

Wu Han, Philip Setzer, and David Finckel: spirited Schubert at CCMS (Sep. 13)

by Stephanie Manning



After more than a decade spent together as an ensemble, Wu Han, Philip Setzer, and David Finckel have become very familiar with certain pieces. And they're determined to make sure those works only get better with age. On September 13, the pianist, violinist, and cellist opened the 73rd season of the Cleveland Chamber Music Society with a staple in their repertory — Franz Schubert's two piano trios.

The group recorded both pieces for an album in 2008 and have performed them frequently, including in a concert for the Cleveland Chamber Music Society more than ten years ago. After all this time, they still manage to make things feel fresh.

The trio's deep knowledge of Schubert is obvious but not overpowering. Their years spent perfecting phrasing, color, and nuance shone in every movement. In Trio No. 1 in B-flat, the group relished in the joy of music-making, enhanced by their impeccable intonation and ensemble cohesion. Finckel's rich, singing cello sound, Setzer's smooth and sensitive phrasing, and Wu Han's continuous energy set the performance apart. The third-movement scherzo felt particularly familiar to the players, whose knowing smiles appeared as if they were sharing an inside joke.

Both trios are distinctly Schubert, brimming with melodic and rhythmic motifs, as well as plenty of repeated material — making them considerably long. Keeping the listener engaged throughout the 80 total minutes of music could be a challenge at times, but the trio ultimately succeeded. And the audience was appreciative, patiently waiting until the end of each work before giving an enthusiastic reception.

Despite the similarities between the two, it was Trio No. 2 in E-flat that emerged as the star of the evening. While No. 1 felt classy but a bit restrained, like the conventional

black suits of Finckel and Setzer, No. 2 was more like Wu Han's colorful outfit — rich shades of blue accented with an eye-catching neon-pink.

The players swung easily between the piece's extremes of energy, particularly in the fourth movement's charming theme and variations. And not a sound from the audience could be heard during Finckel's enthralling solo in the second movement — one of Schubert's most famous tunes.

Throughout the lengthy program, the trio maintained a single-minded focus on the music, entering and exiting the stage with little fanfare, and doing away with an encore. The only spoken remarks came right at the beginning, when Setzer paused to dedicate their performance to the trailblazing violinist Jorja Fleezanis, who passed away last week. Fortunately, the performance proved to be a delightful tribute.

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