

Tuesday Musical: Jason Vieaux & Adam Barnett-Hart (Sept. 24)

by Peter Feher



Not enough repertoire — that's the basic challenge for anyone looking to program a violin and guitar recital. Transcriptions can work, but the players are faced with a competing pair of approaches: to emulate the original instrumentation, or to forge an entirely new sound and interpretation.

Guitarist Jason Vieaux and violinist Adam Barnett-Hart experimented with those approaches on Tuesday night, September 24 in their season-opening recital for the Tuesday Musical series. The results were uniformly pleasing, though some transcriptions felt more substantial than others.

Handel's *Violin Sonata in D*, HWV 371, played to the strengths of both instrumentalists. Vieaux's guitar was well-suited to the undulating figures of the continuo line, and Barnett-Hart was free to explore a style of playing that fell somewhere between solo and accompanied repertoire. Like a good literary translation, the idiomatic nature of the arrangement by Andy Poxon, one of Vieaux's former students, contributed to the ease and freedom of performance.

At the same time, the duo's take on Handel offered much more than a workable transcription. Their approach to the composer was more speech-like, song-like, and dance-like than the typical period performance. A particularly enlightening moment came in the second-movement Allegro, when Barnett-Hart's furious sawing on his violin, combined with Vieaux's nasal plucking on his guitar, approximated a fiddle and banjo duet. This unlikely synthesis of genres — folk, Baroque, and modern classical — made for a strong argument in favor of transcription.

In contrast, a selection of movements from Jacques Ibert's *Histoires*, originally for piano, didn't tap into the full creative potential of the duo. Ibert's more interesting harmonies became effortful on guitar, and the scarcity of musical material, when divided between two instruments, often became apparent.

Five movements from Manuel de Falla's *Siete canciones populares españolas* split the difference between the Handel and the Ibert. The arrangement made use of the unique and distinctive sound of each instrument, including a nice show of extended techniques, while the vocal origin of the music allowed Barnett-Hart to showcase his obvious skill for melodic interpretation. But the productive tension between violin and guitar, and original and transcription, was absent, perhaps overshadowed by comically passionate strums of the guitar and ornamental turns in the violin.

A break from transcribed repertoire came in the form of two solo works for guitar and violin, respectively — Francisco Tárrega's *Capricho árabe* and Eugène Ysaÿe's *Sonata No. 5 in G*, Op. 27.. Even in these solo pieces, the affinity between instruments was on display, sometimes quite literally, as in left-hand pizzicato in the violin. Likewise, a contemporary piece, *Umbrian Colors* by composer Barbara Kolb, stood as an original, untranscribed work for the duo, offering a spare, atmospheric exchange between players.

To close out the program, Vieaux and Barnett-Hart offered Astor Piazzolla's *L'histoire du Tango*, one of the few standard works for violin and guitar. With their highly rhythmic and gesture-driven interpretation, Vieaux and Barnett-Hart captured the essence of the work, finding the thread between its four movements, which grow more abstract in their progression from 1900 to the modern day. Barnett-Hart's lyrical approach may have been too intense for Piazzolla's often melancholy writing, but experiencing a range of interpretations is the joy of hearing standard works and transcriptions alike.

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