

3 June 2017
Guy Johnston - Cello
Joseph Middleton - Piano

The concert performed by Guy Johnston and Joseph Middleton was sensational and left so many of us amazed and delighted that we had had the opportunity to see them here in Bedford. Some of you may remember Guy as the winner of the BBC Young Musician of the Year competition in 2000. He has since become known as a leading soloist and chamber musician. He has performed debuts at the First Night of the BBC Proms and played most of the major cello concertos with leading conductors and orchestras of the UK and around the world.

The concert showed Guy and Joseph, who remarkably had never actually performed together before until this concert, as a true partnership. They listened so well to each other and had chosen a programme of works which really allowed the cello and piano to work together rather than just allowing the cello to be a virtuoso instrument supported by the piano. Guy plays on a 300 year old cello(!) and it was such a treat to hear his soft mellow lower strings, just occasionally difficult to hear against the resonant piano. The concert started with the Beethoven Variations on a Theme from Mozart's The Magic Flute, written in 1801 when the cello was not seen as a solo instrument in the way that it is today and so the piece is a beautiful interweaving of key themes across all seven variations from the piano to the cello and back. This is a piece about love (the theme from the duet in The Magic Flute is in praise of the love between husband and wife) and Guy captivated us all by speaking about his own very recent engagement and the intensity of both love and friendship.

They then performed the melancholic but beautiful Brahms E minor Sonata, which really allowed both musicians to show a wonderful range of dynamics. This is a piece which many cellists learn as a major part of their repertoire and which Guy really lifted to a totally different level through the different colours he showed (the darkness of his lower strings, his incredible string crossings and bowing, his beautiful sustained notes). Joseph's playing was stunning and his fingers effortlessly accompanied and showed us some beautiful chords and bell like sounds.

Guy managed to make it look like playing the cello was so easy and he was so natural and unaffected, making it a delight to watch him. His bow flew off the strings during fast and staccato passages and his intonation was faultless. His pizzicato was particularly impressive and the sound he created, from sometimes just the simplest of pizzicato, was so strong.

After the interval, Guy and Joseph performed two short and less well known pieces by Sibelius (Opus 77 Cantique and Devotion, composed in 1914 and 1915). They were typically soulful and melancholic and left us hoping for more but they quickly moved on to the incredible Prokofiev Cello Sonata in C major, a piece which any

cellist would love to play even a tenth as well as Guy. This piece was written in 1949 at a time when Prokofiev's work was banned from being performed in the Soviet Union though he continued to compose and was inspired to write this piece for the great cellist Mstislav Rostropovich (who debuted it in 1950). Joseph introduced this as a piece about new life and the main themes are so expressive and hopeful, moving from cello to piano frequently. They gave us snapshots of beautiful Prokofiev melodies, as well as dance like rhythms depicting Russian folk music and finishing with virtuosic fire so typical of Prokofiev.

Finally, we were very grateful to be treated to an encore, the understated and beautiful Swan by Saint-Saens played so simply and movingly.

Thank you to the many involved in tempting Guy and Joseph to play for us and in putting this wonderful concert together.