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Richter/Uzur Duo straddles the classical and rock worlds

By Steve Wildsmith | October 21, 2010

The first time guitarist Brad Richter heard Viktor Uzur play the cello, he immediately offered him a part in the ensemble piece he'd been commissioned to write.

That was five years ago; ever since, the two men have performed as a classical/rock fusion duo that showcases speed, talent, improvisation and creativity. It's a match, Richter told *The Daily Times* this week, that allows them both the opportunity to play to their particular strengths.

"Viktor has some skills that I've always wished I had, and I learn from him and work on those things that I'm not as strong as he is," Richter said. "He's an amazing improviser, and he has perfect pitch and a great ear. It's really a healthy challenge to keep up with him when he's improvising or learning a song very fast, and I get so excited to see him working in that way.

"He's an excellent composer, too, but I have a very good ear for the shape of a piece. When it comes to the layout as we go through the entire arc of a composition, I have a bit of a knack for making macro adjustments to things."

The end result of the combination of those strengths — a stirring, soulful blend of sound that straddles two different worlds. Next week, the Richter/Uzur Duo will perform at the Clayton Center for the Arts on the Maryville College campus, and the bond the two men forged in 2005 is stronger today than it's ever been.

Back then, Richter was commissioned by Weber State University in Ogden, Utah, to write a concert-length chamber piece. An acclaimed guitarist, he was a scholarship student at the Royal College of Music in London, where he studied with Carlos Bonell and went on to win the college's guitar competition. On the faculty at Weber State — Uzur, a professor of cello accomplished in his own right, who attained a soloist diploma from the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow, where he worked with such teachers as Fedorchenko, Miller and N. Shakovskaya.

"We had that connection right away, but it evolved slower than it might have otherwise because we were so wrapped up in that larger ensemble piece," Richter said. "I knew cello was going to be a part of the piece when I wrote it, and a couple of his students actually auditioned to play the part, but then met Viktor and we hit it off, so I asked him to play it. He went from being cellist in the piece to being my partner in deciding who else was going to be in the piece, and throughout the whole process, he was very humble. I would give him a cello part to play, and he would play it precisely and then offer a bit of advice on how to play it more precisely."

As part of the composition, Richter included a duo for the two men to perform. But it wasn't until the performance was done and he was driving home that he realized the extent of his future partner's talent.

"He gave me a CD of violin/cello duos he'd done two years earlier, and I was blown away by how fast he was," Richter said. "We immediately started talking excitedly about what we could do as a duo. It turned out we have the same interests, musically, and that we both were wanna-be rock stars when we were



kids. That's another reason we have so much fun — the duo has become a way to vent that rock 'n' roller in us, even though we're still kind of playing classical music."

Richter credits Uzur with the idea of incorporating rock songs into their concerts, and today he estimates that at least half of Richter/Uzur Duo's repertoire has some connection to rock 'n' roll. The first attempt to do so is still one of their most popular arrangements — Led Zeppelin's Middle Eastern opus "Kashmir."

"We were both so excited about that song and how it fits," he said. "It's got that neat progression that makes it lean into other keys, and it seemed like a natural fit for what we do."

Rather than straight-rock covers, the two look for interesting pairings, he added. For example — Uzur brought the classical composition "Flight of the Bumblebee" to the table, and while Richter was impressed by the speed with which his partner could play it, he felt the piece, on its own, lacked flair. In playing with the melody, however, they discovered that it dovetailed nicely into that of the traditional folk song "Misirlou," best known as a surf-rock composition by Dick Dale and the Deltones.

"We started to mess around with it, and it worked really beautifully," he said. "That was our first mash-up between classical and folk."

Others followed — combining the R&B/soul classics "Superstition" and "Jungle Boogie" into a single song, and just this week the two have been working up an arrangement of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody."

"We had already decided ahead of time that it wouldn't work to have both of us, at the same time, play the choir part in the beginning, but I figured out that part on the guitar," he said. "Now, it's just a matter of figuring out what we're going to assign to the cello and working it out from there."

The challenge is the distance between the two men — they live 1,000 miles apart, so the genesis of most songs is done via e-mail and Skype. They compose their individual parts separately, but to bring a piece to its natural conclusion, most of the joint arranging has to wait until they're together — usually on tour.

"We kind of build organically," Richter said. "A lot of times, we don't know what the end result is going to be when we start something. We work on the phone and over Skype when we're apart, so we'll kind of build the foundation of what we want to do, and a lot of it is knowing the pieces we want to arrange and knowing what's going to work on guitar and what's going to work on cello."

"The cello, for example, is much better at making a singing melody line than the guitar. If there's a long, sustained melody or a crucial melody to a piece, we'll have Viktor play that. In those cases, there are certain things we can assign each other without having to be together. We'll come up with a framework of how we want to build the piece and come up with quite a bit of our own parts, and then when we get together and put it all together, the shape begins to change."