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Music review: Lumen Festival opens with Bach's cello suites

By  Christine Pilgrim January 16, 2024



Elinor Frey (photo above by Elizabeth Delage) stepped in for an ailing Reginald Mobley for Early Music Vancouver's Lumen Festival.

Disaster can sometimes turn to triumph. A case in point was when countertenor Reginald Mobley fell ill, cancelling his concert with the Pacific Baroque Orchestra last Friday in the opener to Early Music Vancouver's Lumen Festival.

Leading cellist Elinor Frey was to play with Pacific Baroque at that same concert. She would also perform three of Bach's six Cello Suites, Numbers 3, 4 and 5, in an unaccompanied solo performance the following Sunday.

Suzie LeBlanc, EMV's artistic director, seized the opportunity to ask Frey to step in and play the remaining three Cello Suites, Numbers 1, 2 and 6, in Mobley's place. But Frey pointed out that Bach's 6th Suite, written in a higher register, calls for a five-stringed cello, instead of the regular four-stringed one. "I didn't need a five-stringed cello for the other suites, so I left mine back East," she said. She is an aficionado and owns at least seven different cellos.

When Frey couldn't find a five-stringed cello anywhere in BC, she drove to Bellingham in Washington State to borrow one from a good friend. An evening of sublime music was thus guaranteed.

It opened with the well-known favourite 1st Suite, played with such original nuance that the audience audibly sighed between each of its six movements. Frey's passion for all things cello-related, its history, composers who wrote specifically for it, as well as the instrument itself, informs her playing so that each bar expresses Bach's intent with passion tempered with discipline and skill.

Before embarking on each Suite, Frey took several moments to focus on its essence. The process not only centred her but also enhanced our collective concentration. The clarity of the 2nd Suite, due to that meditative reflection, was palpable. More sombre and mournful than the 1st, written in D Minor rather than G Major, the 2nd Suite provided a beautiful contrast and balanced the first half of the programme perfectly.

When she walked onstage with the borrowed five-stringed cello after the interval and introduced the 6th and final Suite, it was obvious that Frey missed her own beloved five-stringed one. But that didn't stop her from engaging the audience with her precision, musical spirit and 'archaeology.' Her fingers lightly dancing like sprites, her expressions of love and laughter and her total commitment to Bach's compositions made us want to dance with her.

In her words, the music we shared warmed our hearts as well as our toes on that freezing Vancouver evening. Then she said, "I love being cheesy!" and played a delicious encore.

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