

Power of three: Yo-Yo Ma, Emanuel Ax and Leonidas Kavakos deliver wonderful interpretation of Beethoven works at Severance Music Center (Feb.1)

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CLEVELAND, Ohio — Most performances of Beethoven's symphonies at Severance Music Center have the full force of The Cleveland Orchestra behind them.

But last night, pianist Emanuel Ax, violinist Leonidas Kavakos, and cellist Yo-Yo Ma proved that consummate musicianship can power these

compositions at any size. The trio played for a sold-out crowd in Mandel Concert Hall on Feb. 1, and between the choice of repertoire and the larger-than-life artistry, it was a chamber recital of symphonic scope.

"Think of us as the Euclid Avenue Philharmonic," Ax quipped in his introductory remarks from the stage.

In a way, the pianist and his fellow musicians have gone back to the beginning with Beethoven. The centerpiece of Thursday's program, an arrangement of the composer's Symphony No. 1 in C Major, is shaping up to be the heart of *Beethoven for Three* as well. That's the star trio's ongoing recording project, which, counting the latest album in the series (set to be released next month), has covered Symphonies Nos. 2, 4, 5, and 6 — all in adept reinstrumentations by pianist Shai Wosner.

If their performance in Cleveland is anything to go on (a sneak peek at the next CD in production?), then Ax, Kavakos, and Ma are happily hanging around the project's halfway mark. At Severance, Wosner's arrangement of the First Symphony was bookended by the two piano trios that comprise Beethoven's Opus 70. And tracing the

connections between these large- and small-scale works is just another way these three musicians are starting over with the composer.

You could hear from the outset of the concert what makes the piano trio such an essential genre. Beethoven's "Ghost" Trio, Op. 70, No. 1, is a great introduction to the ensemble because it isolates various instrumental possibilities. The first movement begins with a bold unison gesture and then breaks away into different solo and duo configurations — the strings sometimes partnering as a team and sometimes splitting up, the cello joining the piano's left hand while the violin doubles the right.

In the eerily slow second movement that gives the trio its name, time almost seems to stop, though of course Kavakos and Ma kept their individual lines singing, with Ax stoking the undulations underneath. It all builds to a chromatic outburst before trailing away — a trajectory Beethoven brilliantly inverts in the final movement, which concludes with a chromatic flourish from the piano.

Similar surprises abound in the First Symphony, from the unexpected chord that introduces the piece to the teasing elaboration of a scale that kicks off the finale. That latter sequence, in particular, is straight from the playbook of Beethoven the chamber composer — there's a reason every conducting student has to learn how to coordinate this passage that would really work better with fewer musicians. Ax, Kavakos, and Ma traded off measures here, and certainly, a joke among friends is funnier than a joke for a hundred colleagues.

In fact, the full orchestra wasn't often missed in Wosner's arrangement. The percussive, resonant combination of piano, violin, and cello is quite capable of conveying the force and grandeur of Beethoven's symphonies, and the ensemble was tested only in certain moments when Ax had to generate all the sound of the woodwinds and brass while Kavakos and Ma stood in for the entire string section.

As far as orchestration goes, Beethoven offers many colorful choices of his own in his Trio Op. 70, No. 2, the final piece on the printed program. Across four movements, this work makes remarkably rich use of its three instruments, exemplified throughout by the imaginative writing for the piano's upper register.

Switching characters, Ax, Kavakos, and Ma brought the recital back down to earth with an encore by Franz Schubert, the Andante from his Trio No. 1 in B-Flat Major, D. 898. Consider it an intimate conclusion that simply no other ensemble could best.

Photo by Roger Mastroianni

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