

Cleveland Chamber Music Society: fifteen minutes with violinist Philip Setzer

by Daniel Hathaway



We took advantage of a last-minute opportunity to chat on the phone with violinist Philip Setzer of the Han-Setzer-Finckel Trio on the morning before the ensemble's performance on the Cleveland Chamber Music Society series on Tuesday, September 23 at 7:30 pm at Plymouth Church in Shaker Heights.

Setzer, a Cleveland native (both of whose parents played in The Cleveland Orchestra, and who also is a founding member of the Emerson String Quartet), had just emerged from serving for seventeen days on the jury of the International Violin Competition of Indianapolis (won by long-time Cleveland Institute of Music student Jinjoo Cho) and had spent Monday evening coaching members of Sharon Robinson's Intensive Piano Trio Program at the Institute.

Daniel Hathaway: Women seem to have been the big winners in the recent Indianapolis Competition.

Philip Setzer: You know, that's just the way it worked out this year — there were five Korean women and one American woman. It's all done on a point system. We don't discuss things among the jury. The level was generally high, but there were a lot of young, gifted Korean women. It's extraordinary what's coming out of the teaching program there.

DH: Any idea why the violin is so popular in Korea? Of course the piano is as well.

PS: I have some theories of my own, but I think people are drawn to the violin. It's considered something very beautiful to do for a young girl. I think it's been shown that music is very good for your upbringing. In this country, unfortunately, music programs are being pushed aside in public schools because there just isn't enough money. I'm a huge sports fan myself, but money will never get cut from sports programs. The first

thing that goes is music programs because the thinking is that they can get their lessons on the side, so why should we use taxpayers' money to pay for someone's violin lessons? The reality of that is a lot of people are not exposed to music. I think it's part of the culture in Korea now, as it used to be in Europe and the U.S. Larry Dutton, the violist in the Emerson Quartet, came to music through his public school program. His parents weren't musical, and he never would have done that otherwise.

DH: I'd like to get your insights into the program for this evening. I understand that the trio is embarking on a Beethoven trio project this season.

PS: The main thing I do is play in the Emerson Quartet, but David Finckel and I played in a trio before Wu Han came onto the scene, and before he began his 34-year tenure with the Quartet. Later, when David and Wu Han got married, we would get together just for fun to play trios and a concert here or there. A few years ago we said, you know, why don't we get together and play the Schubert trios and record them. That was something I always wanted to do and David and Wu Han have their own recording company, ArtistLed. So we did that, and then we did a little more and recorded Mendelssohn, and recorded Dvorak, and we've been playing about twenty or so concerts a year in addition to our otherwise insane schedules. So we decided that the next project we really wanted to focus on was Beethoven. We're performing most of the Beethoven trios this year except for a couple we're saving for next season. We'll probably record them mostly at the end of the summer.

It's been a long time since I've done all of them. In fact, the one we're playing tonight, op. 1, no. 2 is the one I had never played before last season. For whatever reason, I think it's the one that is actually played the least. It's a fantastic and very important piece. Of the three he published as op. 1, this one in particular has a huge piano part. And the scope of the piece is very, very big. All the movements are very long, the structure is almost what you would expect from a middle-period piece like one of the Razomofsky quartets. So this is not an early, cute piece at all. It has an unbelievably gorgeous slow movement in E Major, certainly one of his great ones and as full of pathos as the last movement is full of humor.

The second piece is the big e-minor Shostakovich trio — now referred to as the second trio because of an earlier, one-movement piece, op. 8, which is now called no. 1. It was written during World War II, and it's full of drama and tragedy. Stalin issued an edict to composers to use folk themes, because they were not supposed to write music that was too formalist or intellectual. So what did Shostakovich do? He added some "Jewish folk music" that he made up himself to the finale, which is certainly not what Stalin had in mind. Right there you seem him being dissident. Shostakovich, who was not Jewish but had many close Jewish friends, aligned himself with others who were being persecuted

by Stalin. He could get away with writing something like that without getting shot because he could say it was about Hitler and the Germans.

Then we have the Mendelssohn c-minor trio, which along with the “Reformation” Symphony is a piece where the composer uses a Protestant chorale. So here you have Mendelssohn, whose Jewish family had converted in order to have any kind of professional success, quoting a Protestant hymn, and Shostakovich, who was not Jewish, using a Jewish theme. That’s a bit of irony in the program that I didn’t even realize when we were putting it together.

DH: I’ve been referring to the group as the famous trio without a name. Will you ever take on a “real” name?

PS: We’ve always just used our names, usually in alphabetical order. Originally we referred to it as the Schubert Trio, but then we thought, what if we were going to play something else? Then the next year we played Mendelssohn. Then we made it kind of a joke that we didn’t have a name. So sometimes we’re called the Finckel-Han-Setzer Trio and sometimes as the Han-Setzer-Finckel Trio and so forth. But I hope people realize we’re a very serious trio who love what we do.

DH: It’s good to know that the Emerson Quartet, which I first heard at Groton School very early in its history, is still going strong with three of its original members after David Finckel departed.

PS: We’re very happy in the quartet. It was a very easy changeover with all good feelings. David just felt that he needed to concentrate on other things, and it was just impossible to do everything he was doing and do justice to the Quartet. Larry and I had both played with Paul Watkins a number of times and really loved his playing. We just sat down and played with him, and it was as if we had been playing quartets together for years. Paul is very happy, and David’s very happy that Paul took his place — Paul was his first choice if we could possibly get him. So we all feel very fortunate.

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