

Naughton Piano Duo at Tuesday Musical: two became one (Nov. 16)

by Stephanie Manning



If you want to identify the Naughton sisters, look at their shoes. As the identical twin pianists took the stage for their recent performance at Tuesday Musical, each wore one red and one black heel, placed on opposite feet. It was a fitting choice — Christina and Michelle Naughton are distinct individuals, yet when playing together, they become one half of the same whole.

On the evening of November 16 at E.J. Thomas Hall in Akron, the Naughton Piano Duo dazzled in Tuesday Musical's Margaret Baxtresser Annual Piano Concert. The all-American program, which featured works from the 20th and 21st centuries, contrasted traditional styles with this music's contemporary evolution.

Seated at two pianos end to end, and with face masks obscuring their nose and mouth, the duo had only their eyes and head movement to rely on — yet their synchronicity never faltered. In Leonard Bernstein's *Candide* for Four Hands, they danced their way through ten musical numbers from the composer's operetta of the same name. Their phrasing of each energetic melody was enthralling, while the more somber, melancholy moments were exquisitely beautiful and emotive.

Christina and Michelle Naughton are both accomplished and impressive soloists, but when they play together, it seems needless to talk about what sets them apart. They become one individual, communicating a string of cohesive musical ideas. In Aaron Copland's *Simple Gifts*, the simple melody is repeated with added complexity every time. In the hands of the duo, this embellishment never obscured the core theme. This piece called for only one instrument, so the sisters sat next to each other at adjoining benches — mirrored in profile, this only enhanced how they appeared to play as one.

In contrast to the first half's vibrant, joyful tunes, the two pieces after intermission were packed with dense textures and aggressive, attention-grabbing musical statements. John Adams' *Roll over Beethoven* twists phrases from two of Beethoven's late works — *Piano Sonata Op. 110* and the *Diabelli Variations* — by adding dissonances, uneven meter and other non-Beethovenian musical ideas.

The Naughtons, who premiered this piece back in 2016, are highly familiar with Adams, and their command and mastery over this music was evident. Above dark, rumbling textures, the twins engaged in a compelling musical argument, trading sharp phrases back and forth.

The duo followed up the Adams with another dense and thorny work: Paul Schoenfield's *Five Days in the Life of a Manic Depressive*, for piano four-hands. Stillness fell over the audience during the third movement, "Elegy," where the Naughtons displayed an uncanny ability to keep even the slowest passages laced with an underlying current of tension and anxiety. The virtuosic jazzy flourishes of the last movement, "Boogie," brought the concert to a resounding close.

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