

CCMS: CMS Front Row National features clarinetist David Shifrin

by Jarrett Hoffman



Through a partnership with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, the Cleveland Chamber Music Society is offering the steamed CMS Front Row National series free of charge.

The latest such program, which premiered on January 29 and remains available through today, February 2, centers around clarinetist David Shifrin. It ties together three performances from the past five years at two Lincoln Center venues, including one outing that's truly in the can't-miss category.

That would be Mozart's classic *Clarinet Quintet*, which reaches sublime territory in the hands of Shifrin, violinists Danbi Um and Bella Hristova, violist Mark Holloway, and cellist Dmitri Atapine in a video recording from 2017 at Alice Tully Hall.

Solid renditions of this piece are not uncommon: it's the perfect vehicle for a clarinetist to show off the refinement of their tone, their expressiveness, and their ability to play a beautiful melody. More special performances add in an array of colors, a total buy-in from the quartet of this different repertoire and format, and a heightened awareness of all the moving parts from everyone involved.

Shifrin, Um, Hristova, Holloway, and Atapine maximize all those aspects of playing while adding another element that's even more rare: a sense that no single phrase feels obligatory or premeditated. The subtle hesitations at surprising moments are a marvel, in particular as Shifrin and Um go back and forth with their melodies, one-upping each other in invention and expression. What's more, the way they all gently calibrate the

tempo along the way turns beautiful passages into revelatory ones, where the music can breathe or excite just a little bit more.



Not to mention the repeats, where tiny changes of interpretation seem to set things off on a slightly different course in the universe. Sure, the notes remain the same as always — outside of the cadenzas and a few charming added ornaments — but with the freshness and the sense of possibility that come with those little differentiations, it feels like experiencing the butterfly effect in music.

After the Mozart, Shifrin joins pianist Gloria Chien in two excerpts from a 2016 performance at the Rose Studio: Luigi Bassi’s *Concert Fantasia on Verdi’s Rigoletto* and Duke Ellington’s *Clarinet Lament*. As pointed out by CMS artistic directors Wu Han and David Finckel, who act as hosts, the transition from Mozart to Bassi means moving from “a work that truly separates great artists from all others” to “music designed to entertain, to delight, and to dazzle,” as Finckel says.

That’s a difficult position for Bassi to be in, and as a result, this isn’t the most satisfying follow-up to the Quintet. Still, the piece receives an enjoyable performance, highlighted by Shifrin’s wonderful sense of nuance and timing in the operatic melodies, Chien’s full-hearted embrace of each section’s new flavor, and, outside of a couple of tiny slip-ups, the clarinetist’s supremely silky technique.

Ellington wraps things up with a unique hybrid of jazz and classical writing, sometimes pulling back and forth. The expressive glissandos and wild runs are captured with plenty of flair from both Shifrin and Chien. What makes their playing all the more satisfying is how in just a glance or two mid-performance, you can see how much they appreciate what the other one brings to the table musically.



As a bonus, two excellent interviews lie on either end of the program. Hear how Shifrin has been adjusting to the time of COVID-19, which arrived at “an interesting crossroads” in his life; gain some insights into his long, varied, and remarkable career; and get a sense of his warm and thoughtful personality.

And in a nice transition, next from Front Row is Chien.

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