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Cellist Frances-Marie Uitti gives virtuoso performance in D.C.

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The spectacularly gifted cellist Frances-Marie Uitti has made a career out of demolishing musical boundaries. She has developed new techniques (most famously, playing with two bows simultaneously), collaborated with a who's who of contemporary composers, and pushed the cello into realms of unexpected beauty and expression. So the place to be Tuesday night for anyone interested in new music or the cello - or just innovative thinking in general - was St. Mary's Church in Foggy Bottom, where Uitti showed why she might be the most interesting cellist on the planet.

St. Mary's is an intimate space - perfect, as it turned out, for Uitti's intensely personal style. The program focused on solo works by composers often labeled "thorny," including the sometimes-brutal Salvatore Sciarrino, the English spectralist Jonathan Harvey, the enigmatic Gyorgy Kurtag and that visionary-by-any-standard Giacinto Scelsi. But Uitti made each work human, not only with her engaging prefatory remarks (she's worked with each of the composers) but with the riveting depth and lyricism of her playing. Sciarrino's "Ai Limiti della Notte" explored a delicate, often-whispered world of sound, Harvey's "Curve With Plateaux" was robust and wildly expressive and Kurtag employed Uitti's two-bow technique (one goes under the strings, the other, over) in his spare "Message to Frances-Marie." It was an evening of exceptional virtuosity and insight, particularly in Uitti's own "Rap't" and Scelsi's "Ygghur," perhaps the high point of the program.

The performance also featured the guitarist Ayman Fanous, who opened with improvisations on two of Heitor Villa-Lobos's notoriously difficult Etudes. Unlike the virtuosic Uitti, Fanous is largely self-taught, and while his love for the guitar was evident, so, alas, was his lack of formal training. But things picked up when Uitti joined him for a joint improvisation, and the evening closed with extemporaneous playing of rare intelligence and beauty.

- Stephen Brookes

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