

**Music From The Western Reserve:
pianists Antonio Pompa-Baldi and Emanuela Friscioni (Nov. 14)**

by Peter Feher



Even the best pianists only share a keyboard in performance with someone they trust. Fortunately for Cleveland audiences, the bond between two players doesn't get much deeper than the duo of Antonio Pompa-Baldi and Emanuela Friscioni.

The husband-and-wife piano team gave a spectacular four-hands recital at Christ Church Episcopal in Hudson on November 14, part of Music From The Western Reserve's 2021–2022 concert series.

You could see the relationship at work on a practical level. Repertoire for two players at the same piano requires a certain choreography. There's just one of each pedal to share, and the hand crossings left and right — which can be so fun to watch a soloist pull off — get more complicated when another person's involved. At times, Pompa-Baldi drew a hand away from the keyboard and into his body, making room for Friscioni, and at the close of a few delicate phrases, the two were crouched together over the same final notes at one end of the instrument.

Musically, the setup was less a marriage of equals, more a constant interplay of two voices. Pompa-Baldi and Friscioni alternated between the primo and secondo roles, but each piece was always a matter of listening afresh, hearing where one part slotted in with the other.

With more hands in the mix, the players in a piano duet find themselves working in the opposite direction of a soloist. If a pianist alone is striving for the balance and separation

of each musical line, duet players are aiming for unity. It's a counterintuitive approach to the instrument (unity is usually taken for granted), which perhaps explains why many pieces for the ensemble are written as miniatures — in short bursts or fragments — rather than in long sustained forms.



Not that Sunday's program was unsubstantial. Pompa-Baldi and Friscioni paced each multi-movement work ambitiously, taking little or no time between sections, and they chose composers who brought a distinctive, masterly style to the instrument.

Paul Hindemith's *Sonata for Piano Four Hands* was the exception for the evening as far as miniatures went. The composer wrote a sonata for nearly every instrument, and he extended the same formal treatment to the piano duet, crafting a piece that dwells, rambles, and occasionally breaks out in fugal passages.

Samuel Barber's *Souvenirs*, Op. 28, comprises six movements, originally written as a ballet, and each dance, from the Pas de deux to the "Hesitation-Tango," assigns clear roles to the pianists. The opening Waltz had Friscioni thumping out oom-pah-pahs in the bass and Pompa-Baldi tracing the melody above, sometimes in octaves.

Debussy's *Six épigraphes antiques* makes use of ten extra fingers in a less showy way. Like in much of his music, the composer explores isolated effects — echoes, sparkles, sighs, and more — made all the more intriguing with a second musician at the piano.

But that restraint fell by the wayside with Rachmaninoff's *Six Morceaux*, Op. 11, a work whose simple and sacred movements ("Chanson Russe," "Slava") even grow virtuosic in the end. It was an impressive finale, but Pompa-Baldi and Friscioni reeled it back for their encore, the Siciliana movement from Luca Moscardi's *Suite*, Op. 13 — a piece written for the couple that plays to their expressive strengths.

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