

Kashkashian gives the viola its due in Slee concert

By **Garaud MacTaggart**

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There are jokes that poke fun at just about every musical instrument you can name, and the viola gets more than its fair share.

(Q: How do you get a violin to sound like a viola? A: Play in the low register with a lot of wrong notes; Q: Did you hear about the violist who played in tune? A: Neither did I.)

What this “humor” really points up is that the viola is a difficult member of the violin family to play properly. While the shape is similar to that of a violin, the increased size and weight of the instrument requires some technical adjustments to make the viola sound as good as it can.

The bow is heavier because more pressure is needed to draw a good result from the strings. Generating a satisfactory vibrato on the viola is another challenge.

In the hands of a virtuoso like Kim Kashkashian, the violin’s larger sibling has a warm, welcoming tone that fills the middle ground between the smaller instrument and the even bigger cello. It’s perfect in a string quartet or in an orchestral setting, but it tends to get overshadowed in those contexts by virtue of its sound playing nicely with the others.

Composers are more likely to feature the violin and cello because of their big voices than the viola's more nuanced tones.

Kashkashian's recital on Tuesday night was a rare case where the solo spotlight shined on the viola. That the material being performed was originally written for other instruments only served to highlight the paucity of music composed with the viola in mind.

"Total Schumann Immersion" was the theme of the evening, and the works played were all arrangements tailored for the viola. Most of them were successful on their own merits, while the opening score (the "Adagio and Allegro," op. 70 – originally written for horn and piano) required some heroic efforts on the part of Kashkashian and pianist Robert Levin to sound convincing.

The five movement "Stucke im Volkston," op. 102 took the beautiful, flowing melody lines of the cello and put them in Kashkashian's hands with great results. She sold the piece with her interpretation and obvious involvement with the score, as Levin goaded her from the keyboard with dramatic flourishes and she stepped into the music, bending and exploding into phrases.

A work for the clarinet, the "Fantasiestucke," op. 73, received a similar treatment while the closing Sonata in D minor, op. 121 for violin and piano was the clear highlight of the evening, generating a healthy dose of applause from the audience, which patently enjoyed seeing a virtuoso playing a great concert on an instrument that rarely seems to get the respect it deserves.

Concert Review

Kim Kashkashian and Robert Levin

Part of the Slee/Visiting Artist Series. Tuesday evening in the University at Buffalo Lippes Concert Hall, North Campus, Amherst.