most disarmingly charming and modest of interviewees and musicians. The project is not an ego trip for him, or not more so than any debut album must be. To expand on his point, he alights on a transcription by Mikhail Bukinik, of Lensky's aria from Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*. 'The music here is not so much about Pushkin's story, the opera itself or the particular emotional moment in the opera, because you are already doing this slightly absurd thing of playing it on the cello. It's more about how the cello can imitate a great vocalist, and how to project all those inflections of phrase and gesture.'

On another level, the album owes its inception, in common with many other 'passion projects' of our time, to the space for study and solitude enforced by lockdown. Fung stripped down his technique, looking for instruction and inspiration to the virtuoso cellists of the 19th century: the likes of Popper, Grützmacher, Servais and Piatti. Before long, he found that their methods and studies were complemented, in every case, by operatic fantasies. Paganini and Liszt wrote many such transcriptions and paraphrases for their own instruments, and as a vital extension of their creative and recreative personalities. But cello works in the same vein have been almost completely overlooked.

In excavating such rarities, Fung wanted to challenge himself as well as broaden his repertoire. 'I wanted to discover a performative side of my musical personality. I never thought of myself as technically strong compared to some of my peers. My strengths as a cellist seemed to lie more in the introspective, lyrical stuff. But on the album there are long passages of

FRED CONRAD



Pianist Richard Fu and Zlatomir Fung recording at Wells Cathedral School

COURTESY OF SIGNUM RECORDS

consecutive octaves and artificial harmonics: really challenging, but also fun and exhilarating.'

Through the course of his researches, Fung recovered a sense of what being a cellist used to mean. 'If you were regarded as a great performer, you were also, by definition, a composer, and you would write music for yourself. That lineage seems to have died out with the birth of the recording era.'

Perhaps ironically, it was with the coming of age of the virtuoso cellist in the modern era, from Casals onwards, that composers began treating the cello more seriously as a solo instrument. 'I don't think there's a 19th-century cello sonata that fully explores what the cello can do.' Really? 'It's baffling to me,' elaborates Fung, 'that this is the case when a piece such as the Servais *Fantasia on Donizetti's La fille du régiment* was out there in the 1850s – using all these octaves and incredible glissandos – and yet it was only in the late 19th century, with pieces such as Dvořák's Cello Concerto, that composers began to take up these interesting figurations. For me Servais, Grützmacher and Popper are cello heroes – they paved the way for the 20th-century composers who wrote for the full range of the instrument's expressive and technical potential.'

As a New York resident, is Fung also an habitué of the Met? 'I don't consider myself such a big opera buff compared to some of my friends. But I do get there.' Indeed, when limbering up to write his own fantasy, he entertained hopes of adapting George Benjamin's *Written on Skin*, among the most successful British operas of the last 20 years, but the composer denied permission. So he turned instead to *Jenůfa*. Even though it dates from 1903, Janáček's pivotal piece of Czech verismo demanded a completely different form compared to the essentially episodic approach taken by Fung's predecessors when making fantasies from Rossini and Donizetti. 'I wanted to write the whole fantasy without any obvious structural pauses, because that's how Janáček composes. But there is an abrupt sensibility to his music. Emotions can shift very quickly. So that allowed me to select musical material from different places in the opera, and find transitions that felt true to the spirit of his writing.'

Every aspect of the album bears the mark of a musician temperamentally disinclined to tread on old ground. Fung had only been playing his c.1730 Montagnana for six weeks when he went into the studio at Wells Cathedral School back in 2023. 'The growing pains of figuring out how to work with it were lessened by the fact that I felt an instant chemistry between me and the instrument. I know it better now than when I recorded the album, obviously, but I wouldn't have it any other way.'

Marshall Estrin wrote the *Fantasia Carmèn* with live performance in mind, and a theatrical vocabulary of physical gesture that has accordingly required adaptation for an audio-only format.

But then all the music on the album thrives on the palpable identity of the performer, as Fung observed earlier. 'I've always immersed myself in the experience of beginning a piece; once I start, I'm completely inside it. But recording something and having to go over a one-minute section again, and having to zero in and make sure that the tempo is consistent through all the takes: perhaps it was doubly challenging because it was my first album. When I play these fantasies live, I respond to the moment. I might want to rip through one section or linger on a note longer. So transferring that kind of energy to the studio was a huge learning experience for me.'

WORKS **Estrin** Fantasia Carmèn **Janáček (arr. Fung)** Fantasy on Jenůfa **George-Hainl** Fantaisie sur des motifs de *Guillaume Tell* de G. Rossini op. 8 **Servais** Fantaisie et Variations sur des motifs de l'Opéra *La fille du régiment* de Donizetti op.16 **Tchaikovsky (arr.Bukinik)** Lensky's Aria from *Eugene Onegin* **Wagner (arr.Wilhelmj)** Walther's Prize Song from Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg
ARTISTS **Zlatomir Fung** (cello) **Richard Fu** (piano)
RECORDING DATES **18–20 December 2023**
RECORDING VENUE **Cedars Hall, Wells Cathedral School, Wells, UK**
CATALOGUE NUMBER **Signum SIGCD 882**
RELEASE DATE **25 April 2025**

ZLATOMIR FUNG

With a string of competition wins to his name and debuts with major orchestras in 2024, Zlatomir Fung is a young cellist to watch. **Amanda Holloway** speaks to him about what inspires him and keeps him grounded

'Our mission is to get that one-to-one connection'

Zlatomir Fung is a name to be reckoned with. This American cellist of Chinese and Bulgarian heritage is a mesmerising presence on the concert stage – technically superb with a warm tone and emotional depth that suggest years of experience, though he's just 24. He's already familiar to US and UK audiences and is broadening his reach with every new debut, from Tenerife to Taiwan.

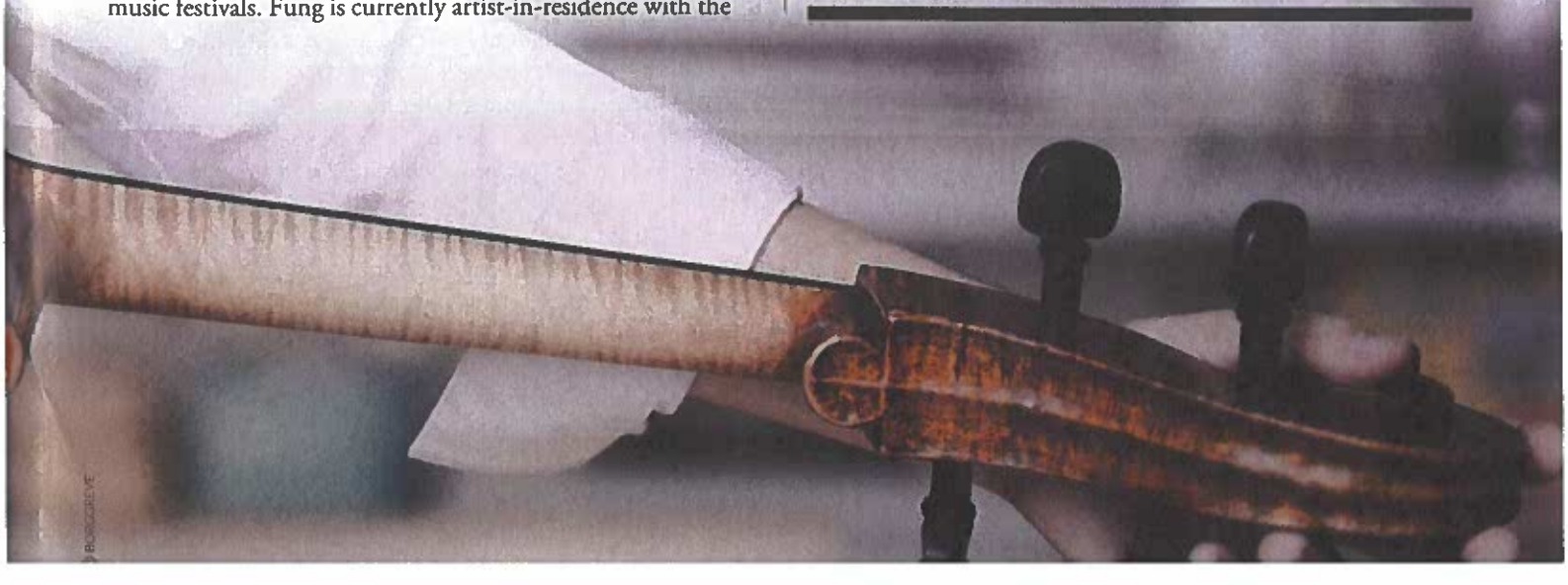
It's four years since he won the cello section of the International Tchaikovsky Competition in St Petersburg, the youngest ever cellist winner and the first American cellist to win in four decades. In that time he's weathered the Covid lockdowns (a frustrating experience for a goal-oriented young man at the start of his career) and started the slow work of introducing himself to orchestras in the US and Europe, increasing his recital work and allowing time for other projects – of which he has many. When we finish talking he's going into the studio to record an hour-long children's drama with a Christmas theme featuring cello-playing elves, which he devised for New York's classical radio station WQXR as part of its Artist Propulsion Lab. Fung, who has an attractively low-pitched speaking voice, says he's not much of an actor but he may allow himself a cameo. He will, of course, be playing the cello part, along with cellist, actor and film-maker Nicholas Canellakis.

With his mop of black hair, bookish spectacles and open, friendly face, Fung is a kind of Harry Potter with a cello and bow, rather than a magic wand. It's no surprise to hear that he is a chess fanatic who toyed with giving up the cello at 15 to take chess more seriously ('I did find a way to practise scales while playing online chess. But it wasn't ideal!'). Fung is also an aspiring screenwriter and cinephile who won a place to study film at New York University but opted for the Juilliard School instead. We should be glad he chose to concentrate on the cello when so many other options beckoned.

Fung made his recital debut at New York's Carnegie Hall in 2021 and was described by one reviewer as 'one of those rare musicians with a Midas touch: he quickly envelops every score he plays in an almost palpable golden aura.' Other recent highlights include returns to Wigmore Hall, London, and appearances at the Verbier, Dresden and Aspen music festivals. Fung is currently artist-in-residence with the UK's Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, for which he opened the 2023–4 season with the Elgar Cello Concerto at Cadogan Hall in London, catching the mood expertly, according to the *Arts Desk* reviewer: 'Fung's greatest revelation was to make what often sounds as dark treading water [...] truly anguished, as if Elgar can't pull himself out of his slough of despond.' RPO managing director James Williams tells me he was delighted by this reception, but not surprised: 'His playing is immediately communicative and there's a finesse, but there's also a body to his sound. And of course he's got a phenomenal technique; he's one of those musicians that just makes everything look effortless.' Audiences are drawn in to Fung's performance, whether it's Elgar, Bach or Berio. 'He's the sort of musician who can turn up and play *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* and you'd still think it was the greatest piece of music ever!' says Williams. Fung returns to the orchestra in February 2024 to play Haydn's Cello Concerto no.1 in London, Hull, Warwick and Northampton, and in May he'll be playing Saint-Saëns's First Cello Concerto in the newly reopened Bristol Beacon.

Also in February, Fung joins the BBC Philharmonic to play the UK premiere in Manchester of Katherine Balch's *Whisper Concerto* (see April 2023's Premiere of the Month), a co-commission between the BBC and orchestras in Dallas and Darmstadt which tests both Fung and his cello to the limit. 'We worked closely on fine-tuning all the extended techniques both before and during her writing process, in long sessions over Zoom and in person, for a period of several months,' he tells me. 'She had a lot of ideas about techniques and sounds that didn't have a standard method of notation, so we worked on how precisely to execute and notate the sounds that she was hearing.' The score ▸

'ZLATOMIR'S PLAYING IS IMMEDIATELY COMMUNICATIVE AND THERE'S A FINESSE, BUT THERE'S ALSO A BODY TO HIS SOUND' – *JAMES WILLIAMS, RPO*



requires Fung to scratch, beat and scrape the strings in a visually arresting performance. 'One of the biggest effects is the white noise sound, which I make by moving the bow really rapidly and creating friction, not pitch,' he says. 'Katherine wanted to create a sense of vain struggle, and the audience can see there is an intense emotional thing happening, but it's just not coming through.' Although the name *Whisper Concerto* derives from the 'whisper cadenza' in Ligeti's Cello Concerto, 'At the end of the second movement, there's a cadenza for cello and chopstick,' says Fung. 'So I think the piece will end up being informally known as the Chopstick Concerto!'

Between now and May 2024 Fung has debuts with more American orchestras, in Sacramento, Rhode Island, Sarasota and Baltimore. Williams is amazed at the amount Fung has managed to achieve in a few short years. 'But he has been very careful in how he progresses, thinking carefully about what those next musical steps are for him and how he develops himself as a musician.' Another plus is Fung's willingness to get involved in the outreach work of the orchestra. 'It's good to see his commitment to community and education work running in parallel with his career, not as some sort of add-on,' says Williams. They are planning projects for early summer 2024, which may involve working in Brent or the Tri-Borough Music Hub, both in London.

'I LOVE THE WAY YO-YO MA PUTS IT; HE SAYS IT'S REALLY ABOUT ONE PERSON, EVEN IF YOU'RE PLAYING FOR TWO THOUSAND PEOPLE'

Fung welcomes the chance to get out of the concert hall and into the community, whether it's working with secondary school orchestras or preschool classes. 'In 2018, I organised a kids' concert targeted at six- to seven-year-olds who'd just started doing Suzuki,' he says. 'It's really rewarding, especially with younger children because it puts everything into perspective. For them there's no such thing as a missed shift; all they care about is whether it's interesting or not.' With such a broad cultural background, does Fung ever see himself as an ambassador for diversity? It sounds as if he is still working out his relationships with audiences and the music business. 'Part of the struggle I personally have with the idea of promoting myself is that what we do as musicians is such a personal thing, aesthetically. I love the way Yo-Yo Ma puts it; he says it's really about one person, even if you're playing for two thousand people. In that moment it's just about you and someone else who's hearing you. Our mission is to get that one-to-one connection; everything we do in promoting ourselves is to get to that. It's not about us.'

When Fung is working with young cellists, does he think back to the advice given by any particular tutor? 'When we practise we have our own internal teacher, which is like the amalgamation of all the ones we've had. The person who made me a cellist was Richard Aaron, with whom I worked in high school and later at Juilliard. He really made me appreciate the craft of cello playing; not only what you're trying to say, but the way that you say it.'

Fung started learning the cello aged three, in Corvallis, Oregon, with a Suzuki-method teacher called Ann Grabe, who was (and still is) principal cellist of the Oregon Mozart Players and a cellist in the Eugene Symphony. 'In the first year I barely picked up the cello. In the Suzuki method, for your first performance you just get up on stage and take a bow. I guess it's about being comfortable in front of the audience. I still struggle with that sometimes: how I should walk when I come out on stage!' He studied with Grabe from 2002 to 2008, before his family moved to Massachusetts. His parents (his mother is a maths professor, his father a software engineer) encouraged their children to learn an instrument, but they weren't musicians themselves. Nor did Fung inherit their maths skills, although he does have an analytical streak. 'For me it was always the humanities: music, theatre and cinema. But sometimes my analytical thinking, which is part of my gene pool, has been an asset to me. I tend to think of my cello playing in a very segmented, analytical way.' Turning off that part of his brain during a performance proves to be the ▸

Fung plays Shostakovich's Cello Concerto no.1 with the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra conducted by Daniel Raiskin

'YOU HAVE TO SUPPRESS THAT OVERLY ANALYTICAL PART OF YOUR MIND AND LET THE MORE FREE-FLOWING PART COME TO THE FOREGROUND'

challenge. 'You gently have to suppress that overly analytical, controlling part of your mind and let the more inspirational free-flowing part come to the foreground. That leap is hard for me, but I'm working on it!'

When the Fung family moved to the Boston area, he attended the New England Conservatory Preparatory School programme. While other twelve-year-olds were playing video games, Fung was watching the live stream of the 2011 Tchaikovsky Competition's cello rounds. It became a ritual to watch the archived performances again while he ate breakfast. The internet has been his friend – Fung studied over Skype with Aaron throughout his teenage years and continued to work with him in person when he joined Juilliard as an undergraduate.

At just 13 he flew to Montreux, Switzerland, to perform in the International Tchaikovsky Competition for Young Musicians, his first international contest. In spite of a fluff in his first piece he won second prize, and from then on he was a competition regular. He won top prizes at the 2015 Johansen International Competition for Young String Players (Washington DC), the 2016 George Enescu International Competition (Bucharest) and the 2018 Alice and Eleonore Schoenfeld International String Competition (Harbin, China).

His success in the 2017 Young Concert Artists auditions came with a series of recitals, in which he had the chance to hone lots of repertoire. His dream of entering the Tchaikovsky Competition was fulfilled in June 2019 when he travelled to St Petersburg to play in programmes that included old favourites (Tchaikovsky, Brahms) as well as music by Carter and the quirky, rhythmic Berio *Sequenza XIV*. In the final round, he gave astonishingly assured performances of Tchaikovsky's *Variations on a Rococo Theme* and Shostakovich's Cello Concerto no.2. 'The Tchaikovsky Competition was the highest pressure because it was live-streamed on Medici TV, but it was also a source of joy because my friends could tune in and I felt them cheering me on.' Continuing his winning streak, the following year he was awarded an Avery Fisher Career Grant and became a Borletti-Buitoni Trust Fellowship recipient in 2022.

For some musicians, competitions are a living nightmare, but Fung seemed to breeze through them. Why was he so successful? 'In that period of my life when I was doing a lot of competitions I wanted to push myself to learn the repertoire and have the opportunity to perform. I was always looking for the next one to do. It felt like a goal – and I'm a very goal-oriented person. As for my relative success in them, I was lucky, in a way. Perhaps one could describe my playing as diplomatic, as one could also describe my personality! Maybe that benefited me in competitions, which are about getting a consensus among people with very different musical tastes. But also I do think it was a matter of experience: that helped me have more control over my nerves.'

His piano partner for the Tchaikovsky Competition was the Romanian Iulian Ochescu, who had played with him in the George Enescu Competition in 2016. When we spoke, Fung was about to record his debut album with Ochescu for the Signum label. It's a programme of works for cello and piano based on or inspired by opera, which Fung has been planning

SIMEON RUSNAK

FUNG'S INSTRUMENT AND BOW

Fung plays a 1717 cello by David Tecchler of Rome, loaned to him through the Beare's International Violin Society by a generous benefactor.

'I have enjoyed this cello a lot; the sound is very round and very expansive and it really projects through so there's a lot of room with it to play around with dynamics. I find it's very open to being handled. Some cellos push back when you try to give it a little "oomph", but this is like, "yeah, bring it on!"' says Fung. Born in Germany, Tecchler worked in Rome in the early 18th century, and his cellos and basses are highly regarded. Many eminent cellists, including Beatrice Harrison, Emanuel Feuermann and, more recently, Robert Cohen, have played one of his instruments at some point. The previous owner of Fung's cello was English musician William Roskelly (1919–2017) – a student of Pablo Casals who played in the London Symphony Orchestra and the orchestra of the Royal Opera House. Since Roskelly's death, Fung is the first cellist to have been loaned the Tecchler.

Fung has two main bows: a 'self-rehairing' Dominique Peccatte, which has some damage at the tip and an unoriginal frog and button: 'It's kind of a player's bow, which is not in the best condition!' says Fung. The other is an early Jean Pierre Marie Persoit, a very different bow in its character. 'The Peccatte has more overtones and a lighter, more elegant sound, whereas the Persoit is more robust and muscular. They complement each other.'

MARCO BORGGREVE

for a while, and for which he has actually commissioned a work, as well as written his own arrangements. 'The commission is a *Carmen* fantasy (*Fantasia Carmèn*) from my friend Marshall Estrin. There are three heavy-hitting *Carmen* fantasies for violinists, but the few for cellists are not really played or they are not especially distinguished. I've also just finished my own arrangement of a fantasy on Janáček's *Jenůfa*. The rest of the album is 19th-century works based on operas – one of the Beethoven variation sets on Mozart's *The Magic Flute* and Servais's variations on Donizetti's *La fille du regiment*.' It sounds delicious, but we will have to wait for the release in autumn 2024.

When asked about cellists he admires, Fung cites two very different musicians: Yo-Yo Ma and Steven Isserlis. 'I feel I know Yo-Yo because I've listened to his recordings fifty times on YouTube, so every day I'm communing with him. He's an endless source of inspiration, and some of my greatest experiences of live music have been at his performances.' Isserlis is a distinctive cellist, not least for his preference for gut strings, of which Fung says: 'It's a choice that comes from a place of great musical integrity in his case, not a schtick. It affects his playing in a way that makes him a unique artist. He has certain mannerisms, certain things that he can do with the instrument that I don't hear among other cellists. I've actually had an opportunity to work with him so his influence on me is even more pronounced. He's another of those cellists that I'm always listening to on YouTube. I find that some of the ways that he thinks about a phrase – ending a phrase, for example – are so inspiringly beautiful that they seep into the way I think when I'm practising on my own.'

Fung is interested in experimenting with the colours and effects available on gut strings. 'My dream is to have a second cello where I can put raw gut on the A and D and wound gut on the G and C, because I feel like that kind of original set-up is really educational. On the couple of occasions I had the chance to play on raw gut I found it a very striking experience. Of course, it's not really practical if you're playing modern music to have that as your set-up, but it would be useful to practise on. Gut strings, in my opinion, have a greater degree of flexibility and sensitivity to not only the finger pressure of the left hand but also the variations of speed and pressure in the bow. So, practising with that sensitivity can shape your playing to be more detailed and musically sensitive, and if you can regularly practise with that input, then you can take what you learn and apply it to your playing on steel strings.'

Fung plays a 1717 David Tecchler cello (see box), which he has had since May 2023. 'It's been interesting to get to know it through all these different weather conditions. Just like with people, you go through a honeymoon phase when you first meet them, then you see them in all the different contexts and you sort of get their average.' That's the child of two mathematicians talking! He clarifies, 'You still have to love your instrument – if it's really going to be the one for you – even on a bad day! But equally I feel that this emphasis on the equipment can sometimes take away your attention from what's important, which is what you do with it.' With his emotional intelligence, generosity and unerring technique, Fung will surely find that one-to-one connection with the listener, whatever cello he is playing. ●

'JUST LIKE WITH PEOPLE, YOU STILL HAVE TO LOVE YOUR INSTRUMENT – IF IT'S REALLY GOING TO BE THE ONE FOR YOU – EVEN ON A BAD DAY!'

South China Morning Post

April 16, 2024

Cello prodigy Zlatomir Fung on his Hong Kong debut, playing with the UK's Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, and 'showing off'

By Ashlyn Chak

Zlatomir Fung Yung-chi was still in his second year of music school when, aged 20 in 2019, he became the youngest cellist to win first prize at the International Tchaikovsky Competition, one of the world's most competitive music awards, which is held every four years in Russia.

His prodigious talent was spotted early on. He won a chain of awards as a teenager and then the merit-based Kovner Fellowship to study at the Juilliard School in New York City. Having turned 25 on April 11, he has already been asked to teach in the cello department at his alma mater.

On April 17, he will make his debut in Hong Kong, the city where his paternal grandfather was born and raised.

Performing in the Premiere Performance concert with local pianist Rachel Cheung Wai-ching, Fung has selected a programme featuring Schumann, Chopin, Brahms, Janacek and... himself.

Fantasy on Jenufa for cello and piano is his own 2023 adaptation of Czech composer Leos Janacek's opera *Jenufa* – an unusual endeavour.

"There was a strong tradition in the 19th century where virtuoso cellist-composers would make arrangements of popular operas at the time by picking the best tunes and the most famous moments and writing variations on them for the cello," Fung says.

"The tradition died off in the 20th century. But I became very interested in this project during the pandemic, as many of these pieces were written by cellists who intended to sort of 'show off' what they could do with the instrument."

The coming performance at the Hong Kong City Hall will be the Asian premiere of Fung's *Fantasy on Jenufa*.

"It's great to do this kind of intimate recital where everything is a

conversation between the piano and the cello."

Other pieces in the concert includes Robert Schumann's *Five Pieces in Folk Style*, which he sees as a "very unusual piece that I've known for quite a while", but a "fun challenge" nonetheless. For the first time, he will attempt Johannes Brahms's Violin Sonata No. 3 in a version for the cello and piano that Yo-Yo Ma recorded some 30 years ago.

Fung's Bulgarian mother and Chinese father – both mathematicians – provided early music education to their four American children.

Fung began playing the cello when he was three-and-a-half, an unusual choice as most children start with the piano. However, his family did not have a piano at home, he therefore started with "a very small cello", he says.

For the first seven years, he studied with a patient teacher who placed a heavy focus on making sure he polished every piece he played before moving onto something harder, he says appreciatively.

"By the time I was 10, I hadn't played that many pieces, but I think I had played them all pretty well."

Around age 13, he decided that he would become a professional musician. In his words, it was a "crazy decision" but that was what he did.

Today, apart from his touring and teaching commitments, he is also artist-in-residence with the UK's Royal Philharmonic Orchestra for the 2023-24 season.

"I feel like I got very lucky – they're a wonderful orchestra, and getting the chance to work with them multiple times has been really interesting," Fung says.

"I've learned a lot. I think the style of British orchestras in general is very different from American orchestras [which I am more familiar with]."

He says he is pleased to finally meet and work with Cheung, who won the audience prize at the 2017 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition and additional accolades at other major competitions such as the Leeds, Chopin and Geneva international piano competitions.

"As a musician, you hear about people; now, with the internet, you can also hear them so easily. The repertoire I choose is sometimes a bit unusual, and I'm really looking forward to working with her," he says. The two will go on to perform in Shanghai on April 25.

Chicago Tribune

December 12, 2023

Best of classical music and jazz 2023: It's always sunny in Chicago

By Hannah Edgar

Best Soloist

Another tie? Duh. Cellist **Zlatomir Fung** delivered a superlatively thoughtful Elgar concerto with the Grant Park Festival Orchestra on July 26, with not a lick of nuance lost in Pritzker Pavilion. (That program also featured a kaleidoscopic performance of the little-heard 1934 "Negro Folk Symphony" by composer William Dawson, who was educated in Chicago.) A few months later, **Conrad Tao** returned to his hometown for a drop-everything-to-be-there brilliant rendition of Gershwin's Piano Concerto in F (Oct. 19-24).

ZLATOMIR FUNG

THE VIOLIN CHANNEL

May 1, 2023

VC Artist Zlatomir Fung Named as Artist-in-Residence at the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

"We are very pleased to welcome cellist Zlatomir Fung as our 2023–24 Artist-in-Residence," wrote the RPO on social media. "Making his debut with the Orchestra on 27 September 2023 in Cadogan Hall, Zlatomir will perform with us in London and across the country in a range of concerts that showcase the versatility of the cello."

"I'm extremely honored to be named the artist-in-residence with the Royal Philharmonic for the 2023-2024 season!" Fung wrote on social media. "I am so excited to get to know this legendary orchestra and to meet new audiences and music lovers next season!"

As part of his residency, cellist and VC Artist **Zlatomir Fung** will appear as a soloist with London's **Royal Philharmonic Orchestra** both on the home turf of Cadogan Hall and on tour — with appearances in Bristol, Hull, Warwick, Guildford, and Northampton.

Fung will perform three different concerti: the Elgar Cello Concerto with Elena Schwarz, the Haydn Cello Concerto No.1 in C Major with Shiyeon Sung, and the Saint-Saëns Cello Concerto No.1 with Emilia Hoving.

A recipient of the Borletti-Buitoni Trust Fellowship 2022 and a 2020 Avery Fisher Career Grant, Zlatomir Fung became the youngest-ever winner of the prestigious Tchaikovsky Competition in 2019, as well as the first American winner in four decades.

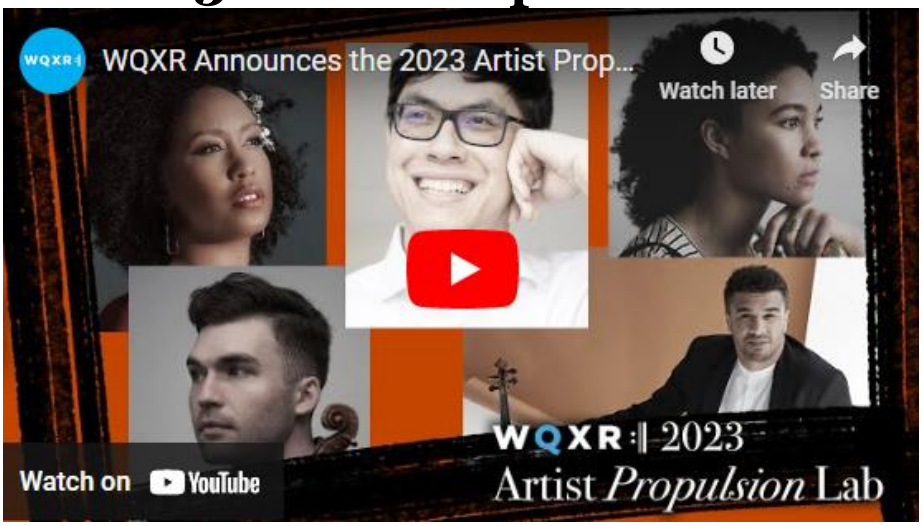
The winner of the 2017 Young Concert Artists International Auditions and the 2017 Astral National Auditions, Fung studied with **Richard Aaron** and **Timothy Eddy** at The Juilliard School.

ZLATOMIR FUNG

WQXR 105.9 fm wqxr.org

January 17, 2023

2023 Artist Propulsion Lab



Meet the 2023 **Artist Propulsion Lab**! The APL is WQXR's innovative program designed to support classical music artists in the creation of original work and in connecting with new audiences.

As part of the APL, five new artists – **Zlatomir Fung**, **Briana Hunter**, **Alexi Kenney**, **Curtis Stewart**, and **Shelley Washington** – will be given the space and support to create new work and to share their diverse perspectives and projects with radio, digital, and in-person audiences. Each artist is committed to expanding conventional ideas about Western classical music and making the artform more relevant to a new generation of listeners.

The APL was founded during the early days of the pandemic to support musicians when live performance came to a standstill. The program now continues as a way to give artists a venue for experimentation and greater exposure for their work. Over 100 artists were nominated by a committee of over 55 experts in the music field, including presenters, educators, and leadership organizations that support young musicians.

ZLATOMIR FUNG

WQXR

July 12, 2023

In the Studio with Zlatomir Fung

Listen 49 min

Cellist Zlatomir Fung joins host Hanako Yamaguchi in the studio as part of his Artist Propulsion Lab residency. He explores his Bulgarian, Chinese, and American background through music for solo cello. Bulgarian-British composer Dobrinka Tabakova's *Pirin* incorporates techniques used on the Gadulka, a stringed Bulgarian folk instrument. Bright Sheng's *Seven Tunes Heard in China* uses familiar melodies from Chinese folk songs. Judith Weir's *Unlocked* was inspired by songs collected from black prisoners in the southern United States.

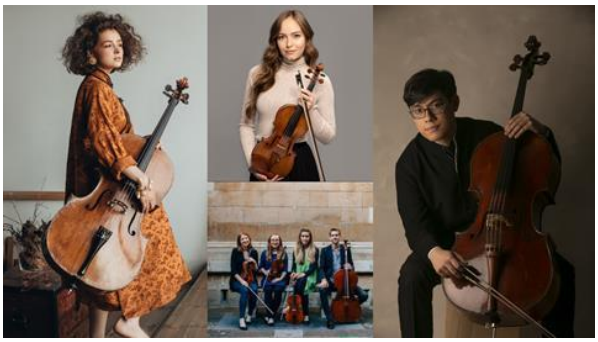
At only 23-years old, Zlatomir has given recitals and played with some of the most preeminent ensembles all over the world. He was the youngest First Prize winner in the cello division of the 2019 International Tchaikovsky Competition. Zlatomir is also a recipient of the Borletti-Buitoni Trust Fellowship and an Avery Fisher Career Grant.

ZLATOMIR FUNG

the Strad

March 17, 2022

Borletti-Buitoni Trust announces awards and fellowships for 2022



Recipients of the 2022 Borletti-Buitoni Trust (BBT) awards and fellowships have been announced, which include several top young string players.

BBT Awards are given to artists or ensembles that the artistic committee perceives as being performers of great quality and musicianship. Their careers are usually quite well established and the trust hopes their BBT budget will assist them in developing their long-term careers.

BBT Fellowships are usually awarded to artists or ensembles who are at an earlier stage of their careers and the trust hopes their BBT budget will help develop their future potential.

Awards of £30,000 have been granted to:
Anastasia Kobekina, cello
Geneva Lewis, violin
James Newby, baritone
Ema Nikolovska, mezzo-soprano

Fellowships worth £20,000 have been granted to:
Consone Quartet
Alessandro Fisher, tenor
Zlatomir Fung, cello
Lucie Horsch, recorder
Theodore Platt, baritone

These awards are announced on 17 March to mark the birthday of the late Franco Buitoni, who co-founded BBT with his wife Ilaria Borletti Buitoni.

In recognition of the difficulties experienced during the pandemic of the last two years, BBT has increased its funding for 2022 and granted more awards. The trust encourages these young musicians to create imaginative projects that will help develop their future careers.

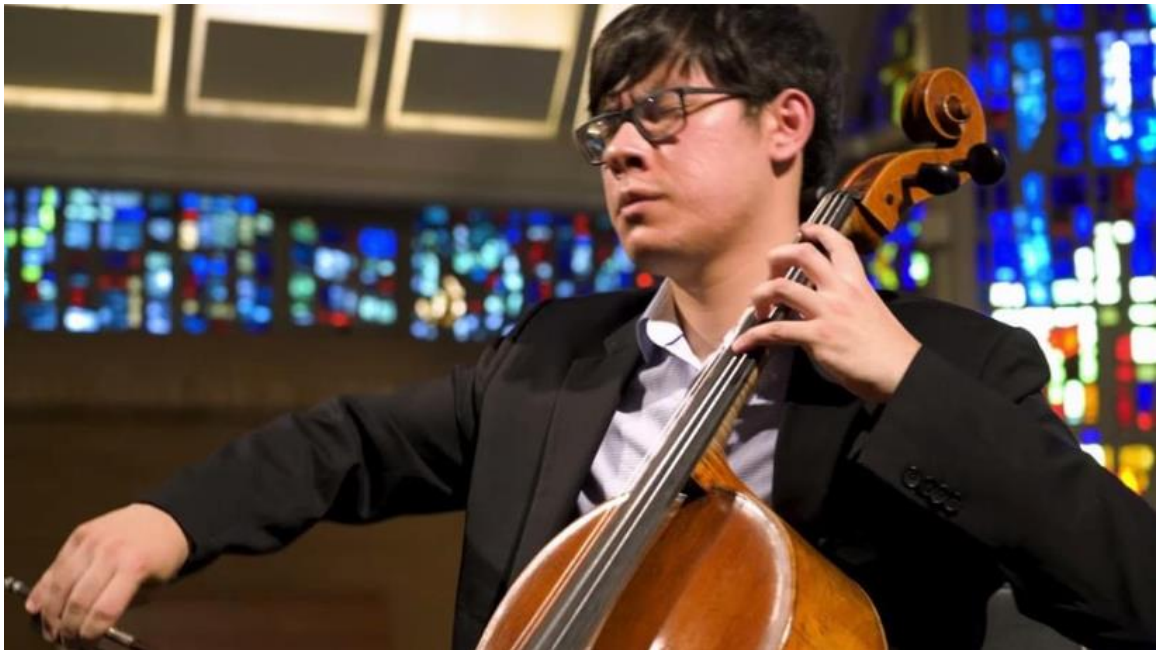
It aims to provide advice, guidance and contacts as well as public relations exposure for artists' BBT-funded projects. Winners receive a high profile on the BBT website, with audio and video material included where appropriate, and via its news and e-newsletters.

Interlude

August 1, 2023

Care in Every Little Detail

By Oliver Pashley



American Cellist Zlatomir Fung is quickly establishing a reputation as one of the country's top young soloists. Receiving a prestigious Avery Fisher Career Grant in 2020 and, more recently, the Borletti-Buitoni Trust Fellowship in 2022, Zlatomir has collaborated with duo partners and orchestras worldwide, including performances across the US, UK, Europe, and Asia, and in February this year made a well-received solo debut at London's Wigmore Hall.

Winner of the 2019 International Tchaikovsky Competition Cello Division- the youngest musician to ever do so – this season Zlatomir finds himself performing as Artist-in-Residence with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, appearing at London's Cadogan Hall and touring the UK with the orchestra. Further afield, Fung tours Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, and appears as soloist with the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra.

I chat to Zlatomir about his work ethic, his fascination with details and passion for music of all styles and periods, and, away from the cello, his borderline addiction to blitz chess.

How did it feel to play at Wigmore Hall?

It was a big honour for me to make that debut.

Everything about that space elevates you artistically. It gives you this sense of enveloping you, and the sound inspires you to do things differently. I certainly felt that from my pianist Benjamin Hochman, who was having the time of

his life. He was just really feeling it and really surprised me!

Do you have a particularly memorable performance experience?

There have been some really interesting performances. With each performance you go into, I find each hall has its own energy, especially when it's a recital. Sometimes it's also dependent on the layout of the audience and how many people there are, but also the space can be very influential in that way.

I did quite a memorable recital in Trieste, in Italy, in some sort of circular theatre, maybe originally built for opera. It was this big stage and the ceiling was very high – basically the opposite of Wigmore Hall. People were four storeys above looking down on me!

Even being in a different place can be inspiring in itself.

I especially get that feeling when I play in Europe, which I still haven't done a great deal. Having grown up in the States, we have a strong classical music tradition, but it's imported from Europe, and every country in Europe has its own identity musically.

I remember when I was in Finland I remember feeling like they really love music, and that there was so much respect and pride in the heritage of what they've brought to the history and tradition of classical music.

When and how did you start learning the cello?

I started when I was three and a half. Both my parents are not musicians. They had studied mathematics, and at the time my family was living in Oregon, on the west coast of the US, and we were in a middle-sized town with a university there.

It just so happened that there was a really wonderful Suzuki cello teacher there, and she was recommended to my family by someone, and I ended up studying with her for six years. She was a really influential person in my musical life because she had me go really slowly, much slower than I see some other people go through the literature, really cultivating a sense of high standards and desire to polish a piece for a long period of time, to develop your relationship with it.

Have you held onto that idea of staying with something, of taking your time?

I like to think so. Being on the 'career circuit' you have to let that go a little bit because you just don't have the time, but still, there's that ideal to strive for.

I see sometimes with other cellists, like when I give a masterclass, I can see in their playing that they weren't fortunate enough to have that kind of teaching at a young age, that there are certain aspects of their playing that feel a little more perfunctory technically, that there's not as much care in every little detail.

Did you always know you wanted to be a professional?

I think it happened gradually over the course of a year or two, but it was around the time when I was 11, 12. It was a confluence of factors, I think. Emmanuel Feldman, my new teacher in Boston where we were living at the time, pushed me to be more serious.

I remember our first lesson together, and I came in and played a three-octave scale for him. He went on this sort of rant about how I should never play a three-octave scale for him again, that it always needs to be four octaves because he said I was missing such an important part of the instrument if you're only playing three octaves.

Point taken! But he was right – if you really wanted to be serious, at the level where I was at the time, three-octave scales weren't going to cut it anymore.

I'm so grateful to him because he really pushed me to be curious also about the history of cello recordings and to know what was really going on.

I also did summer festivals and institutes with people who were older than me who were already on a professional track, and playing with them was very interesting, to see how

serious they were. It was a question of devotion, of seeing what was possible.

Who inspires you today?

I feel like everyone brings different things that I admire. I'm not admiring everything about everyone all the time, but I always try to look for things: what can I learn from that?

A huge inspiration in my life is Yo-Yo Ma obviously, even more so now than when I was growing up. Steven Isserlis is a big influence on me, and I've had the opportunity to meet him a couple of times and play for him.

There are all these other people whom I follow on Instagram and don't really know, like Hilary Hahn: I love her diligence and genuine authenticity in what she does.

How did you feel when you received the Avery Fisher grant?

It was a huge honour for me, and I'm slowly using the grant to commission new works. I've done one already, and I'm looking into a couple more.

I commissioned Marshall Estrin for a new Carmen Fantasy for cello and piano because I love Carmen – it's one of my favourite operas – but also I was jealous of violinists because they have three really great Carmen Fantasies that they regularly perform in recitals and with orchestras, and the cello doesn't have any. There are a couple that exist but they're not really good, so I wanted one that was a real banger.

I think Estrin did a fantastic job and I am excited to see this new addition to the repertoire.

Are there any pieces or composers you feel particularly at home with?

I enjoy playing late Romantic music the most. It feels like you can just sing – that's what I like to do on the cello. I ultimately feel like that's the cello's strength as an instrument, but I also really like contemporary music.

I've been lucky that I've had the opportunity to work with living composers and I think the way you put it – 'at home' – is a good way of putting it because when I think about the relationship that string players had 100 years ago to the music written in the 1880s, it's so close to them because in time they were also close to it.

They had the ethos of what the music needed, and I feel like for us living today, in the age of social media and TikTok and whatever, we have the ethos of music that was written 23 years ago. We understand what it was like for a composer to work on Sibelius or Finale – and to understand that specificity.

One thing I really like about contemporary music is there are fewer ambiguities in what we're supposed to do, which I think is a nice trend in music, for me. Personally, I consider myself a pretty analytical player. I like to know what needs to be done and how it's going to be accomplished, and so the most excruciating but also blissful thing is seeing a page of solo Bach – no bowings, no dynamics, thinking 'What do I do with myself?!'

Tell me about blitz chess.

I started playing chess when I was five but I didn't really get into it until I was maybe ten.

I play blitz chess mainly on the internet, although I'm trying to wean myself off because it can become addictive. A full game is usually about five to six minutes because each player only has three minutes. It can get pretty wild.

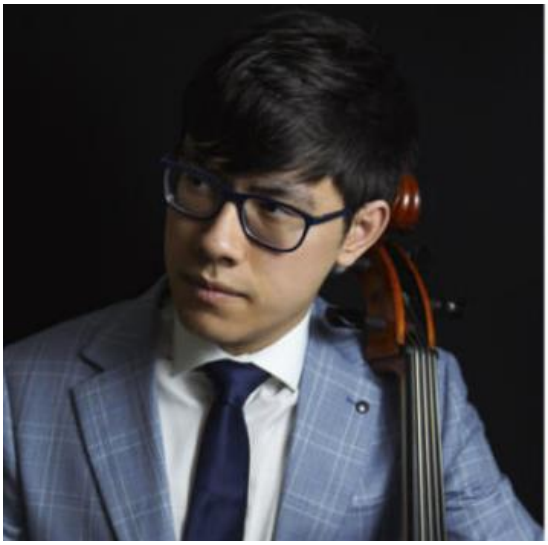
ZLATOMIR FUNG

THE VIOLIN CHANNEL
World's Leading Classical Music News Source. Est 2009

March 25, 2020

2 VC Artists Awarded 2020 Avery Fisher Career Grants

The 2020 recipients of the Avery Fisher Career Grants have been announced – including VC Artists Zlatomir Fung and Stella Chen




The 2020 recipients of the prestigious **Avery Fisher Career Grants** have today been announced, in New York City – including VC Artists **Zlatomir Fung** and **Stella Chen**. This year's 3 grant recipients are:

- Cellist, VC Artist **Zlatomir Fung**
- Violinist, VC Artist **Stella Chen**
- Baroque Violinist, **Rachell Ellen Wong**
-

Administered by the Avery Fisher Artist Program, each grant winner will receive USD $25,000 to assist with career development opportunities.

A student of Richard Aaron and Timothy Eddy at The Juilliard School, Zlatomir is a former 1st prize winner at the Schoenfeld and Enescu International Cello Competitions and the Young Concert Artists and Astral Artists International Auditions – and was awarded 1st prize at the 2019 Tchaikovsky International Cello Competition, in Moscow.

A graduate of the New England Conservatory and Harvard University, where she studied with Donald Weilerstein and Miriam Fried and current student of Li Lin, Catherine Cho and Donald Weilerstein at The Juilliard School, Stella is a former prize winner at the Tibor Varga and Menuhin International Violin Competitions – and was awarded 1st prize at the 2019 Queen Elisabeth International Violin Competition, in Brussels.

A graduate of The Juilliard School, Rachell is a former prize winner at International J.S. Bach Competition – and has performed with the American Bach Soloists, Bach Collegium Japan, The Academy of Ancient Music and Les Arts Florissants.

Since 1976, more than 125 talented young musicians have been recognized with Avery Fisher Career Grant Awards – including Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg, Dmitry Sitkovetsky, Joshua Bell, Sarah Chang, Leila Josefowicz and Alisa Weilerstein – and VC Artists Dover Quartet, Stephen Waarts, Chad Hoopes, Bella Hristova, Stefan Jackiw, Augustin Hadelich, Tessa Lark, Alexi Kenney, Benjamin Beilman, Itamar Zorman, Francisco Fullana, Angelo Xiang Yu, Simone Porter and Paul Huang.

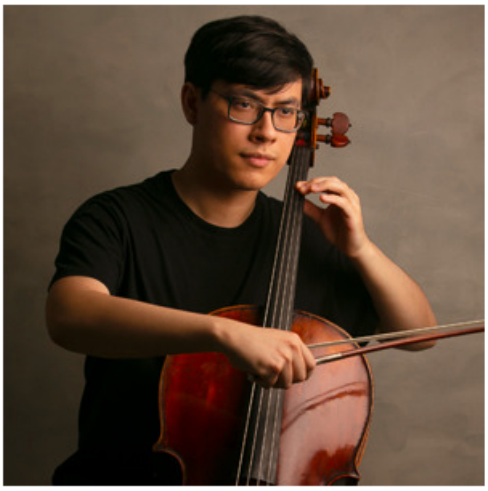
ZLATOMIR FUNG

musicalamerica WORLDWIDE

November 1, 2022

New Artist of the Month: Cellist Zlatomir Fung

By Thomas May



Competing with nature's own surround-sound orchestra, open-air performances aren't the optimal context for a soloist to shine. But Zlatomir Fung kept me riveted at last summer's Bravo! Vail Festival, eager not to miss a single nuance from the moment he began spelling out the theme in Tchaikovsky's Rococo Variations. Under the smiling direction of Leonard Slatkin, this also happened to be the young cellist's New York Philharmonic debut. Poise and virtuosity were assumed to be givens for a winner of the International Tchaikovsky Competition. What captivated me was his unforced musicality in using those qualities to make genuine poetry.

Now 23, Fung became the youngest musician in the illustrious competition's history to take the first prize in cello in 2019 (and the first American in four decades); he received an Avery Fisher Career Grant the year following. Even though neither of his parents is a musician—his mother is a math professor, his father a software engineer—Fung's natural affinity became evident when a friend recommended they take their three-year-old to a local Suzuki teacher. (All three of his siblings were also encouraged to play an instrument.)

"At first, it was a pretty low-key engagement," the cellist recalled during a recent Zoom conversation. But his attitude intensified at the age of 12. The family had moved from Oregon to the Boston area, where he found the musical environment more stimulating and attended the New England Conservatory prep school program. It was around this time that Fung says he first decided he wanted to pursue a career as a professional musician. He watched all the cello rounds when the Tchaikovsky Competition was broadcast online, dreaming of one day participating. "They archived the performances, so I had a routine every morning for six months, while I was eating breakfast, of watching the same performance of the Schumann concerto performed by Edgar Moreau. He was my hero at that time."

Mentors and models

Born in 1999 and of Bulgarian-Chinese heritage, Fung is a musician who has indeed been decisively shaped by the Internet. While still in high school, he began studying via Skype with Richard Aaron, his primary mentor at Juilliard (where he received his degree last May), "before it was fashionable to do lessons on the Internet." Mischa Maisky influenced his understanding of Bach "because his recordings of the Bach suites were among the first that were posted on YouTube. When I searched 'Bach cello suites,' he was what came up."

But Fung singles Rostropovich out as "the cellist who made me want to become a cellist. When I was 12, his recordings changed the course of my relationship with the instrument." He was especially drawn to the Russian's account of the First Cello Concerto of Shostakovich—a composer to whom Fung is especially attracted—and his solo performances. "I was blown away by the refinement of his playing and the way that he was able to communicate so specifically the character of that music." He also admires Yo-Yo Ma as "a beacon of musical intelligence."

The allure of new rep

An intensely goal-oriented individual, Fung adopted a practical attitude to cope with the stress of competitions: "Obviously competitions are something of a cruel instrument, but I always saw them as a way to motivate myself and an opportunity to learn new repertoire." Winning the 2017 Young Concert Artists International Auditions allowed him to give a round of recitals in which he could hone his interpretations of some of the repertoire he would eventually play in the Tchaikovsky Competition. Speed chess provided a reliable break from the pressure. So did his passion for film. (He was accepted to New York University's film criticism program when he applied to colleges—just to see if he could, knowing that music would be his path.)

Fung isn't content to play it safe by focusing only on standard repertoire. He seeks out collaborations with contemporary composers, such as Katherine Balch, who has written a cello concerto for him that Fung will premiere with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra in April 2023. The two met at the Aspen Music Festival in 2014, when the cellist was drawn to the "wildly imaginative stuff she was writing, like a piece for cello quartet where every cellist had a different scordatura [abnormal tuning]."

Another composer Fung works with is Marshall Estrin, whom he befriended at Juilliard and who has written several pieces for him, including a brand-new *Carmen* fantasy. "I'm very excited about it since we cellists only have two *Carmen* fantasies that are remotely good—and they don't compare to the ones for violin." Though nothing has been confirmed yet, Fung says his dream program for his debut album would be a selection of opera fantasies for cello and piano, "a few of which would be from forgotten corners of the repertoire of the 19th century, along with a couple of new arrangements."

Craft and art

Asked about his goals at this point in his career, Fung responds that along with his expanding list of orchestral debuts, he's been focusing on recital programming. "Recitals allow you to tell a whole story, to take people on a journey through what's possible in a particular subset of musical ideas." He also enjoys chamber music a great deal, which tends to be a focus in the summer in festival settings. "In rehearsals I try to stay quiet and let other people critique because I find it so interesting to see their thought process and their approach to improve something."

"Every instrument teaches you different things," Fung says, referring to the 1783 Lorenzo Storioni cello he has been playing of late thanks to a loan from a private benefactor. "It's a bit smaller than a full-size cello and has a rich interior voice. The challenge is to project its color in a way that can be felt from a distance." Fung himself has an air of understated modesty that belies the powerfully individual musical personality he is developing, with its combination of structural insight and expressive warmth.

"Itzhak Perlman said something that has stuck with me: 'Technique is the ability to manipulate a phrase the way you want to.' That resonates with me because I like to approach cello playing first and foremost as a craft. But you can't have that at the expense of seeing the larger picture—craft is always in service of something. I'm always trying to juggle these two aspects."

SLIPPED DISC

July 4, 2019

HOW SMALLTOWN AMERICA RAISED A TCHAIKOVSKY WINNER

By Anthea Kreston

Clocking in at 54,462, it's the largest westernmost city in the contiguous 48 States. Its Mayor is named Biff, and it was founded in 1845 by Joseph C. Avery, who arrived from the East in search of fortune and a new life. He built a log cabin, which he left soon afterward to try to find gold in California, which was totally unsuccessful, so he came back to his poorly constructed cabin with plans to open a store of some kind.

Nestled between two mountain ranges in a fertile valley filled with grass seed farms, Corvallis is home to Oregon State University and Hewlett Packard, and the yearly Da Vinci Days Festival, which features a kinetic sculpture race from sand mountain, through mud pit, to river. It's also the home to several notable people, including Robert Cheeke (bodybuilder and vegan activist), Edmund Creffield (founder of the "Holy Rollers" religious sect), John Krakauer (author, Into Thin Air), and Zlatomir Fung (winner of the Tchaikovsky International Competition for Cello, 2019).

How do people grow up in small towns and find a path towards international recognition as vegan activists, authors and cellists? Zlatomir was 9 when he moved away (that was 10 years ago) but his first 9 years, like everyone's first 9 years, were very, very important. Let's take a look.

I was able to track down his first teacher, who is actually a friend of mine, because I used to live in Corvallis and I hope my second child, who was born there, can somehow, some day make it onto that intriguing list of "Notable People from Corvallis".

Her name is Ann Grabe. She is a suzuki teacher, and has had a pretty interesting path towards that little city which is currently rated as the #2,967th best place to live in America, according to Niche.com.

Anthea Question:

Hello, Ann! What was Zlatomir like when you met him? What was his first lesson like?

Ann:

Zlati had good focus at 3 when he began lessons. He had a strong bond with his mother which helped make lessons so positive. He brought his foot chart and correct sized stool to all lessons.

At his first lesson he learned about bowing feet, cello feet, how to sit without the cello, sitting with the cello, and how to bow. (bough)

His mom was very attentive and took copious notes and totally trusted me, they did EVERY assignment, every week. I think his mom taught middle

school math, though with her good brain I think she could have walked into any place an gotten a fabulous job. She said such supportive and warm comments at just the right moments…she had a very good sense of timing when to ask question and to give compliments.

Anthea:

I know the Suzuki method is based on the idea that everyone is equally able to play an instrument (I was a suzuki child from age 2.5-7). Do you find this to be authentically true, or can you tell when one student or another might have a unique gift?

Ann:

The Suzuki method is based on the idea of teaching music with the same method that children learn to speak their mother tongue. Young children learn to speak their native language at such a high level at such a young age. All children learn to speak, thus all children can learn music. Dr. Suzuki does not say every child will become a concert cellist.

I personally strongly believe that talent is trained, Suzuki himself wanted his method to be called Talent Education.

Anthea:

If you do run into someone with an unusual talent, what do you do to foster that? Do you feel a particular responsibility to that family?

Ann:

If I run into someone who is ready to go, i.e. ready to learn (because of their very strong environment at home being surrounded with music, music games, warmth, support, etc.) I do not give them more attention than my other students. Everybody gets special attention. I teach skills as if every student will play the Dvorak Concerto. If they move slower, it won't be because of my prejudgements limiting them. I both expect a lot and demand a lot from all.

If everybody plays well, the whole class improves.

When Zlati started lessons, there was another little boy 4 years old who also was ready to go, his mom took fabulous notes and they also came every week with every assignment well practiced. There wasn't any competition between them, (such a destructive thing) but it was so helpful to have two kids of similar age start together and see each other at our bi-monthly group classes.

Anthea:

What was Zlatomir like as a cellist and person?

Ann:

Zlati was always a thoughtful, warm, and gentle soul. I think he learned this from both his mom and dad . I got to meet his grandfather at one of our recitals, that grandfather was so smart, respectful, and thoughtful; I loved watching his interaction with his grandson.

Anthea:

What are some of the challenges and benefits to living in a small town?

Ann:

I studied cello at the Hochschule fur Musik for five years in Stuttgart, Germany and received both an education degree and an Artistic Diploma (performance degree), I also taught cello for 7 years at L'institut Suzuki in Lyon, France. Both those cities had large populations, and one day I made a career choice to breath clean air, have access to the mountains and ocean, own a small house with a big back yard with a dog, and to live in a vibrant small town over art galleries, theatre, opera, world famous orchestras, and dirty air filled with coal smoke and diesel fumes. I was sick of all that pollution.

Anthea:

Could you have anticipated that Zlatomir would rise to this level?

Ann:

Absolutely

Here is what Zlatomir says in Symphony Magazine about Corvallis and Ann Grabe, his first teacher.

Cellist Zlatomir Fung salutes a series of teachers who have molded him. "Every teacher has been right for that moment in my life," Fung says. "I'm really lucky and grateful."

Cellist Zlatomir Fung, a Juilliard School undergraduate who already holds a fistful of prizes, says his good fortune with teachers began when he was 3 years old. "Somehow or other, the town where I was living—Corvallis, Ore.—happened to have this brilliant Suzuki cello teacher. And I just fell into her lap," Fung says.

Ann Grabe, a cellist in the Eugene Symphony, devoted Fung's first year almost entirely to such basics as the correct finger position and bow hold, and the thorough grounding paid off from there on, Fung says.

Reviews

Boston Classical Review

May 4, 2024

Zander and BPYO try out program of romantic masters before European tour

By Katherine Horgan

The Boston Philharmonic Youth Orchestra and Benjamin Zander delivered a remarkable performance at Symphony Hall on Friday night to cap off their 12th season. The program of Schumann and Mahler, which the orchestra takes on their European tour this coming June, was a superbly performed showcase of the complexities of 19th-century romanticism.

Schumann's Cello Concerto and Mahler's Fifth Symphony came from opposite ends of the romantic period. Though separated in composition by fifty years, the two pieces chart substantial cultural shifts in musical style even as the romantic aesthetic—the centrality of the artist, nature, and lyric freedom over formal constraint—remained constant.

When compared to classical formalism, the easy romanticism of the Schumann concerto, with its free-flowing melodies and gentle accompaniment, seems an enormous departure even from Beethoven; however, when compared to Mahler's formal inversions, irony, and enormity, Schumann seems almost classical in his lightness and play.

Cellist Zlatomir Fung returned to the BPYO as soloist in this performance. Fung offered a sprightly and tender rendering of the concerto, with his flexible and pleasant tone modulating easily through the work's many moods. The opening chords of the first movement, followed by an expressive entrance by Fung, immediately centered the sensitive relationship between the soloist and the orchestra. The excellent balance between the two continued throughout, with the orchestra maintaining a support that made the delicacy and dynamic range in Fung's interpretation evident in every phrase.

The second and third movements allowed Fung to showcase a range of styles, from the simple lyricism of the Langsam, with its folk influences, to the technical skill of the third movement. Fung's final cadenza finished the piece with a perfect combination of precision and virtuosity.

Fung responded to audience enthusiasm with an encore of Ernest Bloch's "Prayer," the first piece in *From Jewish Life,* a moving performance that shifted the tone of the program towards the

Jewish melodies so prominently featured in Mahler's work.

As Zander reminded the audience, Mahler's Fifth Symphony is a project in and of itself. As the romantic movement progressed, orchestras became larger (there were 120 musicians on stage for the Mahler) and the demands of the symphony more strenuous. As Zander said, "Mahler believed a symphony should contain the whole world." In spite of the challenge posed by Mahler, the orchestra gave the audience no reason to remember its youth. The performance from both ensemble and section soloists was powerful from the opening of the first movement to the spectacular final triumph of the fifth movement.

From the opening trumpet solo of the first movement, delivered by Reynolds Martin, the fantastic sound and blend of the brass was a theme of the evening. The contrasting restraint of the strings made for a tense atmosphere, which finally broke into a thrilling dance. In the second movement, the orchestra moved easily between Mahler's irony and pathos. The cellos, who were intrepid throughout, opened the movement with a menacing entrance, followed by somber melodies in the strings. Timpanist Ritvik Yaparpalvi ushered the movement into a stunning but brief moment of triumph featuring the brass that made the hall ring.

The third movement (Scherzo) that bridges the two halves of the Fifth Symphony relies on the horn, and principal Graham Lovely led the horns gallantly in this movement, with wonderful tone and confidence. If the orchestra was uncertain anywhere, it was in this most difficult movement, but any sense of instability was quickly resolved by strong section leadership and communication from the podium.

After three movements of intensity, the fourth movement (Adagietto), perhaps Mahler's most famous movement, called upon the strings for a different set of skills. A love letter to Alma Mahler, the composer's future wife, this tender and sincere piece requires passion, sensitivity, and deep earnestness. The strings sounded tender and soulful, with the interventions of harpist Shaylen Joos adding luminous details that created a simultaneous sense of repose and hope.

The concert ended in the Rondo-Finale, which in its spirited irony recalled the lightness of the Schumann and seemed to put a period at the end of the performance. This movement recalls Mahler's first and third symphonies more than the other four, especially in the winds whose performance was strong throughout. The concert closed with a perfectly tuned and ecstatic chord from the brass, subsuming this piece's despair and uncertainty into robust merriment—a joyful conclusion to the season.

ZLATOMIR FUNG

bachtrack

February 22, 2024

Stylish Haydn, flinty Schumann from Shiyeon Sung, Zlatomir Fung and the RPO

By Alexander Hall

Encountering some artists in concert for the first time is always intriguing. There are no preconceived expectations, no colouring of anticipation beyond curiosity, no tired cliches to have recourse to. The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra's Artist-in-Residence during the current season is Zlatomir Fung, the youngest ever cellist to take top prize at the International Tchaikovsky Competition. He has a warm, big-boned sound, rich in nuttiness. Accompanied by Shiyeon Sung, with just a modest body of strings grounded on two double basses and with only pairs each of oboes and horns for additional sonorities, he gave a stylish account of Haydn's *Cello Concerto no. 1 in C major*.

What stood out for me was Fung's careful attention to dynamics, emerging at the start and at later junctures too from the body of orchestral sound with a beautifully sustained high line, yet also exploiting the full range of his instrument with dazzling leaps of virtuosity and full-fat chords played on all four strings. In the central *Adagio* he found a rapt, nocturnal quality to the score, where the shadows of the night cede effortlessly to the magic of moonbeams, the soulfulness of the minor key moving the music into much deeper emotional territory. In the romp of the Finale there was a robust earthiness to Fung's playing, which never lost its burnished sheen, but also an impish delight in the mercurial shifts of mood, always respectful of the classical form yet making it glow from within. Sung ensured a neat-and-tidy, supportive accompaniment.

Of her ability to stamp her own personality on the pieces she conducts I'm less sure. Beethoven's *Leonore Overture no. 3*, heard these days more often as a stand-alone item rather than in the theatrical context, still retains the smell of greasepaint. It is redolent in atmosphere and dramatic strokes of interest, like the off-stage trumpet, suitably distanced for the first entry from the second call. It also needs a flexibility of approach for the transitions to sound organic, bringing together all the operatic elements. Sung's metronomic beat elicited little in terms of orchestral refinement, the eloquent woodwind solos apart, and the playing frequently had a metallic edge to it.

Schumann's *Symphony no. 2 in C major* is a much greater test for any conductor. Sung's characteristics tended more to the technical side of things. Her cueing was exact, rhythmic precision was there, dynamic shadings were present, and good internal balances ensured a transparency to the textures. Indeed, she effectively dispelled all the stuff-and-nonsense perpetrated by some about the composer's supposed inability to orchestrate properly. A lot of wind and brass detail gave an aerated feel to the performance as a whole. However, Sung's angular, often martial-like handling of the baton led to a feeling of regimentation, at odds with the

Romantic sweep of Schumann's melodic inventiveness.

If the woodwind and brass captured Sung's interest, I wish the same had been true for the strings. The hymn-like nature of the introduction to the first movement, with its homage to Bachian counterpoint, was insufficiently conveyed. Nor was enough made of the opportunities for hushed dynamics, those achingly beautiful moments where the words of the Quaker poet come to mind, "O still, small voice of calm". Where was the surge of heady excitement which should preface the coda to the first movement? Come the Finale, where there ought to have been an outpouring of sheer joy, we had a kind of enforced rejoicing which would not have been out of place in Shostakovich, with violins acting more like scythes than angelic harps, and touches of goose-stepping as this majestic work neared its end.

theartsdesk.com

February 19, 2024

Fung, BBC Philharmonic, Weilerstein, Bridgewater Hall, Manchester review - clever and comical

By Robert Beale

Placing the UK premiere of Katherine Balch's *whisper concerto* (for cello and orchestra) after Haydn's Symphony No. 100 was probably an inspired idea from the BBC Philharmonic and conductor Joshua Weilerstein.

In its day, the so-called "Military" Symphony was not only striking on account of its use of novel instrumental effects – the "Turkish music" sound of triangle, cymbals and big drum for one, and clarinets (heard, military-band style, alongside oboes and flute) for another – but the clever and comical way they were brought into a context that was otherwise seemingly orthodox and almost academically conventional.

Weilerstein played it in a manner that we don't often get with Haydn symphonies now: far from paring string forces down to the dimensions most frequently on offer in the composer's own day, he had 40 string players around him and also the plummy sound of modern timpani, albeit hit with hard sticks. The second violins were concealed behind their first violin colleagues and only rarely audible when their line had imitative figures in it, indeed the entire texture was top-dominated and solid.

Those "Turks" made their presence heard in loudly assertive style when they gatecrashed the decorous r

efinement of the second movement's allegretto, but after the careful dance steps of the minuet (soldierly types doing their best to remember their ballroom lessons, perhaps?) in the conclusion of the final movement they had grown more civilised and able to join in the jolly extroversions of its presto.

The solo of Katherine Balch's concerto was played by Zlatomir Fung, the American cellist of Bulgarian and Chinese heritage who premiered it last year in Texas (it was co-commissioned by the BBCX with the Dallas Symphony and Staatstheater Darmstadt and had its European premiere in Darmstadt last year, too).

It looks conventional at first: three movements, each with its title in Italian. But then you notice that the Andante is *agitato*, the Presto is *dolcissimo*, and the finale Andante di nuovo – well, that has its own surprises, too.

As Balch herself comments in her note, "how can an andante be *agitato*? A presto *dolcissimo*?" She's going to show us how. Convention might dictate that the composer of a cello concerto is going to agonise over how to make the soloist heard against the texture of a modern orchestra (and she specifies 50 strings

minimum). In this case there were five percussionists, making a dazzling variety of noises, as well as the weight of full brass and wind and a prepared piano … so how to do it? Amplification, stupid. Zlatomir Fung had his own private sound system, with a couple of small speakers in front of him, and I'm told there was "some manipulation of sound" also. And since he had to play for a considerable length of time with a chopstick in place of his bow, it clearly helps to be able to make unusual sounds audible.

Balch is very precise in her requirements, not only of the soloist but of the orchestra, asking for variations on playing methods such as pizzicato and flutter-tonguing, and I could see Ian Buckle the piano player almost disappearing inside his instrument in order to fulfil her bidding.

For the soloist there are extreme demands of virtuosity, which Fung, I'm sure, met with uncanny skill, and when playing in the normal way his tone was serene and beautiful (the orchestra's assistant principal cello, Maria Zachariadou, eloquently had her moment, too, as she took over the solo's melodic role in the third movement while he was busily occupied with other things).

So what does it all amount to? The piece is a tribute to Ligeti's Cello Concerto and its "whispering cadenza", and she says she aims to make the sounds "extremely strange", while using "almost conventionally tonal" melodies, fragments of free jazz and a kind of chorale effect (which becomes heavily obvious towards the end of the piece) as well. There's also intentional "disorder" and "shameless noise" – those were clear enough, with a really weird sequence of pops and rattles from the percussionists while the soloist was doing his thing with the chopstick. But to the listener the underlying language is one of tonality and concord. It's harmony, Jim, but not as we know it, and that is both seriously amusing and unnervingly reassuring.

Manipulating sound and confounding expectations are the essence of compositional skill, and for the second part of the concert we had a masterclass in the way to do it, in Mozart's Symphony no. 41 (the so-called "Jupiter") – the orchestral strings back to the dimensions heard in the Haydn earlier. Joshua Weilerstein decided to make it into a bit of a lecture-demonstration, too, and played us first the finale of Michael Haydn's Symphony no. 28, a piece which Mozart apparently took ideas from as to how fugal technique could be used inside the structure of a classical symphony, while doing it so many times better with the last movement of the "Jupiter". Mediocrity imitates, while genius steals, as they say.

The opening was vigorously and neatly articulated, with Yuri Torchinsky back in the leader's chair (and the violins behind him playing delightfully in the Andante cantabile, too). The minuet was smooth and delicate, and the finale gloriously clear, with brassy horns and energy on all sides.

Sadly, the prospect of music by an unknown name was enough to deter Manchester's Saturday night concert-goers in droves, despite the mainstream symphonies to sugar the pill.

Santa Barbara Independent

February 5, 2024

ON the Beat | Fung

By Josef Woodard

There are splashier and more household name-powered items on the UCSB Arts & Lectures marquee each season, but some of the roster's greatest "secret" shows occur in the organization's "Hear and Now" series at Hahn Hall, which is geared towards bringing emerging, but internationally anointed young classical artists into the glorious, hallowed hall of the Hahn, perhaps most famously (so far) being a just-emerging piano legend Yuja Wang years back. Last year's list included a stunning performance by French harpsichordist Jean Rondeau, taking on Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, in the composer's extended cut.

We got a taste of another inspired young livewire last Sunday when fast-rising and award-winning 24-year-old cellist Zlatomir Fung gave an impeccably played recital with pianist Benjamin Hochman. Aside from stellar performances by both, the afternoon won ample points for left-of-standard programming, with its set of works in five movements. Schumann and Russian composer Tsintsadze framed the recital, on the simple pleasure turf of folk-based writing.

But the heady meat of the program came with young composer Marshall Estrin's *Cinematheque* — written expressly for his friend Fung, based on the cellist's favorite films — and a superb reading of Benjamin Britten's Cello Sonata, originally written for Mstislav Rostropovich in 1961. Britten's score, with livelier inventions enveloping the brooding, centrally-placed "Elegia, Lento" movement, also demonstrated the taut mesh and empathetic links between these two musicians. Estin's piece, given its west coast premiere here, applied variously-impressions of the films *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *Rashomon*, *Annie Hall*, *Clarie's Knee* and *Moonlight*, delves into a palette of sometimes dissonant and terse areas, with a tipsy taste of stride piano and a surprising, sly quote of "Ain't She Sweet" in the *Annie Hall* segment.

Fung is one to watch and listen for, hopefully returning to a Santa Barbara venue near us.

The Free Press

October 14, 2023

Cellist strings together masterful performance in Canadian orchestral debut

By Holly Harris

In a world aflame with war and political strife, music is one of those enduring balms still able to bring comfort and joy to wounded souls.

But it can also become a vehicle for railing against those same unbridled forces of evil, when composers unleash their full arsenal of creativity as an act of utter defiance.

One such piece is Shostakovich's *Concerto No. 1 for Violoncello and Orchestra,* penned in the wake of Stalinism, during which the composer was persecuted and oppressed by the Soviet regime for his daring, often autobiographical works.

Cellist Zlatomir Fung, 24, marked his auspicious Canadian orchestral debut Thursday night with his deeply felt performance of the searing classic, as featured guest artist during the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra's latest Thursday Classics program, led by maestro Daniel Raiskin.

The rising international star, who first began cello at the tender age of three, is the first American in four decades — as well the youngest musician — to have won first prize at the International Tchaikovsky Competition Cello Division, among many other accolades and awards, and now regularly performs concerts and recitals around the globe.

It takes nerves of steel and an iron-clad conviction, equally matched by stellar technical facility, to even approach one of this composer's contemporary masterpieces. Originally written in 1959 for his friend, legendary cellist Mstislav Rostropovich (who famously memorized

the entire piece in a mere four days), the four-movement concerto is widely regarded as one of the most fiendishly difficult works in the solo cello canon.

However, it proved no match for Fung, who checked all those boxes and more, as he dazzled the mid-week audience of 881 with his unflinching artistry.

The cellist immediately asserted his compelling stage presence during the opening movement, Allegretto, his bow playfully rendering the four-note main motive — derived from Shostakovich's musical cryptogram for his name, D-S-C-H — which runs like a unifying thread throughout the work.

Fung's well-paced performance, propelled by rugged down-bowed accents and double-stop runs, often saw him swaying back and forth with his instrument as though in trance, eyes closed, as he inhabited the music with every cell and fibre.

After Raiskin set a relatively brisk tempo for the elegiac second movement, Moderato, the artist further displayed his unabashed lyricism, as well as a carefully nuanced dynamic palette, with his long-arching thematic lines often barely a whisper.

Kudos to principal horn Patricia Evans for her exposed solo passages, delivered flawlessly. Another highlight was Fung performing his principal melody in artificial harmonics, juxtaposed with a ghostly celesta that elicited goose bumps.

However the evening's still point proved to be the unusual third movement, an unaccompanied solo cadenza that bleeds out from the prior harmonics section. It's admittedly rare for an entire hall to remain stone silent — especially during those softer moments, which can inspire nervous coughs. However, Fung held every rapt listener in the palm of his hands. His mesmerizing, highly introspective performance, which will only deepen with each passing year, grew more passionate by the minute. It finally burst, attacca, into the finale, Allegro con moto, now a wild roller-coaster ride, including its embedded musical mockery of Stalin's favourite song, Georgian folk tune *Suliko*.

Raiskin and his musicians kept pace with Fung note for note, further driving the work towards its enthralling finish, earning the soloist a rousing standing ovation and demand for four curtain calls, in turn leading to a welcome encore of Prokofiev.

The compact, 82-minute program (no intermission) — with a new, earlier start time of 7 p.m., a pre-show performance featuring local artists and a post-show Q&A session — also featured Carl Nielsen's *Symphony No. 2, Op. 16 (The Four Temperaments),* which, remarkably, has not been heard on this stage since 1966, under the baton of the late Victor Feldbrill.

Inspired by the medieval concept of the four temperaments reputed to regulate the human personality, the epic-scaled work's four movements, firmly rooted in post-romantic tradition, are titled after corresponding humours: Choleric, Phlegmatic, Melancholic and Sanguine.

This performance was somewhat marred by flaws that included balance issues with the brass (including a loud' n' proud trombone section) during the opening Allegro collerico, though they were mitigated by the winds' sensitive solo passages.

Raiskin infused the second movement, Allegro comodo e flemmatico, with lilting grace, before the subsequent Melancholic, underpinned by lush string sonorities. The allegro sanguineo — Marziale oddly saw the horns and strings fighting each other at times, not always in lockstep with the maestro's crisp direction, but it nonetheless settled before a bright, fiery finish.

Following virtually every concert these days, audience members leap to their feet like coiled springs as a ubiquitous appendix to standard applause. In this case, the mixed crowd awarded the players a relatively tepid, even sluggish partial standing ovation at night's end, perhaps affected by their own personal humour during these roiling times.

theartsdesk.com

September 28, 2023

Fung, RPO, Schwarz, Cadogan Hall review - high style from new cellist and conductor on the block

Classics have new life and vitality alongside a modest British rarity

By David Nice

You go to a concert, three-quarters of it popular classics – also great masterpieces – having been told you have to hear a brilliant young cellist, and into the bargain you also discover a remarkable conductor and an orchestra on top form shedding transcendental light on the familiar. So everybody's happy.

The finale of Stravinsky's *Firebird* ballet tends to produce communal ecstasy, but like the recent London Philharmonic performance of Mahler's Second Symphony under its principal conductor Edward Gardner, which brought an entire audience to its feet within seconds, the interpretation, in this case of Stravinsky's 1919 Suite, was in any case remarkable. Conducting a Royal Philharmonic Orchestra on gleaming form in the Russian and French works on the programme, Elena Schwarz began the evening with very clear definition in Doreen Carwithen's 1954 tone poem *Bishop Rock*, impressions of the Scilly lighthouse. It sounds like generic film music, and indeed Carwithen composed over 30 scores in that genre. It also sounds like something Walton might have kept in his bottom drawer. But with lively turns of phrase, the brass yet to settle, it served just fine as a curtainraiser, and credit to ABO Trust Sirens, promoting music by women composers throughout history, and the William Alwyn Foundation for their support.

From extroversion with a dash of pastoral idyll at the midpoint to the introspection of Elgar's Cello Concerto, and all credit to 24 year old American of mixed Bulgarian and Chinese parentage Zlatomir Fung, cannily chosen as the RPO's 2023-4 Artist in Residence, for keeping much of it so inward. In-your-face romanticism has been the order of the day since the classic du Pré recording, but since hearing Lynn Harrell play it as, mostly, a private confessional, I've been much more hooked on the concerto as a more restrained slice of Elgar the melancholic. A few balance problems – horns too loud for the soloist in the first movement – were offset by Fung's collegial work with the violins, dialoguing especially with trial leader Samuel Staples (it's not good enough, RPO, to make the reader go online for the orchestral personnel, especially as there were quite a few different musicians onstage last night. If any of the names singled out below are wrong, complain to the orchestra). Eschewing much swoony portamento, and faery-fleet in the dream- scherzo, Fung's greatest revelation was to make what often sounds as dark treading water before the final reminiscence of the Adagio theme truly anguished, as if Elgar can't pull himself out of his slough of despond.

A further profoundly musical surprise came in his encore.

Debussy's *Syrinx* sounding utterly spontaneous and apt even in the lower register of the cello. Its rightful instrument, the flute, came to the fore after the interval as magically as I've ever heard it in the deep soul of principal Emer McDonough in *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. Complemented by John Roberts, making the fullest, meatiest sound I've heard from a London orchestral oboist, this turned out to be in full accord with Schwarz's probing depths. The afternoon languor and playfulness don't often make me moist-eyed, but this performance, capped by the discreet tings of two sets of Chinese cymbals, absolutely did.

Likewise the *Firebird* Suite. So often is the complete ballet performed in concert that I'd forgotten the different orchestral touches of the 1919 highlights parade (though surely the trombone glissando in the middle of the Infernal Dance, which I always miss in the reinstrumentation, is an interloper from 1910? If so, the Suite is all the better for it). Moving from the Debussyesque discretion of the earlier stages – the Frenchman greeted the 1910 premiere with "what do you want? You have to start somewhere" – to more full focus attack in the whirring of the ogre's forces at the command of the Firebird.

Schwarz made two further arresting gambits with a very slow Berceuse, highlighting the fine bassoon solo of Richard Ion and the swooning of divided strings, and the quietest possible transition to the light-filled finale, ushered in with perfect nuance by first horn Alexander Edmundson. You thought first, what amazing masterpieces Debussy and Stravinsky served up in their relative youth, and only second, what top-notch performances.

clevelandclassical•com

July 31, 2023

Cellist Zlatomir Fung brings Shostakovich to his Cleveland Orchestra debut

By Peter Feher

The Cleveland Orchestra put together an intricate and intriguing musical puzzle on July 22 at Blossom Music Center. Each piece on the brilliantly balanced program — which showcased the sensibilities shared by 20th-century composers in France, the Soviet Union, and Japan — held the key to understanding and appreciating the others

The Orchestra, guest conductor Kahchun Wong, and the evening's soloist, cellist Zlatomir Fung were more than up to the task of fitting it all together. Spareness, precision, and sensitivity to detail were the features uniting the mix of repertoire, and the musicians gave superb performances where not a note was wasted…

…Fung set a rigorous standard for the evening with his studied solo turn in Dmitri Shostakovich's Cello Concerto No. 1. The 24-year-old cellist, here in his Cleveland Orchestra debut, showed remarkable maturity throughout this demanding work, playing less to show off and more to make sense of a steely score. You could hear the difference in approach from the start, with Fung treating the Allegretto first movement like a nimble piece by Mozart (and nothing like the strained endurance test of so many other interpretations).

At times, the cellist's light touch didn't carry over the Orchestra, but blame an outdoor venue where string soloists always seem to be at a disadvantage. It would have been great to hear this performance in a space like Severance, where Fung should make a return appearance soon. The subtlety of his choices shone through when he was unaccompanied, in the concerto's cadenza and in a lighthearted encore, Gregor Piatigorsky's arrangement of the March from Sergei Prokofiev's Music for Children…

Chicago CLASSICAL REVIEW

July 27, 2023

A neglected American masterpiece and a commanding solo debut at Grant Park

By John von Rhein

...The soloist was the greatly gifted young cellist Zlatomir Fung. Now 24, the Juilliard School alumnus and Ravinia Steans Institute fellowship winner is the first American and youngest artist ever to have won first prize at the International Tchaikovsky Competition, cello division, in Moscow. Local audiences were left slack-jawed by his artistry at last season's University of Chicago Presents series, and his eloquent Elgar underscored that favorable first impression.

With practically everyone else on stage wearing shirtsleeves, Fung looked downright uncomfortable in his dark suit, but he certainly sounded completely at home as he confidently poured out Elgar's noble lyricism. Nary a wailing siren or mewling child could faze him on a sticky night at Millennium Park. His intonation was impeccable, his tone warmly expressive, his feeling for long-breathed phrases altogether sensitive. He dispatched the skittering, catch-me-if-you-can scherzo to a fare-thee-well, and the inwardness of his final *diminuendo* all but made time stand still.

The festival's sound system balanced the cellist's burnt-umber tone against orchestral sonorities Kalmar shaped most attentively and lovingly, never indulgently.

Mark well the name Zlatomir Fung. You will be hearing a good deal from this already-accomplished cellist in the years to come.

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

July 13, 2023

At Breakers, Bach Blazes Forth

By Steven Martorella

Zlatomir Fung delivered a stunningly radiant, resonant, and joyous account of Bach's solo Cello Suites for Classical Newport Wednesday evening in the Breakers Mansion, the perfect acoustic for both the music and the instrument. Though a spate of recordings, live-streams, and recent performances of the solo suites have joined a long line of pre-pandemic renderings, the offering from this young Tchaikovsky gold medalist runs far ahead of the pack. The combination of the Breakers vibrant acoustics, Fung's authentic approach and intense devotion to the music, and the stunning resonance of the 1717 David Tecchler instrument he played let Bach's genius take on an almost orchestral immersiveness. The artist's light and rapid finger-work evident in those improvisatory-styled passages and ornaments normally associated with Bach's virtuosic technique on keyboard instruments such as the harpsichord or the organ, coupled with a most natural sense of the musical line and awareness of how tones dissolve and evolve into one another offered each piece its own distinctive personality, yet the whole fitting together seamlessly within each suite and together as an entire set.

Fung used very little vibrato, instead allowing the stark beauty and resonance of each note to shine forth, offering the kind of clarity the music demands, and the natural acoustic properties of each tone to prevail, with only a rare and occasional "warming" of the note where appropriate. Fung's acute awareness of what is nominally termed "historically informed performance" extended not only to matters of tone, but also to articulation, delivering Bach's basic non-legato style of articulation in a way that never sacrificed the artistry of the musical line, while offering contrasting smooth, velvety passage-work and mindful attention to those passages marked with slurs, thus creating a natural panoply of sounds, structures, and rhythms.

In the generally light and airy prelude movements, Fung provided foretastes of things to come, as in the manner of a storyteller about to embark on a great journey, setting the stage with "Long ago, in a faraway place and time…." In his remarks, he opined that the prelude of the first suite in G Major, in fact, did this not only for its own suite, but for the entire set of six. Performing the suites out of their numerical order, as is often done, the second offering was the Suite in E-flat Major No. 4, which for Fung both in his remarks and his performance, set up a dynamic of tension between the easy-going, regular

arpeggiated eighth-note chords, alighting and holding on the second lowest note of the instrument, from which emanated a rapid and dynamically contrasting passagework which then kept "interrupting" the regular flow of the arpeggiated passages. There followed the two suites in minor keys, No. 5 in C Minor, with its plaintive Saraband, the only movement of its kind not to have chords, its single notes stark and poignant in their tragic beauty, and then the second suite in D Minor, setting up a cyclic scenario that perhaps mirrored Bach's own life, the youthful simplicity of the G Major, confounded by the darker and more dramatic set of three (E-flat, C Minor, D Minor) and finally concluding with the two most exuberantly joyous suites No. 3 in C Major with its expansive and sonorous Prélude, setting a sound covering a broad range of the cello's compass and frequently employing chords of four strings (called *quadruple-stops*), and the final No. 6 in D Major, covering an even greater range. Perhaps written for an instrument with 5-strings rather than four, this piece "went beyond" in more than one sense, as Fung explained it contained Bach's only written dynamic in the entire set, suggesting the contrasting loud and soft dynamics of a Baroque concerto-grosso, and again using rich four-note chords, but this time often in the highest registers of the cello.

Overall Fung balanced imaginative and creative playing with solid historical scholarship, creating a distinctly personal set—historically secure yet refreshingly new. One could hear suggestions of gamba playing, of rustic village dance drones and stately court processionals, most of all the enigmatic persona of the composer himself, who was often criticized for blending elements of French and Italian as if he could not distinguish the one from the other, but in fact, managing to turn the tables around on his critics by showing time and again, his absolute mastery of both styles and his deliberate and mindful choices in combining them and contrasting them, often within a single work. Fung captured all of this with such awareness, sensitivity, and perfection, revivifying Bach. Fung artfully channeled the master's whimsy, dancing, playfulness, awareness of nature and of sound, and sensitivity to the joys and sorrows of humankind. Plaintive, philosophical, and eternal, the music and this performance could also revel in the jollity of a jig.

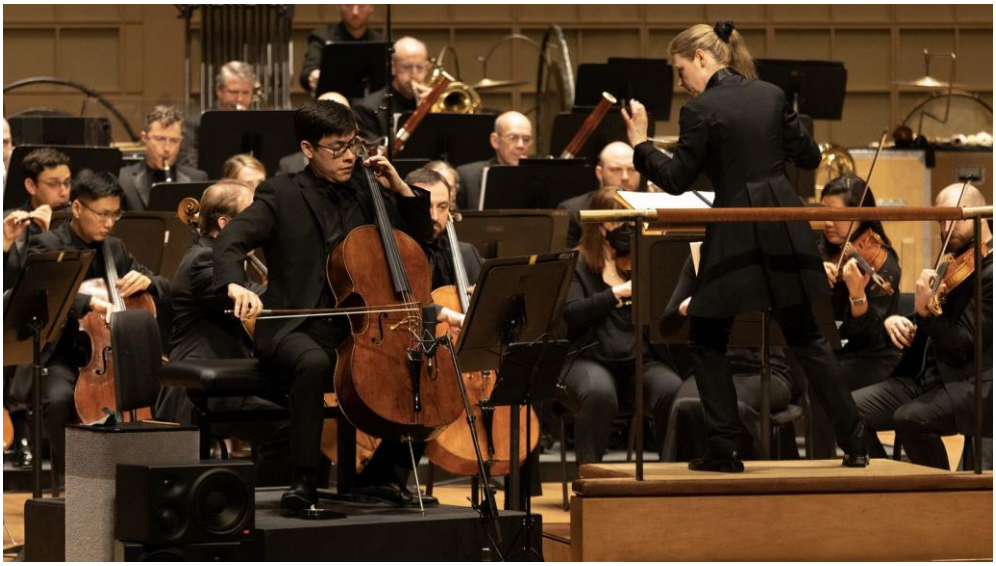
ZLATOMIR FUNG

The Dallas Morning News

April 21, 2023

Dallas Symphony electrifies in 'Rite of Spring,' premieres Cello Concerto

By Scott Cantrell



Thursday night's Dallas Symphony Orchestra concert was a veritable riot of sonic color and texture. The centerpiece was the world premiere of American composer Katherine Balch's elaborately textured *Whisper Concerto*, for cello and orchestra. Also on the program, led by principal guest conductor Gemma New, were Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* and Borodin's *Polovtsian Dances* — two works which shared the program at the Rite's literally riotous 1913 premiere. In her early 30s, with a doctorate from Columbia University, Balch is a visiting composition professor at Yale. The title of her *Whisper Concerto*, a co-commission by the DSO, the Staatstheater Darmstadt in Germany and England's BBC Three, alludes to a hushed cadenza in the 1966 Cello Concerto of the late Hungarian composer György Ligeti.

Name your instrumental special effect, and it's somewhere in this three-movement, 25-minute score. Indeed, a whole page explains the special techniques. A piano is altered in tuning and timbre by various objects clamped to strings or jammed between them. Strings sometime play microtones, pitches between "normal" notes, as well as pitch slides and wispy harmonics. The solo cellist sometimes lays aside the bow to tap strings with a short stick.

So elaborate is all the gimmicky, though, that you'd notice only a little of it unless you'd studied a score and followed it in performance (as I did in a Thursday morning rehearsal). Indeed, one wonders if it's worth loading a score with so many effects that are essentially inaudible. Ultimately, after all the nervous activity, the concerto seems to

strive for the calm chorale that gradually surfaces in the finale.

Slightly amplified, the solo cello is less a "star," less prominent than in most concertos, than an energetic force within the complex textures. The writing is of breathtaking virtuosity, with desperate scurries, big leaps, double stops (more than one pitch played at once), fierce pluckings and slides.

Zlatomir Fung, a young American cellist of Bulgarian and Chinese heritage, with first prizes in the Tchaikovsky and other major competitions, dispatched fearsome challenges with jaw-dropping brilliance. With direction clear and focused, less athletic than in past performances, New and the orchestra made a strong case for the piece. Whether it will have legs remains to be seen, but there was a standing ovation.

The *Rite* challenged its first audience — not to mention the orchestra and Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes dancers. Its earthy primitivism, with lurching rhythms, barbaric yawps and garish shrieks, is news that has stayed news, to borrow Ezra Pound's phrase. But it's long since been standard rep even for conservatory orchestras, and certainly for the DSO.

Conducting more energetically in the *Rite*, New presided over an electrifying performance. Special praise goes to solos from Ted Soluri (that spooky opening bassoon croon), Stephen Ahearn (playing the high E-flat clarinet) and David Matthews (English horn). And there were stirring sounds from the eight horns (five of them subs). I did wish, though, that supertitles had identified the dramatic scenes the music was composed to accompany. Both here and in the rousing account of the *Polovtsian Dances*, from Borodin's opera *Prince Igor*, the visceral immediacy and sonorous envelopment of the Meyerson Symphony Center acoustics made for aural thrills impossible from the finest stereo system.

LEFTLION
Where Nottingham Meets

October 21, 2022

BBC Philharmonic at the Royal Concert Hall

By Ian C. Douglas

What could be a more magical start to a concert than The Sorcerer's Apprentice, the symphonic poem written by Paul Dukas in 1897? As the violins began to plink, many in tonight's audience were no doubt replaying the Disney cartoon in their minds: Mickey Mouse's battle with an army of bewitched brooms. And the BBC Philharmonic delivered those musical memories flawlessly.

So, the evening was off to a good start. Next up was guest cellist, Zlatomir Fung, all the way from America. This 23-year-old is something of a rising star in the classical musical world. He is youngest ever musician to win First Prize at the International Tchaikovsky Competition Cello Division. Since then, he has been delighting music lovers around the world with his virtuosity and undeniable prowess with the bow and strings. This performance was no exception. Zlatomir threw himself into Edward Elgar's Cello Concerto in E minor. Described on the TRCH's web site as 'a poignant farewell to a world blown apart by the First World War', Elgar composed this at a time when his work was losing public appeal. The premiere in 1919 was a flop and the work was largely forgotten about. Then in the 1960s, Jacqueline Du Pré's recording became an international hit, and it has been a popular choice ever since. It is fair to say the legendary Jacqueline Du Pré's version is the definitive one. However, Zlatomir made the piece his own, throwing himself into a passionate rendition that had the auditorium hanging on his every quaver. Zlatomir came across as a likeable and emotive player and his segment was the highlight of the evening.

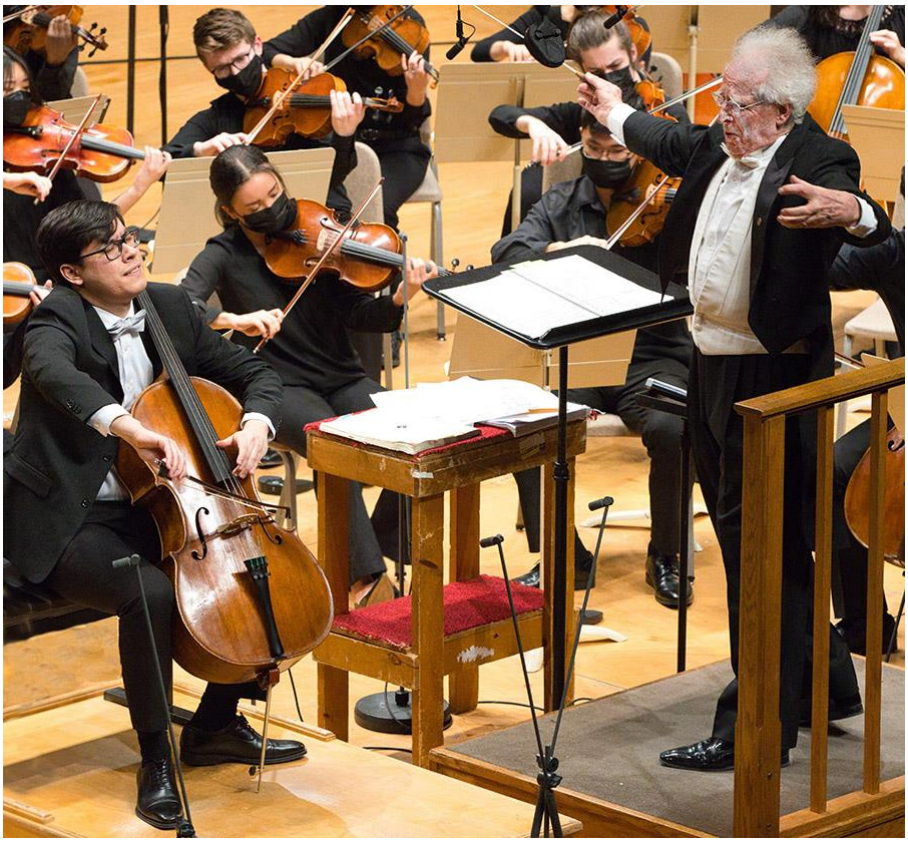
ZLATOMIR FUNG

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

February 28, 2022

War, Terror...and Yes, Uplift

By Jeffrey Gantz



Russia's invasion of Ukraine hung over the concert Benjamin Zander and the Boston Philharmonic Youth Orchestra presented at Symphony Hall Sunday afternoon. Zander began by sharing the thoughts an orchestra member had written to him about the current crisis. He then led the BPO in the Ukrainian national anthem, whose text starts with the words "Ukraine has not yet perished."

The program itself, a 20th-century trio, was already steeped in political turmoil. Both Ravel's *La valse* (1920) and Elgar's Cello Concerto (1919) followed hard on the end of World War I and seemed to be commenting on the collapse of European civilization. Shostakovich composed his Fifth Symphony in 1937, at the height of Stalin's "Great Terror"; Soviet authorities accepted the piece as a celebration, though just what Shostakovich was celebrating is still debated today. It made for a sober afternoon of music, but the performances from Zander, soloist

Zlatomir Fung, and the orchestra were uplifting.

Ravel himself didn't consider *La valse* a response to World War I, noting that he had set the piece (it was intended as a ballet) in 1855. His first thoughts about it seem to date back to 1906: he was contemplating a symphonic poem called *Vienne*, or *Wien* (French and German for Vienna), in honor of the waltz and of Johann Strauss II. By the time he got down to serious composition, it was 1919 and he had a commission for a ballet from Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. Diaghilev rejected the result; Francis Poulenc, who was present, recalled the impresario saying, "Ravel, it's a masterpiece . . . but it's not a ballet . . . It's the portrait of a ballet . . . It's the painting of a ballet." Those words created a permanent rift between Ravel and Diaghilev.

If *La valse* was a ballet, it was, at 13 minutes, a short one. In 1951, George Balanchine turned it into a half-hour dance piece by adding Ravel's 1911 *Valses nobles et sentimentales* at the start. Balanchine also made it a dance of death in which a woman in white is seduced by a figure in black. In 1958, Frederick Ashton, sticking with the 13-minute original, produced something closer to what Ravel had in mind when he told a Dutch newspaper, "It is a dancing, whirling, almost hallucinatory ecstasy, an increasingly passionate and exhausting whirlwind of dancers, who are overcome and exhilarated by nothing but 'the waltz.'"

La valse isn't quite that innocent. The waltz tunes of the first half alternate between teasing and tender, though in one section an unsettling, almost vulgar outburst from the brass and timpani warns of what's to come. The second half reprises the first, but rhythms grow erratic, instrumentation ranges from unexpected to inappropriate, polytonality is hinted at, and the prominence of brass, timpani, and other percussion (cymbals, triangle, castanets, tam-tam, bass drum) make explicit what earlier was only suggested. The tempo quickens; by the end you could almost be listening to Stravinsky's *Sacre*. It's not the sound of the Austro-Hungarian Empire being destroyed in 1918, rather the sound of that empire imploding in 1906.

What we heard as Zander began was the sound of a fretful youngster in the audience; unfazed, he halted the orchestra after a few notes, refocused, and began again. His moderate tempo, along with bassoons, created a spooky atmosphere and gave the players room to be expressive. We got gentle, lilting, languorous waltz tunes, some playful, some dreamy, with glowing solos from piccolo (Joon Park), flute (Grace Helmke), oboe (Coleton Morgan), clarinet (Tristen Broadfoot), and bassoon (Evan Judson). The first irruption from the brass came as a shock, Zander abruptly accelerating, and after that innocence gave way to seductive insinuation. The second half brought the timpani into greater relief; a fine trumpet solo (Sarah Heimberg) signaled the sprint to the climax, which was kaleidoscopic, and then the final pages, which weren't dizzily frenetic so much as lush and lusty.

The Cello Concerto was the last of Elgar's major works, coming some 20 years after the *Enigma Variations*, *The Dream of Gerontius*, and the first *Pomp and Circumstance* march, and a dozen after the First Symphony. In the wake of the First World War, his music had gone out of fashion, and the under-rehearsed premiere of the Cello Concerto, in October 1919, did nothing to restore his reputation. The piece didn't become popular until Jacqueline du Pré recorded it with John Barbirolli (who had played in the cello section at the premiere) in 1965.

Rehearsal difficulties aside, the English public in 1919 may not have been ready for a bittersweet lyricism that bore the scars of war. The concerto opens with a craggy cello recitative in E minor that

puts the question to the orchestra. The woodwinds answer, the cello essays a scale, and the time signature shifts from 4/4 into the lilting 9/8 Moderato of the famous big first subject. This gets tossed back and forth between cello and orchestra, but it doesn't go anywhere, and then the more animated E-major middle section, in 12/8, lapses into reverie. The return of the initial theme is truncated before the cello lets it fade away.

The Allegro molto scherzo spends a third of its four and a half minutes in lazy buzzing before the bees fly off in earnest, and even then they're less than industrious, pausing from time to time in lyrical thought and here too there are lyrical interludes, almost flashbacks. The Adagio is a five-minute meditation on a single theme that leads directly into the closing Allegro. This, like the scherzo, has trouble starting up, and though at 12 minutes it's the concerto's longest movement, it's oddly indecisive. The dotted main theme bustles with forced gaiety; a march version in the cello goes nowhere, as does a hopeful second theme. The cello starts reflecting on the Adagio theme and then on its opening cello recitative. The forward-looking main theme, when it does return to herald a better future, lasts barely 30 seconds.

Zander's instrument, before he turned to conducting, was the cello, and his programs with the BPO and the BPYO have often featured cello concertos. The Elgar was on the BPYO's very first program, in November 2012, with Alisa Weilerstein as soloist and her husband-to-be, Venezuelan Rafael Payare, as guest conductor. On Sunday Zander had as his soloist the gold medalist from the 2019 International Tchaikovsky Competition. Zlatomir Fung was the first American to take the cello division in 28 years, and the youngest ever cello winner.

As with *La valse*, the first notes came from a young audience member (not necessarily the same one). Zander turned and made a remark to the audience that elicited laughter; perhaps he was contemplating the youngster as a future vocal soloist. Fung's first notes, when we did hear them, offered ample evidence of what the Tchaikovsky jury heard: deep, golden, just a hint of gruff or grit. He and Zander didn't wallow in the opening Adagio section; when he did slow, the line didn't sag. The big Moderato melody was resolute, with an unaffected nostalgia; Fung and Zander seemed to be swapping reminiscences. The glorious tutti climax brought memories of the *Enigma Variations* finale. The scherzo went at a light and airy buzz, Fung underlining the cello's initial reluctance to leave the world of the opening movement.

Michael Steinberg's thoughtful program essay on the concerto describes the "songful" Adagio as "a wistful Schumann romance rather than an outburst of Mahlerian anguish" and adds, "it tends to bring out the worst in cellists." It brought out the best in Fung, who, at a proper Adagio tempo, offered a noble elegy for the dead rather than a lament for the whole of Western civilization. The hippity-hoppity main subject of the finale, in Zander's measured reading, sounded fuller-bodied and more persuasive than it often does. All the same, Fung held back, meditated, not seeing that main subject as the way forward. There was sorrow but not self-pity in the retreat into the new theme, then the Adagio, and finally the first-movement recitative. The finish spoke of determination rather than conviction.

Fung also took the gold medal for enunciation in introducing an encore. His "Thank you all so much for being here" was clearly audible even from the back of the house, and so was his announcement that he would play the Sarabande from Bach's First Cello Suite. As in the Elgar Adagio, he was simple and unaffected. I was left wishing Bach had written a longer Sarabande.

Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* was a success at its Leningrad premiere in 1934; it became a fixture in Leningrad and Moscow and spread to international stages. But Stalin's attendance at a 1936 Moscow performance led to the infamous *Pravda* review "Muddle instead of Music" and put the composer at risk. He shelved his already written Fourth Symphony and attempted to placate the Party with his Fifth, which premiered in Leningrad in 1937. After the symphony's first Moscow performance, a journalist suggested to Shostakovich the subtitle "a Soviet artist's practical and creative response to just criticism." Shostakovich accepted it. The criticism he received for *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* was "just" in the sense that his disaffection for Stalin's Soviet Russia was all too obvious. In the Fifth he figured out how to write like a "responsible" Soviet composer and still say what he had to say. We can't know what the Soviet authorities thought of the piece; they may have suspected they were its villains rather than its victors. But given the ovation the Fifth received at the premiere — reportedly 45 minutes, as long as the work itself — there wasn't much they could do but accept it as Shostakovich's return to the fold of Soviet aesthetics.

The score says otherwise. The opening Moderato has a first subject with two themes, one of which stalks the other. The second subject draws on the first, as if to suggest musical themes in the Soviet Union were rationed. But the composer is not allowed to meditate (or grieve) in private: the development coopts the exposition's modest elements into galloping trumpets and a goose-stepping march. The five-minute Allegretto is a parody waltz/ländler with a strong debt to Mahler's barbed *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* song "Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredigt." The Largo, with the violins divided into three parts and the violas and cellos into two each, suggests the choirs of an Orthodox requiem — though Shostakovich was not a believer. It peaks on yet another theme that hammers away on the same note; then celesta and harps tinkle out the coda as if it were the music-box version of a child's prayer.

Shostakovich still had to "justify" the symphony with what would read as a celebratory finale. The opening theme's tub-thumping optimism is undercut by references to Bizet's *Carmen* ("Prends garde à toi"), to the scene in Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* where Pimen sits down to write the truth, and to a song based on a Pushkin text, "Vozrozhdenie" ("Rebirth"), that Shostakovich had written a few months before. The second subject, for solo trumpet, seems to be getting strangled by the orchestra, and the end of the exposition turns into the kind of silent-movie piano accompaniment that as a young man Shostakovich used to improvise at theaters, as if nodding to Party musical taste. The "development" doesn't develop any themes; instead it harks back, in muted strains, to the people's music from the first three movements. The tub thumping, when it returns, hammers home a message. Party officials and the premiere's audience may not have understood that message the same way.

Zander has not made a specialty of Shostakovich the way he has of Mahler, but he has made two recordings of the Fifth, one with the BPO recorded in Jordan Hall in 1994 and one with the BPYO taken from a live performance at Carnegie Hall in 2013. He last played the piece with the BPO in 2012. His general adherence to Shostakovich's metronome markings has invariably produced good results.

Sunday's reading started out sweet but apprehensive; the tone was set by the ominous growl of the bassoons when the stalking theme returned. If Zander's tempo seemed a bit faster than the metronome mark of 76 quavers, pretty

much everyone else's does as well. Corinne Foley's crucial oboe solo made the proper impact; so did the stabbing notes that persist to the end of the symphony. Colors were somber but not gray. Tension remained high in the more animated second subject, with its poignant flute (Joon Park) and clarinet (Alexander Erlich-Herzog) solos, and then thumping piano (Gaeun Lee) led into a development that was rich as well as raucous. Zander maintained clarity in the canons for strings and horns, and the climax, where the recapitulation literally wrenches the material from the development, screamed protest. Flute and horn (Graham Lovely) made for a melting duet; the coda featured nocturnal strings, flute, piccolo (Grace Helmke), and first violin (Eric Chen) all soloing on the oboe motif, and then Lee's hopeful closing celesta, with ghostly trumpets and timpani playing the stalking theme underneath.

Zander's Allegretto brought heavy cellos and basses and winds that squawked and shrieked, sarcastic but not ugly, before settling into Shostakovich's depiction of the Party waltzing. The solo violin and flute of the Trio made a valiant if vain attempt to give the proceedings some dignity. The Adagio surged with passion; Zander's reading called to mind the opening movement of Mahler's Tenth, which was first performed in 1924, though I don't know whether Shostakovich had heard it by 1937. The four-note idea for first violins got due prominence and was later echoed by the xylophone, presaging the finale's hammering away on the same note. There was more fine soloing from flute in the second subject and from oboe, clarinet, and flute in the development's pastoral section; the recapitulation wound down with eerie high violins and then the celesta and harps in the coda.

Tempo in the finale of the Fifth has been a puzzle since the premiere. The general outline is clear: like the first movement, the finale is marked to start at a moderate pace, gradually accelerate to the midpoint, then decelerate till it finishes at close to the original tempo. But for some reason Shostakovich wrote the final mark, the one for the coda, as 184 quavers to the minute rather than the 92 crotchets you'd expect. This decision led to printed scores (some still available today) listing the mark as 184 crotchets to the minute — twice as fast.

The forces who gave the 1937 premiere, Evgeny Mravinsky and the Leningrad Philharmonic, made the symphony's first recording as well, early in 1938. Mravinsky was Shostakovich's choice for the premiere and rehearsed with the composer, so it's no surprise that his recording observes the composer's markings, more or less. Leopold Stokowski gave the American premiere in 1939 and recorded the symphony that same year. He takes not just the coda but the entire finale at a gallop, and that tradition continued in recordings by Dimitri Mitropoulos (1952) and Leonard Bernstein (1959). Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic made theirs (in Symphony Hall) after touring the Soviet Union in the summer of 1959; Shostakovich was present when they performed the Fifth in Moscow and afterward remarked that it worked very well. Perhaps he was being polite to his American guest; perhaps he saw Bernstein's energetic interpretation as a viable alternative. Whichever, the popularity of Bernstein's recording and the speed of his finale — 8:55 as opposed to a norm of 11 to 12 minutes — raised doubts about Shostakovich's intentions. Bernstein may have thought the finale sounded even more hollow at a fast tempo (and Shostakovich may have agreed), but to some listeners, his interpretation suggested the composer had written a genuine celebration of Stalin's Soviet Russia.

That can hardly have been Shostakovich's intent. It wasn't just his Fourth Symphony that "disappeared" in

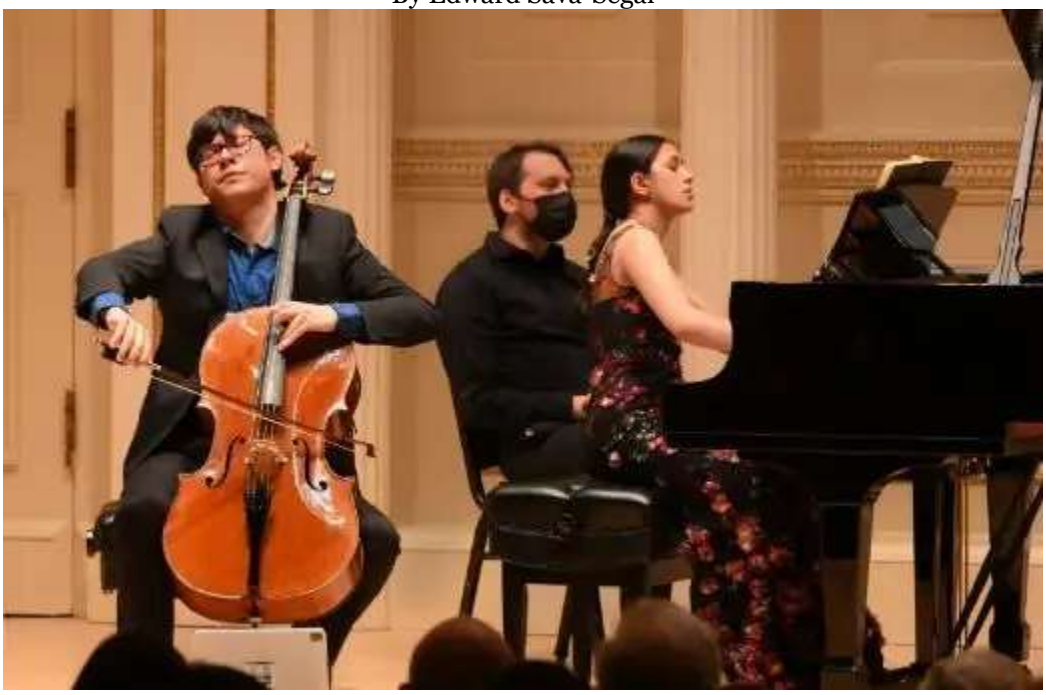
1937 — many of his relations, friends, and colleagues were taken away. In Solomon Volkov's controversial Shostakovich memoir *Testimony*, the composer, speaking of the Fifth's finale, is quoted as asking, "What exultation can there be?" The mundane, timpani-saturated swagger that follows the Largo's delicate prayer is his answer — regardless of tempo. On Sunday, moreover, Zander's very moderate starting tempo undercut any thoughts of festivity, suggesting instead the people's slow trudge. The second-subject trumpet solo (Jon-Michael Taylor) broke through the orchestra's stranglehold; the shimmering horn solo that ushers in the development seemed to belong to a different time and place. This took us, inexorably, to another magic celesta moment before the march returned. Zander's slow pace clarified Shostakovich's reason for putting the final metronome mark in quavers: he wanted us to hear every individual eighth note, right down to the coda, where, under timpani bashing in fourths (Shostakovich must have had the Mahler Third in mind), one note, an A, is repeated 252 times. In Zander's final pages, this was the note of the people, the protest of the people, the resistance of the people, their ownership of the music.

bachtrack

October 21, 2021

Carnegie Hall: Zlatomir Fung and Mishka Rushdie Momen drape transcriptions in a golden glow

By Edward Sava-Segal



Transcriptions and arrangements are not an insignificant part of the Western musical heritage, allowing composers to reuse preconceived material and interpreters to enrich their repertoire. By chance or by design, only one of the works included by Zlatomir Fung and Mishka Rushdie Momen in their Carnegie Hall debut recital – Dvořák's brief but melodically rich *Waldesruhe (Silent Woods)* – was originally conceived for cello. Schumann scored his *Adagio and Allegro in A flat major* for the recently introduced valve horn, while Schubert wrote his *Sonata in A major "Arpeggione"*, D.821 for a hybrid instrument that was in vogue in the 1820s before disappearing in the bottomless pit of forgotten gadgets. César Franck's famed *Violin Sonata in A major* was meant to feature, as the title suggests, a violinist. (The encore introduced another arrangement, by Marshall Estrin, adding a beautiful cello line to Borodin's *Nocturne* from the *Petite Suite* piano cycle).

At his young age, Fung seems to be one of those rare musicians with a Midas touch: he quickly envelopes every score he plays in an almost palpable golden aura. Always smiling, he approached both the gentle and dreamy introduction

and the fiery second segment in Schumann's *Adagio and Allegro* with the same calm determination that was a distinctive sign of the entire evening. The way Fung and Rushdie Momen never overemphasized the piece's ebullient romanticism, drawing attention instead to those lyrical passages in the *Allegro* that recall the melodic and rhythmic motives first encountered in the *Adagio*, was remarkable indeed.

More evidence of the deep level of understanding between two interpreters that haven't played much together was even clearer in the meatier works on the program. It is not about their entrances being (almost always) synchronous or blending timbres but about sharing a perspective on the relative importance of every interpretative detail. In rendering Schubert's music, they seem to agree that reminiscences of his gloomy Lieder are never too far even in a relatively exuberant opus as the *Arpeggione Sonata*. The melancholy-imbued central movement with its frequent major-minor shifts was truly the high point of this version, despite its brevity. The *Allegro Moderato*, with the cello main theme detaching itself from the accompanying weave, sounded at times both energetic and pensive. The joy in the virtuosic finale was mostly tempered, with forte moments proving themselves ephemeral.

Presented in Jules Delsart's well-known arrangement – the only one sanctioned by the composer – Franck's *Sonata in A major* was rendered with great ardor and lyricism. At the same time, details were carefully considered. At the end of the serenade-like *Allegretto*, the merging of the two alternating themes was exquisite. The way the sad, Slavic-sounding motif appearing in the *Recitativo-Fantasia* was connected to the opening theme had a magical quality. In a score where the piano has a major role, Rushdie Momen's assertive pianism successfully supplemented Fung's inspired reading. Nevertheless, as in Schubert, the sensitive, technically solid pianist could only partially match the cellist's phenomenal dynamic range, constantly instilled with surprising inflections.

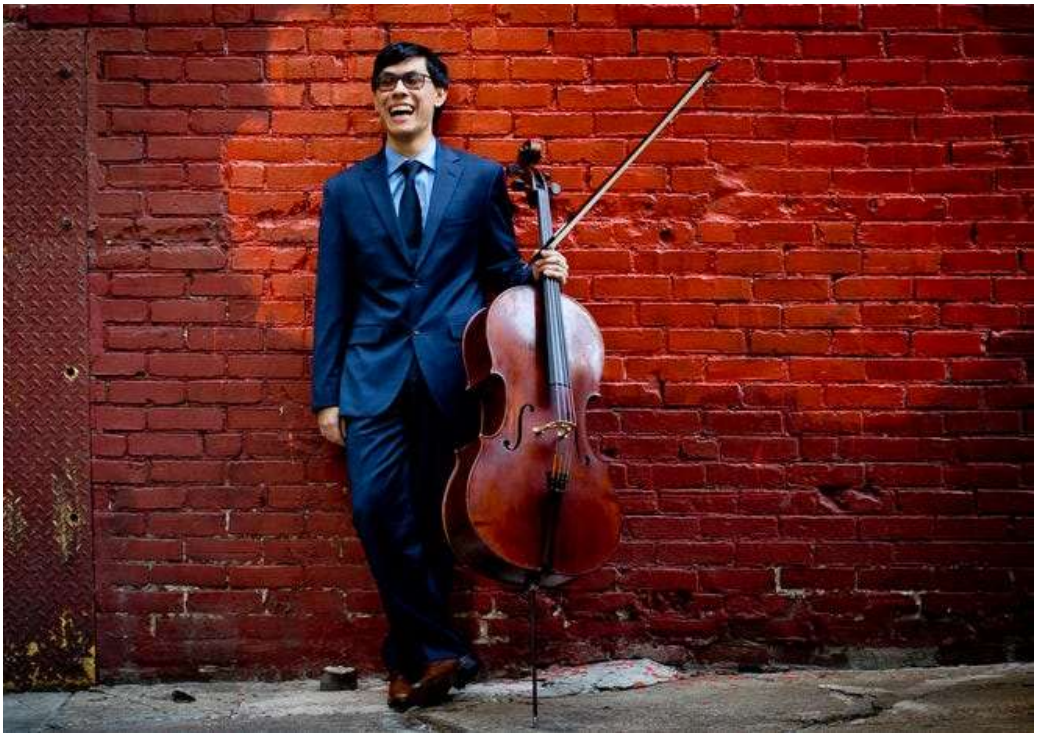
Weill Recital Hall's intimate space and acoustics offered the opportunity to absorb chamber music in conditions closer to those the composers had in mind when they conceived their opuses. When purists comment about the need to employ original instruments to recapture the creators' intentions, they only tackle half the equation. Despite using (relatively) modern instruments, the clarity of the sound and the level of perceived details in Fung and Rushdie Momen's recital easily transported one back in time to an 19th-century salon.

TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

November 15, 2021

Symphony Pro Musica – and soloist Fung – brilliant in return to stage at Mechanics Hall

By Jonathan Blumhofer



Symphony Pro Musica, silenced for 21 months by the coronavirus pandemic, returned to the stage in triumph this weekend with the aptly-titled program, "Return to Performance!" Their concert Sunday afternoon at Mechanics Hall (also presented at Hudson High School on Saturday night) brought together pieces by William Walton, William Levi Dawson and Edward Elgar.

Elgar's 1919 Cello Concerto had been slated for SPM's aborted spring 2020 season. Happily, the orchestra and conductor Mark Churchill were able to reschedule it for this past weekend – and with the originally-planned soloist, Westborough native Zlatomir Fung, in tow.

By just about any measure, the Julliard-trained Fung is a major, up-and-coming artist, with the distinction of being the youngest musician to have taken First Prize in the Tchaikovsky Competition Cello Division (he was also the first American in 40 years to net the award when he won it in 2019).

Sunday's performance brilliantly showcased what all the fuss is about.

Fung's playing was consistently warm-toned and beautifully connected, especially in the flowing, lyrical turns that make up much of the Elgar's first and third movements. At the same time, he brought terrific energy to the music's extroverted portions, particularly the

second movement's spiccato articulations.

All the while, Fung emphasized the music's melancholy character, drawing out the introspective, vulnerable qualities of its exposed passagework. Further, his takes on the Concerto's handful of playful figurations sparkled.

Churchill led SPM in an accompaniment whose phrasings were notably flexible and rhythmically taut. Indeed, the ensemble's sensitive responsiveness to Fung's reading – in terms of color, articulation and dynamics – impressed mightily.

Afterward, the cellist rewarded Sunday's house with an encore of a J. S. Bach "Sarabande."

The afternoon's other big piece was Dawson's "Negro Folk Symphony."

Premiered by Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1934, the Symphony's three movements draw on various African American spirituals, all vigorously transformed and developed.

It's rarely heard, at least since Stokowski's early-1960s recording of the piece, and Churchill and SPM deserve credit simply for presenting this gripping score.

But Sunday's was also a rightly mighty performance of it.

The big first movement, "Bond of Africa," was characterized by vital rhythms and soulful melodies. Churchill ensured that the music was carefully balanced and blended, all the while drawing a big dynamic range from his forces. Accordingly, the score's explosive moments – especially its cacophonous, Ivesian peroration – spoke bracingly.

In the central movement, "Hope in the Night," beauty and mystery intermingled, highlighted by melting solos from English hornist Ariel Fullmer and principal horn Mauricio Marinez. Its playfully dancing central part offered a bit of light relief, though it was SPM's bold realization of the movement's sober, closing bars that left the strongest impression.

Meanwhile, the concluding "O, Le' Me Shine, Shine Like a Morning Star!" was smartly shaped, its snapping call-and-response figures culminating in a visceral account of the Symphony's driving coda.

To open the afternoon, Churchill and SPM led off with Walton's swaggering "Crown Imperial March." First heard at the coronation of King George VI in 1937, this is music of nobility and celebration.

On Sunday, Mechanics Hall's resonant acoustic provided "Crown Imperial" a conspicuously lustrous sheen. Within that, SPM's performance was warm and stately, marked by tight rhythms, swirling woodwind runs, and playing of rich dignity over the march's songful theme.

ZLATOMIR FUNG

THE ASPEN TIMES

August 10, 2021

Aspen Music Fest Review: Cellist Fung impresses

By Harvey Steiman

Sunday's Aspen Festival Orchestra featured the mainstage debut here of cellist Zlatomir Fung. Once a member of the Aspen Contemporary Ensemble, he went on to score a big victory in the International Tchaikovsky Competition, the first American in four decades to win the cello division.

His performance of the composer's Rococo Variations on Sunday revealed refined playing of the dancing theme and the first few variations. Singing tone, pinpoint pitch and phrasing shaped the slower middle sections, and he finished with brilliantly rapid playing in the finale. A modern encore let him pull out all the virtuoso stops, a reminder of his work with the contemporary ensemble here.

ZLATOMIR FUNG

theStrad
VOICE OF THE STRING MUSIC WORLD SINCE 1890
October 2019

First-prize winning cellist Zlatomir Fung played to his strengths in Shostakovich's Second Concerto

ST PETERSBURG

Four of the six finalists in the cello discipline of the 16th Tchaikovsky Competition were good enough to have walked away with first prize, even if it was clear why the judges opted for the American Zlatomir Fung (pictured right). In every sense, in St Petersburg we were a long way from the respective drama and controversy of the violin and piano finals taking place in Moscow. The result reflected it. The winner chose not a showpiece (as far as any cello concerto can be such), but a simmering, unsettling and predominantly quiet work – the second of Shostakovich's concertos. At the concert hall named after the same composer, the audience appreciated Fung's risky choice and was visibly moved by a performance that proved there wasn't so much risk after all. He was only the second finalist to be treated to a rhythmic handclap from the audience, after that for the Russian Anastasia Kobekina the previous evening (she was placed third).

Choosing the right repertoire is strategy in itself, and with the Shostakovich, Fung played to his strengths – among them the sort of ability to control the score's slow-burn agenda that you would normally associate with one beyond his years (at 20, he was the second-youngest finalist after 17-year-old Yibai Chen from China). With no orchestral introduction to steady his nerves and settle a not entirely concentrated audience in sweltering St Petersburg, he crept into the concerto's opening bars with steel, plotting the first movement's long line with poise and patience. He was on top of the atmosphere in the curious dance with the tambourine at the start of the finale, and his care with expression meant he came out of it fighting, with yet another tone colour to show us.

Many would have suspected something special was on the way following Fung's performance of the prescribed work, Tchaikovsky's *Rococo Variations*. Of all the contestants, Fung appeared the least eager to please as he played with the St Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra, extending their yawning opening gestures with an accomplished nonchalance bordering on the louche. It was a performance in which the soloist prioritised his own enjoyment – which is fine if you have the nerve for it, and he did. Fine also if you have the quality of sound, and that Fung most certainly does have: a cultivated, deep yet unforced voice blessed with a legato that persisted even in the cadenzas, where Fung allowed us fleeting glimpses of his passionate soul. Sometimes, that legato could compromise clarity and accuracy: in the final variation, his tuning wavered.

For those who would have liked more red blood, there was another finalist who provided it while retaining soulful composure and boasting something of Fung's delectable sound. Kobekina (24)

Second-prize winner Santiago Cañón-Valencia breathed colour and humanity into his cadenzas

Third-placed Anastasia Kobekina played Elgar with simmering passion and strength

IT WOULDN'T HAVE SURPRISED ME HAD FIFTH-PLACED 17-YEAR-OLD YIBAI CHEN WON OUTRIGHT

offered up an Elgar Cello Concerto with simmering passion and real architectural strength – linking up the concerto's varied ideas where the orchestra could appear unconvinced or even confused (there was one unanimously incorrect entry from a group of wind players). Kobekina is a player with huge potential and almost overwhelming sincerity. She gave us surely the most reactive *Rococo Variations*, cocking an ear towards the winds, shifting colour and interpreting more overtly, though it came after an admittedly stiff start.

The top three finalists happened to play consecutively, and it was second-placed Santiago Cañón-Valencia (24), from Colombia, who preceded Kobekina on the middle evening of three. Bejewelled with multiple finger rings and with his black hair bound tightly in a bun, he cut a dashing figure on the stage of the St Petersburg Philharmonia's Grand Hall and enjoyed posing for photos with the competition's legions of young followers after his performance – for a good deal of which his eyes were apparently fixed closed.

Cañón-Valencia may be a natural performer on and off stage, but his *Rococo Variations* trod a central line that shied away from revelatory exposure, of himself or of the score, and couldn't match the conversational lightness of Fung's performance. The Colombian got his teeth into Shostakovich's First Cello Concerto, retaining a certain beauty of tone in the first movement but conveying the all-important claustrophobia at the same time. In that respect, he could give the impression of wanting more confrontation and imposition from the St Petersburg PO and Nikolai Alexeev, a restrained conductor from whom less sometimes really is less. Cañón-Valencia got his way in the cadenzas, into which he breathed variegated colours and true humanity, and by the conclusive chase-down he had even managed to cajole the orchestra into bringing him something of a fight. But it was easy to conclude that the Colombian simply wasn't in his preferred environment, as much as he sucked up the attention of the competition's youthful fans.

The all-cellist jury chaired by Clive Gillinson – it featured Mario Brunello, Myung-Wha Chung, Karine Georgian, Ralph Kirshbaum, Mischa Maisky, Truls Mørk, Daniel Müller-Schott, Sergei Roldugin, Tsuyoshi Tsutsemi, Jan Vogler, István Várdai and Jian Wang – might have been on the lookout for a ready-made soloist rather than exceptional potential, as there was plenty of the latter in the lower-placed finalists. It wouldn't have surprised me had fifth-placed 17-year-old Chen won outright. He is a player of huge charisma, prone to demonstrative gestures and clearly aware of his talents. His choice of the Prokofiev *Symphony-Concerto* – a piece that needs its soloist to be more than a soloist – reinforced as much but showed that, despite a big sound and huge presence, he was prone to occasional bluster and was often a stranger to intimacy.

He is certainly one to watch, as is Finnish Senja Rummukainen (another 24-year-old at the time of the competition), who played straight before Chen on the opening night of the finals and whose own sotto voce sound reinforced the sheer heft of his. I have heard Rummukainen before, in delectable chamber music and small-scale concertante performances; she has lots to offer the world stage but there is no doubting that the scale of her sound counted against her here in both the Tchaikovsky and in Dvořák's Concerto. She was positioned sixth. We heard the Dvořák, too, from fourth-placed South Korean Taeguk Mun (25), who opted to play his concerto first and the *Rococo Variations* second. Like Rummukainen, he used the slow movement's bewitching poise to cast a spell over the large hall. But his tuning was shaky in the faster passages. If he wanted to clear his head before the divertissement footing of the Tchaikovsky, it worked. His performance was warm, sensitive and humorous enough even to raise a smile and some lightness from Alexeev on the podium. No mean feat.

ZLATOMIR FUNG

the Strad

June 28, 2019

Winners announced at Tchaikovsky Competition

Sergey Dogadin and Zlatomir Fung take the violin and cello crowns in Moscow and St Petersburg

The Tchaikovsky International Competition has announced the winners of its 2019 edition across all categories. It's violin and cello winners are:

Violin

- 1st prize Sergey Dogadin (Russia)
- 2nd prize Marc Bouchkov (Belgium)
- 3rd prize Donghyun Kim (South Korea)
- =4th prize Mayumi Kanagawa (US)
- =4th prize Aylen Pritchin (Russia)
- 6th prize Milan Al-Ashhab (Czech Republic)

Cello

- 1st prize Zlatomir Fung (US)
- 2nd prize Santiago Cañón-Valencia (Colombia)
- 3rd prize Anastasia Kobekina (Russia)
- 4th prize Taeguk Mun (South Korea)
- 5th prize Yibai Chen (China)
- 6th prize Senja Elina Rummukainen (Finland)

Held every four years and now in it's 16th edition, the competition also has

piano, woodwind, brass and voice sections.

First prize winners in each instrument category will be awarded $30,000 each and from these a Grand Prix recipient will be awarded an additional $100,000, to be announced on 29 June during the winners' gala concert at the New Stage of the Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg.

Second prize winners take $20,000 and silver medal, and third prize $10,000 and bronze medal; fourth to sixth places win $5,000, $4,000 and $3,000 respectively.

Sergey Dogadin, 30, whose final performance included Mozart's Violin Concerto no.3 in G major and the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto, came second in the 2011 Tchaikovsky Competition, in which no first prize was awarded.

He graduated from the St Petersburg State Rimsky-Korsakov Conservatory (classes of Professor Vladimir Ovcharek and Professor Andrei Dogadin); studied at the International Menuhin Music Academy (IMMA) with Maxim Vengerov (2012); completed his postgraduate course at Hochschule für Musik und Tanz Köln (class of Professor Mihaela Martin) and the University for Music and Performing Arts Graz (class of Professor Boris Kuschnir). He continues to study with Kuschnir, who was on the Competition jury, at the Music and Arts University of the City of Vienna.

He has previously won the Joseph Joachim International Violin Competition in Hannover (first prize) and the Singapore International Violin Competition (first prize). He plays a 1721 Domenico Montagnana violin.

Zlatomir Fung, born in the United States in 1999 of Bulgarian-Chinese heritage, currently studies with Richard Aaron and Timothy Eddy at the Juilliard School. He was a first prize winner of the 2017 Young Concert Artists International Auditions, and made his recital debuts earlier this year in New York and Washington, DC.

He has also won first prizes at the Schoenfeld International String Competition, George Enescu International Cello Competition, Johansen International Competition for Young String Players, Stulberg International String Competition and Irving Klein International Competition.

ZLATOMIR FUNG

Oberon's Grove

February 19, 2019

Young Concert Artists: Zlatomir Fung

Young Concert Artists presenting cellist Zlatiomir Fung in his New York debut recital at Merkin Hall. Tengku Irfan was the pianist for this wide-ranging, thrillingly-played program.

"Young" was the operative word tonight. And both of these musicians disprove the old adage that 'youth is wasted on the young'; they have spent their teen years developing their talent, and building impressive performance résumés. Now they are ready for anything.

Mr. Fung, a native of Oregon, reveals a charming personality in this Q & Afrom the Violin Channel. Of Bulgarian and Chinese heritage, the earnest 19-year-old cellist was greeted by enthusiastic cheers from the packed house when he walked onstage at Merkin Hall tonight. In the course of his opening work - four of the *Eleven Capricci for Solo Cello* by Joseph Dall'Abaco - Zlatomir Fung established himself as both a poet and virtuoso of the highest order.

These Dall'Abaco works are a very pleasant alternatives to the Bach cello suites with which cellists so often open their recital programs. Mr. Fung displayed clean, warmly resonant tone, a gift for dynamic finesse, and a depth of feeling that seemed remarkable in one so young. In the first *Capriccio*, trills and grace notes were deftly etched into the musical line. To end his set of four, Mr. Fung chose the 11th, which includes passages of demented *agitato,* played with great fervor. As applause engulfed the cellist, he took a spot among my top five players of the instrument...or maybe even...my top three?

Pianist Tengku Irfan - slender of frame and looking far younger than his score of years - then joined Mr. Fung for a revelatory performance of Enest Bloch's *Baal Shem*. This music was new to me; the passion and tenderness with which the two artists played it made a direct connection to my soul.

Ernest Bloch, a native of Switzerland, was a young violinist on tour in the USA when, falling short of money, he got stranded in New York City and decided to stay here. Moved by a Hasidic Jewish service he attended in 1919, Bloch wrote the *Baal Shem*, subtitled "*Three Pictures of Hasidic Life.*"

During the opening *Vidui*, I was so mesmerized by the playing of Mssrs. Fung and Tengku that I couldn't write even the briefest note about the music; all I can say is that it moved me deeply - both the music itself and the playing of it. The piano introduction to the ensuing *Nigun* - masterfully played by Irfan Tengku - leads to music-making of searing intensity from both players. A series of descending trills for the cello took my breath away. In a complete mood swing, the concluding *Simchas Torah* has a very optimistic feel: an almost romantic-style passage leads to dancing and ultimately to passion. With a tumult of cheers and applause, the audience saluted the two musicians after this spell-binding performance.

In a remarkable display of what a cello can do, Mr. Fung gave a triumphant performance of Luciano Berio's *Sequenza*. From his opening tapping, patting, and slapping of his cello, Mr. Fung creates all manner of sound effects - shivering, squeaking, barking, scratching, gliding - as the piece proceeds. Mixed in are brief touches of whispered *pianississississimo,* including an ultra-quiet ending. This bravura showcase knocked the audience for a loop; Mr. Fung took a bow amid a din of enthusiasm.

Following the interval, the pianist and cellist gave the premiere performance of *Prelude* by Katherine Balch, the current YCA Composer-in-Residence. This was my second hearing of music by Ms. Balch, and again it struck me as finely-crafted music from a composer who has perhaps not yet found her own distinctive voice.

From a turbulent start, we go on a magical mystery tour and - via some strong accents - to noisy music that works both players into a frenzy. The gimmick of having the pianist reach inside the piano to produce isolated sounds has been done before - I never get the point of it - but a mad cello cadenza gives the piece a spark. An amusing sour taste sets in as some intentionally ambivalent pitches crop up. Drifting onward, *Prelude* leads without pause into the evening's final work: the Brahms *Cello Sonata in E-minor*, Opus 38.

In the Brahms, the partnership of cellist and pianist showed yet again how finely matched these two musicians are. It's a bit of an odd sonata, in that there's really not a 'slow' movement *per se*. But the opening *Allegro non troppo* (actually very '*non troppo'*) makes up for it: it has a darkish glow with a poignant, wistful melodic line. The pianist here was a marvel, and Mr. Fung summoned incredible depth of tone from his cello. The second movement is a *Menuetto* that sometimes teasingly has the air of a waltz; the musicians play at times in unison. Mr. Tengku had the Steinway in full flourish for the concluding *Allegro*, and Mr. Fung sealed his New York debut triumph with spectacular playing.

As an encore, these two young artists offered a luminous rendering of Gabriel Fauré's "*Après un rêve*". The sheer enthralling beauty of their playing held the audience in a state of breathless awe.

BENICIA HERALD

February 2, 2017

Vallejo Symphony sees high turnout for 'Noon'

By Elizabeth Warnimont

Soloist Zlatomir Fung, left, and VSO Director Marc Taddei attended a post-concert reception at Avery-Green Honda in Vallejo Sunday evening

The Vallejo Symphony Orchestra (VSO) played the second concert of its 2016-17 season to an impressive crowd at the Hogan Auditorium in Vallejo Sunday. With 364 people attendind, it was the largest audience for the orchestra since 2014, according to VSO board member Tim Zumwalt. "Noon" was the middle concert of the season, falling midway between last November's "Morning" and the upcoming "Evening," slated for March. All three concert titles take their names from corresponding Haydn symphonies.

In this, the second concert of his first season at the baton for the Vallejo ensemble, Marc Taddei seemed excited to be presenting not only "the greatest symphony ever written," as he describes Beethoven's Eroica, but also a fresh, early work by Haydn and a special performance by a bright young talent in Shostakovich's Cello Concerto No. 1, featuring prodigy cellist Zlatomir Fung of Massachusetts.

Taddei introduced the day's first selection, Haydn's "Noon" or Symphony No. 7 in C Major, as a work of raw talent, written before the classical-era master developed his more mature and refined, signature composition style. The piece is built on a simple, even structure, with distinct variations on a brief melodic theme. Not only does the listener hear much repetition in rhythm and melody throughout, but the piece also lacks power and even variation in mood. It might remind some listeners of early music lessons.

The Haydn piece started out with a really beautiful mixture of winds and strings. The initial measures set a tone of pleasantness and contentment, full of color in its balanced blend of sound. As the movement got rolling, though, those segments of perfect sonic harmony and clear, attuned horns adorning well-synchronized strings became only intermittent.

The slightly more emotional second, adagio movement sounds almost sappy to a 21st century ear. One can feel the relative immaturity of the younger composer. It is refreshing in one sense, in its bright innocence, but it lacks sufficient power, either in humor or passion, to command a respectable level of interest. The symphony performed the youthful music with technical mastery.

In the third, menuetto movement, the horns awaken the ear with renewed splendor as they accentuate the underlying waves of sound from the strings, but surprisingly in this performance, wherever the strings were quiet and the winds had occasion to shine alone, they sounded disappointingly timid.

In its finale, allegro movement, the piece picks up excitement with its faster pace and higher-register, piccolo-adorned melodies – but again, in those measures where the winds had their moments to shine alone, the sound was notably restrained. The movement cried out for something greater, whether in serenity or brave power, and the important wind instruments fell shy.

Shostakovich's Cello Concerto No. 1 also begins simply, with a four-note theme presented by the solo cello. The theme is quickly elaborated upon by string sections and builds to pulsating, percussive waves, beating solidly and steadily like a gently rolling sea against the prow of a ship.

Listeners are drawn slyly and smoothly into the more frenetic pace and tone of the second, moderato movement. The even rhythm of the preceding allegretto falls away to a more restless tone, creating a picture of an escapee frantically navigating unknown avenues, some ominous force pressing him urgently forward. In turn, the frenzy of the movement is somewhat calmed by soothing tones from the bassoon, as if a great bird were soaring above the fray, alerting the subject to a route to safety. Horns and clarinets also contribute contrasting sounds of soothing amid the urgency of the solo cello and its accompanying larger strings. As if in response to the encouraging winds, the solo cello takes on an assertive thread leading into the subsequent candenza movement.

This is where Fung had the greatest opportunity Sunday to demonstrate to listeners how he has come to win so many impressive awards at his young age. The 17-year-old cellist showed a mastery of his instrument that was truly a thing to behold. He was lost in the magic of the music – not lost as one may be lost at sea, but lost to the middle school auditorium as he executed his pure talent, maneuvering the strings with exquisite control as he created his own musical mosaic. The candenza was highly creative, yet firmly in keeping not only with the style of the piece but with its story progression as well. Fung's cadenza measures told the story of a soul in sadness but not despair, vulnerable yet able to grasp onto hope and continue forward on an ever-surer path until it finds a place of solace in the company of kindred spirits.

Beginning during the cadenza, in its latter half, the music takes a turn to long periods of slow quiet, so much so that some in the audience Sunday were lulled to sleep. Even the timpani drum, which pounded annoyingly (as prescribed) in the earlier movements, began to sound overly muted. A surprise punctuation by chimes contributed to the dreamy mood, as the cello notes spanned from the instrument's highest to its lowest registers, so gently as to maximize the dreamy feel.

The piece concludes with a final, allegro movement, and the orchestra and soloist did increase their volume at that point but not their passion, as if the dreamer awakened to a semi-conscious but never fully awakened state.

Taddei introduced the afternoon's final selection, Beethoven's Third, or Eroica Symphony, as "the most important symphony ever written." That may be true, from a historical perspective, as its clear reflection of ideals from the French Revolution and the very Age of Enlightenment earn it a place in world socio-musical history. It is also unquestionably a magnificent piece of music regardless of its position on a timeline – but whether or not it's the greatest musical accomplishment in its era of music history, or even the composer's greatest achievement, is a

matter of more varying, subjective opinion.

The piece opens with grandeur, a heralding of its own arrival, or conceivably that of some grand royal procession. Strings quickly predominate, building in waves a pleasant, rolling thunder in varying degrees of power. Winds enhance the exuberant energy with bright, clear tones. Forceful beats from the timpani drum announce the most powerful moments – and Vallejo's was right on the money in tempo, if excessively loud. The basses and cellos were also exquisite in precision and tone, if a bit too quiet to fully appreciate their sensitive expression.

The second, adagio movement (Marcia funebre, or funeral march) seemed brief and inconspicuous until its end, when a simple and percussive beat signaled its ultimate climax, preparing listeners for the dramatic change to come.

In its third, scherzo movement, flutes lend a confident, joyful aspect, though again, at least from left of center in the audience seating area, they sounded overly quiet. The violins laid the foundation on which the winds danced, and their tuneful response was enthusiastic and lovely.

The fourth, finale movement, an allegro molto, allows a soft staccato to establish the story and once more, the orchestra's winds responded in lovely but quiet congruence.

The symphony under its new direction is taking shape nicely, and the March season finale promises to be a strong finish.

ZLATOMIR FUNG

June 3, 2016

Baltimore Chamber Orchestra sets 34th season; closes 33rd stylishly

By Tim Smith

The 2015-2016 season finale last Sunday began with the BCO's assistant conductor Joshua Hong leading a supple, buoyant account of J.C. Bach's deftly written Symphony in D, which points the way toward Mozart and even early Beethoven.

The ensemble's smooth, well-balanced playing continued throughout the afternoon, with Thakar taking the podium.

There was a sensitive collaboration with guest artist Zlatomir Fung in Schumann's poetic Cello Concerto. A rich, warm tone, impeccable intonation and thoughtful phrasing suggested a good future for the 17-year-old soloist. His appreciation for dynamic shading proved especially rewarding.

Thakar overlooked possibilities for underling the audacious spirit of Beethoven's Symphony No. 1, stressing instead the graceful, lyrical side. That yielded very elegant results in the Andante (the woodwinds supplied lovely tone color here). If the other movements could have used more bite, the transparency and clarity of the orchestra's response proved admirable.