

# No failure to communicate

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by LAWRENCE COSENTINO

## Cello Plus chamber series draws guest artists into musical 'family'

Musicians have many ways to communicate. Several years ago, after listening to a recorded take, growly singer Tom Waits told pianist Stephen Prutsman there was “too much tonic water” in it.

“We worked it out,” Prutsman said. “He uses metaphors. There are different truths all over the place.”

The St. Paul-based composer/pianist stands out like a red poppy in a bouquet of guest of guest artists coming to this year’s Cello Plus chamber music festival at MSU.

The weeklong festival ranges from sublime masterpieces by Brahms, Schubert and Haydn to lighter music — such as Prutsman’s newest work, to be partially unveiled at Sunday’s festival closer.



Suren Bagratuni, MSU cello professor, started the festival in 1997 to draw out-of-town artists like Prutsman, Canada’s stellar St. Lawrence String Quartet and Prokofiev-shredding violinist Sergei Babayan, all of whom are coming this year.

“It’s the most guest artists ever, and pretty good ones,” Bagratuni said. “I was lucky to get these people on board.”

Bagratuni won’t say it himself, but his expansive spirit and profound cello artistry are big draws for his guests.

“There’s not one drop of music that comes out of his cello that’s superficial,” Prutsman said. “Everything has meaning.”

The festival concentrates on masterpieces, but not unrelentingly. Last year, Prutsman led Bagratuni and a guest ensemble in an athletic romp through his original score for Buster Keaton’s 1924 silent comedy, “Sherlock Jr.,” complete with kazoo interludes and twisted bits of 12-tone, Schoenberg-style modernism.

“Every rehearsal, every piece, that’s how much fun we have,” Bagratuni said. “I love whatever he does.”

Prutsman gets his fun inside and outside of the classical box. He’s written over 40 arrangements and compositions for the avant-garde Kronos Quartet. Musicians as diverse as cellist Yo-Yo Ma and jazz saxophonist Joshua Redman have played his music. In 2003, for a concert honoring the Dalai Lama, Prutsman arranged eight of Waits’ songs for the singer to perform with Kronos. He also played piano on Waits’ three-CD album, “Orphans: Brawlers, Bawlers & Bastards.”

This year, Prutsman brings an ambitious work in progress for piano and string quartet, “Color Preludes.”

“I have no idea about it,” Bagratuni said last week. “It’s brand new.”

In recent months, Prutsman has been building a complete set of 24 preludes — one in each key, in the tradition of Scriabin, Hindemith, Shostakovich and other modern composers who can’t seem to resist toying with a taffy-like form that dates back to Bach.

The cycle isn't finished yet, but Prutsman will bring about 13 of them, two of which have never been publically performed, to the festival.

One of Canada's premier chamber music groups will help Prutsman premiere the music.

"The St. Lawrence String Quartet is recognized by all of us string quartet geeks as one of the greats," Prutsman said.

The quartet's first violinist, Geoff Nuttall, has an energy and accessibility that have made him a hero of the chamber music world. The New York Times has called Nuttall the "Jon Stewart of the string quartet."

"He loves to speak about the music, and they have a very fresh approach," Bagratuni said of Nuttall and the quartet.

One of Prutsman's new preludes quotes from "Close to the Edge," an epic tone poem by one of his favorite bands, the 1970s prog-rock band Yes. The homage will set up an interesting dynamic on stage — Nuttall doesn't like Yes.

"Geoff loves Bob Dylan, but now I'm forcing him to play Yes," Prutsman crowed. "It's silly but fun."

Prutsman, who has an autistic son, is no purist about concert decorum, either. He spends a lot of time putting together events for "low-functioning autistic kids."

"They can move, clap, vocalize, and not worry about being embarrassed," he said.

Bagratuni wanted to show that side of his guest as well, so Sunday, at 11 a.m., Prutsman and the St. Lawrence Quartet will host a concert for autistic kids and their families at MSU's Fairchild Auditorium. The program is free and open to the public.

"It's a welcoming concert," Prutsman said. "If a kid vocalizes while I'm playing Beethoven, that's fantastic. I love it."

Sunday's concerts cap a generous week of chamber music. On Monday, Bagratuni and friends will play epic piano quintets by Brahms and Schubert. The latter may be one of the most beautiful pieces of music ever written; the former is no slouch, either. Wednesday's concert will feature Babayan, one of the world's foremost interpreters of the music of Soviet bad boy Sergei Prokofiev. Babayan will play some of Prokofiev's little-heard "Sarcasms" to kick off a night of Slavic music.

Bagratuni and Babayan are old friends, going back to high school in their native Armenia. They both served in the Red Army, but not together. In 1986, Babayan was struggling through a brutal first year in the Soviet infantry. He later told Bagratuni that he switched on a radio one night and was heartened to hear his friend's award-winning performance in the International Tchaikovsky Competition.

"He said it helped get him through," Bagratuni said.

Now they wrangle like an old married couple.

"With Sergei, rehearsals aren't polite, like they are supposed to be," Bagratuni said. "Oh, would you please consider this," he cooed, affecting a phony collegial tone. "We tell everything to each other's face: 'I don't like what you do.'" Friday's concert will be a Brahms blowout featuring Korean-born guest artists, including Kyung Sun-Lee, an acclaimed violinist from Seoul, along with Ruggero Alliffranchini and Maiya Papach, two top players from the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra.

Bagratuni is proud that two top MSU students, violinist I-Pei Lin and violist Yury Ozhegov, will take part in the festival as well, along with former Bagratuni cello student Viktor Uzur, who pops up frequently on NPR as part of the Richter Uzur Duo with guitarist Brad Richter.

The festival's close-knit, family vibe continues after the concerts, when everybody goes to Bagratuni's house for a bountiful, Russian-style post-concert meal.

"I can't just play a concert and go to sleep," Bagratuni said. "Musicians are like that. You want to communicate, maybe have a glass of wine."

## Cello Plus Festival

With MSU faculty and guest artists

All events at Fairchild Theatre 542 Auditorium Road, East Lansing (517) 353- 5340, [music.msu.edu](http://music.msu.edu)

7:30 p.m. Monday, April 4 Romantic Masterpieces \$15/\$12 seniors/\$5 students

7:30 p.m. Wednesday, April 6 Slavonic Masterworks \$15/\$12 seniors/\$5 students

8 p.m. Friday, April 8 Chamber Music Favorites: Stars from Korea \$15/\$12 seniors/\$5 students

11 a.m. Sunday, April 10 Azure Concert For developmentally disabled children and families FREE, RSVP at music.msu.edu

3 p.m. Sunday, April 10 From Haydn to ... Prutsman Pianist Stephen Prutsman, St. Lawrence String Quartet \$15/\$12 seniors/\$5 students

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