

Review

Joshua Roman and Andrius Zlabys at Tuesday Musical

By Daniel Hathaway



Cellist Joshua Roman and pianist Andrius Zlabys made a winning duo at E.J. Thomas Hall in Akron on Wednesday evening, November 16 in a program of Debussy, Piazzolla, Visconti and Brahms, the Clara I. Knight Young Artist Concert on the Tuesday Musical Association Series. The concert had strong regional connections: both of the artists as well as composer Dan

Visconti are graduates of the Cleveland Institute of Music.

After TMA executive director Barbara Feld outlined the outreach activities that had kept Roman and Zlabys busy for the past two days, including a moving story about Roman's effect on patients waiting for chemotherapy at Summa Health Center, the page turner got a round of applause for sounding an A on the piano while Roman tuned offstage. Once the two artists appeared, the magnetism of their onstage personalities became immediately apparent.

Debussy's two-movement *Sonata* also immediately demonstrated their affinity for each other as musicians and their kindred, highly physical approach to their instruments. They brought out Debussy's many colors, their ensemble was perfect, and every nuance was finely coordinated. The pizzicato sections answered by dry piano comments were especially arresting. The enthusiastic audience applauded after the first movement, which Roman acknowledged with a bright smile.

Piazzolla wrote the *Gran Tango* for Rostropovich in 1982. You have to be steeped in the culture of Buenos Aires to play Tango music with all the moodiness and explosiveness of a native, but Roman and Zlabys did a fine job of conveying the work's rhythmic propulsiveness and displayed stunning unanimity at its conclusion.

Roman recounted how he had first met Dan Visconti on the Goodtime cruise ship during Freshman orientation at CIM. The cello suite *Americana* was conceived during the composer's year in Berlin, a period that "made him acutely aware of being an American". Of its five movements (some of which feature pre-recorded material), Roman selected three which take their inspiration from such iconic, all-American tunes as *Columbia the Gem of the Ocean* and *Yankee Doodle*.

Visconti has deconstructed the tunes to the point where they're sometimes only subliminally recognizable, but the three movements were kinetic, accessible and fun, featuring extended cello and piano techniques, wistfully beautiful cello melodies and dance forms as well as cadenzas for the cello that ranged from Bachian to craggy and syncopated.

Following intermission, Roman and Zlabys played Brahms' *Second Sonata* with lyrical clarity and remarkable transparency of texture and won a standing ovation. The audience enjoyed an unidentified encore (a lyrical cello melody over an ostinato of paired piano chords which Zlabys played from memory. His own piece?)

Somewhere along the line, Joshua Roman got dubbed “a classical rock star” and the phrase has been embedded in his publicity materials ever since. A more true characterization might describe him as a wonderfully talented and committed cellist with a sunny, outgoing personality who is entirely genuine in his approach to music and his desire to share it with audiences. That certainly came across on Tuesday at E.J. Thomas.

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