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Naughtons offer yin, yang and unity at the Ordway

Rob Hubbard, Special to the Pioneer Press

I'm sure that a psychologist or geneticist could do a much better job than I explaining the unique means of communication shared by twins, but there was evidence aplenty of it at St. Paul's Ordway Center on Tuesday night.

That's where piano-playing sisters Christina and **Michelle Naughton** opened the Schubert Club's 119th International Artist Series season with a tremendously entertaining glimpse inside the shared ideas, emotions and something else entirely that comes through when two artists together since the womb collaborate to create something.

The Naughtons are natives of Madison, Wis., freshly out of Philadelphia's prestigious Curtis Institute. But the 22-year-old twins displayed something Tuesday that you don't expect to find in such youthful players: An interpretive confidence that spanned a couple of centuries worth of repertoire and an infectious sense of joy in music making.

That came through immediately in the opening Andante and Allegro Brilliant by Felix Mendelssohn, which bunched the pair together at one keyboard. There was poetry in its meditative opening, playfulness in the bouncy Allegro that made them seem not so distant from being two little girls in the sandbox. It was a delight to experience their exchanges of thundering rolls and darting lightning strikes.

Far more serious was Franz Schubert's "Lebensstürme," its stately, sad chorale delineating the disparate but complementary approaches of the two pianists. Christina (dressed in black) took the low end of the keyboard and gave the music gravitas, while **Michelle**, the sprite in white, frolicked about in the upper register.

They looked something like a Taoist yin and yang symbol when they faced one another across two pianos during Johannes Brahms' "Haydn Variations," and there was a paradoxical combination of duality and unity to their performance.

Sometimes, their shared phrases seemed like absolute agreement, as if they were finishing one another's sentences; other times, like heated exchanges. But their visions merged marvelously on a flourish-filled finale.

With both the Brahms and Maurice Ravel's "La Valse," they took pieces familiar to the audience chiefly as orchestral works and asked listeners to rethink them as something intimate and conversational. But Mozart's K. 448 Sonata for Two Pianos sounded very much like one could imagine the composer intended, a showcase for two simpatico players on which the Naughtons were reminiscent of the symbol for theater, Christina dramatic, **Michelle** comedic.

After all of that classical-era precision, Witold Lutoslawski's "Variations on a Theme by Paganini" allowed the two to unleash their wilder sides, inspiring an ovation that brought the sisters back for two encores. Considering that the two were brought in relatively late in the game after violinist Sarah Chang canceled, this was some pinch hitting far superior to anything our hometown Twins produced this season.

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