

Cleveland Chamber Music Society: Two Nights, Six Trios — a conversation with Wu Han and David Finckel

by Mike Telin



“Beethoven’s six piano trios are important touch points in his development as a composer,” pianist Wu Han said during a telephone conversation. “Hearing all of them is the equivalent of hearing all of the string quartets — not only is it a rich and unusual experience, but you become a different listener.”

Thanks to the Cleveland Chamber Music Society, audiences will have the opportunity to hear all six trios when Wu Han, violinist Philip Setzer, and cellist David Finckel perform them on two adjacent nights at Fairmount Temple.

On Monday, March 26 at 7:30 pm, the program includes Op. 1, Nos. 1 and 3, and Op. 70, No. 1 (“Ghost”). The following evening — same time — you can hear Op. 1, No. 2, Op. 70, No. 2, and Op. 97 (“Archduke”). Tickets are available [online](#).

The pianist said that hearing the three trios that make up Opus 1 will help listeners understand Beethoven in a deeper way. “He made his debut in Vienna with them. They were played in one evening and Haydn was there. Each of the three are completely different, but it was the most innovative piano trio writing of that time. He pushed the art form forward. You gain a sense of the evolution of the art form in Opus 70, and of course Opus 97 set the stage for the trios of Brahms, Mendelssohn, and Dvořák.”

Joining our conversation, David Finckel said that it is rare to perform and/or hear the six over two nights. “We’ve had the good fortune of finding a presenter who is committed enough to the art form to want to offer the extraordinary experience of

hearing these works that cover the three famous creative periods of the composer's life."

The musicians said they leave the decision about program order to the presenter, although they have performed all six in chronological order in one day — with a break for dinner. "The last time we did that was I think last year in Potsdam, NY. The temperature outside hovered between 10 and 20 below," Finckel recalled. "It was too cold for anybody to leave the hall so we just stayed inside. The audience was stuck and we were stuck, so we just played them one after the other. But we all kept each other warm."

When asked if she has a favorite, Wu Han said that is an impossible question to answer because when she walks onstage, every piece becomes her favorite. But she did admit that she loves the Archduke. "Opus 1, No. 3 is spectacular and so innovative. It was the most representative of Beethoven's music at that point. But that's why I enjoy playing all six of them, to understand their historical content. He was trying to make a name for himself not only as a composer but also as a pianist. For me early Beethoven is always challenging — figuring out how to distinguish the differences between Beethoven, Mozart, and Haydn is fascinating for any pianist."

Finckel and Setzer have played Beethoven's complete quartet cycle many times in their careers — Finckel had a long association with the Emerson Quartet, and Setzer is still a member. "It is unusual for two string players to have done all of the quartets as well as all of the piano trios," the pianist said. "David and I have also played the five cello sonatas in one night. All of this gives us a different perspective."

Finckel added that having played all of those works has deepened his connection to Beethoven. "This is something that we encourage young musicians to do — gobble up as much music of the great composers as they can as quickly as possible. The more of it they know, the more it will help their performance of any work by that composer."

After having given so many performances of the Trios, do they continue to discover new things in the music? "It's a lifelong search," Wu Han said. "Every time I play a Beethoven Trio I never feel like I have done it justice — I think oh, there's one more place I could do this, or I missed a musical opportunity there. The compositions are so inventive that you can never finish your discovery. I don't think it's possible. That's what defines a great composer, and these compositions are the greatest human achievement. But I have to say that as a pianist, I enjoy playing with David and Phil. Theirs is a friendship that has lasted more than 40 years. There is a chemistry between them — and it is a privilege for me to be part of the group."

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