

Young lion tames old masters

Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic

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To hear a young man playing music written by graybeards is a marvelous thing, especially when he does it with the vigor and carefree spirit that cellist David Requiro displayed in his Herbst Theatre recital on Sunday night.

The late sonatas by Debussy and Brahms that served as centerpieces for this program are very serious works, full of autumnal reflections and deep philosophizing. But Requiro's rejoinder to all that was both witty and welcome: "Lighten up, old man."

Sunday's recital was presented by San Francisco Performances as a gift to subscribers, a near-annual tradition that throws the spotlight on the winner of the prestigious Naumburg Competition. In this case, the honor was especially apt since Requiro, 23, is an Oakland native who served an apprenticeship as principal cellist of the San Francisco Youth Orchestra and won the Bay Area's Irving M. Klein International String Competition in 2006.

The recital, with pianist Elizabeth DeMio as accompanist, amounted to an exciting catalog of Requiro's musical gifts (which he will display again later this week in a pair of appearances with the Marin Symphony). Chief among these is the beauty of his string tone, a light-footed but resonant sound that seems to leap from the instrument.

That in turn is matched by a wonderful rhythmic pliancy that makes even the most intricate writing sound unruffled, and an interpretive approach that is uncomplicated without ever seeming glib or lightweight.

Those qualities shone in the two late sonatas, turning the craggy and sometimes forbidding utterances of middle-aged composers into buoyant, vividly streamlined music.

Debussy's Sonata, with its fragmentary rhetoric and stark rhythmic dislocations, can amount to a portrait of the artist as an old cuss, even in spite of the invigorating speed of the finale. Requiro treated that aspect with respect - the abrupt turns of the central movement were done with all their sharp edges dangerously honed - but he also refused to be cowed by the composer's gruff exterior, and the result was a performance with a little more of the lovable curmudgeon to it than usual.

There was an even more revisionist spirit in the Brahms, which was done with a much-needed lightness of touch that kept the music from lapsing into the ponderous. The broad, fervent melodies of the first

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movement emerged dark but swift, without any fat on them, and the finale was brisk and brilliant. To witness Requiro, with his baby face and fearless technique, tugging merrily at Papa Brahms' big beard was a rare treat.

The rest of the program was lighter in tone to begin with, which made Requiro's youthful approach less striking, though no less lovely. Beethoven's "Bei Männern" Variations opened the evening on a winning note, and three zippy pieces by the Catalan cellist and composer Gaspar Cassadó wound things up nicely.

In between came a deft and committed rendition of William Bolcom's aptly named Capriccio for Cello and Piano, a four-movement sonata-like creation that consistently succumbs to the temptation of prettiness for its own sake. There was one gorgeous, soulfully played encore, "Arobnaya," by the Georgian composer Sulkhan Tsintsadze.

David Requiro: The cellist plays Tchaikovsky's "Rococo" Variations with the Marin Symphony at 7:30 p.m. Sunday and next Tuesday, at the Marin Veterans' Memorial Auditorium, San Rafael. Tickets: \$27-\$65. Call (415) 499-6800 or go to www.marinsymphony.org.

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