

Jay Harvey Upstage

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IVCI laureate brings Finnish music to local attention, is joined by Ronen musicians for Brahms



Jaakko Kuusisto

To the casual American music-lover, the Finnish contribution to classical music is usually summed up in the work of Jan Sibelius. But the cultivation of music in Finland over many decades since Sibelius has produced a wealth of worthy successors, as well as superb players and conductors nurtured by the nation's outstanding music education.

Monday night in the Laureate Series of the International Violin Competition of Indianapolis, Jaakko Kuusisto furthered our acquaintance with this phenomenon. A laureate in the 1994 IVCI, he has amassed many other honors since, including impressive credits as a composer and conductor in addition to his violin-playing.

The first half of the violinist's program at the Indiana History Center was all Finnish, starting with the founding father, Sibelius (1865-1957). Five Danses Champêtres, played with Chih-Yi Chen at the piano, made for an expansive curtain-raiser as well as a charming exposition of Kuusisto's fitness as a fiddler.

Sibelius yielded with some reluctance to the recognition that a concert violinist's career was not in the cards for him. But, as is generally well-known from the repertory staple of his Violin Concerto, Sibelius wrote so naturally for the instrument that he fused his compositional gifts readily with his insider's performing knowledge.

Danses Champêtres shows him in his lighter mood, evoking 18th-century French garden parties in a series of sprightly dance-based duos. Throughout, an instinctive feeling for contrast is evident: Pizzicato phrases lie adjacent to bowed playing, double stops come into play unobtrusively, and the music, with the piano underlining the festive mood and rhythmically enlivened atmosphere, is demanding mainly in the gracefulness required to make the variety of timbre and articulation seem unforced. Kuusisto conveyed the right kind of virtuosity, with idiomatic support from Chen.

The two were also partners in the guest artist's "Valo (Light)," op. 23. About 10 minutes long, the work resembles the opening and closing of a large aperture, suggesting the subject of light as everything from glaring to dim. Perhaps twin apertures is the more accurate concept, since each instrument goes its own way to a considerable degree. Kuusisto showed a sensitive, even witty feeling for the radical difference between violin and piano. Especially striking were dramatic rests before what seemed like a final flourish in both instruments, but turned out to be a climactic episode leading to mutual subsiding; then came a final widening of the apertures to end the piece.

Kalevi Aho is one of Finland's established contemporary composers, becoming gradually better known in America and the rest of Europe. His "Solo 1 (Tumultos)" for unaccompanied violin cast in bold relief the strong individual voice Kuusisto already has in his compositions. The contrasting styles made Aho and Kuusisto a stimulating program choice.

Aho focuses on kaleidoscopic shifts over a long span. The piece opens with slow-moving phrases revolving around a static tonal center. There's little shimmer at first in this non vibrato start, but the line is gradually decorated, then intensified. A steady, laconic staccato pulse becomes characteristic, but it's often interrupted by vigorous figuration that moves to the forefront the tumult of the title. The work ends in a splash of virtuosity. Kuusisto played "Solo 1" with the same burnished, centered tone and natural command of expressive and technical variety he displayed in the concert's other Finnish pieces.



L-R: Jaakko Kuusisto, Charles Morey, violins; David Bellman, clarinet; Ingrid Fischer-Bellman, cello; Amy Kniffen, viola (Photo by Denis Ryan Kelly Jr.)

A staple of the chamber-music repertoire occupied the rest of the concert, bringing onstage a representation of the IVCI's concert partner, the Ronen Chamber Ensemble. Playing first violin, Kuusisto was joined by violinist Charles Morey, violist Amy Kniffen, cellist Ingrid Fischer-Bellman, and clarinetist David Bellman for Brahms' Clarinet Quintet in B minor, op. 115.

The five-way partnership sounded well-honed. In the first movement, phrases that dip in ardor and volume close to the vanishing point proved a harbinger of the sensitively performed slow movement. Bellman's tone featured feathery pianissimos against the muted strings. The quintet avoided any sign of impatience or unevenness as it unfolded Brahms' calm, rhapsodic scenario. The compact Scherzo found the ensemble in a well-executed dancing mood, and the finale — a set of variations, a form of which Brahms was an absolute master — confirmed the wisdom of this series' practice of bringing back IVCI laureates to collaborate with some of the area's top professional musicians.