

Cello Plus Concerts brings incredible musicians to MSU

Bridgette Redman, For the Lansing State Journal 12:03 a.m. EDT April 3, 2015



(Photo: Courtesy MSU)

Sometimes a jam session can grow into something big.

Suren Bagratuni, an internationally acclaimed cello player who now teaches at Michigan State University's College of Music, made a practice of getting together with fellow musicians for chamber concerts where they could play the music they were in love with.

As a faculty member at the University of Illinois, he suggested that they get together and play at the facilities there.

"I used to travel a lot to play chamber music with my friends and colleagues," Bagratuni said. "We went all over the world. We didn't have any place to meet annually. I said, why don't we meet in Illinois, I have the facilities, but I can't pay you."

From those informal jam sessions, chamber concerts that were free to all, grew a week-long festival, now hosted at MSU and a series that attracts musicians from around the world.

Called "Cello Plus," the festival features four concerts with a cello "plus" other instruments that allows for a very open format. Unlike in Illinois, MSU put up money for the chamber concerts so the musicians now are paid and the concerts are no longer free.

Bagratuni continues as the artistic director and plays in each of the concerts.

"We start on Monday and finish on Sunday," said Bagratuni. "With people donating money just for this series, I have an opportunity to bring more and more people, not only quantity, but quality. I sometimes bring big names, important famous musicians, or those not known well to our audiences, but they are incredible musicians. It's great to see how easily people agree to come here to interact with our faculty and students."

This year's festival has the following themed concerts:

- Schubert and Dvořák, Monday, April 6, 7:30 p.m.; features Pianist Boris Slutsky from the Peabody Institute with MSU faculty Bagratuni, Dmitri Berlinsky, violin, and Yuri Gandelseman, viola. Features Schubert's Piano Trio in B-flat major and Dvořák's Piano Quartet in E-flat major, Op. 87.
- The French Connection, Wednesday, April 8, 7:30 p.m.; features two piano quartets by Gabriel Faure. Guest artists include include Ruggero Alliffranchini, violin, and Hsin-Yun Huang, viola, with faculty artists Deborah Moriarty, piano, Ralph Votapek, piano, and Bagratuni, cello.
- Bach Plus, Friday, April 10, 8 p.m., features two guest artists, Stephen Prutsman, piano, Huang, viola, the Festival Ensemble and the University Chorale, directed by David Rayl.
- The Silent Movie, Sunday, April 12, 3 p.m., features a multimedia event with a silent film and live piano (Prutsman, who is also the composer) and strings. Also includes works by Dvořák with guests Randolph Kelly, violist, Alliffranchini, violin, and faculty artist Bagratuni, cello, and student I-Pei Lin, violin

The opening night is an all-faculty concert with a guest pianist. The Bach Plus concert will incorporate MSU graduate students and the University Chorale. Both of these concerts are traditions in the 15-year history of the festival. Then there are concerts that are unique to this year.

"Each year we do something special," Bagratuni said. "(Prutsman) is a composer who composed piano for silent movies. So this is a live presentation of it. It has never been done before; the silent movies were accompanied by piano, but Prutsman did a piano quintet, which can be performed on its own. With the movie, it is a wonderful conception."

Musicians arrive two days before the concerts and they do intensive rehearsals leading up to the concert. For the most part, the pieces are all pieces they've played individually before and they just have to rehearse playing them with the combination of people. However, new pieces such as the silent movie score require more rehearsals as they are not already in the musicians' repertoire.

"I have no such experience playing to accompany a movie," Bagratuni said.

Artists this year include five faculty artists, four guest artists, 15 advanced student string players and the student vocalists of the 55-member University Chorale. All four of the concerts will be held in MSU's Fairchild Theatre Auditorium.

"I would welcome people to come and experience these artists. People don't have chances to see them very often and these are really outstanding musicians," Bagratuni said.

IF YOU GO

What: Cello Plus Concerts

When: Monday, April 6 through Sunday, April 12

Where: Fairchild Theatre, MSU Auditorium, MSU campus

Tickets: \$15 per concert, \$12 for seniors citizens, \$5 for students and those under 18

Contact: (517) 353-5340 or music.msu.edu

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