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Princeton Symphony Orchestra Returns to Live Music With Early Summer Chamber Concert

By Nancy Plum

Princeton Symphony Orchestra welcomed a live audience to Morven Museum & Garden for the first time in months last Thursday night with a presentation of “Boyd Meets Girl,” featuring guitarist Rupert Boyd and cellist Laura Metcalf. The “pods” of audience members on the lawn of Morven’s pool house were clearly elated to be out on a warm night of music, complemented by overhead planes, chirping birds, and the occasional barking dog.

Boyd and Metcalf, a married couple who have long been performing under the monikers “Boyd” and “Girl,” presented a program of music ranging from the 19th to 21st centuries, crossing genres from Romantic masterpieces to contemporary classical to the Beatles. The combination of guitar and cello has not frequently been heard throughout music history, and most of the pieces they performed last Thursday night were “stolen,” in their words, from other instruments. These innovative arrangements not only showed the technical proficiency of the two artists, but also created a unique musical palette.

Boyd and Metcalf began the concert with a piece suitable for a summer evening. Erik Satie’s *Je Te Veux* dated from a period in the composer’s life when he delved into lighter cabaret music in order to make a living. As played by Boyd and Metcalf, the short waltz immediately evoked strolling along the Seine in Paris. The two instruments were well-balanced, with Metcalf keeping the cello melody light.

The two musicians took a brief journey across two centuries and continents in this concert, beginning with a well-known Franz Schubert vocal song arranged for guitar and cello. Schubert’s “Gretchen am Spinnrade” was programmatic in its depiction of a spinning wheel (Boyd’s guitar) spun by a young woman in love (Metcalf’s cello). Boyd’s continually moving accompaniment was

rhythmically exact, while Metcalf provided an agile but intense melody. The French repertoire selected by the duo dated from the early 20th century and well conveyed the impressionistic style and musical passion of that era. Claude Debussy's *Arabesque No. 1*, originally composed for solo piano, was played with a sweet cello melody and with both instruments executing the polyrhythms well, concluding the piece high in their respective instruments.

The most powerful moment of the performance was a movement from Oliver Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*, composed originally for clarinet, violin, cello and piano — instruments available in the World War II prisoner-of-war camp in which Messiaen was being held. Messiaen drew inspiration for the work's eight movements from the Biblical book of Revelations and dedicated the *Quartet* "in homage to the Angel of the Apocalypse." Boyd and Metcalf performed the fifth movement "Louange à l'Éternité de Jésus" ("Praise to the Eternity of Jesus") with a keenly meditative quality, varying the level of intensity in the music with decisive and sharply-played chords from guitarist Boyd. The duo turned their attention to Americana with music composed specifically for them by American composer Robert Beaser. The two selections from Beaser's *Mountain Songs* set story-telling Appalachian folk songs in an open and airy musical texture. "Barbara Allen," originally composed for guitar and flute, showed a languid guitar melody against Metcalf's subtle cello playing. "The House Carpenter" was more rollicking, with Boyd executing a very steady accompaniment on guitar.

Boyd and Metcalf drew from contemporary music to throughout the program with arrangements of songs by Beyoncé and the Beatles, with an encore of a Michael Jackson hit. Beyoncé's "Pray You Catch Me" incorporated electronic effects in its original version which were recreated by Metcalf on the cello and through fast playing by Boyd on guitar. Two songs by the Beatles, "Eleanor Rigby" and "Blackbird," were well suited for arrangement for cello and guitar, as both originally contained guitar parts. The duo played "Eleanor Rigby" nimbly, with ornamentation in the guitar, and alternating between plucked and strummed playing style. Boyd and Metcalf's performance of "Blackbird" featured a great deal of slide from both instruments, incorporating bird sounds to complement those naturally heard in the Morven Garden.

After a long indoor winter, Princeton Symphony's audience would likely have been happy just to sit in Morven Garden, chatting to the live sounds already present outdoors in the spring. Listening to "Boyd" and "Girl" gave last Thursday's audience a rarely-heard instrumental combination to discover and an entertaining performing duo to enjoy.

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