



Piano legend at Linton Series and Miami University's Hall Auditorium

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Pianist Menahem Pressler: astonishing artistry at 87

Over the weekend, legendary pianist Menahem Pressler, 87, anchor of the Beaux Arts Trio, performed back-to-back concerts in Oxford and Cincinnati. His Linton Chamber Music Series program, performed with three excellent string players, repeats tonight in Loveland, and tickets are still available. Here's the review:



Alexander Kerr, former CSO concertmaster, joined his colleagues on the Linton Series

After more than 60 years on the performing stage, most musicians would be glad to spend their golden years away from the spotlight. But pianist Menahem Pressler, 87, still thrives on an international career that takes him to all corners of the globe.

Over the weekend, Pressler was in the region to perform a solo piano recital in Hall Auditorium at Miami University on Saturday, and on Sunday, a chamber music concert on the Linton Music Series in Avondale. (The latter repeats tonight in Loveland.)

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Pressler, a founding member of the Beaux Arts Trio, which set the standard for piano trios for more than a half century, has been on the faculty of Indiana University's Jacobs School

of Music since 1955. Since the breakup of the trio, he has focused on solo recitals and ensembles with his many musical colleagues.

On Sunday afternoon in the beautiful First Unitarian Church, "Pressler and friends" presented the kind of music making that one feels lucky to witness. The enthusiastic audience that packed the intimate venue was treated to two encores, which capped the program of piano quartets by Mozart, Turina and Dvorak.

Pressler's musical partners included two IU colleagues — violinist Alexander Kerr, former concertmaster of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, and Eric Kim, former CSO principal cellist – as well as violist Paul Neubauer, an artist of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.

With the pianist, who turns 88 on Beethoven's birthday, Dec. 16, this was a stellar ensemble. Together, they instantly set a tone of refinement, unity of expression and congeniality.

They opened with Piano Mozart's Quartet in G Minor, K. 478. It was wonderful to hear Pressler's magical touch with these superb string players. The slow movement was a highlight of seamless shading from light to dark between the instruments. The finale, a rondo, was tackled with exuberance, lightness and a genuine spirit.

Joaquin Turina's Piano Quartet in A Minor, composed in 1933, was a breath of fresh air. The Seville-born composer studied in Paris, and the French Impressionists are never far from his charming Spanish rhythms and melodies.

In the slow opening, the strings projected a sultry theme over Pressler's lush, expertly balanced harmonies at the piano. There were stunning moments for each instrument, from the gorgeous sonorities achieved by Pressler to the soulful cries of Kim's cello. Kerr, who projected a sweet tone throughout, dispatched a virtuosic cadenza with ease and enormous beauty. Neubauer was a terrific partner, who soared expressively in his solos.

The quartet concluded with an energized reading of Dvorak's Piano Quartet in E-flat Major. Pressler, who seemed indefatigable, summoned the power to match the strings, and knew instinctively when to pull back as the wealth of Bohemian melodies unfolded. Highlights included Kim's impassioned phrasing in the slow movement and the sparkling dialogue between piano and strings in the scherzo. In the finale, the musicians balanced brilliance with moments of nostalgia.

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With the crowd on its feet, they provided an encore: the Andante from Brahms' Piano Quartet in C Minor, Op. 60.

Earlier, to honor Anne Black, retiring from the Linton board, Pressler also performed a piano solo: Chopin's Nocturne in C-Sharp Minor, Op. Post.

OXFORD — On Saturday in Hall Auditorium on Miami University's campus in Oxford, Pressler delivered a solo recital of Beethoven, Debussy and Schubert, as part of the university's "Year of the Arts."

Pressler's artistry is of the golden era of pianism. Even after a lifetime at the piano, he can still offer fresh insights into the classics. He possesses agility and power, but this was a concert that was all about beauty of sound, subtlety and thoughtful phrasing. In an era of excessive showmanship, Pressler never drew attention to himself, but instead, got to the heart of each composer.

He opened with Beethoven's Sonata No. 31 in A-flat Major, Op. 110. Pressler's trademark light, sparkling touch was evident in its opening arpeggios, but this was also music making with a profound, timeless quality. He performed its four movements in one unbroken span, and every phrase had something unique to say. In particular, the slow movement, with its extended "recitative," was deeply interior and beautifully felt.

The sonority, clarity and range of Debussy's "Estampes" was breathtaking. The pianist illuminated the Asian-colored theme of "Pagodas" with ringing tone, set against lightly rippling arpeggios like wind chimes blowing in a breeze. "Soirée dans Grenade" – evoking Grenada, Spain — was played with abandon and sensuality. "Jardins sous la Pluie" was a technical tour-de-force.

Despite the bright instrument, there was never a harsh note. Schubert's Sonata in B-flat Major concluded the program. The autumnal quality of Schubert's final sonata was unmistakable, and the pianist lingered on each chord. The scherzo was full of charm, and Pressler communicated the sense of joy that carried into the finale. In a work of heavenly length, his energy flagged a bit, but he found power to end with a flourish.

After two standing ovations, he performed two gems that seemed to come straight from the heart: Chopin's Nocturne in C-Sharp Minor and – perhaps a subtle hint — Brahms' "Wiegenlied" (Lullaby).

The Linton Chamber Music concert repeats at 7:30 p.m. tonight, Congregation Beth Adam, 10001 Loveland-Madeira Rd., Loveland. Tickets: 513-381-6868, www.lintonmusic.org.

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