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MUSIC REVIEW

Jazz, classical masters mix for a joyous holiday finale

Sensual cello blends with energy of piano

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SPECIAL TO THE PIONEER PRESS

The Music in the Park series describes itself as “presenters of traditional and contemporary music.” The organizers went a bit far afield Sunday afternoon in presenting jazz pianist Butch Thompson in a concert with cellist Laura Sewell at St. Anthony United Church of Christ.

Their program, which featured a number of cuts from Thompson and Sewell’s recent CD “Bethlehem After Dark,” brought the holiday season to a joyous conclusion.

The event was a benefit for the 2-year old St. Anthony Park Community Foundation, a fund to support the nonprofit institutions of the St. Anthony Park neighborhood in St. Paul.

Whether playing ragtime, Jelly Roll Morton or traditional carols, Thompson is an undisputed jazz master. It’s a joy to watch his hands floating over the keys, coaxing all manner of sounds out of the instrument.

He’s an entertainer par excellence as well as a proficient musician. His take on “The Twelve Days of Christmas” — embodying the entire history of jazz — was witty, silly and wonderful.

WHO: Pianist Butch Thompson with Laura Sewell, cello

WHAT: Music in the Park series

WHEN: Sunday afternoon

WHERE: St. Anthony Park United Church of Christ

CAPSULE: Holiday favorites, jazz standards and contemporary arrangements highlight the unique partnership of Thompson and Sewell.

Sewell is a classically trained cellist. She treats traditional hymns and the songs of Irving Berlin with the same seriousness she brings to the classical repertoire.

And tossing seriousness aside, she plays with stylish flair.

The two make ideal partners. Both are sensitive to the unique gifts of the other: the sensuous sound of Sewell’s cello and the dazzle and energy of Thompson’s piano. And in complementing each other, they made the most of both.

They were at their best in “Bethlehem After Dark,” a fantasia on “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” An elaborate series of variations for both instruments, it had the feel of a freewheeling improvisation.

Music in the Park remains one of the most creative series in town. It’s only appropriate that they sell out event after event.