

Cello Tells Stories

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The technical and musical foundation is iron-solid, now Paulo Cello Competition winner BRANNON CHO wants to concentrate on communicating his messages to the public.

American Brannon Cho won the Paulo Cello Competition in October - at the end, it was no surprise, but the high level still left the options open before the end. We heard the Prokofiev in the final round three times with the Helsinki Philharmonic, and Cho was clearly the best in his honest and imaginative playing. "I was very inspired for this piece being in Helsinki, because the city, its cold climate and architecture took my imagination to Prokofiev's time in Leningrad," he says. "The piece includes the history of the Russian people, and the city, its conflicts, blood and tears that were significant to Prokofiev. These cold images combine with the composer's ballets, like Romeo and Juliet's lyrical romanticism, but also Peter and the Wolf - sarcasm."

Cho always strives to find out about the personality and life of composers, because they provide ingredients for interpretations.

"Prokofiev wrote letters to his sons, and they were full of fun jokes. He was clearly a humorous man. This is also a big part of the Symphony-Concerto."

The atmosphere of the Paulo Cello Competition was excellent in Cho's view:

"It felt more like a cello festival, where the audience and the competitors are supporting each other, rather than a cut-throat competition."

Is the technical side emphasized, however, in music competitions?

"It's one aspect among others. At this level, a musician needs a very solid technical basis to have the freedom to express themselves under extreme pressure. It's like a house: unless the foundation is good, the house is not strong. But the most important thing for me is to touch the audience and to communicate, also including respect for the score and for the composer's wishes."

How can you communicate consciously? "I guess it comes from exploring the piece first, and discovering how it deeply touches the musician himself. Then you have to try to stand outside and to imagine what the public feels and how they react to what they hear. This requires experience. The performer must lead the reactions of the public and take over the situation," Cho ponders.

"My current teacher Laurence Lesser at the New England Conservatory has talked a lot about these things. He has taught me very much about timing, and listening to yourself

from the outside. In the process, he has encouraged me to believe in playing from my heart; without that, all things are only sorted by reason.”

Lesser also has further developed Cho’s right hand, deepening the sound. Cho’s strong foundation was built by Danish Hans Jørgen Jensen, who was his teacher since the age of 11.

"He was really demanding, but through this encouragement, I could find musical freedom.” Periodically over the past 6 years, Cho took several lessons with Frans Helmerson. “He always talked about different colors and about the spectrum of what even one phrase can contain. Many times, he asked me to play one phrase in several different ways, without telling me beforehand how to play it. This taught me to always think very creatively, and to find your own way. When I was younger, this was very difficult.”

Cho tells that he has been wanting to become a soloist from the beginning, because he did not play in youth orchestras as a young boy. Later, he has found chamber music and is so inspired by the musicians he plays with. "The string quartet literature is so huge that it could be studied for life. Chamber music teaches listening and the whole idea of supporting each other."

Bach's solo suites were not required in the earlier stages of the Paulo Competition, as most competitions do, but each finalist was required to play a movement of their choice after the final concerto as an encore. The rules of Baroque-period performance are not as important for Cho. "I feel it is more important to focus on the message and character of the music- whether it is a dance, fantasy or prayer- rather than exactly how it was played before."

Cho's parents are from Korea. He always speaks Korean with his family. “I am not sure why so many Koreans always become great musicians, besides the fact that they start studying there really early and learn a very solid foundation. And then for most, it is a matter of course to move to Europe or America to deepen their relationship with the different languages of music.”

Brannon Cho will be coming to Finland again in January, when he plays with the Kymi Sinfonietta as soloist (9 and 10 January). Also, he will be performing on February 2 at the Helsinki Music Centre in Martti Rousi’s festival concert. ■