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Strauss and Hendrix: Benjamin Verdery in Concert at the Kunstmuseum

by Tobias Blum

Against the white semi-circle of the auditorium in the Bonn Museum of Art, Benjamin Verdery's colorful dress-shirt stood out. In fact, one could see from his attire that the American guitarist does not feel bound to the gravely serious tradition of art music, although the program of the 101st Bonn Master Concert Series, with compositions by Janacek, Strauss, and Bach indeed contained serious musical weight.

The concert began with one of Verdery's own compositions, "Prelude and Wedding Dance." Stylistically, his secure and detailed tone production is impressive. In contrast with hard, almost percussive attacks, he succeeds effortlessly in giving room to the waxing and waning individual notes and chords, giving all of the necessary space in softer passages.

The concert was a demonstration of great virtuosity, and, above all else, a remarkable playfulness. The Cello Suite of Bach was impressive, and "Be Kind All the Time" for guitar and digital delay, featuring extended techniques involving chopsticks and thumbtacks, in the no man's land between modern classical and free jazz, was genuinely exciting.

The second half began with two short pieces by Janacek, and continued with "Philippe's Center," another piece written by the guitarist. The simple and beautiful melody in the second movement was the high point of the concert. A short but entertaining anecdote from the head of the Guitar Department at Yale University, who freely shared insights from the stage, was followed by Strauss' "Blue Danube Waltz" in an arrangement respectful of the piece, but performed with an accent on the upbeat, which suggested a satirical, if friendly, interpretation of the famous melody.

Pieces by Otis Redding, Prince, and Jimi Hendrix were even further deconstructed to their structural skeletons and reassembled, changing the old rock classics into the ultra-new. A long ovation and an encore ended the excellent concert in the Bonn Museum of Art.

