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Bewitched by Bach



String Theory: Christian-Pierre La Marca at St. Mary's Church. Photo: R. Ravindran

In the hallowed precincts of St. Mary's, young French cellist Christian-Pierre La Marca captured music's classic flavour on his 300-year-old cello

A 16th Century church. A 17th Century cello. And, a 21st Century musician.

Under the high-vaulted roof of St. Mary's in Fort St. George, the oldest Anglican church East of the Suez, French cellist Christian-Pierre La Marca chose to perform the first three of Bach's suites for the cello.

A pleasing feature of this concert, organised by the Prakriti Foundation, the French Embassy and the Alliance Française of Madras, was the very rare chance to enjoy the intimacy of a recital and see the cellist up close.

Inside the thick masonry walls of the chancel, packed with people, history and the heat of the day, Christian-Pierre's slender fingers skimmed over the strings to bring alive Johann Sebastian Bach's rich Baroque music.

The suites (BMV1007, BMV 1008 and BMV 1009), some of the most-recognised pieces for solo cello, sounded so much at home in the church, written as they were by the composer when he was Kapellmeister at Kothen.

Composed around the 1720s, the cello suites, numbering six, lay forgotten for almost 200 years until the renowned Catalonian cellist Pablo Casals rescued them from the relative obscurity of music classrooms and held them out to the world. The suites have six movements each — Prelude, Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, Galanteries and Gigue.

Even in so solemn a setting, Christian-Pierre captured the joyous energy of the pieces, underlining the dance origins of the compositions. A decade into his international career, Christian-Pierre has already won fame for the spontaneity and sensitivity of his musicianship. He has performed at prestigious concert halls and music festivals around the world and as a soloist with major orchestras. An exclusive recording artist for Sony Classical, he also performs the works of contemporary composers. Trained by some of the great cellists of our time, Christian-Pierre is one of the founding members of the award-winning chamber ensemble, Trio Dali. Presently an artist-in-residence at the Singer-Polignac Foundation in Paris, Christian-Pierre plays a 1725-made Antonio Stradivari cello, named The Vaslin, on loan from the luxury goods label, LVMH.

The prelude to ‘Suite No. 1 in G major’ has arpeggios aplenty, which Christian-Pierre played with fleet-fingered flexibility sounding off a rich resonance. Trills unfolded gracefully in rapid succession in the Allemande and Courante passages that ended with a happy-sounding Gigue; it built-up an intensity to the more meditative ‘Suite No. 2 in D minor’. Both at full volume and at a whisper, Christian-Pierre played the piece as it was meant to be, keeping it rich in imagination and improvisation, despite the distracting beads of sweat that rolled off his forehead and onto the strings. Never, for once, did the oppressive humidity take away from the genius of his playing.

Having conquered the heat, Christian-Pierre offered a bravura account of ‘Suite No. 3 in C major’ with vibrant tempos and subtle variations of pressure that sang lightly in the ear. For the encore, he played Pablo Casals’ hauntingly beautiful protest music, ‘Song Of The Birds’.

Bach’s solo suites for the cello are journeys in contemplation for both musician and audience. And, at that candle-lit evening at St. Mary’s, Bach travelled far on the strength of Christian-Pierre’s immense talent.