

Anthony McGill & Emanuel Ax on Oberlin Artist Recital Series (Feb. 5)

by Kevin McLaughlin



The crackle in the air on February 4 was perhaps more or less routine for clarinetist Anthony McGill and for Oberlin's Artist Recital Series, which always seems to bring out the best in performers. But still, his kind of artistry doesn't come along every day. Add to it pianist Emanuel Ax's exquisite contributions, and you had a real night to remember in Finney Chapel.

Robert Schumann's *Fantasiestücke* Op. 73 (Fantasy Pieces) are heard with equal pleasure performed on clarinet (Schumann's original) or cello. But McGill showed the advantages of his instrument with his branded suppleness, his crayon box full of sound colors, and a chameleon's ability to be heard or veiled at will.

The duo emphasized the picturesque over the dramatic in these three miniatures — Schumann originally entitled them “Soirée Pieces.” In the first, McGill tone-painted, applying slight fluctuations in tempo without disturbing the rhythmic flow. In the second his lightly textured approach and casual affect offered welcome contrast. And in the third he achieved intensity, partly from the series of rising scales and accompanying dynamics.

McGill's ability to color his sound also served him (and us) well on the A clarinet in Jessie Montgomery's four and a half minute *Peace*, written during the height of COVID in 2020. With terraced, saturnine phrases, he captured the sadness and resignation of the work — what the composer calls “a necessary dynamic to the human experience.”



Staying with his A clarinet with the bronze-colored bell, McGill improved on Schubert's Sonata D. 821, a piece written for the "Arpeggione," a six-stringed quasi guitar/cello/gamba instrument invented in the early 1800s that never quite took off. Using his most lustrous tone, McGill made phrases "speak" as well as sing, and enhanced dynamics through tonal shading. In the lovely slow movement, he modulated sustained, single notes like a scrim against Ax's changing harmonies, and the two achieved an art song intimacy in the final Allegretto.



Starting off the concert's second half, Ax played a haunting but efficient performance of Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata." Tempos and touch throughout were precisely considered but paced for a long-term payoff. In the middle movement, there was just enough jolt from the oddly placed accents to keep us guessing about the meter and give it rustic liveliness. In the third movement Ax conjured up a subtle storm. Rather than pounding the keys, he underplayed, leaving it to the listeners' imaginations to fill in the cinematic rain and thunder.

Florence Price's lyrical *Adoration* from 1951, originally composed for organ, was a tender clarinet morsel, three minutes in length. McGill cast a spell of devotion over the audience, who stayed hushed, possibly in disbelief, many seconds after the already quiet final note tapered into thin air.

Ad anah? Is Hebrew for "Until when?" or "How much longer?" As composer James Lee, III explains, it is the prophet Habakkuk's question to God in the Bible, "How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?" McGill and Ax captured the despondence as well as the optimism of the work, a four-minute envisaging of the end of violence.

The duo returned to lyricism and added playfulness to Bernstein's *Sonata for Clarinet and Piano*, an early gem of a work from the composer's Tanglewood days. Apparently, the early work was written under the influence of a recent Hindemith masterclass. How else to explain the polytonal harmony, *alla breve* time signatures, and stolid motivic

development? But suddenly, glimmers of Bernstein's future self appeared: a boisterous movement in 5/8 ended the work — and the recital — in high spirits.

There was hope for an encore, and one came with little prodding. McGill said we should all “go home” to the theme from Dvořák's “New World” Symphony Largo movement: “Goin’ Home.”

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