



Violinist hits musical home run

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James Ehnes, violin; Andrew Armstrong, piano
Rozsa Centre, University of Calgary

For baseball-loving violinist James Ehnes, it was a musical home run: a sold-out audience leaping to its feet at the end of the concert, shouting and whistling its appreciation.

Few recitals I have witnessed have been more enthusiastically received.

As Prairie dwellers ourselves, the Manitoba-born Ehnes is a Canadian cousin, his demeanour recognizably our own -- truly a local boy made good.

And how good! Now a world traveller as a concert violinist, with a fistful of highly admired, award-winning recordings in his suitcase, Ehnes is fully launched into a career that promises to be illustrious and distinguished.

Ehnes plays a Stradivarius violin, and his style of performance is congruent with everything the name has come to mean in violin tone: brilliant yet singing, sensuous yet full-throated and powerful.

The first half concluded with Brahms' Violin Sonata in G major, the longest and most melodic of the three sonatas, and it was here that one had the clearest sense of why Ehnes' playing is so admired.

The delicate opening movement, with its sinuous lines, was always poetic and beautifully shaped. The slow movement was, if anything, even more special in its depth and spiritual emotion.

Similar, if rather more extroverted qualities, marked the performance of the Richard Strauss that concluded the program.

Here and throughout the concert Ehnes was well partnered by pianist Andrew Armstrong, a piano of solo virtuosity but who understands the role of a duo pianist.

Gentle in the Brahms sonata, Armstrong was all fire and energy in the Strauss, the two performers well matched in their approach to the music and in the superb technical level displayed.

The concert opener was a Baroque sonata by Jean-Marie Leclair. It is hard to play Leclair in a French Baroque style with a piano accompaniment, no matter who is playing the piano. This performance was immaculate in a modern way of playing, with the piano part discretion itself.

The program also included Bartok's Second Rhapsody. Like the other items on the program, it was beautifully played.

The encore returned to Brahms and to the world that Ehnes most naturally inhabits. In the words of the old Gershwin song: who could ask for anything more?