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Pressler's Dvorak is a revelation

Concert review

BY JANELLE GELFAND | JGELFAND@ENQUIRER.COM

Menahem Pressler and Friends brought down the house Tuesday, to open the 78th season of Chamber Music Cincinnati.

No doubt, those in the large crowd in Corbett Auditorium knew of Pressler's near-legendary status, as pianist and founding member of the Beaux Arts Trio 52 years ago. But hearing the 83-year-old pianist perform the Dvorak Piano Quintet with his "friends" – in this case **The American String Quartet** – was a revelation. Here is a golden-era pianist, whose tone color, gossamer lightness and exuberant support of his fellow musicians is rare and unparalleled today.

Pressler, distinguished professor at Indiana University, squeezed in the performance between a piano recital tour and 17-concert European tour with his trio, celebrating its farewell season. Yet, a performance of Dvorak could not have been more energized, spontaneous and fresh.

Dvorak's Piano Quintet in A Major is a gift for chamber music lovers. Bursting with Bohemian folk melodies, its challenges include its mercurial changes of tempo and mood.

From the opening, there was complete unity of expression between the pianist and the quartet: violinists Peter Winograd and Laurie Carney, violist Daniel Avshalomov and cellist Wolfram Koessel. The first movement opened like a memory, with a nostalgic dialogue for cello and piano, and ended with an accelerated flourish. As the music unfolded, one could admire the warmth of the cello and viola, and the sweet precision of the violins. Pressler alternately propelled the action and played the accompanist – supporting with a featherweight touch that allowed his colleagues to soar.

But it was the pianist's luminous sound that drew the listener in, and he took his time to revel in a theme here and there. The "Dumka" was wonderfully paced, with liberal use of rubato and stunning, ever-changing phrasing. The Scherzo sparkled, its runs tossed off in effortless sweeps. The players plunged vigorously into the finale, with Pressler turning often to communicate with his colleagues. Its fugal section was a tour-de-force; the chorale was like a hymn, just before the electrifying surge to the finish.

Rock-star cheers from the student-heavy CCM crowd resulted in an encore: The slow movement from Brahms' Piano Quintet in F Minor, played with depth and beautiful sonority.

The American Quartet, now in its 32nd season, is a distinguished ensemble that champions new music. Their program included Mozart's Quartet in C Major, K. 465, "Dissonance," and Alban Berg's Quartet No. 3. Mozart's "Dissonance" Quartet is named for its unusual (for the time) introduction, preceding the most joyous of quartets. The American's view of the opening was stark, dark and mysterious, before bursting like a ray of sunshine onto the lively allegro. The first movement was often a dialogue between Winograd's pure, arresting violin color and the rich, full tone of cellist Koessel. The "Andante cantabile," one of Mozart's most sublime slow movements, was played with mesmerizing beauty. The ensemble is one of unified style and effortless technique, and nowhere was this more evident than in Berg's Quartet No. 3. The work of 1910 looks back to post-romanticism, as much as it looks forward to atonality. It was a reading of clockwork precision, transparency and power. The first movement, "Langsam," with special effects that included "ponticello" playing on the bridge, was emotional, enthralling and, at times, edge-of-your-seat. The second movement contrasted atmospheric moments with intensity, all played with immense virtuosity and conviction.