

Emanuel Ax to open in-person Tuesday Musical Series March 25

by Daniel Hathaway



Thanks to COVID-19, the earth has cycled through four seasons since pianist Emanuel Ax has played a solo recital. He's looking forward to making up for that with an all-Chopin program on the [Tuesday Musical Series](#) at E.J. Thomas Hall in Akron on Thursday, March 25 at 7:30 pm.

This time around, the annual Margaret Baxtresser Concert will mark the Association's first in-person event since the pandemic began, and the management has made sure that all performers have had their vaccinations, and that distancing protocols are respected in the seating plan.

Ax has chosen works from Chopin's later years: the *Two Nocturnes*, Op. 55, the *Polonaise Fantasia*, Op. 61, the *Three Mazurkas* of Op. 56, the *Barcarolle*, Op. 60, the *Nocturne in E*, Op. 62, No. 2, and *Scherzo No. 4*, Op. 54.

I reached "Manny" Ax by telephone at his getaway in the Berkshires to chat about his program, which I found a bit unusual. Lots of pianists program Chopin, but you don't often see a complete recital dedicated to his works.

"I've never done it, but it's been done," he said. "This program is meant to feature incredible masterpieces from Chopin's later years. I learned some of it that I'd never played before during quarantine and I'm excited about trying out the program. Of course, I'm going to be very nervous because I haven't done a recital for a year. I hope people will forgive me for things, because it's going to be difficult in that sense."

Ax will be joined on the Thomas Hall stage by Youngstown State University piano professor Caroline Oltmanns. “Caroline and I are going to talk a little bit about the program. It’ll make things a little less formal, and that’s always a good thing.”

Earlier in this non-season, Emanuel Ax helped keep the music going at Cleveland’s Severance Hall by recording Haydn’s D-Major Piano Concerto with Franz Welser-Möst and The Cleveland Orchestra, part of a one-hour program on the Orchestra’s *In Focus* series that remains available on demand on the Adella streaming platform.



Without an audience present, Ax said that the November event felt like an open rehearsal, and face masks and distancing added to the oddity of the situation. “We’re usually so connected that my friends and I onstage look at one another, smile at each other — or frown at each other, whichever — and it was very strange not to see their facial expressions. You could tell that someone was smiling because of the crinkles around their eyes. But the orchestra sounded amazing, as usual — that didn’t seem to interfere with the way they played at all.”

The Haydn was paired with Bartók’s *Divertimento for Strings*, a work that was particularly challenging to bring off under the circumstances. “The Haydn was tough enough, but the Bartók was astonishing,” Ax said.

E.J. Thomas Hall, a cavernous venue that can seat nearly 3,000 people at full capacity, seems ideal for social distancing and good air circulation. How does Ax connect with an audience in such a non-intimate setting? “I couldn’t tell you. I hope it will force people to listen even more carefully,” he said. “I will certainly do my best to communicate whatever I can. We’ll see. We’re all flying blind.”

Does Emanuel Ax think any positive results will come out of the experiences of this strange year? “I would like to think that the absence of live concert life is going to remind people how wonderful it is to hear live music. The same way that I’m sure there’s an incredible hunger to see the Cleveland Browns play: to actually be in the stadium for the game. Or to see the Cavaliers — just to be together. Humans love the idea of sharing events, so I would like to believe that once we’re able to, people will remember and appreciate how wonderful it is to be in a place with other people experiencing live theater or live music, or live sports.”

Ax sees some other trends that may continue. “Programs have gotten shorter. I think generally there will probably be a lessening of the formalism of concerts, and I think I’ve been talking about that for a very long time in my life. Things like applause between movements.

“It’s nice to have a middle ground for all of this. Sometime we should trade audiences between the symphony and the opera. As you know, in opera everytime there’s a spectacular aria, the audience applauds, no matter what. Yet we don’t applaud between movements of a symphony. We should trade.”

Does Ax think online performances will continue to be part of his future? “I don’t know. It’s been coming anyway, but I think it will be nice to have a balance. It’ll certainly be interesting to do some live stuff without streaming or recording — just an event that only happens once. I look forward to that very much.”

With brighter sky at the end of the tunnel, Ax says it’s looking more and more like a normal season next year. “I’m supposed to go to Europe in May and do some stuff, but I have no idea if that’s going to happen, so I’m thinking month to month and week to week.”

Published on ClevelandClassical.com March 16, 2021

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