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Cleveland Orchestra Recital Series showcases piano trio masterpieces (Oct. 19)

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CLEVELAND, Ohio — With its usual occupants off on a three-week European tour, the setup on the stage of Mandel Concert Hall at Severance Music Center for a program of piano trios on October 19 might have suggested that an intimate evening of chamber music was about to take place — perhaps in a hall a bit too large for the occasion.

Not so. On the Cleveland Orchestra's Recital Series last Monday evening, violinist Lisa Batiashvili, cellist Gautier Capuçon, and pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet treated a large audience to pristine performances of works by Dmitri Shostakovich, Claude Debussy, and Antonin Dvořák on a grand, nearly symphonic scale.

We've heard each of these musicians as soloists with The Cleveland Orchestra, but to have them come together for chamber music was a magical experience. The three were perfectly matched in musical sensibility and sound.

A special aspect of the program was the opportunity to hear rarely performed trios by composers we think we know. If anyone thought that pieces by this evening's roster just amounted to business as usual, it took only the first two works to disabuse them of that opinion.

Shostakovich wrote his first piano trio at the age of 16, and Debussy his only trio at 18. There are clear hints about where the format would take the Russian musician, but the Frenchman went off in an entirely different direction.

Shostakovich's many style and tempo changes reflect what might be called his musical bipolarity, or at least the many stories to be imagined in this piece. It begins hauntingly, then in a faster section, the players brought out its intense emotion.

An eloquent piano line from Thibaudet and a passionate night song from Capuçon hinted at the composer's Romantic side, while exploring typical rhythms associated with Shostakovich. After returning several times to the single movement's opening material, the composer wraps up the work with a quick coda and a fun ending.

Debussy's Trio differs most radically from his later, impressionist works, although it's replete with beautiful, lyrical ideas packaged in four-bar phrases.

The scherzo begins with a playful melodic dance in the piano, its articulations perfectly matched by the strings. The ending note came as a surprise.

A grand cello line introduced the Andante espressivo, and the piano finished it with a twinkling gesture over long string chords.

The passionate Finale eloquently rode the dramatic ebbs and flows of the music.

With its hints of Brahms, Antonín Dvořák's Piano Trio No. 3 in F minor arrived as a more identifiable work by its Bohemian composer. Symphonic in concept and execution, it began with a glorious unison and ended with an infectiously jazzy coda.

The Allegretto grazioso presented syncopated piano rhythms against metronomic strings, relieved by a relaxed "B" section that might have been a folk song.

After the simply beautiful Poco adagio, the trio ended with the composer's signature folk dance, a furiant, with its characteristic twists and turns.

Manu Martin's captivating Lim Symphony of Oceans Trio was the perfect encore. Written for the trio, the piece is derived from a large-scale symphonic work. Thibaudet told the audience "It's about protecting the planet, something that we care about." That comment and the gorgeous music that followed, brought the admiring audience to its feet for a second time.

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