

## Piano Cleveland Live: piano, violin, and an Ohio City pub (Feb. 5)

by Stephanie Manning



“How do we bring in people who are interested in piano music, but might be intimidated by their first experience being in a concert hall?”

That’s the question Marissa Moore said she and the Piano Cleveland team were considering when they started a series of free performances held in local bars.

As the host of the Cleveland International Piano Competition, Piano Cleveland puts on plenty of events in Severance Music Center — “which is the most beautiful but probably the most intimidating space you can imagine,” said Moore, the organization’s executive director. “We thought it was really important to pair that with places that have more accessibility.”

Since 2022, these small, relaxed concerts in neighborhood pubs have been going strong, and are now part of the series “Piano Cleveland Live.” Last week’s event on Wednesday, February 5 brought folks to Forest City Brewery to sip drinks, eat food, and listen to the music-making of pianist Arseniy Gusev and violinist Shannon Lee.

Glowing lanterns hung from the ceiling in the warmly-lit space, while attendees watched from round tables fanning out from the stage. At a high table to the side sat Paula and Rob Anzlovar (*pictured*), who were happy to come out and enjoy the music in a more relaxed spot.

“Our friend told us about Piano Cleveland before the Treelawn concert,” Paula explained, referring to Daria Rabotkina’s appearance at the Treelawn Social Club in November. Paula plays the piano for fun, while Rob enjoys listening. “We’re really looking forward to



hearing the music,” she said. “It was wonderful last time.”

Onstage, the duo of Gusev and Lee performed excerpts from their recent album, *Witraż (Stained Glass)*, including works by Grażyna Bacewicz, Bohuslav Martinů, and Karol Szymanowski. In between those selections were the pair’s own arrangements of Transylvanian folk songs, traditional Czech and Polish tunes, and ancient Greek melodies.



“We’re not trying to imitate exactly how the folk musicians played it, because frankly, we can’t,” Lee told the assembled crowd. “This is more about the connection between what we’ve recorded and the sources of inspiration that these composers had.”

Gusev noted that the choice of venue fit quite nicely with the music on their program. “It’s actually not far from Eastern European

aesthetics — having music performed and presented in more casual venues,” he said. Composers like Béla Bartók and Igor Stravinsky would have been exposed to folk music in spaces similar to this one.

The hustle and bustle of waiters slipping between tables, conversation drifting through an open door, and the muffled sounds of a trivia night in the other room were more an addition to the ambiance rather than a distraction. And the acoustic proved surprisingly adept at projecting the unamplified music from the stage.

“It sounds a lot better in here than I would have expected,” said Alan Bise, who produced the duo’s album for Azica Records. “It’s always fun when musicians get a little out of their comfort zone and go into the community and play in unusual places.”



*Photos by Gregory Wilson*

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