

Sister Act



Princeton-Born Pianists Christina and Michelle Naughton are Rising Stars

By Anne Levin

Classical music claims a long tradition of sibling performers. There are the Shahams (violinist Gil and pianist Ori), the Labeques (pianists Katia and Marielle), and the Capucons (violinist Renand and cellist Gautier) — just to name a few.

Currently prominent on that roster are Christina and Michelle Naughton, 31-year-old virtuoso pianists who spent their first year of life in Princeton, and returned last month to perform as soloists with the Princeton Symphony Orchestra (PSO). The glamorous Naughtons, whose father taught computer science at Princeton University, are not just sisters — they are twins. Good luck telling them apart.

As toddlers, the girls moved from Princeton to Madison, Wisconsin, when their father, Jeffrey Naughton, joined the faculty of the University of Wisconsin. Their

earliest music study was with their mother, an amateur pianist. There was no grand plan, at first, for professional careers.

“Our parents are not musicians, but they are very much music lovers,” said Michelle, speaking by phone from the Manhattan apartment she shares with her sister a few weeks before their PSO performances. “Practicing the piano was something we looked forward to. We didn’t know it was supposed to be a chore.”

The sisters played separately, not thinking they would go on to appear in recitals and concerts with major symphony orchestras. “The together thing started toward the end of high school,” said Michelle. “We did a performance together, and it just clicked. We knew this was something we wanted to continue.”



Rossen Milanov posed with Michelle, left, and Christina following their appearance with the PSO. (Photo courtesy of Princeton Symphony Orchestra)

Both studied at The Juilliard School of Music in Manhattan, and later graduated from the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. The sisters’ joint career was launched in 2009 with a recital at Washington’s Kennedy Center. Next was a concert with the Philadelphia Orchestra, at The Mann Music Center. It was conducted by Rossen Milanov, who is currently celebrating his 10th anniversary as music director of the Princeton Symphony Orchestra. In a review of that performance in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, critic David Patrick Stearns wrote of the sisters, then 20 years old:

“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 virtuosos 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.”

Milanov has fond recollections of this early collaboration. A week before he conducted the PSO in the same Mozart piece with the Naughtons as soloists, he said, “We actually have a sort of long performance history. I have been following their career with great excitement since that time. They are such refined players. And I think it’s wonderful that the natural genetic relationship they share seems to raise the level of musicianship.”



Photo by Lisa Marie Mazzucco

In the decade between that first concert and the present, the Naughtons have performed with major orchestras all over the United States. Internationally, they have appeared with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, the St. Petersburg Philharmonic, the Royal Flemish Philharmonic, the Hong Kong Philharmonic, and numerous others.

Their repertoire favors not only Bach and Mozart, “but a lot of modern music as well,” Michelle said. “Our most recent recording on Warner Classics is called *American Postcard*, and it has music by several 20th-century American composers.” The album includes compositions and commissions by John Adams, Aaron Copland, Conlon Nancarrow, and Paul Schoenfield. The sisters have also premiered works at various festivals and series devoted to 20th-century American music, including a work by composer Paul Lansky, a professor emeritus at Princeton University.

The Naughtons move comfortably between performing on two pianos and performing together on one instrument. The latter, known as piano four hands, is its own genre, with a distinct set of requirements. Two people used to having the 88 piano keys — and the pedals — to themselves must not only share, but feel comfortable with, the intimacy that comes with occupying one bench and one keyboard.



Photo by Lisa Marie Mazzucco

“Each genre has its own advantages and disadvantages,” said Michelle. “Two pianos is wonderful for orchestral transcriptions. And with four hand, you almost feel conversational. We do a lot of that.”

All of this togetherness that comes with being a sister act has its challenges. “It’s not like we’re always together. And we don’t always agree on everything,” said Michelle. “But we know each other so well, and that ultimately means we have a certain spontaneity when we perform.”

Milanov is especially appreciative of the sisters’ ability to perform as one unit while retaining their individuality. “In classical music, what is generally important is the point of view,” he said. “We are all different people, and we come with our own emotional history and understanding of the world around us. Just like in the visual arts, you couldn’t find two people who could paint the same object in the same way. But this is what I appreciate in performers — people who collaborate, with their own point of view. Certainly with Michelle and Christina, you can see their individual reflections to music. And it’s very exciting to watch.”

The PSO chose the concerts featuring the Naughtons last month to announce a fundraising campaign to support the orchestra over the next 10 years. Starting with the sisters’ appearance, the season has been programmed to celebrate Milanov’s first decade as music director.

The sisters were happy to be part of the occasion. “We have performed with Rossen Milanov before, but not with this orchestra,” said Michelle. “We were born in Princeton, so we are very much looking forward to playing there — with him.”

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