

Cellist bows to friendship

By Lisa Talesnick - Vernon Morning Star

Published: March 03, 2009 7:00 PM

In the beginning of 1725 was the cello. And the cello was with God, and the cello was God. And the cello became music and dwelt among us.

After the first movement, sweat dripping from his forehead, Arnold Choi, 23, picked up his cloth, wiped the 284-year-old Carlo Tonnoni cello fingerboard, and then wiped his own brow.

Was it in Tonnoni? Was it in Dvorak? Was it in what Choi was feeling? Or were these three — who never met in their physical existence — burning together in their own passionate friendship under conductor Rosemary Thomson's baton?

In introducing the Okanagan Symphony Orchestra's concert *Passionate Friends* at the Performing Arts Centre Sunday, trumpet player Jim Howie warned us that Choi would deliver Dvorak right into our souls.

And with a little help from his friends, he did.

Italian luthier Tonnoni, a contemporary of Stradivari, was in such service to the great passion of the Romantics, that the subtle relationship between his precision and care sing through the voice of the instrument.

And playing Antonin Dvorak's *Concerto for Violincello in B Minor* is a dream come true for every cellist.

The title of the evening, *Passionate Friends*, was inspired by the compositions and friendship between composers Johannes Brahms and Antonin Dvorak.

"Brahms seems to be pleased by his connection with me," writes Dvorak. "As an artist and a man I am so overcome by his kindness that I cannot help but love him. What a warm heart and great spirit there is in that man!"

The *Symphony in F Major, No. 3* by Brahms, so delicately played by the OSO players, was inspired by Dvorak's *Fifth Symphony*.

There was a sustained warmth in the playing, still enough to hold the intensity of friendship and communicate the message of the Romantic composer. Even to the last note which was slow and still and steady. This work inspired Dvorak to write his *Seventh Symphony* (considered by many to be his best), which in turn inspired Brahms' *Fourth Symphony*.

In his introduction of the evening, Howie spoke about the deep friendships that exist within the orchestra and with members of the audience. He called it his symphony. In doing so, he invited everyone on stage with him that night. Even my tickets landed me sitting with seven dear friends entwined on all sides.

I had the occasion last night to sit with another dear friend at a memorial service for OSO subscriber Denis Gumbrell. Denis composed a note to his wife of 61 years just before he died, saying: "When you need me, call me, and I will be there. You will know in your heart that I am here."

"You know," she told me. "I can feel him with me."

Here's to the passion and music of lasting friendships among us.

Cellist Arnold Choi performs Dvorak with the Okanagan Symphony Sunday.
Photo by Stephanie Loo de Nevers

