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Live Classical Music: Richard Stoltzman, Menahem Pressler and the New York Chamber Soloists Orchestra at Royce Hall

By Don Heckman

Mozart and Brahms were on the bill at Royce Hall Saturday for a UCLA Liveconcert featuring pianist Menahem Pressler, clarinetist Richard Stoltzman and the New York Chamber Soloists Orchestra. For some listeners, this one included, Mozart and Brahms are not just nearly a century apart, they're also at opposite ends of potential interest (with Mozart in the ascendancy).

This program, however, had a common link in the presence of a pair of works for the clarinet – Mozart's Clarinet Concerto and Brahms' Sonata for Clarinet and Piano. The Mozart work is not only the definitive work for the instrument, it's also one of the composer's most extraordinary compositions. Written for Anton Stadler, the clarinet's first virtuosic player, at a time when the instrument was still in the process of development, it nonetheless captured a stunning range of subtlety and nuance.

Stoltzman, one of the few concertizing classical clarinetists, clearly understands those aspects as well as – and perhaps better than – anyone since Stadler. And his performance of the Concerto was the highlight of the evening. Despite a few surprising glitches on some upper runs, Stoltzman brought to life the beautifully conceived technical portions of the work, as well as its embracing lyricism.

He was able to do so in part because of the vibrant playing of the NYCSO. Performing without a conductor, the gifted members of the ensemble came together in musically symbiotic fashion, producing the sort of dynamic spontaneity rarely heard in classical ensembles working under the hegemony of a leader's baton.

Opening the program with a performance of the Mozart G Major Piano Concerto No. 17 with the NYCSO, the 86 year old Pressler revealed his deep understanding of the rich complexities of this stunning work. One of the most compelling of Mozart's major piano concertos it can be played in a relatively light hearted manner. Or it can be played – as Pressler did – with attention to such fascinating aspects as the surprisingly complex harmonic subtleties of the Andante and the buoyant, dance-like aspects of the Allegretto.

Pressler, like Stoltzman, benefited enormously from the intimate support provided by the NYCSO. And, by the time the program had concluded, one was left with the hope that UCLA Live will bring this stellar ensemble back next season for a concert completely dedicated to a spotlight performance of their own.