When the lists of notable concerts of the 2015/16 season are drawn up, the joint recital by pianists Maria João Pires and Julien Brocal before a packed Reinberger Chamber Hall at Severance Hall should be close to the top of everyone’s list. It was a remarkable concert, both musically and as a model for showcasing outstanding younger musicians.

Maria João Pires is an iconoclastic musician; she rarely performs in the United States, and in fact, has taken time out from her career for significant periods of time over the years. Her only previous appearance at Severance Hall was in a Mozart concerto with The Cleveland Orchestra in 1992, conducted by Christoph von Dohányi. This rarity of access made Thursday’s concert all the more special, particularly in the intimate setting of Reinberger Chamber Hall.

Maria João Pires is founder of the Partitura Project, based at the Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel in Belgium. The veteran Portuguese pianist had the idea of pairing well-known artists with young, emerging talent to share concerts, thus exposing audiences to younger musicians with the “draw” of a well-known name on the program.

Pires views the project as an alternative to the competition circuit, while still placing high musical expectations on the younger artist and giving the younger musician experience in the concert ritual. In this program, both pianists were on the stage throughout, seated at the back of the stage when not playing. Julien Brocal also served as stage hand, changing the two piano stools as necessary.
The concert had originally been publicized as all-Beethoven; about two weeks before, the program was modified. Pires played Beethoven’s last two piano sonatas, op. 110 and op. 111, while Brocal played music by Maurice Ravel. This program change was an excellent decision, sparing Brocal from direct comparison to Pires’s decades-long experience with Beethoven’s sonatas. It also gave the program musical contrast, shining a spotlight on Brocal’s fluent and transparent technique in Ravel’s delicate and colorful Sonatine and Miroirs.

Pires and Brocal opened the concert with Maurice Ravel’s 1909 four-hand transcription of Claude Debussy’s Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune. This version has a much different sensibility from the smooth sensuality of the orchestral original. A single piano line, no matter how legato, cannot match the solo flute that opens the original. But once you attune your ears to the more rhythmic and articulated piano sounds, it is quite alluring. Ravel was both a pianist and a master orchestrator, so he knew how to capture Debussy’s essential qualities. Pires and Brocal played with precision, trading thematic material back and forth seamlessly, building to the work’s climax and returning at the end to the languid serenity of the beginning.

Julien Brocal’s performance of Ravel’s three-movement Sonatine showed a fluent technique, full of pianistic color and sensitive phrasing. The second movement minuet was charmingly simple. The third movement Animé shimmered delicately.

In the second half of the program Brocal played Ravel’s five-movement Miroirs with the same skill he showed in the Sonatina. “Noctuelles” (Night Moths) was fluttery and dry sounding; “Oiseaux tristes” (Sad Birds) was filled with representations of birdsongs, although much more abstract and impressionistic than those of Olivier Messiaen. The lamenting of Ravel’s birds was apparent, a single repeated note, returned again and again. “Une barque sur l’océan” (A Boat on the Ocean) brought cascades of arpeggios depicting the sea. Brocal played the flashy movement with aplomb, followed by an equally brilliant performance of the difficult “Alborada del gracioso” ("Morning Song of the Jester"), with its Spanish flair and depiction of a sunny day watching a clown on the town square. The final movement, “La vallée des cloches” (The Valley of Bells), was sonorous in its representations of echoing bell sounds. By the evidence shown in his Cleveland performance, Julien Brocal, who has not yet turned 30, should have a distinguished career ahead.

Closing the first and second halves of the program, and calling on decades of experience, Maria João Pires gave magisterial performances of Beethoven’s final two piano sonatas, Nos. 31 and 32. She managed to capture both intimacy and drama in Beethoven’s thorny works, playing delicately one moment and thunderously the next. The Sonata No. 31 in
A-flat, Op. 110, is mercurial, with fortissimo and pianissimo passages directly next to each other. Following a brilliant Allegro second movement, a recitative-like introduction serves as a transition to the third movement that alternates a fugue with music of extraordinary tenderness.

The Sonata No. 32 in C, Op. 111, with only two movements, is even more dense in its rhetorical gestures, with unexpected harmonic transitions and starkly contrasted sections. The challenge of the first movement is to hold the musical thread in a coherent stream. The second movement, much longer, is a set of variations in C major. The third variation is striking in its dance rhythm — closely resembling a modern boogie-woogie. Pires’s performance was transcendent in its coherence and riveting in its intensity. The entire audience seemed transfixed.

At the end, the audience was on its feet cheering, whistling, and stomping feet. Maria João Pires was a generous mentor and shared the acclaim with Julien Brocal. In the end, Pires finished the evening with an encore, a Beethoven bagatelle, beautiful in its simplicity.

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