

Review

**CMA Masters of the Violin — Ray Chen
with Julio Elizalde (February 12)**

by Daniel Hathaway



Not quite twenty-five years old, violinist Ray Chen has left his prodigy days well behind and enjoys a burgeoning reputation as a smart, stylish young virtuoso who told this publication that his main concern is to connect with audiences.

Born in Taiwan and brought up in Australia, and having spent a local stint at the Encore School for Strings in Hudson barely a decade ago, Chen is refreshingly devoid of pretense and attitude. And as he showed a good-sized audience at the Cleveland Museum of Art on February 12, he can deliver an impressive and thoroughly engaging recital.

Chen and his pianist partner, Julio Elizalde, playing modishly from iPads, led off with a vigorous and incisive retelling of Mozart's A-major sonata, K. 305, neatly passing off phrases and finishing each other's sentences like old buddies. The two-movement piece, written when Mozart was barely twenty, concludes with a set of six variations on a theme in which the two musicians brought out a variety of subtle inflections.

Also capable of a bit of good-natured mischief, Chen served up three desserts as the second course: Pablo de Sarasate showpieces that usually never make it onto printed programs but get played as encores. *Habanera*, op. 21, no. 2, *Playera*, op. 23, no. 1 and *Zigeunerweisen*, op. 20, no. 1 gave Chen the opportunity to show off his virtuoso chops.

Chen's playing was virile, dazzling and visceral but always under complete control. His strong bow arm and fleet fingers made Sarasate's gypsies sound highly disciplined no matter how fast the music, and his intonation was razor-sharp even when notes fell high on the fingerboard.

It might have provided a fine contrast to be able to follow that directly with Beethoven's *Kreutzer* sonata (op. 47), but the flow of the program was interrupted by an intermission. Once back, Chen and Elizalde crafted an enthralling reading of the sonata full of purpose and direction. The duo made beautiful contrasts between dramatic and lyrical passages in the first movement and mood changes were instantaneous. The second movement — another set of variations — was sweet but intense. The *Presto* finale was speedy but re-

laxed; long phrases linked the spiky rhythms into elegant arcs and Chen and Elizalde's fast passagework unisons were flawless.

An encore was clearly in the cards and Chen and Elizalde came up with even a fourth serving of Sarasate, tossing off his adorably trashy *Introduction and Tarantella* with elegance and obvious affection.

The performers' easy stage manner added to the attractiveness of the evening. Elizalde noted that Mozart had labelled his sonatas as pieces for piano with violin accompaniment, at which Chen pretended to take umbrage and feigned storming off stage. Later, the pianist told the amusing story of how Beethoven named his sonata "Kreutzer" in about thirty seconds — far more efficiently than the rangy program notes. If you're going to verbally engage your audience during a performance, take a tip from these guys about how to do it.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com February 20, 2014