

## Church of the Western Reserve Concert Series: “Johannes Brahms: Late Works” (June 25)

by Peter Feher



One instrument can make a world of difference. The clarinet took top billing on Friday, June 25, in a free chamber program at Pepper Pike’s Church of the Western Reserve, the first live performance back after more than a year for the CWR Concert Series.

Making the most of the clarinet was as much the composer’s job as the performers’. Friday’s program was all

Brahms, three pieces from late in the composer’s career, when he had taken an interest in the reed instrument. (He wrote a fourth piece in that period too, his Clarinet Quintet, Op. 115.) The CWR concert stuck to the smaller configurations: the two Clarinet Sonatas, Op. 120, and the Trio in A Minor, Op. 114.

Husband-and-wife duo Daniel Gilbert and Donna Lee were the core of the program. Gilbert — a professor at the University of Michigan — is certainly no stranger to the Brahms Sonatas. This is Clarinet Repertoire 101, with a particularly robust piano part that was wonderful to hear Lee tackle with a soloist’s verve.

To an almost unfair degree, the First Sonata in F Minor puts the relationship between clarinet and piano under a microscope. When shaping a simple melody, the clarinetist has to insist on legato at all costs, whereas the pianist, who can’t sustain, builds up the phrase cumulatively.

Gilbert finessed many a lyrical line — easing into high notes, rounding out the bottom of phrases. Still, the piano’s percussiveness inevitably rubs off on the clarinetist’s attacks. This can work to the piece’s advantage at times. A three-note motif, recurring like an ellipsis in the opening Allegro appassionato, takes on the finality of a stinger at the end of the fourth movement, Vivace.

The Second Sonata in E-Flat Major intensifies the tug and pull between instruments. Brahms has the piano generating his typical rhythmic displacement — say, the offbeats in a measure sound more like downbeats — and the clarinet slots somewhere in between. Gilbert took the orchestral musician's compromise, keeping rhythms precise but never letting them grow wild or take on a life of their own. He did let loose with the Allegro half of the final movement, though — the closest either Sonata comes to out-and-out virtuosity.

Cellist Keith Robinson joined for the Trio and, from the first passionate, vibrato-filled phrase, signaled a different ensemble approach. He played up every detail of his part, from single, expressive notes to guitar-like strumming across the cello's strings. These were delightfully showboaty contributions that stopped short of upstaging.

With the best chamber music, each instrument has a way of enhancing the others' sound. Robinson's cello in the mix actually meant more clarinet, not less. The Sonatas might be soloistic in name, but Brahms found a clarity of purpose for the clarinet in his Trio.

Digging into unison passages with the cello, hanging out on a high note between phrases, or floating above the spare texture of the two accompanying instruments — this is a chance for the clarinet to do what it does best.

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