

## Tri-C Classical Piano Series: Pierre Réach at CMA (Feb. 9)

by Nicholas Stevens



Musicians love a good metaphor: take, for instance, that of summiting a mountain. When a violinist speaks this way after playing all of Bach's partitas, or a soprano recalls preparations for a Wagner opera, the image of the artist mounting some hostile peak offers implications of persistence, struggle, and of course triumph. Pianists might describe Beethoven's sonatas this way. But how many have *actually* played at the top of a mountain?

[Archival video](#) confirms that French pianist Pierre Réach literalized this image of the soloist at the summit over twenty years ago. A recent concert in Cleveland confirmed that the figurative Everest of Beethoven's piano music still bears his banner as well.

Cuyahoga Community College presented Réach in an all-Beethoven program on Sunday, February 9, as part of its Classical Piano Series. The Cleveland Museum of Art's Gartner Auditorium may not have offered a Pyrenees vista, but it was warmer, acoustically as well as literally.

The afternoon began with the dapper Réach striding out, smiling, and launching straight into the passionate opening bars of Beethoven's *Sonata in A-flat*, Op. 26. Letting the inner voices sing, he translated the composer's signature ardor into clean attacks and yearning phrases. The bass register, miraculously clear, emerged as a distinguishing strength early, and remained so throughout the left-hand-punishing program. At one point, Réach intentionally let a high phrase obscure the melody — a storm on the mountainside.

In this sonata's scherzo, syncopations tear at the fabric of time. Réach made the slashing palpable. His take on the funereal third movement had darkness — but not the warm embrace of night. Its rhythms had a glinting coldness that presented the perfect contrast

with a later, gentler passage. A master of efficient transition, Réach tumbled pell-mell into a finale so eager in its quest to resolve that some phrases slipped briefly, deliciously out of time.

Next came a reading of the *Sonata No. 14 in c-sharp* (“Moonlight”) that initially floated along at a quick clip — until the melody came in, and gravity pulled at the phrases. Pedaling judiciously, Réach gave the impression of a crisp, bright evening rather than a foggy scene from Poe. Instead of letting the mood sink in, he pivoted without pause to the deliberately fluffy dance of the second movement. The third movement often becomes pianists’ excuse to show off right-hand dexterity, but Réach allowed the higher end of the keyboard to flow from the propulsive force of the lower.

Dizzy whirling and tense moments of expectation distinguished the performance of the first movement of the *Sonata No. 15 in D* (“Pastorale”) that opened the second half. Out of its suspenseful final note flowed the dark materials of the second movement, a moment of shadow amid sunshine elsewhere. Tension between animation and relaxation defined the third movement, and the fourth offered a preview of his approach to the ultimate finale of the concert.

Réach delivered the sort of sparkling performances that the audience had by then come to expect in the first and second movements of the *Sonata No. 30 in E*. However, it was in the third that he delivered the conclusion to his thesis on Beethoven’s piano music. In this pianist’s reading, the composer’s rhythms strain at their containers, and the forms accommodate the content only by force of will. A piano, a sequence of discrete sections, a grid of time, a human interpreter: each can try to contain Beethoven’s ideas, but they will show the stress of doing so. Fortunately, Réach — still poised and smiling in his tuxedo as he welcomed applause — has climbed this mountain often enough that he could now scale it without breaking a sweat.

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