

CCMS at the Maltz: Ehnes & Armstrong in first of three Beethoven recitals (Sept. 17)

by Daniel Hathaway



James Ehnes and Andrew Armstrong are celebrating the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth with performances of his ten sonatas for violin and piano. It's a big undertaking, and performances can come in different configurations: the duo will sometimes play the whole lot over two or three adjacent evenings, or space them out over three widely-spread performances.

The Cleveland Chamber Music

Society has opted for the latter. The opening concert of the set took place at the Maltz Performing Arts Center on September 17, with others to follow on January 14 and April 21.

Programming a complete cycle of a composer's works can be either illuminating, a colossal bore, or anything in between. In this case, thanks to the duo's easy mastery over this thorny repertoire and their engaging way of putting it across, the musical journey promises to be delightful.

As Ehnes noted from the stage, the sonatas are ambitious, but they're also friendly and ingratiating. Perhaps not so friendly for the pianist, considering that Beethoven was writing with his own impressive capabilities in mind, but that seems to have bothered Armstrong not at all. He dashed off dizzying runs and scales with technique to spare, and engaged Ehnes in spectacular feats of coordination all evening.

The duo played the three sonatas of Op. 12 and the first of Op. 23 in near-chronological order, reversing the last two in order to end in a major key.

The D-Major Sonata, Op. 12, No. 1 began with plenty of *bravura*. A lighter touch and some exquisite expressiveness graced its second-movement theme and variations. Armstrong's runs in the final Rondo were splendid.



Ehnes and Armstrong traded sprightly rhythmic motives at the top of the A-Major Sonata, Op. 12, No. 2, and emphasized the more persistent gestures of its “Pleasant” finale (*Allegro piacevole*).

The outlier in this group, the a-minor Sonata, Op. 23, changes mood in the direction of the dramatic and its texture toward the turgid. Its finale, marked *Allegro molto*, remains unsettled until its surprising, quiet ending.

The Op. 12, No. 3 Sonata ended the evening in the heroic (for Beethoven) key of E-flat with a satisfyingly familiar-sounding Rondo theme.

Ehnes initially shied away from speaking from the stage, but couldn't help himself. All to the good, because his comments were refreshing and unpretentious. He began by noting that the Opus 12 sonatas were dedicated to Beethoven's teacher, Antonio Salieri, who was actually “a good guy who didn't poison Mozart.” He made fun of the off-again-on-again ritual that performers follow between pieces, which he described as “the charade of hiding behind the scenery.” And right after intermission,

he voiced an opinion about the temperature in the Maltz that many in the audience were feeling: “It’s really cold in here.”

All of that was, of course, on top of Ehnes’ splendid and stylish playing, which sounded as fresh and healthy at the end of the evening as it did at the beginning. After the final sonata, he returned to the stage with Armstrong, saying, “We could have gone to hide, but we’re getting hungry. Would you like something else? How about some Beethoven?”

The generous and lovely encore was the slow movement from the “Spring” Sonata — a teaser for the January concert.

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