

# Paired to perfection: Twin sisters on two pianos showcase each other

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The allure of sibling musicians extends beyond novelty and well into telepathy.

Violinist Yehudi Menuhin was always best with his pianist sister, Hephzibah; they claimed to read each other's musical minds. But Christina and Michelle Naughton, who made their Philadelphia Orchestra debut Tuesday at the Mann Center, aren't just sisters, but identical twins, whose musical compatibility is even more keen than their physical resemblance.

The 20-year-old pianists from Madison, Wis., were part of the Curtis Institute of Music's contribution to this Mann season. Though the crowd wasn't nearly as big as for Monday's opening, the concert will be discussed for a long time to come - and not because Mayor Michael Nutter was the accomplished *Carnival of the Animals* narrator.

The duo piano medium is hard to do well. Two similar-sounding instruments aren't easy to find in some quarters, and those who play them are often solo virtuosi on holiday, which means they pound away, reminding you all too often that the piano is essentially a percussion instrument. So hearing Mozart's Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra with such a strong sense of the music's specific needs being addressed - the case at Tuesday's concert conducted by Rossen Milanov - is indeed a luxury. Of the two, Michelle (the one in red) had the deeper insights into what lay behind Mozart's decorous piano writing. But Christina (the one in blue) must be credited with the kind of phrasing and sensitivity that so beautifully showcased her sister, and compatibility of sound that clearly showed one piano doing what the other was not.

Beyond knowing how to stay out of each other's way, they fused synergistically in Lutoslawski's *Variations on a Theme by Paganini* with a level of energy and showmanship that approached that of the famous Labeque Sisters. Even the best student talents grow reticent in the face of a large audience. But these two played with a freedom of execution and expression that no doubt came with the security of so clearly knowing the talent at the other keyboard.

Ending the concert with Carnival of the Animals was an inspired concept, but not a great idea. The piece's 14 short episodes, played both by two pianos and orchestra, are among Saint-Saens' most unbuttoned, resourcefully descriptive music. But the piece's continuity depends on everybody being quick on the uptake - not easy with limited rehearsal and in a space as large as the Mann. Nutter had worked hard on the humorously tortured rhymes and, thanks to some unorthodox rhythms, never let the doggerel verse lapse into sing-song routine. He also projected a sense of discovering the humor in the moment, allowing us to do the same.

Contact music critic David Patrick Stearns at [dstearns@phillynews.com](mailto:dstearns@phillynews.com).

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