

Cleveland Chamber Music Society: Wu Han, Setzer & Finckel at Fairmount (Mar. 23)

by Daniel Hathaway



Pianist Wu Han, violinist Philip Setzer, and cellist David Finckel — the No-Name trio who like to keep it that way — have been offering performances of Beethoven's complete piano trios for several years now. That repertoire takes up two complete concert programs, and presenters have been given their choice of several formats.

Patrons have heard them in two concerts in a single day with a dinner break, in two concerts over two seasons (as on Akron's Tuesday Music series in March and October of 2015), or in concerts on two adjacent evenings, as on the Cleveland Chamber Music Society series last week. That pair of performances on March 23 and 24 at CCMS' old venue, Fairmount Temple Auditorium, were relocated from Plymouth Church due to Holy Week conflicts.

The lineup of pieces on those two programs can change, but on Monday, March 23 the three musicians began with Op. 1, Nos. 1 and 3, then ended with the "Ghost" Trio, Op. 70, No. 1. Those Opus 1 pieces, the earliest to which Beethoven attached a catalogue number but which were by no means his first compositions, were an important landmark for the 24-year-old pianist-composer. He used them to establish his credentials in Vienna, making his debut playing all three Opus 1 trios on a single concert with Haydn in attendance.

Thus in these early trios, pianist Wu Han finds herself at center stage, and she channeled Beethoven superbly. Playing with elegant virtuosity and crisp articulation, she spun out dazzling runs and passagework, looking all the while as though nothing could be more fun. Each of the performers has a distinct stage persona. Violinist

Philip Setzer is all concentration and business, and cellist David Finckel keeps closely in touch with his colleagues through a variety of validating glances and facial expressions. On Monday, the three performers were in complete agreement about every crescendo, diminuendo, and change of dynamics.

The trio made fine contrasts between the cheerful, E-flat Trio (No. 1) and the weighty, tragic C-minor work (No. 3), then went on to put across the attractive strangeness of the “Ghost” Trio. Written thirteen years after the Op. 1 pieces, the two trios of Op. 70 mark Beethoven’s first return to the medium of the piano trio after a slew of symphonies, concertos, piano sonatas, and string quartets — and an opera.

Striking unison lines from the strings flowed through the energetic opening Allegro. But where are the ghosts that some uncredited commentator heard in this piece, giving it a nickname that stuck? Some believe that the composer’s sketches for the Largo, found on the same sheet where he mapped out tunes for an unfinished opera on *Macbeth*, were influenced by Shakespeare’s witches. The trio certainly thought so, bringing its eerie, supernatural elements to the fore. All of that spookiness evaporated in the cheerful finale, which Wu Han, Setzer, and Finckel played to the hilt.

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