

Huang duo's fantastic collaboration opens Kent Blossom season (July 14)

by Stephanie Manning



The evening of July 14 surely felt like a momentous one for the Kent Blossom Music Festival. Just shy of two years since the Festival's last live, in-person performance, Kulas Visiting Artists Paul Huang and Helen Huang took the stage at Ludwig Recital Hall to open Kent Blossom's 53rd season. Performing for both an in-person and virtual audience (I heard the live stream), the violinist and pianist dazzled in sonatas by Mendelssohn, Corigliano, Ysaÿe, and Franck.

The two pieces that appeared on the first half of the concert are not as well-known as their composers — but the duo's performance certainly made the case for programming them more often. The opening *Sonata in F* by Felix Mendelssohn was stunning. The first movement, *Allegro*, featured soaring violin melodies from Paul Huang that were accentuated by his gorgeous vibrato.

The hall and its mic setup allowed for a wonderfully resonant sound through the beautiful and expressive *Andante*, where Helen Huang's versatile playing shone in both supportive and soloistic roles. In the bubbly *Presto*, the players' staccatos and accents cut through without sounding too pointed.

The duo's teamwork seems to come as natural as breathing. Their phrasing and tempo changes were effortless, and their unison passages were always impressive, maintaining great clarity and evenness even at the fastest tempos.

This focused collaboration served them well in John Corigliano's *Sonata*, a challenging contemporary work. According to the composer's program notes, the sonata was originally titled *Duo*, and "therefore obviously treats both instruments as co-partners."

This sentiment was evident throughout all four movements, as both players worked together through polyrhythms and complex time signatures. In the third movement, a foreboding Lento, a passionate cadenza from the violinist displayed his graceful control of his high register.

In our [interview](#), Paul Huang mentioned that parts of this piece remind him of *West Side Story*. That comparison quickly came to mind during the final Allegro, which remained playful without letting go of the frenetic energy of the previous movements. That lively mood also served the duo well in their encore, Arthur Benjamin's *Jamaican Rumba*.

After intermission, Paul Huang returned to the stage alone for a captivating performance of Eugène Ysaÿe's *Sonata for Violin Solo No. 3 in d, "Ballade."* Occasionally, his wide vibrato caused soft entrances to sound less confident, but this was a small thing in the context of his wonderfully soloistic playing. Throughout the dramatic six-minute piece, he skillfully navigated a variety of moods and tone colors.

Helen Huang rejoined her duo partner for the finale, the Franck *Sonata*. Her flowing solo passages shone during the opening Allegretto ben moderato, while the following movements highlighted both players' rich sound and thrilling energy.

After the piece's triumphant conclusion, the two close friends took a moment to hug before bowing to the audience — the crowd in Ludwig gave them a standing ovation.

Photo by Bob Christy

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