

Christina and Michelle Naughton, Twin Pianists, Perform at Naumburg Orchestral Concerts

By Corinne Ramey, Wall Street Journal, Aug. 4, 2014

<http://online.wsj.com/articles/christina-and-michelle-naughton-twin-pianists-perform-at-naumburg-orchestral-concerts-1407173152>

When the pianists Christina and Michelle Naughton perform together, they never look at each other, but they move in tandem, mirroring each other's every gesture.

"It's really bizarre," said Cristian Măcelaru, associate conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra. "When you see a quartet that has been playing together for 25 or 30 years, it's a similar thing."

"This sounds freaky, but there are times I forget we're two people playing together," Christina said.

On Tuesday, the 25-year-old twins perform at the Naumburg Orchestral Concerts, a free summer series at the Naumburg Bandshell in Central Park. They built their program around the theme of dances: John Adams's "Hallelujah Junction," Ravel's "La Valse," Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" and Milhaud's "Scaramouche."

The Naughton sisters have lived together their entire lives, save for Christina's first eight minutes, before Michelle was born. Now they share an Upper West Side apartment, sparsely furnished except for two electronic pianos—they plug in their headphones and practice silently late at night—and a pile of stylish shoes.

They were born in Princeton, N.J., but spent their childhood in Madison, Wis. They began playing the piano at age 4, initially taught by their mother, an amateur pianist.

The Naughtons think they are identical twins and share the same Wisconsin accent, with elongated O's. On recordings, they said, even listeners who know them well can't tell who is who. (Their teacher, the pianist Joseph Kalichstein, begs to differ, although said he couldn't articulate how.)

Sitting around their kitchen table, the twins, seemingly nervous yet chipper, couldn't quite put a finger on the ways that they are different.

"Everyone asks us that," said Michelle, "and we feel bad because we don't have a good answer," added Christina.

There are visual differences—Christina has longer hair, and, peeking out from identical shoes, Michelle’s toenail polish is purple and her sister’s red. And they do argue, they said. But 90% of their disagreements are musical ones, said Michelle.

“We kind of speak our own language, so if someone were to listen, I don’t think they’d know what was going on,” said Christina.

Michelle added, “They could feel it, maybe,” but the twins declined to demonstrate their rehearsal twin-speak. Resolving musical disagreements never means meeting in the middle, both said, since that would just water down musical ideas.

Christina (in blue) and Michelle (in pink) Naughton playing as children. (Photo courtesy of Naughton family)

The Naughtons earned undergraduate degrees at Philadelphia’s Curtis Institute of Music, then graduate degrees at Juilliard, finishing in 2013. They attended every single one of each other’s piano lessons.

Mr. Kalichstein, who taught them at Juilliard, described them as “incredible talents” and “bubbly, highly intelligent, sweet girls,” who rapidly learn new repertoire.

“When they play together, they seem to have one mind and one body—it’s extraordinary,” he said. “Like one person with two hands playing.”

The twins didn’t begin performing together until a concert presenter asked them to play a duo piece, in Overture Hall in Madison, about eight years ago.

They haven’t looked back. This season includes performances with the Philadelphia Orchestra and Houston Symphony in addition to recitals around the globe.

The conductor Edo de Waart has known the twins since 2007, working with them with the Milwaukee Symphony and, this coming season, with the Royal Flemish Philharmonic.

The Naughtons have “an almost eerie sense of oneness between them,” he said. “They are very spirited, but very Midwestern, with their legs on the ground.”

“I met them a few times with their father there—they tease,” said Mr. de Waart. “They are two normal girls giving their dad a hard time.” (Their parents declined to comment. “My parents are shy,” Michelle wrote in an email.)

At this point, the twins are no longer pursuing solo careers. “We used to try to program one short solo each, but more and more we’re choosing to play together because we like it,” said Christina.

“For traveling it’s perfect,” said Michelle.

Christina said, “And it’s good because someone needs to wake me up.”

“I can’t imagine not playing with you,” added her sister.

Christina and Michelle Naughton perform Tuesday at the Naumburg Bandshell in Central Park; naumburgconcerts.org.