

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Toronto Ontario Saturday, July 25, 2009

Menahem Pressler and Friends

* Toronto Summer Music Festival
at the MacMillan Theatre
in Toronto on Thursday

Menahem Pressler and Friends – the diminutive but undimmed octogenarian chamber pianist and three superb younger string players (violinist Alexander Kerr, violist Lawrence Dutton and cellist Paul Watkins) – performed gloriously at the Toronto Summer Music Festival Thursday night in piano quartets by Mozart and Dvorak.

The four players lead far-flung lives and are not long established as a touring group in the same way as was the Beaux Arts Trio, of which Pressler was the pianist and guiding spirit for some 50 years. But they play as if they've been together much longer than they have in a finely balanced, intimately inter-responsive colloquy of true chamber music making.

Their Mozart – the Piano Quartet No. 2, in E flat major, K.493 – was immensely refined, stylish and vital. It was notable especially for its perception and projection of the astonishing strokes of harmonic outreach, well ahead of their day, with which Mozart transforms and deepens thematic materials that seem initially simple. You would almost have to think that in the next century the Franz Schubert of the two piano trios and the great String Quintet in C must have known and been stimulated by these strange and original “pushings of the envelope.” And Pressler and his friends conveyed, with keenest pleasure

and an exquisite particularity, all the implications of both the strangeness and the originality of Mozart's work.

Their Dvorak – the Piano Quartet No. 2, in E flat major, Op. 87 – was even more of a revelation. It's not a work that has much currency in the repertoire, perhaps because it is beyond the grasp of the standard ad hoc ensemble. Its rich and startling changes of texture and dynamics, laced through with melodies of disarming artlessness, challenged even this sophisticated foursome, but they were able not just to rise to the challenge but to revel in it. They made its kaleidoscopes of colour and design, its singularities of rhythm, momentum and dynamics, cohere in a rare kind of vivid refreshment. There was no hint here of the dead hand of routine. This was Dvorak alive, and experienced anew.

Not surprisingly, the audience was transported, and Pressler announced an encore “to quiet you all down” – the ravishing slow movement of Brahms's Piano Quartet No. 3, Op. 60 . Watkins, the young cellist, spun out the lyrical opening melody with a gentle heartfelt simplicity over Pressler's quiet piano, and the two other strings, first the violin, then the viola, joined them in Brahms's eloquent, subtly dovetailed four-way discourse. It provided a gracious and touching closure to an uncommonly persuasive evening of music.

Ken Winters, Special to *The Globe and Mail*



115 College Street • Burlington VT 05401
(802)658-2592 • music@melkap.com • www.melkap.com

