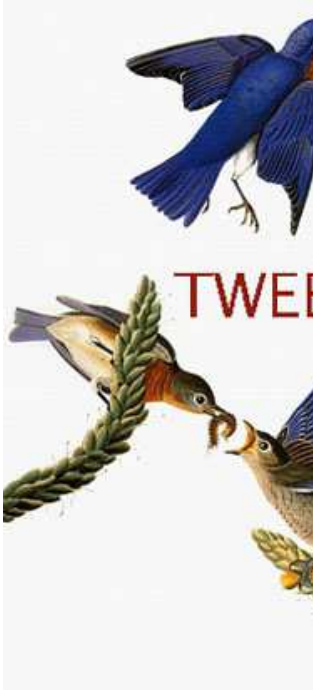
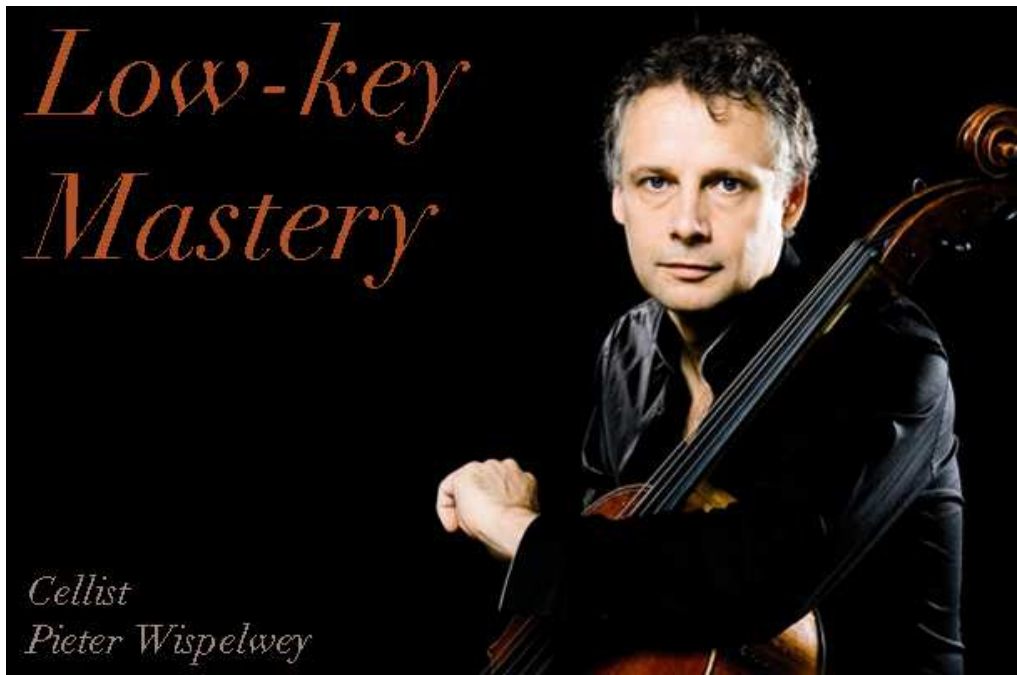




Thursday, February 9, 2012

Pieter Wispelwey at Celebrity Series



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The house for Pieter Wispelwey was only about two-thirds full last Friday night at [Celebrity Series](#) - I suppose because Yo-Yo Ma is the only cellist people have heard of in these parts.

Ah, but we few, we lucky few! I'd heard from friends who had caught the Dutch cellist in earlier local appearances that he was a sensation, and by the end of the concert you might have heard me wondering, "Yo-Yo Who?," so transporting was Wispelwey's mastery. Because of the odd ways

celebrity works in this country, though, I suppose Wispelwey may never "break out" into the kind of celebrity Ma currently enjoys. But damn, he deserves to. And there's no reason why he and Ma couldn't occupy opposing niches of musical fame: Ma could handle the warm, beaming, broad stuff, leaving Wispelwey all the cerebral, knotty, haunting stuff.

Not that I didn't leave the concert with the impression that basically Pieter Wispelwey can play the hell out of anything he wants to. Although come to think of it, what he seems to *really* want to play is the violin! Almost everything he performed last Friday was a transcription from that instrument. I'm not sure what a violinist might have made of those choices - or what a cellist might have said about the snub given to the instrument's own literature - but Wispelwey himself made his selections ceaselessly compelling.

To be specific, most of what Wispelwey played were transcriptions of violin and piano duets - the wonderful Paolo Giacometti was his accompanist - and there's often a problem with this kind of transcription, as the violin line is inevitably transposed *down* for the cello, but doing the same thing to the piano part would leave it thudding around at the bottom of the keyboard. So the two "halves" of the duet are closer harmonically than they were originally, and as the piano is quite a bit louder than the cello, there's always a danger of the keyboard drowning out the strings.

This was only occasionally a problem, however, during the opening Brahms Sonata in G Major, Opus 78 ("Regen," or "Rain"), in which the great German composer's intertwined piano textures seemed occasionally to overwhelm the cello. Or was that the *idea*, that the cello was meant to vanish into the piano, as a comment on the piece's very density? I entertained this thought with some sympathy, as it seemed an apt metaphor for something indescribable about Brahms, and because the performances of both cellist and pianist were really quite wonderful, and seemed somehow braided; Giacometti's constant pedaling and careful phrasing kept the piano always encroaching on, but never quite overcoming, the cello. The results were subtle and introverted, yet still somehow lyrical; "Brahmsian" in a very deep sense indeed.

What came next was still more wonderful - Schubert's Fantasy in C Major, Op. 159. Inspired by a Paganini performance the young composer once witnessed, the piece is a showstopper, building from a haunting opening tremolo, through a set of light-hearted phrases tossed back and forth between the players, to a virtuosic set of variations on one of Schubert's own early songs. The performance here was so inspired that I felt tempted to call it "definitive," even though I knew it couldn't be (can a *transcription* ever be "definitive"?) Still, Wispelwey and Giacometti seemed to capture the sweet spirit of this great genius in a way I've heard few other performers manage to do.

The rest of the evening was perhaps less ravishing, but always rewarding. The one piece on the program originally written for solo cello was George Crumb's Sonata from 1955, but this short, rather over-thought piece (generally counted as Crumb's first mature work, although you could mistake it for juvenilia) amounted to little more than an earnestly furious scribble. Wispelwey did what he could with it, though. Far better was Stravinsky's *Suite Italienne* (after *Pulcinella*), for which pianist Giacometti returned to the stage. This is an odd little work, a cross between Stravinsky and Pergolesi, of all people; it's certainly piquant and alive with a weird kind of verve; and its slightly-acid Italianism is probably unique. Perhaps it only seemed slightly flat after the riches evident in the Brahms and the Schubert. Luckily there were still two encores (thanks to a standing ovation) - a "calm" (according to Wispelwey) bit of vocalise, transcribed from Fauré's *Après un rêve*, and a "not so calm" version of Chopin's tripping *Grande Valse Brillante in E-flat Major*. The first encore had lustre; the second sparkle. I could have happily stayed for a dozen more.

Posted by [Thomas Garvey](#) at 12:12 AM 

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About Me

Thomas Garvey

A local reviewer for several years from my perch at the *Boston Globe* years ago, but have yet to find haven (and probably won't, as it's vanishing fast). In the meantime couldn't keep quiet about the state of the culture (also, I missed the free town needs a smart, unfettered not interested in tossing softballs to the suburbs (or the academy), and I