

Cleveland Chamber Music Society: a chat with CMS pianist Alessio Bax

by Mike Telin



Whether it's a sports team or a chamber music ensemble, it's all about assembling the perfect combination of people who together can achieve the highest performance standards. "This is a dream team," pianist Alessio Bax said of his Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center colleagues during a recent telephone conversation. "I've worked with each of them separately on many occasions, but to have them all together for these concerts is amazing. They are all fantastic musicians, great people, and we all like each other, so it's going to be a lot of fun."

On Tuesday, January 17 at 7:30 pm at Plymouth Church, Bax will be joined by violinist Ani Kavafian, violist Yura Lee, and cellist Paul Watkins for a Cleveland Chamber Music Society concert that will feature piano quartets by Brahms and Fauré.

A first prize winner at the 2000 Leeds International Piano Competition as well as a former member of CMS Two, [Alessio Bax](#) was the recipient of both Lincoln Center's 2013 Martin E. Segal Award and an Avery Fisher Career Grant. The Italian-born pianist said that he is honored to be part of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center (CMS). "It's like home to me."

Bax also looks forward to playing in Cleveland for the first time, especially with this program. "It's beautiful, and I'm very excited," the pianist said. "CMS

organizes over one hundred concerts a year, and they always ask for program suggestions. I'm not sure what role this played, but I have suggested both the Fauré and Brahms quartets in the past, and they came together on this program."

Tuesday's concert will open with Brahms's "Scherzo in c" from the *F.A.E. Sonata for Violin and Piano*, WoO2, a four-movement collaborative work between Brahms, Schumann, and Schumann's pupil, Albert Dietrich. The piece was dedicated to the violinist Joseph Joachim, who had adopted the motto, *Frei aber einsam* — hence *F.A.E.* "This is a favorite of mine," Bax said. "It has so much energy, and makes the perfect opener. I can't wait to hear what Ani will bring to it."



Bax described Fauré's *Quartet for Piano and Strings in g* as "intoxicating," although he admitted that when he first heard the piece he didn't understand it. "It was strange because I had so many musician friends who were in love it, but I began to realize that I was trying to over-analyze it in a classical way, especially when it came to the harmonies. I think to fully appreciate the piece you need to immerse yourself in Fauré's sound world. It is otherworldly and is one of the few pieces I have played that has the potential of stopping time — just let it transport you, and cherish every single moment."

The evening will conclude with Brahms's *Quartet for Piano and Strings in A*. Inspired by Schubert, it is the longest chamber music work by the composer. "It's a masterful work with a range of emotions — from the intimate slow movement where it's almost like you're having a conversation with yourself, all the way to

full symphonic sounds,” he said. “The last movement is a great Gypsy romp. I’ve played it several times and I’m excited to play it with this group.”

The Cleveland performance is the first stop on the ensemble’s seven-city tour which includes Waterloo, Ont., Winston-Salem, Vancouver, Grand Rapids, Purchase, and Lincoln Center’s Alice Tully Hall. “It’s a great program,” Bax said. “The musical content is vast, but hopefully we’ll manage to bring it to life every night.”

In addition to Bax’s busy performance schedule, he was recently appointed Artistic Director of Italy’s Incontri in Terra di Siena Festival. “It’s a new chapter in my life, so I am looking forward to that.”

See Alessio Bax in action and meet his wife, pianist Lucille Chung, and their daughter Mila, during an [NPR Tiny Desk Concert](#) on Father’s Day of 2016.

Photo credit: Lisa-Marie Mazzucco

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