

Virginia Symphony cellist takes recital beyond CNU with livestream

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Rebecca Gilmore and her father, Jimmy Gilmore, perform at Christopher Newport University on April 20, 2021. (Rebecca Phillips)

NEWPORT NEWS — Professional cellist Rebecca Gilmore is a sort of local Johnny Appleseed, sowing musical seeds everywhere she goes to expand awareness and appreciation of music — especially during COVID times. It's a mission that has led her to play, among many venues, in a bank lobby, the back of a Honda Odyssey, a yoga studio, a taphouse and even the roof of a restaurant.

A media-savvy person, Gilmore embraces all performance options, and her latest was a livestream performance of her faculty recital at Christopher Newport University, where she serves as a cello instructor in the music department. The event took place April 20 in the Peebles Theatre-Ferguson Center for the Arts and was broadcast via YouTube.

The program showcased Gilmore's laudable technique and musical maturity as well as that of her compatriots: Benjamin Corbin, assistant professor of piano and collaborative arts at CNU, and her father, Jimmy Gilmore, a clarinetist of note and faculty member of Duke University and Meredith College. Rebecca Gilmore is assistant principal cellist with the Virginia Symphony, where she has played for 20-plus years, and the Spotify artist's involvements in chamber and orchestra work, solos and recitals, teaching and recording are considerable.

Opening the fare was Martin Berteau's Sonata in G Major for cello and piano. Done with tasteful Baroque flourishes throughout, the stage was set for compelling fare.

A champion of music by Norfolk's internationally-acclaimed Adolphus Hailstork, Gilmore selected two of his works. Hailstork had dedicated "Novelette" to the Gilmores and the duo fully embraced the rhythmic and delightful dialogue in this charming piece.

His "Theme and Variations on 'Draw the Sacred Circle Closer'" opens with a soulful, opening theme that evolves into a series of variations encompassing a range of emotions. Gilmore treated each variation with a distinct feel and not as if they were virtuoso exercises, as lesser players sometimes do. Her warm, full tone, technique and temperament combined to make this engaging hearing.

Amy Beach's "Chanson d'Amour" was written for mezzo-soprano, cello and piano. Here, dad Gilmore assumed the vocal line, adding texture to the work's lyricism and its flowing, delicate design. Corbin's sensitive keyboard work in

rendering tender, supportive lines contributed to the beauty of this highlight moment.

Closing the evening were three selections from Max Bruch's "Eight Pieces." Romantic-era inspired, "Romanian Melody" was broad in scope and line, extended lyricism and heartfelt emotion; "Night Song" pulsed with gentleness; and "Allegro Vivace" was bright, light and cheerful. Finely delineated for all three instruments, the collective sound and talent made this a listening delight of substantial pleasure.

Before the music, however, there came critical planning. With audio-visual details left to the music department, Gilmore undertook the time-consuming issues of coordinating with CNU for rehearsal and performance space, permissions for a few guests to attend, and consideration of pandemic restrictions, which led to the masks worn on stage.

Her job was made easier, she said, by Dr. Mark Reimer, professor and director of music. "He's been highly supportive of my big ideas to promote music."

She said CNU is interested in doing livestream events, which might become a more permanent post-pandemic option. (As a technical note, the sound transmission of the performance was fine, but that of comments made by the Gilmores was not.)

Allowing that livestreaming can be glitchy, Gilmore said perfection is an impractical goal. "It goes as it goes," she said, suggesting that musicians want to do the best possible, but too many get hung up on perfection. "I wanted this recital to be fun and fulfilling. To enjoy playing."

"My thinking," she said, "is that if you don't do things, then they don't exist."

Always eager for the next new thing, Gilmore said, "I'm not done living or performing. I haven't played my last work, and don't want to be stagnant."