

EMANUEL AX

Critical acclaim

"Surprisingly, it wasn't one of the anniversary composers who had the strongest interpretative light shone on him. By some quirk, a string of recitals at the Wigmore Hall all had Franz Schubert's music at their core. They were all wonderful, but Emanuel Ax's was the most revealing, as much for its sudden moments of impetuosity as its seasoned wisdom."

Ivan Hewett, December 20, 2011 *The Telegraph*

"Ax displayed a creamy technique, played with a breathtaking ease, yet one where each note had meaning and purpose. The cadenza in the first movement was a whole musical story in itself, phrases dissipating slowly into the air, fingers like butterflies kissing the keys and power available when needed. This was a musician of scope and confidence, one who never had to overwhelm the music and Dohnanyi and the PSO wisely complimented his effortless style."

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra/von Dohnanyi, Mozart K466, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, 19 October, 2002

"His greatness, his overwhelming authority as musician, technician and probing intellect emerges quickly as he plays. Within minutes, we are totally captured by his intensity and pianistic achievement."

Los Angeles Recital, *Los Angeles Times*, February 7, 2001

"Ax is an extremely satisfying pianist; he is at home in a wide variety of music and his pianism is always thoughtful, lyrical, lustrous."

The Washington Post

"The soloist was Emanuel Ax - strong on bravura, ravishing in finesse and flinging himself into the work with glee. There was a liquid purity in the slow unfurling phrases of the slow movement, a real optimistic bounce in the finale."

LPO/Eschenbach/Beethoven 5 *Guardian*, October 24, 1998

"...hearing Ax play on an Erard grand of 1851 was a revelation.... Almost more extraordinary than Ax's absolute technical ease was how he seemed totally at home on this instrument, exploiting those contrasts in tonal register to capture in turns the brilliant clarity of the sometimes explosive passagework in the opening movement...."

OAE/Mackerras/Chopin 1 *The Times* May 19, 1998

"As the population of piano virtuosos keeps growing, Mr Ax remains a dot of seriousness in a sea of frivolity. His choice of music made listeners think about every piece in relation to every other. His patience and peripheral vision, qualities that keep Schubert's discursive sonata style in line, were deeply appreciated, not to mention the beautiful sound and careful separations of colours."

Carnegie Hall *New York Times* February 24, 1997

"Playing doesn't get much better than the masterful rendering Ax gave the first published piano concerto of Frederic Chopin... From the dramatic opening movement, to the nocturnal spell of the middle movement, to the sprightly, almost playful finale, Ax revealed the concerto's passion and intensity without falling into the melodramatic traps that lesser musicians find so tempting in Romantic literature."

Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra/Gittleman/Chopin 1 *Dayton Daily News* January 15, 1998

"Emanuel Ax is one of our most gifted Chopin pianists - a rare breed - and his playing has finesse and suitable power."

OAE/Mackerras/Chopin 2 Classic CD June 1998

EMANUEL AX

Penderecki Piano Concerto Premiere Reviews

Critical acclaim for artist

Krzysztof Penderecki, Concerto for Piano and Orchestra 'Resurrection'

World Premiere · 9th May 2002 · New York, Carnegie Hall

Philadelphia Orchestra/Wolfgang Sawallisch

Press Reviews

"...there is plenty for an audience of first-time listeners to feel good about: a treacly music-box section with harp and celesta, a ravishing Merchant-Ivory patch of musical purple prose, a hymnlike theme, cellist imitating a heartbeat, and a gorgeous bloom of an English horn solo...The really impressive thing about Penderecki's piano concerto is that it is a real piano concerto. The relationship between soloist and orchestra in modern times is a loosely defined concept, and all that's required to put a "piano concerto" label on a work is the act of rolling the piano out front. Not so for Penderecki, who gave Ax a part that is monstrously difficult and interacts with the orchestra in a typically heroic way."

Peter Dobrin, The Philadelphia Inquirer, 11th May 2002

"...this work began life as a vibrant capriccio. Then while Mr. Penderecki was composing, the events of 9/11 intervened and the music, inevitably, took on ominous undertones. The resulting 25-minute, one-movement concerto is eclectic, boldly episodic and invigorating...Throughout, Mr. Ax's playing of the daunting piano part was intense, commanding and wonderfully mercurial...the glittering orchestration offered a vibrant array of colours and effects."

Anthony Tommasini, The New York Times, 14th May 2002

Orchestration: 3 flutes (3rd doubling piccolo) · 2 oboes · English horn · E flat clarinet · 2 clarinets · bass clarinet · 2 Bassoons · Contrabassoon · 5 horns · 3 trumpets · Flugelhorn ·

4 trombones · 1 tuba · percussion (4 players) · harp · celeste · strings

Duration: 30 minutes

EMANUEL AX

Los Angeles Times • March 16, 2012

Music review: John Adams' 'Absolute Jest' in San Francisco

BY MARK SWED

When John Adams was a young composer and conductor in San Francisco in the early '70s, he would often perform the experimental music of John Cage and other radicals, which was the hip thing to do at the time. But he has said that all that avant-garde business could leave him musically dissatisfied, and he'd go home and put on recordings of late Beethoven string quartets.

That is essentially what he does in a provocative new orchestral piece -- an Adams-sized mélange of late Beethoven -- commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony as part of music director Michael Tilson Thomas' American Mavericks festival here.

The premiere at Davies Symphony Hall on Thursday night was sandwiched between just such radical '70s pieces as Cage's anarchic "Song Books" Wednesday and Feldman's opaque Piano and Orchestra, which followed Adams on Thursday's program.

So is Adams merely reliving his youth, or is he perhaps a maverick's maverick, rebelling against the festival's prevalent progressive spirit? The wise-guy title of the new piece is "Absolute Jest." And it's a great entertainment, as long as you don't think too hard about it.

The score is Adams' first major orchestral work since his ambitious "City Noir," which Gustavo Dudamel premiered with the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 2009. Written for the St. Lawrence String Quartet and the San Francisco orchestra, "Absolute Jest" is based on fragments from the scherzos of two Beethoven quartets, Opp. 131 and 135, and the Ninth Symphony.

With Beethoven bits bouncing off the walls, "Absolute Jest" has all the chugging rhythmic and contrapuntal complexity expected of Adams. Beethoven's mind-boggling "Grosse Fuge" was another reference point and seemed to be Adams' real jumping-off point. His use of the orchestra was ever imaginative and surprising. Piano, harp and cowbells were tuned in pure, or just, intonation, which helped connect Beethoven to the maverick sound of Lou Harrison and Terry Riley.

Adams has been down these roads before. Throughout his career, he has attempted in his own music to come to terms with composers in history. The most original and meaningful examples are the operas "The Death of Klinghoffer," "El Niño" and "Flowering Tree," which are, respectively, modeled after (but do not quote) Bach's passions, Handel's "Messiah" and Mozart's "Magic Flute."

There is also a trickster side to Adams, although it has been suppressed of late as he has ascended through the ranks of living American classical composers to reach, at the age of 65, the top spot. "Absolute Jest" seems, however, as much a trickster piece as "Grand Pianola Music" was in the '80s when it thumbed and thumped its nose at Modernism in the '80s.

But if "Absolute Jest" treads, in the context of the Mavericks concerts, old ground (Lukas Foss' 1967 Bach-based "Phorion" was given the night before), it got a hot performance under Tilson Thomas. Subtle amplification is part of

Emanuel Ax

Los Angeles Times • March 16, 2012

page 2 of 2

the postmodern package and the jumpy St. Lawrence was so energized that you might have thought sound designer Mark Grey had wired the quartet's seats.

The three other works Thursday were noteworthy as well. The program began with a premiere by another composer who, like Adams, lives in the East Bay. Mason Bates' "Mass Transmission," for chorus, organ and electronica, looks at how the telephone and early radio connected people across the planet but created a new kind of global loneliness in the process.

In terrific texts, taken from the Dutch Telegraph Office and from the Dutch East-Indies, a mother in Holland and her child in Java anxiously communicate through early technology, the distance miraculously bridged but also exaggerated in the process. The San Francisco Symphony Chorus lovingly intoned these texts, which organist Paul Jacobs underscored with drones. More interesting, though, were Bates' beats, which he applied to his sampling of wheezy old radios and Javanese gamelan. Donato Cabrera was the conductor.

After intermission, Tilson Thomas led an ethereally quiet and too-beautiful-for-words account of Feldman's Piano and Orchestra, and then he raised a ruckus with Varèse's "Amériques."

Emanuel Ax was the inspired soloist for Feldman's meditative study of disjointed chords and single instrumental tones in unpredictable painterly patterns. Ax's plush tone and intense focus created the sensation of floating in air and yet being somehow rooted to the earth. Time felt as though it stood still and yet the piece seemed to be over in an instant. I can explain none of this. The experience was exceptional.

Enough quiet. Varèse was said to have found Feldman precious. In "Amériques," he utilized a huge orchestra with a very noticeable percussion section. Stravinsky and Debussy were major influences on his 1927 score, while the percussion was something wild and original. Many players wore white earplugs to protect themselves from machine-age noisiness. But their playing was, as it was all evening, arresting.

EMANUEL AX

Seattle Times • March 11, 2012

Emanuel Ax at Benaroya: From thorny to daring to magical

BY MELINDA BARGREEN

An excited audience brought back the concert pianist for several encores on Sunday, March 11. His program included Aaron Copland (Piano Variations), Haydn (Andante with Variations in F Minor), Beethoven ("Eroica" Variations) and Schumann ("Symphonic Etudes").

A whole afternoon of "theme and variations" music: At first glance, this didn't seem like the most scintillating concept for a piano recital.

But by the time Emanuel Ax played the triumphant finale of Schumann's "Symphonic Etudes," the ecstatic audience was calling him back for encores so vigorously that the Benaroya Hall houselights finally were raised to signal "time to leave."

This gives you some idea of the remarkable intelligence, interpretation and artistry with which Ax presented his program of Aaron Copland (Piano Variations), Haydn (Andante with Variations in F Minor), Beethoven ("Eroica" Variations) and the aforementioned Schumann. He came out swinging, so to speak, with the thorny and acerbic Copland work — in a considerably more dissonant vein than the folksy Copland of "Rodeo" and "Appalachian Spring." Ax played the Copland variations with such probing finesse, however, that he made the audience really listen, and ignited an enthusiastic response.

It was the seldom-programmed Haydn work, understated and modest, that was perhaps the afternoon's most revelatory performance. Originating in a different harmonic universe than the Copland, the Haydn was given an intimate, personal reading that reminded the listener why Ax has been called the least percussive of pianists. His touch is amazing. The keys are not so much struck as sighed upon — moved as if by a breath. There is no sense of fingers or hammers or material mechanisms: the note simply materializes and floats in the air. I have no idea how he does it.

The Beethoven was downright jolly, its familiar theme (which would later become more famous when recycled as the theme of the "Eroica" Symphony finale) with the dramatic dynamic contrasts emerging in a bravura performance. Ax produced daring, athletic interval leaps and brought out the innate humor of the score with its sudden changes in volume.

Ax's performance of the Schumann "Symphonic Etudes" included (as he announced from the stage) three additional movements besides the original theme and 12 variations (the work has a rather complicated publication and performance history). His reading was remarkable for its emotional range: The various pieces sounded beseeching, wistful, furious, nostalgic, and finally triumphant. There was plenty of firepower, but what lingers in the memory was the array of delicate filigree effects and the brilliant contrasts Ax was able to create at the keyboard.

A prolonged ovation drew him back to the stage for two encores: "Pagodes" (from Debussy's "Estampes") and the first "Valse Oubliée" of Liszt. Both were magical.

Emanuel Ax

The Guardian • August 21, 2011

Proms 47 and 49: COE/Haitink – review *Royal Albert Hall, London*

BY ANDREW CLEMENTS

In the programme notes for his two concerts with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe, Bernard Haitink categorised Brahms as "a composer who thinks with his heart and feels with his brain". It's a marvellous description, and one that could be applied just as tellingly not only to Haitink's own conducting but to Emanuel Ax's piano playing. Ax joined Haitink and the COE for both of their all-Brahms programmes, pairing two of the symphonies, the third and fourth, with the two piano concertos.

This was wonderfully mature Brahms, humane and intensely musical, the product of a genuine meeting of interpretative minds. Ax is the antithesis of the self-regarding, attention-seeking soloist. Even in such huge works as these concertos, his playing had a pearly, chamber-music quality, not just in the slow movements – the Adagio of the first looking towards the introspection of Brahms's late piano pieces, the Andante of the second a rapt dialogue with the COE's principal cellist – but in the more robust exchanges of the outer movements where everyone listened to everyone else, with Haitink presiding over it all with his usual authority.

There were moments, in the first concerto particularly, that could have been more extreme – a more starkly tragic first movement, more exuberance in the finale – just as there were passages in the two symphonies that could have been underlined more heavily, like the F minor angst of the opening of the Third. But working with forces this size allowed Haitink to create moments of extraordinary refinement and transparency, whether in the Third's intermezzo or its closing pages, or the flute solo in the finale of the Fourth, delivered, typically, without a hint of superfluous pathos.

Emanuel Ax

Cleveland Plain Dealer • May 20, 2011

Offbeat Cleveland Orchestra program offers much to savor

BY ZACHARY LEWIS

Just exactly what music director Franz Welser-Most intended with the Cleveland Orchestra's program this week isn't clear. But the lack of a strong, coherent theme doesn't prevent enjoyment of what is, in fact, a piquant evening at Severance Hall, a menagerie of four diverse works in mostly striking performances. Best advice: sit back and savor the ride.

Musical threads were as scarce as empty seats Thursday as the orchestra presented one score apiece from this and each of the last three centuries, perhaps in preparation for the diverse offerings in store for this summer's Lincoln Center Festival. Still, the program made a certain structural sense, as the concert's two halves mirrored and echoed each other in sometimes telling ways. Additionally, Welser-Most took time Thursday to honor the four longtime players retiring at the end of the season.

Straddling intermission with masterful ease was pianist Emanuel Ax, soloist in both Haydn's D-Major Piano Concerto and Stravinsky's Capriccio, a small-scale concerto from 1929. Ax's Haydn was everything one could ask for. A model of lightness, softness, boldness, and quicksilver emotion, his performance amounted to pure manna for the Classical aficionado. Welser-Most and the orchestra strode nimbly alongside their colleague, last here in 2008.

Though 150 years younger, Stravinsky's Capriccio bore resemblance to the Haydn in the form of comparably restless moods and brisk tempos. But there the similarities ended. Haydn couldn't possibly have predicted Stravinsky's madcap romp, a fusion of Baroque and jazzy elements with a percussive style all his own. Neither could anything compare to Ax's performance: cohesive, suspenseful, and above all else, fun.

The evening concluded with Beethoven's Symphony No. 8. That the work served as the last hill on a musical roller-coaster only made a jubilant score sound all the more festive. Moreover, there was much to love in the performance. Following in Ax's footsteps, Welser-Most kept textures crisp and contrasts sharp, guaranteeing effective delivery of the composer's ideas. Particularly engaging was the final Allegro, characterized by dynamic extremes.

Only late in the program, after visiting three other musical destinations, did the merit of hearing Adams' "Guide to Strange Places" at the top of the night become fully apparent. Between a brilliant team of percussionists and countless colorful solos, Thursday's performance more than covered the basics, conveying the music's mechanical energy and gradually increasing senses of urgency and darkness. But a Minimalist score such as "Guide" also hinges on clarity, and on that front, the reading came up short.

Doubtless the piece will be in tip-top shape this July, when the orchestra take it to New York. In the meantime, there's a little room for refinement, and much on this program to appreciate.

Emanuel Ax

Audiophile Audition • May 15, 2011

BEETHOVEN: Symphony No. 5 in c, Opus 67; Piano Concerto No. 4 in G, Opus 58 – Emanuel Ax, piano/ San Francisco Symphony/ Michael Tilson Thomas, conductor

SFSmedia multichannel SACD 0037, 68:21 *****

Absolutely the best-sounding recording of these two works ever issued!

BY STEVEN RITTER

Now that Tilson Thomas and company have completed their landmark Mahler series it is good to see them continuing on and turning in other directions. The fact that it is Beethoven surprised me somewhat, as this pairing is more known for their adventurous programming, and this is certainly not that, but yet another foray into the tried and true, and heaven knows we are not in any sort of shortage as regards these two works.

But I am still happy to see them, if for no other reason than the fact that this is the best-sounding recording of either of these pieces that I have ever heard in my life. The clarity, overwhelming presence, and stunning surround sound balance must be heard to be believed, the SFSO sounding like the best orchestra in the world. I am not the type of audiophile that glories in sound for sound's sake if the interpretation is a dog; but I must admit that I could almost detect that in myself when listening to this recording, marveling many times at the sheer beauty of sound and the outstanding engineering that went into this effort. This is one honey of a recording.

Interpretatively it is actually middle of the road, but that is not a bad thing. Thomas is a proven Beethovenian, having completed a full set of the symphonies many years ago on Columbia with the English Chamber Orchestra. That set was a sparkle, using a smaller orchestra that provided a lean, energetic, and young man's stab at the symphonies. This Fifth is not like that one; indeed, considering the recent spate of Beethoven symphony recordings the last ten years or so, this one seems a deliberate throwback, at least in the first movement. It is slower than most, and quite deliberate, though the conductor is quick to highlight certain aspects of phrasing that do provide some new illumination on the work. But generally speaking I was a bit fearful at what was to follow. I needn't have worried—Thomas's subsequent interpretative felicities show that he was not setting out to take us down memory lane, but was providing a very deliberate and careful approach to the motive-heavy first movement that springs the subsequent movements to life in a manner maybe not possible if not for this deceptive setup as fate first knocks at the door.

I do need to mention that many of the things I hear in this recording that strike me as unusual or even revelatory I do not believe solely the responsibility of the conductor. In this case there are things that have simply been overlooked or drowned out in other recordings that the engineers are able to bring to light here, especially some of the timpani work, often difficult to capture. This reading, while not groundbreaking in a major way, sounds fabulous and is very exciting and convincing.

The Forth Piano Concerto, Beethoven's greatest, has no want of great recordings. My favorite, unfortunately, is still sitting somewhere in the Polygram vaults, the 70s reading of a bearded Bernstein conducting the Bavarian Radio Symphony on DG with Claudio Arrau, curiously also paired with the Fifth Symphony. That is a stunning reading of this marvelous work, and I wish DGG would get on it—or maybe Archivmusik—and release it. But I must confess that this new turn with Emanuel Ax, certainly one of the most overlooked of the “great” pianists today, gives it a run for the money. This is easily the best new recording of this piece I have heard in 20 years, everything perfectly proportioned, and captured in sound to die for. Ax has a very masculine touch in this work while filigreed with a feminine sensibility in his way with the many decorative passages that are the hallmark of this piece. Yet the heroic nature of the work is not ignored, and the final passages are as exciting as any you will ever hear.

Emanuel Ax

Audiophile Audition • May 15, 2011

page 2 of 2

This is in all ways a superb release. It is not indicated as to whether these forces are planning to complete all the symphonies or the piano concertos or both; but it would certainly be a wonderful idea to continue on with the mixing of both genres on each disc. I have a feeling that if that happens, we will have two sets that would rank with the very best.

[Of all the symphony orchestras who have been dropped by their record label and turned to doing their recordings themselves, the San Francisco Symphony has become the most appreciated by audiophiles for its huge sonic advancement over the very poor last few recordings RCA Red Seal did for them...Ed.]

Emanuel Ax

The Telegraph • March 21, 2011

Emanuel Ax, Wigmore Hall, review Ax played with eruptive force during this all-Schubert recital.

Rating: * * * *

BY IVAN HEWETT

For a pianist with such a stellar reputation, especially in his native America, Emanuel Ax cuts a remarkably modest figure. Portly and professorial, he hurried on to the Wigmore Hall stage for this all-Schubert recital with the distracted air of a man keen to get on with some urgent business, and plunged straight into the Four Impromptus.

Ax's manner is so determinedly uncharismatic that it takes a while to realise just how remarkable his playing is. These pieces are full of emotional switchbacks and mysterious changes of pace – rapid one moment, then mysteriously becalmed for bars at a stretch. And like the piano accompaniments to the songs, Schubert's piano music is often punishingly difficult, without appearing at all impressively virtuoso.

At no point did Ax appear anything other than in total command. His tone was bright but never shiny, the tricky octave passages forceful yet light. In the final variation of No 3, the rippling right-hand scale passages were a delight, but I expected that. The surprise was finding my ear attracted to the modest chordal accompaniment below, which one normally "takes as read" but here was so perfectly placed that it became eloquent.

The clarity of the playing, combined with its naturalness – Ax is never finicky – goes hand in hand with a refusal to offer up the conventional signs of "inwardness" and depth. The third Impromptu is often made to sound otherworldly, but Ax reminded us that it is actually a dance, albeit a stately one. The final B flat Sonata is even more prone to mythologising, its serene opening movement often played with a kind of unearthly grandeur. Ax took it at a moderate pace, the mysterious bass trills separating the phrases exactly placed.

All this might make Ax seem prosaic and unwilling to register the strangeness of late Schubert. In fact he is anything but. Trembling under that professorial mien is a subversive energy, which burst out most surprisingly in the reappearance of the main melody towards the end of the first movement of the sonata. Here there's an unexpected upward shift of the harmony, which Ax played with eruptive force.

Emanuel Ax

The Arts Desk • March 19, 2011

Ax, London Philharmonic Orchestra, Jurowski, Royal Festival Hall

BY EDWARD SECKERSON

Send in the clowns. Or at least that was Vladimir Jurowski's musical thinking in bringing together the mighty foursome of Prokofiev, Stravinsky, Haydn and Shostakovich and seeing just how far their capricious natures might take us. The allusions and parodies came thick and fast and just when you thought there was no more irony to tap, in came the most outrageous instance of misdirection in the history of 20th-century music: Shostakovich's Sixth Symphony. And that is no joke.

Jurowski has fashioned some brilliant programmes in his time but I really cannot think of another where the ingenuity of the juxtapositions so satisfyingly chimed with the musical interactions. Each work was actually enhanced by its relationship to what had gone before and what was coming next. Music from Prokofiev's absurdist operatic fable *The Love for Three Oranges* arrived first, its orchestral storyboard pithier, if you like, on account of Jurowski's squeaky-clean articulation of it. Carlo Gozzi's characters were "visualised" in cartoonish exclamations, each micro-dynamic so explicit and precise as to renew the startling originality of the scoring. I can't think of a time when every note of this popular suite counted more. The "toy story" March was in itself a feat of musical animation. All of which augurs well for Jurowski's Prokofiev series next year.

'We almost didn't want the interval as Stravinsky gave way to Papa Haydn and good-humour was now all about harmonic sleight of hand'

So the clowns – in the shape of Carlo Gozzi's commedia dell'arte troupe – had arrived and so, too, had Emanuel Ax, a superannuated Harlequin, to tease and delight with one of Igor Stravinsky's most scintillating confections – his *Capriccio for Piano and Orchestra*. The Baroque Concerto Grosso meets 1920s salon music in this elegantly subversive opus and between them Ax and Jurowski had its perspectives shifting and twitching like a piece of musical Cubism. There is a folksy allusion in the central slow section where Stravinsky manages to imitate the repeated-note twang of the cimbalom whilst simultaneously invoking the extravagance and beauty of Baroque embellishments. Only he. But it takes a true craftsman of the keyboard to do that – and Ax is certainly that.

We almost didn't want the interval as Stravinsky gave way to Papa Haydn - the Piano Concerto in D - and good humour was now all about harmonic sleight of hand. Ax beautifully blurred the boundaries here between a nimble Classicism and dewy-eyed Romanticism. And I'll wager that Jurowski had even considered the satisfying symmetry of a three-movement concerto mirrored by a three-movement symphony.

He and the London Philharmonic really have Shostakovich's Sixth licked now. There was a moment in the protracted first movement *Largo* where the most strident of woodwind chords was cut off in its prime as if to suggest protesting voices forcibly stifled. There are enciphered protestations everywhere in this piece. It was perhaps the biggest deception Shostakovich ever sprung on the oppressive Soviet establishment. He effectively promised a grandiose Lenin tribute and delivered a three-ring circus.

The tragic tone of the opening leads us to expect heroism but what we get is outrage with a rictus smile. The contrast could hardly have been more extreme in Jurowski's reading. He nails the desolation of the first movement (cue Shostakovich's sorrowful instruments of choice, cor anglais, flutes and piccolo) but makes it about so much more than just atmosphere. And then perceptions of slapstick are pushed beyond the Keatonesque to progressively faster extremes (brilliant work from the LPO) with the solo piccolo so startled as to almost pop off the chart of his upper register.

And wouldn't you be at the prospect of the Red Army Band's 11th-hour entrance? As I say, no joke.

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par LUCIE RENAUD

Une sonorité d'une richesse troublante qui sert admirablement Brahms, une limpidité de jeu qui lui permet d'énoncer Mozart de façon quasi improvisée, une virtuosité qui demeure au service de la densité du propos musical: Emanuel Ax séduit le public et la critique avec subtilité. Qu'il dialogue avec un orchestre, retrouve l'un de ses complices de musique de chambre de longue date, dont Yo-Yo Ma et Itzhak Perlman (avec lesquels il a enregistré en 2009 les trios de Mendelssohn) ou qu'il joue à armes égales avec le pianiste Yefim Bronfman, il réussit presque toujours à surprendre. Qu'on l'apprécie pour la première fois sur scène, qu'on le découvre à travers la séduisante série d'émissions produites en 2007 par CBC dans laquelle, semaine après semaine, il échangeait avec Eric Friesen et abordait les grands concertos du répertoire, exemples au piano à l'appui, l'impression subsiste qu'une seule phrase musicale ou quelques paroles prononcées de sa voix chaude et posée suffisent à abolir la distance, comme si, par quelque tour de prestidigitation dont il conserve le secret, il était devenu un proche, un confident, un ami que tous appellent affectueusement Manny.

JUST CALL HIM
manny
by LUCIE RENAUD

An enthralling wealth of sound that serves Brahms beautifully, a crystalline touch that conveys Mozart as if improvising, a virtuosity that remains subservient to the intelligence of musical speech: Emanuel Ax subtly enchants audiences and critics alike. Whether performing with an orchestra or one of his long-time chamber music companions, including Yo-Yo Ma and Itzhak Perlman (with whom he recorded Mendelssohn's trios in 2009), or in tandem with the pianist Yefim Bronfman, he almost always succeeds in surprising. Whether you hear him now for the first time or you discovered him back in 2007, when he recorded those wonderful programs with the CBC's Eric Friesen discussing the major concertos of the repertoire while playing excerpts on the piano, after hearing a few notes, or a few words spoken in his warm voice, you feel close to him, as if he had magically turned into a likeable pal whom everyone knows as just... Manny.

PHOTO J. Henry Fair

« Idéalement, la réaction du public me confirmera que la musique jouée est belle, riche, que le compositeur nous aura touchés. Si le public le ressent, j'aurai fait du bon travail! »

NÉ EN POLOGNE, AYANT PASSÉ SON ENFANCE À WINNIPEG, avant de poursuivre ses études à New York, en musique et en littérature française, mari de la pianiste japonaise Yoko Nozaki, Emanuel Ax pouvait être considéré citoyen du monde bien avant que le terme se retrouve sur toutes les lèvres. Pour lui, un artiste se doit d'intégrer origines, cultures et vécus pour réussir à transmettre cet amalgame au public. Si l'interprète compte parmi les invités réguliers de l'Orchestre symphonique de Montréal, on ne l'a pas entendu en récital ici depuis 1976, deux ans à peine après qu'il soit devenu le lauréat du premier Concours international Arthur Rubinstein. Incapable de trancher entre les deux, récital ou concert, il considère les expériences complémentaires. « Je pense que la musique pour piano est la chose la plus excitante du monde, explique-t-il lors d'une entrevue téléphonique, et elle représente un défi bien particulier, constitué à la fois d'une peur terrible combinée à la décharge d'être seul sur scène. Bien sûr, nous avons l'habitude de répéter seuls, mais quand vous êtes sur scène avec un orchestre, vous êtes avec plusieurs amis, une conversation s'établit avec vos collègues. »

Manny admet se sentir très nerveux avant d'entrer en scène, sensation diffuse qui continue parfois de l'habiter, même une fois enveloppé par la musique. « Le travail régulier compte évidemment, mais vous devez aussi intégrer à votre horaire le repos, faire les gestes nécessaires pour qu'à 20 heures, peu importe le soir et le lieu, vous soyez à votre meilleur. En concert, je ne prends jamais les choses à la légère. J'aimerais être plus détendu, mais c'est un des aspects sur lesquels je travaille, afin que la nervosité ne m'empêche pas d'offrir la meilleure prestation possible. Idéalement, la réaction du public me confirmera que la musique jouée est belle, riche, que le compositeur nous aura touchés. Si le public le ressent, j'aurai fait du bon travail! »

Même s'il a franchi il y a quelques années le cap de la soixantaine et pourrait songer à ralentir la cadence, Emanuel Ax n'a aucunement l'impression d'être parvenu à un sommet et continue de travailler du nouveau répertoire (il se consacre depuis quelque temps aux partitas de Bach et aux sonates de Schubert, compositeur qu'il présentera d'ailleurs à Montréal). « Je pense qu'il y a toujours place à l'amélioration dans tous les domaines et il me reste encore quelques années pour le faire. Nous sommes très chanceux de toujours travailler du matériel qui possède autant de facettes, si profond, dont vous n'aurez jamais fait le tour. Peu importe la partition sur laquelle vous travaillez, vous n'aurez jamais l'impression que vous en avez exploré tous

BORN IN POLAND AND RAISED IN WINNIPEG, he studied music and French literature in New York, and married the Japanese pianist Yoko Nozaki; thus, Emanuel Ax was a citizen of the world long before the global village became fashionable. He thinks an artist must assimilate a variety of backgrounds, cultures and experiences and be able to pass on the results of this comingling to the public. He is a regular guest of the Orchestre symphonique de Montréal but has not been heard in recital here since 1976, two years after winning the first Arthur Rubinstein International Competition. Unwilling to choose between recital and concert playing, he sees them both as complementary. "I think piano music is the most exciting thing in the world," he said on the telephone. "There is a special challenge and a special kind of terrible fear combined with the jolt of being out there all by yourself. Of course, we are used to practising by ourselves. But when on stage with an orchestra, you are on stage with a lot of friends, there is a conversation going on between you and your colleagues."

He admits to feeling very nervous before going on stage, an indefinite feeling that sometimes persists even when he is enfolded in music. "Of course, practising matters, but you also need to get rest, arrange your schedule so that at eight o'clock in the evening on any given day, you're at your best. When I play I never take things lightly. I'd like to be more relaxed,

but I work hard not to let it interfere with giving the best performance we can. Ideally, the reaction from the public should be: this is incredibly beautiful, meaningful music that we heard tonight; this composer really meant a lot to me tonight. If an audience feels that, then I think I've done a good job!"

Even though he is over 60 and might be forgiven for wanting to slow down, Emanuel Ax shows no sign of having reached his peak; on the contrary, he continues to embark on new projects: he is currently working on Bach's partitas and Schubert's sonatas, and will be showcasing the latter composer in Montreal. "I think one can always improve and I still have some years to do so. We are very lucky to be dealing with material that is deep and interesting from so many points of views

that you never really get to see it all. With whatever music you're working on, you never feel you've explored every side of it, which makes it exciting to be a pianist. If you've been playing something like Beethoven's *Fourth Piano Concerto*, which I have been for 35 years now, I've never felt I finally understood every point of view on this piece. There are about another 50 ways to approach it and to feel about it and I look forward to the next two years of working on it! We're lucky we get to work on things that are never-ending. The piece actually only exists when you play it. Of course, there is a paper version, but it's not really the piece. The

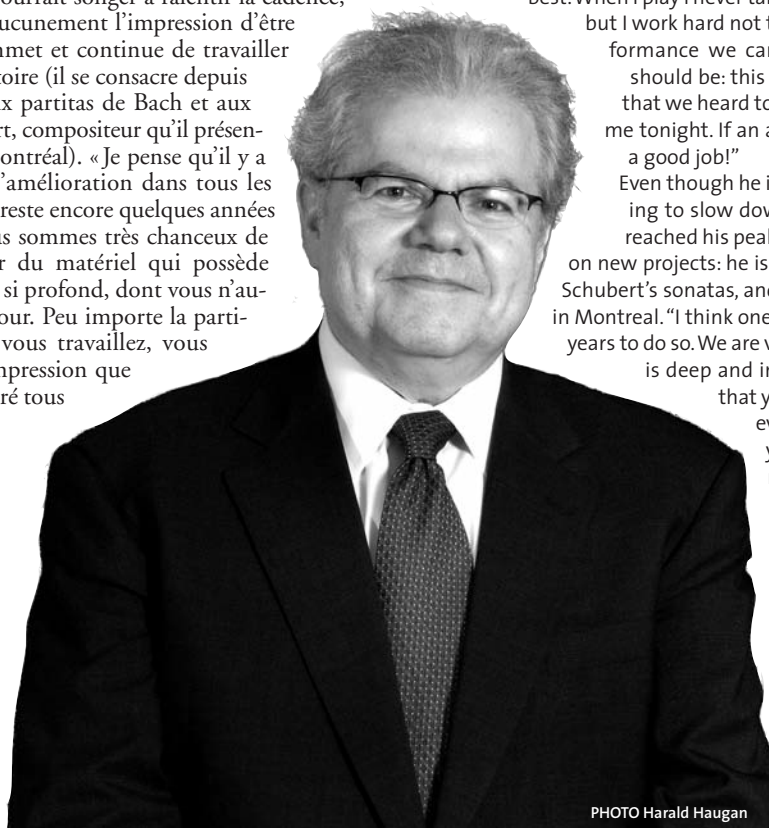


PHOTO Harald Haugan

les aspects possibles. Cela rend la chose d'autant plus excitante d'être pianiste. Même si vous avez souvent joué une œuvre comme le *Quatrième Concerto pour piano* de Beethoven – ce que je fais depuis 35 ans maintenant –, vous ne pouvez jamais prétendre avoir enfin compris chaque point de vue de l'œuvre. J'ai toujours l'impression qu'il y a encore cinquante autres façons de l'aborder, de la ressentir, et j'ai hâte de passer les deux prochaines années de ma vie à y travailler! J'estime que nous sommes privilégiés de pouvoir le faire. La pièce existe seulement si vous la jouez. Bien sûr, il en existe une version papier, mais celle-ci n'est pas vraiment la pièce. Elle devient réelle quand vous la traduisez en sons. Par conséquent, chaque concert peut – et devrait – être différent. Ceux qui vont souvent au concert réagissent différemment chaque fois qu'ils entendent cette musique, ils ne penseront jamais: "J'ai entendu le *Concerto* de Beethoven la semaine dernière, je ne l'écouterai plus jamais!" Chaque fois que vous l'entendez, c'est une nouvelle expérience.»

S'il juge essentiels les enregistrements, il les perçoit comme des incitations à apprécier l'œuvre en salle: «Je pense que les concerts sont fantastiques, aussi bien pour l'interprète que l'auditeur. Bien sûr, tout le monde aime posséder un superbe enregistrement d'une œuvre, mais vous souhaitez aussi entendre cette personne en concert.» Il établit un parallèle avec les groupes rock ou les événements sportifs qui continuent d'attirer les foules. «Si je peux entendre un grand pianiste sur disque – il y en a tant! –, disons les sonates de Beethoven de Murray Perahia, cela ne veut en aucun cas dire que je ne me déplacerai pas pour l'écouter. Au contraire, ce serait plutôt: "J'ai le disque et j'ai hâte de voir ce qu'il fera sur scène!"»

Conscient du pessimisme qui semble teinter l'univers de la musique classique, Emanuel Ax refuse néanmoins de baisser les bras. «Je ne prétends pas posséder une vue d'ensemble et je peux uniquement parler à titre personnel, en tant qu'interprète, en observateur, mais je suis en désaccord avec cette impression générale. Je pense que plusieurs personnes aiment le genre de musique que nous jouons, mais que tout est devenu scindé. Vous vous souviendrez peut-être du temps où nous n'avions que trois chaînes de télévision et non 500. Je pense qu'aujourd'hui, les gens peuvent se divertir, apprendre de tant de façons, et nous devons accepter le fait que la musique classique ne peut pas par exemple entrer en concurrence avec un film comme *Titanic*. Cela ne fonctionnera jamais de cette façon, mais il y a encore tant de gens qui s'intéressent à la musique classique, qui l'aiment, et je pense que cela n'a rien à voir avec un statut socioéconomique, sauf peut-être lorsque l'on songe au prix de certains billets. De fait, si les billets sont très dispendieux, il est normal que ce soit des gens plus âgés qui les achètent. Si nous réussissons à proposer des solutions pour rendre le tout financièrement acceptable, je pense que plus de jeunes viendront. Certains interprètes actuels font des efforts formidables pour combler le fossé entre le côté impulsif de la musique populaire et la pensée

“ Ideally, the reaction from the public should be: this is incredibly beautiful, meaningful music that we heard tonight; this composer really meant a lot to me tonight. If an audience feels that, then I think I've done a good job! ”

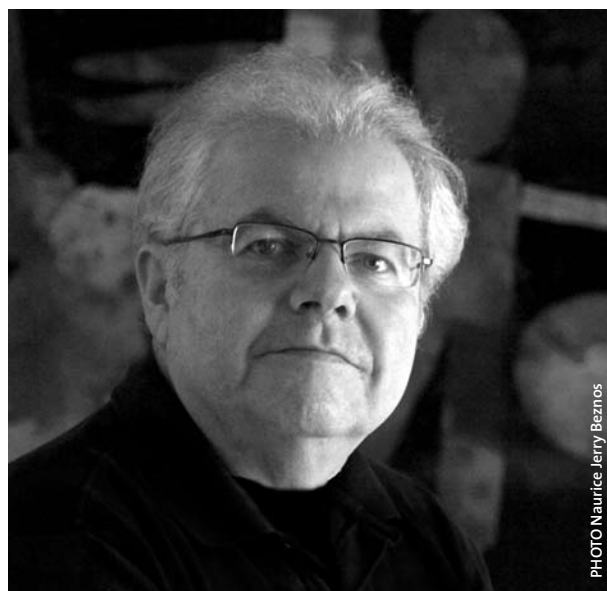


PHOTO Naurice Jerry Bezno

piece is when you put it into sound. Therefore, each particular performance can be—and should be—different. People who go to a lot of concerts and hear the great masterpieces react differently every time they hear that music. They never feel they've heard the Beethoven Concerto last week, so they never have to hear it again. Every time you hear it, it's a new thing.”

While he considers recordings essential, he sees them as incentives for seeking out live music in the concert hall: “I think live performance is a fantastic thing both for the performer and the audience. Of course, you like to have a wonderful recording of the piece but you also want to hear that person live.” He draws a parallel with rock bands or sports events that continue to draw crowds. “If I can hear a great pianist on record—there are so many!—say the Beethoven sonatas by Murray Perahia, this does not necessarily imply that I will not go somewhere to listen to him. It is rather a matter of thinking: I have the recording, and I can't wait to hear what he sounds like in the concert hall!”

Aware of the pessimism pervading the classical music scene, Emanuel Ax refuses to admit defeat. “I don't have an overview; I can only speak from my point of view. As a performer who observes things, I disagree with that general assessment. I think there are many people who like the kind of music that we do, but that everything is being splintered. You may remember the time when we had only three television channels and now, there are 500. I think the difference is there are now many more ways of enjoying yourself, of learning about things,

tour d'ivoire du classique, tels que Yo-Yo Ma, Simon Rattle et Lang Lang. Plusieurs écoles et conservatoires réalisent que, pour un artiste d'aujourd'hui, ce n'est plus suffisant de jouer de façon brillante, et il faut explorer les divers talents des musiciens, qu'ils soient amusants, charismatiques. Je pense que la jeune génération rendra ce monde meilleur pour nous tous, et cela me remplit d'optimisme.» **LSM**

Société Pro Musica, 14 février, 19 h. www.promusica.qc.ca

SON PROGRAMME de RÉCITAL

Si Emanuel Ax a abordé la musique de chambre de Schubert à plusieurs reprises au fil des ans, il ne s'est penché que récemment sur ses sonates et impromptus, avec une révérence mêlée d'une certaine crainte: «La musique de Schubert est merveilleuse et vous ne pouvez jamais la ruiner entièrement.» Il a conçu son récital comme un triptyque, qui comprend l'immense *Sonate en si bémol* et la radieuse *Sonate en la majeur*, op. 120, les *Impromptus* op. 142 en ouverture de programme devenant eux-mêmes une grande sonate, composée de mouvements extérieurs en *fa* mineur, complétée par deux séries de variations en son centre.

«J'ai toujours adoré la Sonate opus 120, explique le pianiste. Elle est incroyablement parfaite et magnifique; malheureusement, je la trouve également très difficile. L'une des choses que je découvre en jouant Schubert – constat que j'avais déjà fait d'une certaine façon en abordant les trios – est qu'il n'était pas un pianiste aussi remarquable que Beethoven ou Mozart. Plusieurs passages ne semblent pas très difficiles à l'écoute, mais le sont en réalité. On ne peut pas se fier aux prouesses pianistiques, contrairement à Beethoven qui, quand il intègre un passage très difficile, se débrouille pour que les gens le comprennent. Avec Schubert, très souvent, vous n'avez pas cette chance. La musique est charmante, mélodieuse, un baume pour l'oreille, mais pianistiquement, même si elle ne paraît jamais difficile, elle est impossible. Voilà ce que je dois combattre la plupart du temps!

«Je crois que, d'une certaine façon, si vous souhaitez comparer deux géants, la différence essentielle entre Schubert et Beethoven – compositeur que Schubert admirait beaucoup – me semble que, avec Beethoven, vous êtes toujours parfaitement conscient du temps, du temps qui passe, dont les choses ont besoin pour se dérouler. Avec Schubert, c'est tout à fait l'opposé. Si vous écoutez une interprétation idéale de la *Sonate en si bémol*, vous ne pouvez pas dire si celle-ci a duré cinq minutes ou une heure. La musique s'arrête, reprend, vous vous y perdez et n'avez aucune idée du temps écoulé. Si je peux transmettre une parcelle de cela dans mon interprétation, je serai sur la bonne voie.»

and we have to accept the fact that classical is not going to be able to compete with a movie like *Titanic*. It's not going to work that way, but there are still a lot of people interested in classical music and who love it. I think in a way it has nothing to do with socioeconomic status, except possibly the price of tickets. In fact, if tickets are very expensive, it's normal that older people are the ones able to afford them. If we figure out ways to make it acceptable financially speaking, I think more young people will come. Some performers today are helping tremendously to bridge the gap between popular impulse and a kind of ivory tower thinking, people like Yo-Yo Ma, Simon Rattle and Lang Lang. A lot of schools and conservatories are realizing that just to teach someone to play brilliantly is not enough for a modern-day artist and they are exploring different talents of people who are funny, charismatic. I think the new generation will make this world better for all of us, and it fills me with optimism.» **LSM**

Société Pro Musica, February 14, 7 p.m. www.promusica.qc.ca

HIS RECITAL PROGRAMME

While Emanuel Ax has touched upon Schubert's chamber music several times over the years, he has only recently started looking at his sonatas and impromptus, albeit with a great deal of reverence and awe: "Schubert's music is wonderful and you can never spoil it completely." He designed his recital as a triptych, including the huge *Sonata in B flat* and the radiant *Sonata in A major*, Op. 120. The programme begins with the *Impromptus* Op. 142, themselves a kind of great sonata beginning and ending in F minor with two sets of variations in between.

"I've always adored the *Sonata* Op. 120," enthused the pianist. "It's incredibly perfect and beautiful and, unfortunately, I found it is very hard. One of the funny things I'm discovering playing Schubert—which I already knew in a way from playing the trios—is that he was not a pianist on the level of Beethoven or Mozart. A lot of the stuff doesn't sound so terribly difficult but it is. It has no relation to pianistic display because, in Beethoven, he made sure people knew that the stuff is really hard when it is. With Schubert, very often, you don't get that. It's lovely music that's lilting and easy on the ear and pianistically not difficult; yet, it's impossible. So this is what I'm fighting with most of the time!"

"I think in a way the difference between Schubert and Beethoven, if you want to take another great composer, whom Schubert admired a lot, is that with Beethoven you're always incredibly aware of time, of time passing, and how much time things take. With Schubert, it's the exact opposite. In the ideal performance of the *Sonata in B flat*, you can't tell if it's five minutes or an hour. It stops, it starts and you are just in it and you don't know how much time has passed. If I can get some of that into that piece, I'm on the right track."

Emanuel Ax

The New York Times • February 27, 2011

A Reading of Schubert, Both Fiery and Fresh

BY ALLAN KOZINN

The opening performances of Lincoln Center's Tully Scope festival at Alice Tully Hall were high-profile new-music programs, but the idea behind this nonthematic series is that it should touch on the breadth of New York's musical life. There will be a lot more new music, and early music as well. But on Saturday evening the festival set its sights on the 19th-century Viennese mainstream, presenting a Schubert recital by the pianist Emanuel Ax.

Mr. Ax's signature style — a shifting balance of poetry, earthiness and analytical clarity — suits this music, not least because his fluid changes of focus seem to mirror Schubert's impulses so precisely. That is an illusion of course. Other pianists make entirely different interpretive emphases sound just as convincing, and that is where the magic of great performance lies: in the ability to make a specific sequence of choices sound inevitable and fresh even for listeners who think they know the music inside out.

Mr. Ax began with the second set of Impromptus (D. 935) and quickly established the sense that his Schubert would be unpredictable. When you think of the F minor Impromptu that opens the set, for instance, you imagine a fairly easygoing, ruminative theme: a rolled chord followed by a descending, dotted sequence that sounds like a rubber ball bouncing slowly down a staircase. Not here. Mr. Ax's reading was fast, fiery and insistent, a small drama that found a gentle resolution only at the very end. And he played the piece with a conviction that made that interpretation sound as if a tense approach were the only sensible way.

The other impromptus were as vividly characterized, and if some of Mr. Ax's reconsiderations were open to debate — his disinclination to linger in the chordal phrases that begin No. 2 arguably deny Schubert's request for a legato line — they kept his performances lively and surprising. And even small touches, like Mr. Ax's sharp accenting in No. 4, seemed to pull the listener closer than usual to the heart of this vital music.

In the program's two sonatas Mr. Ax was less freewheeling but no less thoughtful. The Sonata in A (D. 664) thrives on calm reflection, and that was what Mr. Ax gave it, along with a sweetly singing line in the Andante and a healthy measure of textural sparkle in the finale.

The big B flat Sonata (D. 960), to which Mr. Ax devoted the second half, was notable for a probing spirit that put a spotlight on Schubert's inventiveness. The contrast between Schubert's melodies and accompaniments — the luxurious, free-floating theme in the first movement, for example, is supported by an ominous, insistent rumble — has rarely sounded quite so stark.

But the real joy in Mr. Ax's account had less to do with such details, however enlightening, than with the broader conception and its extremes of gracefulness and tumult, meditation and unbuttoned passion.

Emanuel Ax

The Oregonian • January 16, 2011

Classical review: Emanuel Ax joins Oregon Symphony in standout performance of Brahms' Second Piano Concerto

BY JAMES MCQUILLEN

Even in a subscription season that has already included stars such as Hilary Hahn and Stephen Hough, Emanuel Ax's performance Saturday night with the Oregon Symphony was a standout, a sterling display of artistry in a monumental work.

The music was Johannes Brahms' Second Piano Concerto, an unusually long, four-movement concerto featuring ingenious construction, vast expressive scope and a radically reimagined relationship between soloist and orchestra. It seemed tailor-made for Ax, who likewise balanced technical prowess and lyrical profundity with ease and grace.

Brahms' rich sonorities and often dense textures demand heroic effort from the soloist -- lots of fingers playing loads of notes at sufficient volume to match the orchestra. It's virtuosic without flash, and so was Ax; his demeanor at the keyboard spoke poetry rather than heroism. Both his jaw-dropping fingerwork, clear and controlled even in the most punishing runs, and his power, which was only occasionally overwhelmed by the orchestra, seemed effortless.

Not only is Ax one of the leading pianists alive, but he's also one of the most revered chamber musicians, and the strengths that go into great chamber playing were key to Saturday's performance. Guest conductor Emmanuel Villaume led the orchestra in responsive partnership, with a sense of keen listening apparent throughout. More decisive attacks and more robust sound would have helped here and there, but given that the Oregon Symphony had never worked with Villaume previously, it was an impressive collaboration, and I'm tempted to return for Monday's performance.

At times, it achieved the chamber ideal of intensely intimate conversation, most notably in the achingly lovely third-movement duet with Ax and principal cello Nancy Ives. (In a gracious gesture, Ax beckoned Ives to come around from behind the piano and share the riotous ovation at the end of the piece, after which he offered a Schubert Impromptu as a generous encore.)

The major work in the first half was "Color," written 10 years ago by the French composer Marc-André Dalbavie. It was a shrewd programming choice, seizing an opportunity to present a modern work to an audience drawn by Ax and Brahms. The title refers both to a medieval compositional technique underlying the music as well as to the sometimes mysterious instrumental colors Dalbavie achieved through sparse textures and unorthodox doublings. Radiant sonorities in spacious orchestration recalled the work of Dalbavie's mentor, Pierre Boulez.

Reading from the enormous score, Villaume capably led the orchestra through the vast soundscape rich in overtones, which in sections gave the impression of an enormous wine glass played by a finger drawn around its rim.

EMANUEL AX

St. Louis Post-Dispatch • November 5, 2010

Lintu, Ax collaborate brilliantly with SLSO

BY SARAH BRYAN MILLER

This weekend's concerts by the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra feature two outstanding artists: an up-and-coming conductor, Hannu Lintu, and a legend of the piano, Emanuel Ax. Together with the orchestra, they made beautiful music indeed.

Lintu, one of the seemingly endless supply of brilliant musicians to emerge from Finland in recent years, looks a little bit like a well-dressed Ichabod Crane: he's tall and thin, with long limbs, a long torso, long fingers and a long head topped by slightly spiky hair.

On Friday morning he demonstrated complete command over his instrument, the orchestra, communicating with its members clearly and eliciting a luminous, lovely sound throughout the program.

Ax is altogether rounder and non-spiky, and no less in command over his instrument. He has lived with Johannes Brahms' Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor for many years, but long acquaintance with this familiar work has not diminished his commitment to the music.

Together, Lintu and Ax gave it a dynamic reading. The first movement was vivid, filled with drama and energy; its conclusion was thrilling. The second movement was as gentle, graceful and serene as the first was energetic.

The third movement was notable for the shimmering playing of the violins, and for the exciting conclusion it provided to the concert.

Ax was completely engaged with Lintu and the orchestra, for a real collaboration. It wasn't all note-perfect, but it still constituted an excellent advertisement for the advantages of hearing live music, rather than depending upon reproductions.

Some in the audience deliberately arrived late, appearing at the intermission, and heard only the Brahms. They missed a fine performance of the first half's beautiful work, "Le Baiser de la fée (The Fairy's Kiss)," by Igor Stravinsky.

This is uncharacteristic Stravinsky, a broadly appealing, gently agreeable ballet score from 1928. Commissioned by the dancer Ida Rubenstein, it's based on music by Tchaikovsky, without a moment of dissonance or snark in its entire length.

In its marriage of two such different composers, "Fairy's Kiss" is an odd but highly listenable hybrid, filled with beautiful melodies, and lovely, transparent harmonies. There are humorous moments; there is writing that is almost achingly sweet.

Lintu made a strong case for it, with translucent playing in the strings and woodwinds and great work by the brass.

It's also a showcase for the orchestra's soloists, and Lintu was generous with well-deserved solo bows for, among others, principal horn Roger Kaza and his section, principal flute Mark Sparks and principal cello Daniel Lee.

Emanuel Ax

The Pittsburgh Tribune • May 16, 2010

Mendelssohn: Piano Trios: Itzhak Perlman, Yo-Yo Ma, Emanuel Ax (Sony Classical)

By MARK KANNY

A new musical dream team makes its debut on this Sony Classical CD of the two Piano Trios of Felix Mendelssohn. Violinist Itzhak Perlman, cellist Yo-Yo Ma and pianist Emanuel Ax each perform at their legendary best and are obviously inspired by living the music together. The CD honors Mendelssohn on the 200th anniversary of his birth, and includes an excellent essay by Ax and comments by Ma and Perlman. The music making itself is filled with loving devotion. The first movements of both trios are slower than expected, but the interpretations are actually full of variety and include well-signified details that are usually overlooked. It all sounds so natural that the musicians seem to be mediums for Mendelssohn's genius. The sound is utterly natural and transparent. No surprise because the producer is Steven Epstein, who in the 1990s oversaw the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra's excellent recordings for this label.

Emanuel Ax

New York Times • May 6, 2010

A Power Trio Highlights Mendelssohn

BY VIVIEN SCHWEITZER

After celebrations of the Mendelssohn bicentennial last year, the spotlight has shifted to this year's Schumann and Chopin anniversaries. But the pianist Emanuel Ax, the cellist Yo-Yo Ma and the violinist Itzhak Perlman shifted attention back to Mendelssohn for much of their "Live From Lincoln Center" broadcast from the Kaplan Penthouse on Wednesday evening.

These genial superstars, who interspersed their fine music-making with engaging commentary, opened the program with the Scherzo from Mendelssohn's Piano Trio in D minor, which Mr. Perlman described as a perfect example of the composer's vivacious style. Many listeners, he added, consider Mendelssohn, a happy child prodigy who composed his marvelous String Octet at 16, a rival to Mozart in terms of teenage brilliance.

Mendelssohn was certainly a master of melody, a genius particularly evident in his "Songs Without Words." Mr. Ax and Mr. Perlman offered a gracious performance of one of them (Op. 19, No. 1), and Mr. Ax and Mr. Ma, playing with a rich tone, followed with another (Op. 109).

For the Adagio from Mendelssohn's Cello Sonata in D, Mr. Ma played the 1712 Davidoff Stradivarius, the same instrument the Polish count and cellist Mateusz Wielhorski used to perform the work, with Mendelssohn in the audience. Mr. Ax and Mr. Ma offered a richly hued interpretation of the Adagio, whose chorale reflects Mendelssohn's admiration of Bach.

The finale of Mendelssohn's Piano Trio in C minor, a work here played complete, also quotes a chorale. The players' passionate interpretation of the first movement earned lengthy applause.

The concert also featured several "Phantasiestücke" ("Fantasy Pieces") by Schumann, who called Mendelssohn "the Mozart of the 19th century, the most illuminating of musicians." Mr. Ax and Schumann share the same birthday, Mr. Ma pointed out, June 8. But Mr. Ax doesn't have any "imaginary friends," Mr. Ma added, referring to Schumann's alter egos, Florestan and Eusebius.

Mr. Ax accompanied Mr. Perlman, who played with a sweet tone, in the "Phantasiestück" (Op. 73, No 1). Mr. Ma and Mr. Ax offered a vivid rendition of the first of Schumann's "Fünf Stücke im Volkston" ("Five Pieces in Folk Style").

Then it was back to Mendelssohn for the encore, the second movement of the D minor Trio, whose elegiac opening Mr. Ax performed beautifully.

MENDELSSOHN

Piano Trios 1 & 2, Opp. 49 & 66

Itzhak Perlman, violin; Yo-Yo Ma, cello; Emanuel Ax, piano
 Sony Classical 88697 52192 2 (CD). 2010. Steven Epstein, prod.; Richard King,
 eng. DDD. TT: 59:00
 Performance ★★★★★
 Sonics ★★★★★

When superstars unite in a musical collaboration, the result is always extraordinary, and this recording is no exception. These three players put their instrumental and tonal masteries entirely at the service of the music. Merging, but not submerging, their powerful personalities in mutual supportiveness, they achieve incredible unanimity of expression and homogeneity of execution; this is truly a "civilized discourse between friends," as chamber music has been described. Ma and Ax, longtime partners, seem to think, feel, and breathe as one, and though this is their first recording with Perlman, he fits into the ensemble like a glove on the hand. (To celebrate Mendelssohn's 200th birthday, they performed these trios together last March, and will repeat them in a live telecast next May.)

The performance recorded here is as close to ideal as can be imagined. From the very beginning—Ma's somberly subdued, pensive statement of Op.49's opening theme—it is clear that the players are putting their own stamp on these familiar masterpieces. Written at the height of Mendelssohn's compositional maturity, they not only encompass a wide emotional range, but also offer plenty of opportunities for bravura display. Yet the players never call attention to themselves or their consummate virtuosity. Their tempi are moderate with time to linger over significant details; they meticulously observe dynamics, phrasing, and articulation; and they make the melodies soar. They bring out the works' passion, drama, lyricism, poetry, and elfin lightness; their liberties are poised, judicious, and always sound spontaneous. Even the balance is admirable, both between the pianist's hands and—a rare feat—among the instruments, with melodic lines carefully weighted and interwoven. (In Op.66, the piano is sometimes too prominent, proving that Mendelssohn wrote for his own famously brilliant technique, but not for today's grand piano.) Best of all, these superstars project an infectious enjoyment of the music and each other's company.

To say that the recorded sound does full justice to the players' tones—Perlman's glorious, luxurious vibrancy, Ma's dark, sonorous warmth, and Ax's singing, nuanced touch—is high praise indeed. This recording will make the world's music lovers very happy. —Edith Eisler



Emanuel Ax
San Francisco Chronicle • April 27, 2010

Music review: Emanuel Ax in Chopin, Schumann

BY JOSHUA KOSMAN

Emanuel Ax's three-month bicentennial tribute to Chopin and Schumann wound up in Davies Symphony Hall on Sunday night in the most suitable way possible: with the pianist alone at the keyboard, offering a characteristically thoughtful and exciting sampling of the two men's piano music.

I mean no disrespect to Ax's prior collaborators on this project, cellist Yo-Yo Ma and soprano Dawn Upshaw. But aside from Schumann's songs, the works on those programs - presented, like this one, as part of the San Francisco Symphony's Great Performers Series - were somewhat peripheral to the major accomplishments of either composer. It was the piano that was central to their thinking, almost exclusively so in Chopin's case. And nothing quite illuminates the artistic character of either figure like a solo recital - especially one as vivid and eloquently shaped as Ax's.

What Sunday's program revealed, yet again, is that despite having been born within months of each other in 1810, and despite sharing many musical affinities, Schumann and Chopin had relatively little in common. Schumann was an omnivorous intellectual, intent on using music to widespread dramatic and poetic ends, while Chopin's imagination never roamed very far beyond what could be achieved with the piano.

Ax made a powerful case for each, but to this taste the Schumann offerings proved much more rewarding. The C-Major Fantasy in particular - Schumann's bold and brilliant attempt to fuse the immediacy of his character sketches with the broad formal solidity of Beethoven's sonatas - got a superb reading, full of fire and sensitivity. One of Ax's great strengths as a performer, in fact, is his ability to blend tenderness and muscle in a single amalgam, and the first movement of the Fantasy - marked by rippling left-hand accompaniment and a questing but always clear sense of purpose - showed off that gift.

Ax stumbled a time or two in the demanding technical thickets of the central movement, but that hardly slowed the momentum or the dramatic charge of the music. And the finale, with its serene harmonies and limpid rhetoric, sounded especially lovely.

That movement - along with the "Fantasy Pieces," Op. 12, which got a brisk and evocative reading after intermission - focused on those parts of Schumann's music that seem closer than others to Chopin's quasi-improvisatory vein. Ax mined it more directly in the "Polonaise-fantaisie" in A-Flat, Op. 61, and a set of three Mazurkas, as well as a gorgeously played encore of the Nocturne in C-Sharp Minor, Op. 27, No. 1.

But before that, Ax concluded his regular program in a more extroverted strain, with a bravura account of Chopin's "Andante spianato and Grande Polonaise," Op. 22. It's a rare pianist who can uncover the rhythmic vivacity and polish in this potentially clattery showpiece, but Ax pulled it off.

As an added treat, the program included a work newly commissioned for the occasion from the English composer and pianist Thomas Adès. His Three Mazurkas form an overt and loving tribute to Chopin - particularly the first, which mimics some of the old master's trademark gestures but with different notes.



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Emanuel Ax

The National - Abu Dhabi • April 20, 2010

Emanuel Ax, Yo-Yo Ma, Itzhak Perlman: Mendelssohn Piano Trios

BY KATIE BOUCHER

Performed at New York's Carnegie Hall in April 2009 to celebrate Mendelssohn's bicentenary, this recording of two of the German composer's most accomplished piano works combines the star power of three of classical music's most gifted players for the first time. The result, unsurprisingly, is exquisite.

Rarely do such musical powerhouses come together, and the easy bond between them is evident throughout in the music's effortlessly lilting timbre. Some might be tempted to interpret that as a lack of vigour, but it is simply the sound of three old hands doing something with such ease that it just trips off the bow – or keys in Ax's case.

There is no fight for supremacy, since the structure of the works gives each a chance to shine. Ma wields his cello in the way you would expect from a multi-Grammy Award-winning artist, while Perlman on the violin and Ax on the piano both make it clear, by their technical brilliance, exactly how they got to the top of their respective games.

There are moments when the indulgently Romantic tone of the piece threatens to smother you, but it is this that makes these works of chamber music some of the most popular of their genre, and led Mendelssohn to be described at the time as "the Mozart of the 19th century".

Emanuel Ax

The Los Angeles Times • March 26, 2010

Music review: Emanuel Ax with Lionel Bringuier and the Los Angeles Philharmonic at Disney Hall

BY RICHARD S. GINELL

What do you do if you are Shostakovich, you've been officially condemned and then rehabilitated by a murderous state, and you are trying to follow up a triumphant Fifth Symphony?

The obvious course would be to write an equally stirring sequel, hopefully with another ambiguous subtext that the authorities wouldn't recognize. Instead, the beleaguered but not intimidated composer came up with one of the most bizarre symphonic structures he or anyone had ever conceived.

This Sixth Symphony opens with a massive, frightening, bleak, pessimistic movement marked Largo – the slowest tempo Shostakovich could think of – and closes with two short, flippant, sarcastic, even bawdy scherzos. Although the Sixth received much circulation when it was new, no one really got it – and only in recent times have we come to appreciate this lopsided piece for the quirks that baffled everyone in 1939.

Enter Lionel Bringuier, the wildly gifted 23-year-old associate conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. There are aspects of the Sixth that he does not quite feel yet at this stage in his young career, but they are overwhelmed by those that he can deliver right now.

Bringuier's rendition of the long opening movement Thursday night was beautifully played and well-proportioned, with soulful solo flute work from Catherine Ransom Karoly. Yet it seemed emotionally reserved, not quite hopeless and chilling enough. Or maybe I'm wrong, for at the end, many in the audience burst out in a loud symphony of coughs as if they had caught colds in the Soviet chill.

But then, Bringuier showed that he understands the weird humor of those irreverent scherzos better than almost anyone. He took the tempos at a lightning pace, with the Philharmonic following right along without a hitch, and got the basses to dig into the rhythms. He brought off gigantic climaxes of impressive, even brutal power, only to slip back into the flippancies with such great timing that it made one laugh out loud. This was terrific Shostakovich conducting.

Bringuier also seemed to bring out the best in Walt Disney Concert Hall's current resident Chopinist, Emanuel Ax, in the Piano Concerto No. 2. Ax, of course, is an old hand at this – he first recorded the piece when he was 28 (the L.A. Phil store was selling the CD edition downstairs) – and at 60, he was more ruminative, freer with the rubatos, yet clearer in articulation, and ultimately more interesting and probing. The second movement was especially beautiful, with wide dynamic contrasts and searching drama in the center. With his crisp, vigorous accompaniment, Bringuier gave the orchestral part a lot more care and feeding than it usually gets – even more than the conductor on Ax's recording, Eugene Ormandy, who was considered one of the best accompanists of his time.

Berlioz's "Le Corsaire" Overture served as a preview of the evening's coming attractions – precise, even brilliant playing in the extroverted sections, smooth and flowing elsewhere, rapier-like thrusts in phrasing.

The program repeats Saturday at Disney -- and Friday without the Shostakovich -- and on Sunday in Costa Mesa.

Don't miss Bringuier while he's still with the Phil; word is getting around, and a big post elsewhere looks to be in his future.



Emanuel Ax

The Los Angeles Times • March 23, 2010

Emanuel Ax begins L.A. Philharmonic residency

The pianist will be a jack-of-all-trades during his 10-day stay

By BARBARA ISENBURG

About two years ago, the pianist Emanuel Ax started thinking about how to celebrate the bicentennials of the two great Romantic Era composers, Chopin and Schumann (both born in 1810). Given that he both knew and performed with other world-class musicians and orchestras, Ax came up with the idea of a multi-part concert program involving a great many of those colleagues.

His longtime collaborator, the cellist Yo-Yo Ma, came onboard, and so did soprano Dawn Upshaw. Amsterdam's Concertgebouw, London's Barbican, New York's Carnegie Hall, the San Francisco Symphony and Los Angeles Philharmonic not only agreed to host the concerts but also to co-commission new music from a variety of composers. "It was," says Ax, "a dream come true."

The pianist and his dream return to Los Angeles on Tuesday for the second of three programs highlighting Chopin, Schumann and new music. Building on his well-received session at Walt Disney Concert Hall in January with Yo-Yo Ma, Ax launches his 10-day Los Angeles Philharmonic residency, beginning with Upshaw, then adding chamber music and orchestral performances later this week.

"A song is a very personal journey, and you kind of feel your way with a new partner in performance," says Upshaw, whose performances in this concert program have been her first with Ax. "He brings such a great deal of experience and knowledge, but he never forces anything. He is always responding to wherever our music making takes us."

That's what Ax, 60, has been doing for decades. The Polish-born musician began playing piano at 6, was trained at New York's Juilliard School, and won the first Arthur Rubinstein International Piano Competition when he was 25. He has since recorded more than two dozen albums, won several Grammy Awards, and performed to critical acclaim with major musicians and orchestras from New York to Singapore.

"Manny's engagement with the composer is more comprehensive than many other pianists," observes Ara Guzelimian, dean of the Juilliard School. "His musical and intellectual curiosity lead him to chamber music and song as well as solo work."

Chatting about his music by telephone last week, the reflective pianist agrees that he's equally comfortable onstage with a second musician, a full orchestra or on his own. "I never really distinguished between solo pianist and chamber music pianist," says Ax. "You have other voices to deal with, but musically, it's not that different."

Emanuel Ax

Los Angeles Times • March 23, 2010

page 2 of 2

Ax will perform in all these contexts during his concerts here. "He is a poet of the piano," says Deborah Borda, president and chief executive officer of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Assn. Ax's "On Location" residency this year is his second with the Philharmonic, she adds, saying, "He is almost like a member of the Los Angeles Philharmonic family in that there are so many different ways he manifests in our life. He appears every season, has toured with us and is close to both Esa-Pekka Salonen and Gustavo Dudamel."

No musical relationship is so close, of course, as his friendship and music-making with the cellist Yo-Yo Ma. Ax and his then-future wife, pianist Yoko Nozaki, attended the cellist's debut concert in New York nearly 40 years ago and, says Ax, "I remember saying I hope to get to work with him. We met in the Juilliard cafeteria a few months later, really hit it off and have been friends and colleagues ever since. It is one of the great parts of my life and has always been an incredible joy."

Today among the most highly-sought-after pianists globally, the peripatetic musician performs 80 to 85 concerts a year, some at home in New York, but most everywhere else. Although he says he plans to cut his performance and travel schedule back a little the next few years, he still practices every day for several hours.

Consider, for instance, Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 2, which he performs here later this week with the L.A. Philharmonic. "Every time I practice, I learn new things about the music," says Ax. "I've been working on that concerto since I was 18, which is 42 years, and I'm still trying to find ways of communicating the beauty of the piece better."

On the other hand, sometimes the music truly is new to him. John Adams and Christopher Rouse have written pieces for him in the past, and his current Chopin-Schumann programs have in turn also commissioned new music. For instance, he and Ma debuted Peter Lieberman's "Remembering Schumann," and the pianist's program with Upshaw this week includes a new piece by Stephen Prutsman. Ax will be back here in April with not just more Chopin but also "Three Mazurkas," a commission from Thomas Adés.

Whether by Prutsman, Lieberman or Adés, Chopin, Schumann or any other composer, the music assumes center stage for Ax. "I would like people to listen *with* me to the music and to basically feel they had a wonderful experience with the composer. What all of us are looking for is a way to get the people in the hall to be excited by the music *and* the performance."

Emanuel Ax

The New York Times • March 18, 2010

Music Review | Emanuel Ax and Dawn Upshaw

Piano and Voice Salute Chopin, Schumann and Those They Inspired

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI

Emanuel Ax could easily have celebrated the joint 200th anniversaries of Chopin and Schumann with a series of solo piano recitals. Instead, in three programs at Carnegie Hall, he tried something fresher.

He began in late January by exploring the works for cello and piano by Chopin and Schumann with his old friend Yo-Yo Ma. Last month he presented a thoughtfully conceived solo recital. And on Wednesday night, with the soprano Dawn Upshaw, in lovely voice, he concluded with a fascinating program of songs by Chopin and Schumann, with some Chopin piano pieces mixed in.

In tribute to these masters Mr. Ax asked three composers to write new works for this series. First came Peter Lieberson's "Remembering Schumann" for cello and piano. In the solo program Mr. Ax played Thomas Adès's Three Mazurkas, modern-day riffs on Chopin. Wednesday's program was to have included a new work by Osvaldo Golijov, but Mr. Golijov was unable to write it in time. Instead Ms. Upshaw and Mr. Ax gave the American premiere of "Piano Lessons," a new song cycle written for them by Stephen Prutsman, which sets six poems by Billy Collins.

Chopin's 17 collected songs, written throughout his life and published as Opus 17, are all settings of Polish poems, perhaps one reason they are seldom performed by non-Polish singers. The songs are not what devotees of Chopin's rhapsodic piano pieces might expect. The music is at the service of the text: direct, unadorned and eloquent.

In "Gdzie Lubi" ("There Where She Loves"), about a lovelorn young woman, Chopin evokes a gurgling stream with just a simple, undulant accompanimental figure in the piano, which cushions the wafting melody, tenderly sung here by Ms. Upshaw. She was especially affecting in the bittersweet "Melodya" ("Melody"), which required her to execute a high trill on the word "dzwigali." Try that at home.

Ms. Upshaw sat in a chair onstage next to a small table with a vase of flowers while Mr. Ax gave a lilting account of Chopin's Four Mazurkas (Op. 41). The setup evoked the salons in Paris where Chopin was the most comfortable performing. Mr. Ax also bought refinement and sensitivity to Chopin's Two Nocturnes (Op. 27).

The Billy Collins poems that Mr. Prutsman set to music tell of a youngster enduring piano lessons from an eccentric teacher and struggling to practice scales. Mr. Prutsman's music cleverly combines evocations of five-finger exercises and Alberti bass figures with hazy harmonies, hints of mellow jazz, a two-step stride and a nod to Debussy.

After intermission Ms. Upshaw and Mr. Ax presented a well-chosen set of 12 Schumann songs, mixing works from 1840, when Schumann was nearly obsessed with the genre, and seldom-heard songs from his later years, all exquisitely performed.

For their second and final encore they offered what Ms. Upshaw called "the first song that Osvaldo Golijov wrote for me," "Lúa Descolorida" ("Colorless Moon"), an aching lament by a Galician poet, which in this haunting performance was somehow a fitting way to end a tribute to Chopin and Schumann.

Emanuel Ax

The New York Times • February 12, 2010

Music Review: A Snowy Celebration of Schumann and Chopin

BY ANTHONY TOMMASINI



Photo by Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

New York music lovers can be an intrepid bunch. Despite Wednesday's snowstorm, a sizable audience made it to Carnegie Hall for a recital by the estimable pianist Emanuel Ax, the second in a series of three programs celebrating the 200th birthdays of Chopin and Schumann.

In no time Mr. Ax banished thoughts of winter as he played the stately, solemn opening chords of Chopin's Polonaise-Fantaisie, an elusive late work, more fantasy than polonaise. Mr. Ax played this haunting music with uncanny dramatic timing and melting sound. During the opening section, as the sound lingered after each statement of the chord motif, a lacy hint of a melodic line trailed slowly up the keyboard with eerie calm.

Eventually the gentle polonaise began, played here with beguiling elusiveness. In this wondrously strange work stretches of dance alternate with harmonically rich musings and bursts of rhapsodic fantasy. From Mr. Ax's magnificent performance I know that he loves the piece as much as I do.

Fantasy was a recurring theme in this substantive program. Mr. Ax played Schumann's great Fantasy in C as well as his "Fantasiestücke," a suite of eight fantasy pieces. "Fantasiestücke" truly is fantastical. To the dreamy lyricism of "Warum?" ("Why?") Mr. Ax brought a touch of inquisitive urgency. He dispatched the impetuous flights of "Traumes Wirren" ("Dream's Turmoil"), all whirling runs and turns, with scintillating delicacy.

Emanuel Ax

Audiophile Audition (Online Magazine) • February 10, 2010

MENDELSSOHN: Piano Trio No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 49; Piano Trio No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 66 - Yo-Yo Ma, cello/Itzhak Perlman, violin/Emanuel Ax, piano - Sony 88697 52192 2, 59:40 ****

The new "Million Dollar Trio" presents a lustrous Mendelssohn album



as their first inspired offering as part of the composer's bicentennial celebrations.

BY GARY LEMCO

Two generations ago, the trio of Artur Schnabel, Gregor Piatagorsky, and Jascha Heifetz became dubbed "The Million Dollar Trio," and it seems that epithet now belongs to the three distinguished instrumentalists who realize Mendelssohn's inspired chamber works on this delicious disc. In celebration of Mendelssohn's 200th anniversary, these colleagues decided to record the two trios 28-29 March 2009 at The Academy of Arts and Letters, New York City, under the guidance of producer Steven Epstein.

The facility of composition in the *D Minor Trio* (1839) consistently reveals a freshness of spirit and inventive charm that obviously appeal to these performers. As

might be expected, the keyboard urges ever forward in sonata-allegro form, but never at the expense of the other two instruments, and Ma's cello sings with noble authority in the seamless *Molto allegro agitato* first movement.

Mendelssohn always conjures up "songs without words," and the *Andante* of this fine chamber work proves the rule. Here, Perlman's burnished violin tone sets the stage for a completely absorbed transparency of texture in all parts, with Ax's conscientious piano part underlining the pathos of expression. While Mendelssohn's Romanticism may appear staid, in the manner of an Austen novel heroine, the sincerity and simplicity of his melodic gifts belies any charge of emotional "effeminacy."

Few can rival Mendelssohn's "elfin" impulse, and here the rondo form trips in figures always acknowledging the primacy of his *A Midsummer Night's Dream* fancies. The duo that often erupts between Perlman's fleet violin and Ax's diaphanous piano make for brilliant ensemble, with the Ma cello often shimmering in its own lights. The quasi-martial last movement *Allegro assai appassionato* keeps everyone busy, especially the active keyboard part that often calls for chromatic octaves and plastic chordal declamations. How much of the Heifetz ethos Perlman has integrated into

Emanuel Ax

Audiophile Audition • February 10, 2010

page 2 of 2

himself can be assessed by comparing this version with that of the older master; but Ma, too, makes his sweetly songful contribution felt in the secondary theme whose sentiment remains direct without cloying. The inevitable transition to D Major marks a happy culmination for the ensemble, who bask in each of the composer's lyrical outpourings, "from the heart to the heart," to paraphrase Beethoven.

The *Trio in C Minor* (1845) casts a darker stormier shadow than the first, and its relatively gloomy hues appealed to that fellow melancholic, Johannes Brahms. In this opening movement, the duet of violin and cello exerts its hegemony, leaving the piano occasional runs and accompanying ostinato figures. The string duet announces the lovely secondary theme in the major mode that becomes quite the rhapsody. The chromatic line and its brooding variants often concede some influence to Mendelssohn's *The First Walpurgis Night*, Op. 60. The recap utilizes melodic kernels and brief rhythmic cells in felicitous harmony that move to a sighing ardent restatement of the full theme at the impassioned coda.

Ax alone announces the song without words that dominates the *Andante espressivo* second movement; but once Perlman and Ma arrive, they remain in close harmony. The rocking motif in the rhythm could easily have been derived from one of Mendelssohn's choral motets. The cello writing reminds us of the equally facile Sonata in D Major, Op. 58 by this same composer. Perlman, too, provides exquisitely arched phrases for this wonderful moment of expression. The *Scherzo*, as Mendelssohn once offered, "is rather nasty to play," as this well applies to the piano part. Brilliantly quick and quicksilver, the music flies at dizzying speeds, the violin buzzing and the keyboard aloft in various registers. What sufficed for eight players in the Op. 20 Octet now must be provided by three enthralled artists with symphonic aspirations. The last movement, *Allegro appassionato*, takes its cue, as in the *Reformation Symphony*, from a pre-fabricated chorale, here the sixteenth-century Genevan psalter "Vor deinen Thron tret ich hiermit."

The intensity of the writing, however, never betrays any sense of compromise, especially as the figures descend in leaps and sighs to a fine-honed sense of devotional closure. A fine debut album--frankly, a tough act to follow.



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Emanuel Ax

Democrat and Chronicle, Rochester • February 5, 2010

What our critics are listening to

EMANUEL AX, YO-YO MA, ITZHAK PERLMAN: MENDELSSOHN PIANO TRIOS.

BY ANNA REGUERO

This is the heavyweight version of the Mendelssohn Piano Trios — three of today's most widely known and celebrated classical musicians on one disc is almost too good to be true. The recording lives up to the hype. These trios are impeccably performed and full of zest, thanks to the joyous music-making among these three friends. In jazz, it's called playing in the pocket when music feels so good; that's what to expect here...

Yo-Yo Ma and Emanuel Ax
The New York Times • February 1, 2010

Pianist and Cellist Have an Encounter with Chopin and Schumann

BY VIVIEN SCHWEITZER

A duo recital for piano and cello is not the most obvious way to celebrate the Schumann and Chopin bicentennials, since both composers treated the cello as a relatively minor player. But at Carnegie Hall on Friday evening the cellist Yo-Yo Ma joined the pianist Emanuel Ax in the first of three recitals Mr. Ax is devoting to the two composers. **It's an indication of the continuing popularity of these performers, who are frequent collaborators, and of the Romantic repertory that the hall was packed, with audience members crowded onto both sides of the stage.**

The shared birth year of Schumann and Chopin perhaps makes it inevitable that their anniversaries should be celebrated jointly. Although they are certainly very different composers who followed divergent paths, similarities abound: The music of each is full of whimsy and imagination, and their lives and careers were curtailed by fragility, Schumann's mental and Chopin's physical.

The program opened with Schumann's Adagio and Allegro (Op. 70), originally written for horn. **Mr. Ma spun out the melody of the tender first movement with eloquent phrasing before plunging into the fiery Allegro. Schumann's Five Pieces in Folk Style (Op. 102), which followed, illuminate his penchant for small-scale forms and his fondness for contrasting dreaminess with vigorous outbursts.**

Mr. Ma and Mr. Ax also performed the New York premiere of Peter Lieberman's "Remembering Schumann," which conveys the spirit of this Romantic composer in a contemporary voice. Mr. Lieberman, who writes that he has always loved Schumann while being "somewhat scared by how unhinged his music could be," constructed this three-movement work on a variations form.

The cello unfolds with rhapsodic flair over oscillating piano chords in the first movement; the third is based on a signature motif that Schumann used in "Carnaval" and other works. Contrasting melodious interludes with agitated sections, the score aptly evokes its namesake, perhaps to a fault: except for a few piquant harmonies, Schumann's voice overpowered Mr. Lieberman's. **Mr. Ax and Mr. Ma played it with obvious dedication.**

Schumann was also represented by his Fantasiestücke (Op. 73), miniatures intended for amateurs and sometimes performed by violin or clarinet with piano.

Mr. Ax and Mr. Ma offered a spirited rendition of Chopin's popular "Polonaise Brillante" in C, which the composer self-deprecatingly called "nothing but tinsel." The program concluded with Chopin's Cello Sonata in G minor, not a work that rates highly in comparison with his extraordinary output for solo piano. But Mr. Ax and Mr. Ma, equal and expressive partners throughout, offered an elegant rendition.

Emanuel Ax

Pittsburgh Tribune • January 22, 2010

Review: Symphony crowns top performance with bravura

BY MARK KANNY

Conductor Manfred Honeck and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra were back at the top of their game Friday night at Heinz Hall, offering remarkable interpretations performed with the utmost commitment.

The first concert after a seven-week absence began with an exciting performance of Ludwig van Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 5 -- known as the "Emperor" -- featuring soloist Emanuel Ax. His playing was full of bravura, sensitive phrasing and touch, and a wonderful array of trills.

Ax said in a recent interview that a conductor's most important contribution to a concerto performance is the kind of energy he or she brings. Honeck brings many kinds of energy to each piece he conducts, including in this concerto swift urgency to the first movement and a slow movement that had the nobility of spirit Beethoven intended. The collaboration between soloist and orchestra was as close as chamber music.

Ax's encore was an exquisite account of "Des Abends" (In the Evening), the first of Robert Schumann's Fantasy Pieces, Op. 12.

After intermission Honeck lead a breathtaking performance of Anton Bruckner's Symphony No. 7.

The piece begins with a barely audible string tremolo after which the initial idea is a glorious ascending line for cello doubled by horn for only four measures. Honeck created a striking long line, connecting everything beyond after the horn bows out to when the woodwinds and violins pick up the opening idea with new colors and feeling.

It is no accident that the opening musical idea works so well when played with an inverted version of itself (up goes down). Bruckner spent many hours working through inversions. It is not merely a technical device in his hands and contributes some of the symphony's most remarkably atmospheric moments.

In color, weight and pacing, Honeck made the spirituality of Bruckner's slow movement a darkly glowing reality. The lament played by the tenor tuba and horn after the big climax with timpani, cymbals and triangle was written right after the composer heard of the death of Richard Wagner. Wagner had invented the tenor tuba with his friend Hans Richter, a horn player and conductor.

Every section of the strings, winds and brass made wonderful contributions. Timpanist Chris Allen produced some awesome sonorities, including a long low E rolled pedal in the first movement..

The surprise was the impressive guest principal flute David Buck. He's principal flute of the Oregon Symphony.

Emanuel Ax

Boston Globe • November 7, 2007

Beethoven's music speaks for itself through Emanuel Ax's hands

BY MATTHEW GUERRIERI

You need a lot of technique to take Ludwig van Beethoven at his word. On Sunday afternoon, pianist Emanuel Ax tackled the familiar yet formidable "Waldstein" Sonata in C Major (Op. 53), and he achieved the not inconsiderable feat of letting the music speak for itself, in all its stubborn, maddening glory.

The dense, obsessive passagework of the first movement had clarity and bite; the bass tremolo leading into the coda was a precise avalanche. Steady, deliberate austerity marked the slow movement, with eloquent pauses juxtaposed against the transfixed, pedal-blurred cantabile line that opened the closing rondo. The muscular grandeur of the finale was paced like a thoroughbred, each dramatic crest building on the last.

Ax's brand of virtuosity - command rather than flash - was manifested throughout his recital at Jordan Hall, presented by Celebrity Series of Boston. Rhythms were flexible, but with authority and momentum; accumulations of notes were shaded into pellucid clarity, each pitch ringing with purpose, even amidst thick chords or contrapuntal traffic. To seem simply a conduit for the music, as Ax did, demonstrated a deep and seamless artistry.

Ax opened with early Beethoven, the Sonata in A Major (Op. 2, No. 2). The young Beethoven was in aural love with the piano's multiple sonic personalities. Themes bounce from high to low, accompaniments are embroidered in a multitude of patterns, scintillating ornamentation becomes a resonant end in itself. Ax did justice to the full range. He started out by pointing up each contrast in dynamics and articulation: Beethoven the awkward guest, excitable, moody, and disdaining small talk. As the piece went on, he shifted the dichotomies from moment-by-moment to section-by-section, the temperamental rhetoric coalescing into confident sculpture.

In between the sonatas was music by Robert Schumann, whose mercurial, protean forms were well-served by Ax's direct, robust phrasing: He immediately found the core of each new mood, making vibrant and entrancing what, in lesser hands, could be merely attention-deficient.

Ax used a near-continuous but unobtrusive rubato to stitch the variegated sections of the Op. 20 "Humoreske" into a convincing whole that still gave free rein to Schumann's unorthodox whim. With drive and lilt, Ax emphasized the choreography in the masked-ball snapshots of the Op. 2 "Papillons." The dancers returned for an encore, Frédéric Chopin's Waltz in A Minor (Op. 34, No. 2). Like the rest of the program, one felt that this simply was how the music should go.

Emanuel Ax

Chicago Tribune • May 13, 2006

Dohnanyi energizes CSO

Maestro had the orchestra playing with an elegance

BY JOHN VON RHEIN

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's need to maintain strong ties to a tradition that reaches back to the earliest years of the institution has brought a number of Old World masters into the Symphony Center fold. None is more welcome than Bernard Haitink, whose highly anticipated tenure as principal conductor begins this fall.

But there's also Christoph von Dohnanyi. If not a peerless technician in the Haitink manner, the Berlin-born Dohnanyi, 76, is an honest, serious, thorough musician whose recent successes with the CSO earned him return invitations this year as well as in the following two seasons.

His concert Thursday night was one of those memorable occasions when players and podium inspire and energize each other so completely that a standard symphonic program suddenly becomes anything but standard.

Mozart's Symphony No. 25, the so-called "little" G Minor symphony, showed Dohnanyi's impeccable ear for balancing and clarifying the sound of a Classical orchestra. The restless syncopations of the opening movement had a darkly dramatic intensity that looked ahead to Beethoven. Mozart's unusual scoring includes four horns, and Dohnanyi put their saturated color to telling use.

Then it was on to "Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks." The Strauss tone poem has been one of our orchestra's signature showpieces practically since it gave the American premiere in 1895. Indeed, the CSO performs this demanding score with such practiced virtuosity that one forgets how easy it is for lesser orchestras to make a hash of it.

Dohnanyi had the CSO playing with an elegance, lucidity and proportion that brought out the music's humor and high spirits. He's too sober an artist to elbow the listener in the ribs, as have such heavy-handed interpreters as David Robertson and Daniel Barenboim. The Chicago woodwinds were a joy, light and full of character, while our lithe strings found the chamber music in the opulent orchestration. Not for ages have I heard a more refined or enjoyable "Till."

After intermission there followed another absorbing performance, that of Brahms' First Piano Concerto, with Emanuel Ax as soloist.

The massive scale of this masterpiece, with its thick scoring, makes it an unwieldy challenge for even the best pianists and conductors to bring off successfully. Ax recorded the Brahms Concerto No. 1 a couple of decades ago with James Levine and the CSO, but that performance is nowhere near as commanding as the Brahms he, Dohnanyi and the orchestra gave Orchestra Hall on Thursday night.

The qualities that make Ax a major Brahms interpreter were all there: the big and pliant sonority, stamina, intelligence, poetic feeling and deep musicality. Brahms requires a lot of heavy lifting from the soloist in the outer movements, yet Ax balanced his command of the big bravura passages with great sensitivity to the delicate inflections that shape the raptly beautiful Adagio.

Dohnanyi led an incisive and caring accompaniment, creating a spontaneous sense of dialogue in which the piano and orchestra spoke to each other as respected equals. The audience went wild.

Emanuel Ax

Denver Post • March 14, 2007

Veteran pianist keys audience in

BY SABINE KORTALS

Translating inner worlds to an external audience is no easy feat.

But veteran pianist Emanuel Ax achieved just that in a solo recital of two Beethoven sonatas paired with two complementary sonatas composed by Robert Schumann.

Playing from memory to another sold-out posse of Friends of Chamber Music patrons at Gates Concert Hall on Tuesday night, Ax - a familiar face to Colorado concertgoers - was masterful in his evenhanded approach to making each well-known work sound fresh.

Intellectually adroit as he is technically dexterous, Ax delivered a reading of Beethoven's Sonata No. 2 in A Major that was slow and pondering in the second of four movements, even academic at times. Yet Ax didn't stop there - his capacity to grasp the theoretical construct of music serves only to undergird his stirring delivery of the emotional heart of it.

Sinking into each note with careful deliberation and just the right measure of intensity, the unassuming virtuoso deftly drew out the melodic lines that, in less capable hands, are too easily hidden among clustered harmonies. The extended scherzo movement was played with swift precision, and the final rondo movement was brilliantly crisp.

In Schumann's improvisational Fantasy in C Major, Ax's poetic impulses illuminated the harmonically lush, if fragmented, themes. Arguably Schumann's greatest piano work, it is unified by a musical motive from Beethoven's song cycle "An die ferne Geliebte."

Continuing with Schumann's character piece "Papillons" after intermission, Ax delved into the colorful carnival feeling of the airy, playful work. Here, too, he not only shaped each delicate nuance with tenderness and exactitude, but held the silences between musical thoughts with exquisite timing.

In Beethoven's furious and fervent "Appassionata," Ax's extraordinary endurance bore out the trills, tremolos and deep rumbles of the mighty work with controlled ardor.

The only distraction to the sheer artistry that unfolded on stage was a mysterious high-pitched ambient sound that recurred throughout the evening.

Emanuel Ax
Gazeta (Moscow) • June 29, 2005

Emanuel Ax gave his first performance in St. Petersburg

BY GULNARA SADYCH-ZADE

A renowned pianist Emanuel Ax gave two concerts during the "June Stars" Festival. The program of the first night included the works by Beethoven and Chopin, while for the second concert Ax performed the Second Concerto by Brahms accompanied by the First Philharmonic orchestra with Yuri Temirkanov as conductor.

"June Stars" is the name of a new festival organized by St.-Petersburg Philharmonia. The highlights of this festival are concerts of famous conductors Yuri Temirkanov, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Neeme Jarvi, Zoltan Kocsis and Krzysztof Penderecki (who is as active as conductor as he is as composer). Among other festival events were the concerts of famous and relatively "expensive" pianists: Emmanuel Ax, Helen Grimaud and young Finnish pianist Antti Siirala, whose international career had a swift start. Ax was the first performer in the piano series. An American of Polish origins who studied in Julliard, he is now one of the top pianists of the highest rank.

Despite his extraordinary popularity there were empty seats in the audience during the Ax's solo concert. The gap between the local philharmonic life and the global music stage has become so wide during the last 15 years, that St.-Petersburg music lovers do not follow any more the international development. They do not know what is going on at the academic stages of Europe and the rest of the World, who holds the first place in the unofficial "ranking", who are the first choice of record companies. And nobody wants to go to the Philharmonia if it is only to listen to Beethoven's sonatas and Chopin's ballads, worn out by numerous performances.

Those who ignored Ax's concerts lost out. It has been a long time since we last heard such a refined and at the same time noble and simple performance: no exaggerations, no wobbling, no moaning or sugariness. The performance that wiped the cheap sentimentalism off hackneyed Chopin's works. From the very beginning of the First Ballad, heartfelt, performed in an undertone as if speaking to a close friend, one could see what to expect. Soft touch, sincere dialogue with music text and impeccable technique all made Ax's performance unrepeatable.

The first part featured Beethoven's Second and Third sonatas. These are performed by everybody from high school students to conservatoire graduates. It is very difficult to find a new interpretation and almost impossible to find that fine line, that divides the style of early Beethoven from for example Haydn or Mozart. Ax brilliantly completed this task: without deviating from the classicist style, he could develop in these sonatas that "light breathing" that rendered extreme clarity to the technique. The pianist created the wide canvas of the sonatas in four parts, painting a sunny and typically classicist picture of the world. Listening to the pianist one is forced to agree with his interpretation and dreams of the shining world without problems or suffering.

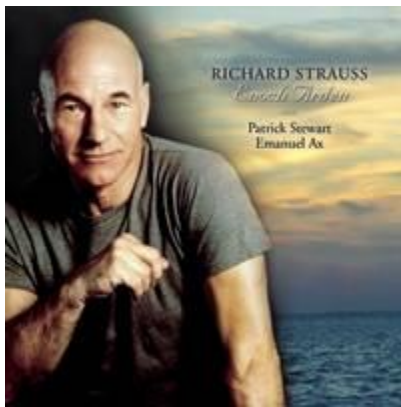
Emanuel Ax

Guardian Unlimited • September 14, 2007

Strauss: Enoch Arden; Piano Pieces, Op 3, Stewart/ Ax

(Sony)

BY TIM ASHLEY



Strauss wrote Enoch Arden in 1897 as a vehicle for Ernest von Possart, a well-known actor-producer of his day, who was also Strauss's boss during his years at the Munich Court Opera. A melodrama in the original meaning of the word - a work with musical accompaniment - it's a setting of Tennyson's poem about the eponymous shipwrecked sailor who eventually makes it home, only to discover that his wife, Annie, believing him dead and driven to penury in his absence, has married Philip, Enoch's best friend from childhood.

Some of it has the sketchiness associated with compositional haste, but there are some fine things towards the end when Strauss, ever the accomplished psychologist, digs deep into Enoch's moral and emotional agony. Patrick Stewart is the latest in a long list of actors to champion the work, and his performance with pianist Emanuel Ax is a model of intimate restraint until we get to the closing pages, when the pair of them ratchet up the voltage to overwhelming effect. Two of the Five Piano Pieces Op 3 (not Op 30, as it says on the sleeve) are also included: Ax plays them with great finesse.

Emanuel Ax

The Independent • March 2, 2009

AX / Dudamel / Philharmonia Orchestra, Royal Festival Hall, London

(Rated 5/ 5)

BY BAYAN NORTHCOTT

When a dynamic young musician suddenly emerges from the unlikeliest background and amid sensational publicity, standing ovations are liable to follow, whatever the quality of the actual performances.

Yet the 27-year-old Venezuelan Gustavo Dudamel is manifestly the real thing. Conducting without score, he not only remembers and signals every cue of a complex orchestral piece, but feels and shapes every phrase and paragraph with natural musicality and life. His gestures may be extravagant, but they are unfailingly functional – and evidently infectious. Rarely has one seen the Philharmonia Orchestra responding – indeed throwing itself about – with such un-English physicality.

Clearly, they were all having a terrific time. That was in Mahler's perfervid hour-long Symphony No 5 in C sharp minor (1902), which comprised the main part of their Royal Festival Hall bill. But preceding it with one of Mozart's calmest piano concertos also showed Dudamel's range. From the insinuating little violin phrase that launches the first movement, his reading of the Piano Concerto No 17 in G, K453 (1784), had an exceptional spaciousness and translucence, with the limpid arabesques of Emanuel Ax's piano invoking radiant responses from the woodwind principals of the Philharmonia. There were moments of poise in the slow movement when time almost seemed to stand still, yet the accelerating variations of the finale had all their due vivacity.

Not much calm in the Mahler, which sets out in funereal marchings interspersed with outbursts of hysterical grief, centres on a huge Alpine knees-up of a scherzo full of echoing horns; and resolves, by way of an intensely hushed love song for strings and harp – the famous Adagietto of Death in Venice notoriety – in a joyous finale, unalloyed for once by Mahlerian irony, in which bucolic tunes turn all manner of contrapuntal cartwheels, and even stand on their heads.

And it was all here in this sur- passingly vivid reading. Maybe there were a few moments when the hysteria lost focus; maybe the Adagietto was a little too lovingly nuanced quite to carry through. But in general the choice of tempi and the pointing of detail were convincingly balanced, while the emotional and sonorous intensity were tremendous.

Emanuel Ax

New York Times • February 19, 2007

Piece by Piece, a Festival Takes Shape

BY ALLAN KOZINN

The New York Philharmonic is having it both ways in its festival Brahms the Romantic. By the end of the season the orchestra will have hit all the major orchestral works, including the “German Requiem,” and in the aggregate this traversal unquestionably has the critical mass to constitute a festival.



There are more inventive and enterprising festivals an orchestra might offer of course, but if Brahms is what the Philharmonic wants to explore, then Brahms it is. So why did the orchestra wimp out, scheduling its Brahms in isolated clumps, scattered through the season?

A festival usually explores its theme in a concentrated run of concerts, so that its subject's full scope can be absorbed in a single, hedonistic burst. The music is transformed into an evolving structure. Relationships become apparent. And listeners who want either to study the music or simply to revel in it can do so in a context that means something. That is the difference between a festival and a bunch of related concerts adrift in a sea of unrelated ones, which is what the Philharmonic is doing.

The first installment was a single subscription week split into two programs. In Part 1, earlier in the week, Lorin Maazel led Brahms's First Serenade and First Piano Concerto, with Emanuel Ax as the soloist at Avery Fisher Hall. Part 2, beginning on Saturday evening, was the logical sequel: the Second Serenade and the Second Piano Concerto, with Mr. Ax again at the piano.

It takes considerable stamina and focus for a pianist to play both Brahms piano concertos in a week, but Mr. Ax has always been a superb Brahmsian, and he clearly didn't find the task daunting. The salient feature of his account of the Concerto No. 2 in B flat was a fluid rubato that created the impression of a natural, organic breath and helped make this war horse sound fresh and alive.

Striking as well was his sense of detail, evident in everything from his sharply accented phrasing in the opening movement and his supple unfolding of the Andante, to the vividness and sheer electricity in his pulse-quicken rendering of the Allegro appassionato.

There was a lively sense of give-and-take between Mr. Ax and Mr. Maazel, and the orchestra matched Mr. Ax in vitality. There was also much to admire in Mr. Maazel's leisurely reading of the Serenade No. 2 in A, a work that takes its title seriously some of the time, affording entertaining moments of shapely melody and almost danceable rhythms, but that also offers moments of greater depth and barely suppressed symphonic ambition. Brahms scored the work for reduced orchestra, with only woodwinds and low strings, and the Philharmonic played it with an appealing warmth of tone.

Emanuel Ax

New York Times • May 31, 2008

Berio's 'Love Letter' to Schubert, Inspired by Sketches for an Unwritten Symphony

BY ANTHONY TOMMASINI

The dynamic conductor David Robertson was almost certainly on the short list during the New York Philharmonic's search for a music director to succeed Lorin Maazel. Though Alan Gilbert wound up with the job, on Thursday night Mr. Robertson conducted the orchestra in a concert that suggested what qualities he might have brought to the position.

It was not just the characteristically inventive program he devised but the way he presented it that was so rewarding, especially when he turned to "Rendering," Luciano Berio's wildly free recomposition of sketches Schubert made late in his short life for what was to have been his 10th symphony.

Mr. Robertson, a born teacher, began with an engaging explanation of the work. To understand Berio's aim when he undertook this project in 1988, Mr. Robertson suggested, it is helpful to know something about Schubert's sketches: scattered fragments of themes and incomplete longer passages, written for piano with just hints of possible instrumentation.

Mr. Robertson asked a Philharmonic pianist, Harriet Wingreen, to play the vigorous, jaunty theme that Schubert intended to open the symphony's first movement. It's just 16 measures, and not until measure 14 do we get "anything that resembles harmony," Mr. Robertson said. Then he had the orchestra play Berio's rendering of the passage, thick with Schubertian harmony, though touched with quizzical, vaguely modern elements.

Mr. Robertson seemed genuinely moved as he explained that Schubert, in the last month of his life and fearing that his skills at counterpoint were deficient, started taking lessons. Because Schubert was poor and manuscript paper pricey, he jotted down a homework assignment — a counterpoint exercise — on a page of the symphony sketches. Berio was so touched by Schubert's dutiful yet tender counterpoint (which Ms. Wingreen performed on the piano) that he included the exercise in the second movement of "Rendering," remaking it into a mystical, tonally unmoored, elusive passage.

In this 35-minute piece Berio honors Schubert by composing a fantastical rumination on his sketches. He patches the fragments onto a three-movement structure, filling in the missing swatches with his own music, producing a "love letter" to Schubert, as Mr. Robertson called it. In the most modern sections of the work Schubert and Berio are eerily mingled, as if Berio had tapped into Schubert's creative mind, a jumble of fleeting ideas.

Mr. Robertson's devotion to this score came through in the sensitive, colorful and exactly executed performance he drew from the Philharmonic players. The music's effect was enhanced by its placement on the program after another hybrid work: the Swiss composer Michael Jarrell's nuanced and piercing orchestrations of three piano études by Debussy. Mr. Jarrell transcribed these austere late Debussy works in 1992.

After intermission the pianist Emanuel Ax joined Mr. Robertson for an exhilarating performance of Beethoven's "Emperor" Concerto. When you reach the mature master stage of your career, as Mr. Ax has, aren't you supposed to turn all probing and autumnal? Not Mr. Ax, who played with youthful brio, incisive rhythm, bountiful imagination, delicacy when called for and thundering power when the piano fought back.

The ovation was so ardent that Mr. Ax played an encore, the melancholic Andante from Schubert's Sonata in A (D. 664), which, in the spirit of the evening, was exquisitely rendered.

Emanuel Ax

Philadelphia Inquirer • March 22, 2007

A different Ax offers same great moments

BY DAVID PATRICK STEARNS

Is there a more comfortable presence than Emanuel Ax? A frequent visitor to Philadelphia's concert halls, the 58-year-old pianist always transcends nonmusical obstacles - snowstorms, summer heat, antiseptic sound systems - with his velvet legato and amiable presence. Never, in my experience, has he phoned in a performance. But without a concert to salvage and with conditions ideal (Kimmel Center's Verizon Hall, thanks to Philadelphia Chamber Music Society) and a program of his choosing, a different Ax emerged Tuesday. He was on so many edges that when he reverted to his nice old self for an encore, you wished he hadn't.

Ax is an original. He doesn't allow his Chopin-esque manner to become a one-size-fits-all approach. Where other pianists want to be grand and profound with slow tempos and big, sloshy sonorities, Ax goes in the opposite direction with escalating speed and crispness. The more he increases tension, the more intently you listen - and perceive the profundity. In Schumann's Papillons (Op. 2), where melodies from two different worlds are sounding simultaneously, other pianists tend to pedal generously, suggesting those two worlds are distant but adjacent mountainsides. Ax put them in close, sweaty proximity. Charles Ives would have loved it.

In other great moments, performance heat was fused with intelligent strategy. Even the greatest pianists can't keep Schumann's Fantasy in C, with all its unguarded, openhearted rhapsody, from being a letdown after the first movement. Ax left no room for that. Movements jumped on each other's backs without pause and with such emphatic concentration that your brain hadn't time to ask if the last two movements measured up to the first.

The velvet legato was kept in his back pocket for a pair of Beethoven sonatas, Op. 2 (No. 2) and Op. 57, "Appassionata." But the coloristic abilities that create this trademark sonority joined forces with Ax's equally keen ability to clearly show the audience how the composer got from one stunning event to another: Unusually firm pianissimos and even pregnant silences became arresting, effective transitional techniques. In the "Appassionata," the two chords that succinctly usher in the final movement had such a different timbre, you could barely believe they came from the same instrument - this, while maintaining a sonic kinship that convinced you they belonged in the same piece. Beethoven's volatility became so apparent that Ax narrowly avoided train wrecks, taking the music's rage to the verge of chaos - with great effect. He played the final movement not as a virtuoso romp that happens to be in a minor key, but as a furious journey to hell.

Chopin's Waltz in A minor, which is core repertoire for Ax, was the technically sure but emotionally absent encore. After that kind of "Appassionata," how can you be charming when the earth has been scorched?

Emanuel Ax

The Philadelphia Inquirer • June 23, 2006

Orchestra has a Jekyll-and Hyde night at the Mann

BY DAVID PATRICK STEARNS

Many musical mysteries resolve themselves if only given enough time and thought. But I'll bet that in my final moments, as my life is flashing before me, I'll still be baffled by the acoustics and sound design at the Mann Center for the Performing Arts.

On Night Two of the Philadelphia Orchestra summer season on Wednesday, the two halves of the concert were completely different experiences, seemingly played by vastly different orchestras. The size of the ensembles varied from one half to the next, the first having a smaller group appropriate to Mozart's Don Giovanni overture and Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 5, known as The Emperor, with the ever-welcome soloist Emanuel Ax.

Whether the fault lay with the performance, the acoustics or amplification, the orchestral sound was miserable. It had no body; in plainer terms, it was scrawny. Rhythms felt heavy-footed. Luckily, Ax is the sort of artist who never lets an audience down, and not only did he deliver an artistic experience, but you could hear it, thanks no doubt to the microphone stuck into the body of his piano.

The performance's soul lay in the second movement, where Beethoven's orchestra writing so often casts the pianist adrift into soliloquy-like solo passages. In such moments, Ax created his own time zone, with each phrase unfolding in a way that had its own mind. While his playing didn't exactly defy the meter of the music, he seemed to make its time increments grow on their own accord.

Such interpretive wizardry gives the impression of something unique happening before your very ears, as opposed to a vivid run-through of what happened in rehearsal. And in repertoire as frequently heard as this, you're grateful for a soloist who is able to bring your ears into the present moment without resorting to perversity.

In the concert's second half, guest conductor Peter Oundjian seemed transformed from a congenial routineer to a musician of temperament. He brought great detail and color to an even more often heard "greatest hit," Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition in the Ravel orchestration. Here, the orchestra sounded like its glamorous self, each of the piece's episodes established with its own beautifully delineated sound world.

Of course, there were many more musicians onstage. And it must be said that the quality of sound is relative; this wasn't up to what you would hear at the Kimmel Center, but it facilitated a consistently absorbing experience. Maybe the artificial sound boosting was minimized because the orchestra could project with sheer brute strength. But is brute strength enough to keep the sound from getting lost in the Mann Center's ultra-high ceiling? A mystery indeed.

Emanuel Ax

The Plain Dealer • October 3, 2008

Compelling Cleveland Orchestra program features pianist Emanuel Ax

By ZACHARY LEWIS

Pianist Emanuel Ax is the featured guest of the Cleveland Orchestra this weekend, and he fulfills that role magnificently as a vibrant soloist in two short, lesser-known works for piano and orchestra.

In actuality, though, many musical artists, not just Ax, deserve credit for an unusual but subtly compelling program that, under music director Franz Welser-Most, often sounds like chamber music on a grand scale, with players around the ensemble exchanging crucial commentary and taking turns in the spotlight.

Nowhere was Ax's virtuosity on greater display Thursday night at Severance Hall than in "Burleske," a miniature concerto by Richard Strauss so dramatically self-important it could be accused of mocking Romantic-period works two and three times its size.

At every point in this dazzling showpiece, Ax was in complete control, whether rattling off sparkling roulades or discovering genuine poetry in the music's few slower passages. Then again, so was principal timpanist Paul Yancich, whose martial opening statement served as the work's rhythmic backbone.

The Ax effect was even more transformative in Karol Szymanowski's Symphony No. 4, "Symphonie Concertante," a work, incidentally, the Cleveland Orchestra premiered in the United States in 1933.

Here, the pianist joined ranks with Welser-Most and the orchestra to cut through the thickets of a dense, prickly score and expose music of both visceral intensity and sincere emotion.

Where brute, percussive force was called for, Ax supplied it in spades, hammering out blocks of sound with explosive energy. But in the central Andante, the pianist switched gears entirely, partnering with flute and bassoon to spin a few precious moments of musical weightlessness.

Szymanowski isn't a composer easy to love, but as rendered Thursday night by Ax, Welser-Most and crew, his Symphony No. 4 at least emerged as music easy to admire.

Absent Ax, Welser-Most and the orchestra were at their collective finest in four selections from Dvorak's "Slavonic Dances," Op. 46. Each of these colorful little gems -- Nos. 2, 3, 5 and 7 -- shone brightly on beds of fluffy percussion, through confident, warm-blooded performances marked by great flexibility of tempo, refined dynamics and crisp contributions from the woodwinds.

Mozart has a way of stealing any show, but on this occasion, the mild performance of his Symphony No. 25, the first work on the program, was the only one that didn't quite live up to its potential.

Emanuel Ax

The Plain Dealer • October 3, 2008

page 2 of 2

The two inner movements set the collegial precedent for the evening, with unified phrasing tying together the Andante and pleasant conversations between woodwinds and horns illuminating the Minuet.

But in the bolder first and last movements, Welser-Moet and the orchestra tended to substitute stateliness and articulate counterpoint for fire and urgency. Polish is always a virtue in Mozart, but in the exceptionally dark 25th Symphony, a little grit isn't out of place, either.

Emanuel Ax
The Plain Dealer • March 9, 2004

After early stumble, ensemble turns out stunning performance

BY DONALD ROSENBERG

Cleveland has hardly been a magnet for visiting orchestras. Until last year, for example, when it made its Severance Hall debut, the Vienna Philharmonic hadn't come our way since 1967.

Coincidentally, that was the same year the Israel Philharmonic last appeared in Cleveland - and at the same location, the Music Hall. So it was a delayed joy to encounter the Israeli ensemble Sunday during its debut at Severance Hall, which was packed.

Led by principal guest conductor Yoel Levi, who served as resident conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra in the early 1980s, the program largely had a stunning impact, especially when the musicians dug into works by Beethoven and Shostakovich.

Founded in 1936 as the Palestine Orchestra, the Israel Philharmonic has provided a besieged nation with artistic enrichment. The ensemble's dedication can be heard in the penetrating sonority and corporate purpose it brings to everything.

Sunday's concert was the first in the orchestra's three-week U.S. tour, and a bit of jet lag could be heard in the opening work, Prokofiev's "Classical" Symphony (which followed both the American and Israeli national anthems). Levi led a leisurely account that lacked the requisite spark and charm. Tempos were sleepy until the finale, which still sounded tight and overly controlled.

With this warm-up done, Levi and company came to caffeinated life. They joined pianist Emanuel Ax in a reading of Beethoven's "Emperor" concerto that probed the work's grandeur and delicacy in equal measure.

Ax may be the sunniest pianist on Earth; he is also one of the most thoughtful. He exuded majesty in the first movement's flourishes and lavished his special brand of dignity and finesse over the aristocratic demands.

The slow movement was a sublime hush to which Ax and his colleagues also brought subtle nobility. And the pianist proved how tastefully acrobatic and ebullient he can be, relishing the finale's leaps and fleet lines.

Levi, who conducted the entire program from memory, was as alert to classical decorum as he was to his soloist's flexibility. The winds sounded subdued much of the time, as if they hadn't had quite figured out the hall's acoustics. But this was Beethoven on an extremely high level.

The same could be said, to put it mildly, for the performance of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 after intermission. The fifth is a devastating indictment of Soviet oppression and hypocrisy, as well as an eloquent plea for human compassion.

Levi brought the conflicting emotions to the boiling point, always mindful of the inexorable narrative flow and never resorting to empty bombast. The first movement came across as the brave, biting and tender outpouring it should be. Shostakovich's subversive side emerged to brilliant effect in the Allegretto, with cellos and basses marvelously earthy and brasses full of gleaming chutzpah.

Emanuel Ax

The Plain Dealer • March 9, 2004

page 2 of 2

The heart of the fifth is the Largo, a lament for the ills of society. Here, the winds sang with yearning beauty and the ensemble conveyed the defiance that makes this music so potent. By the time Levi and the orchestra placed their fervent stamp on the finale, it was clear these artists must return soon to share their intensely vivid artistry.

Emanuel Ax

The Telegraph • August 30, 2005

Proms 2005: a fine-tuned and sumptuous performance

BY MATTHEW RYE

With the Geneva-based Suisse Romande Orchestra rarely heard from these days on disc or on tour, Zurich's Tonhalle Orchestra can comfortably be regarded as Switzerland's leading ensemble, especially in the 10 years since the American conductor David Zinman took over.

His electrifying spirit has led to some acclaimed recordings of Beethoven and Strauss and both composers featured in the orchestra's Prom last night, its first since its debut here in 2003.

But first came Wagner's Flying Dutchman overture - a gift from a nation with no coastline to the season's maritime theme (but then the Swiss, unfortunately, know a thing or two about storms and an excess of water after the last couple of weeks). Zinman directed a turbulent account, one with plenty of drama and atmosphere.

Emanuel Ax was then the soloist in Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto and gave a performance that revealed as much about the accompaniment as it did of the solo part.

From the very beginning, with the first theme presented in unusually clipped notes by the orchestra, this was obviously going to be an absorbing listen, and so it proved, with Zinman bringing as much insight to the music as Ax.

The opening movement had less of the portentousness of Beethoven's later C minor music and more the lighter touch of the work's main inspiration, Mozart.

The slow movement had a rapt quality about it, with a refreshing sense of looseness to the metric flow in Ax's playing of the opening theme, which was followed up in the orchestra's development of the same music.

The finale, eschewing anything flashy, reiterated the perfect balance between Ax and the orchestra in its playfulness and exuberance.

Strauss's blockbuster, Also sprach Zarathustra, came across with renewed life, too. The piece is not exactly a work that can take a subtle approach, but Zinman and his virtuoso orchestra explored more of its inner detail than one often hears.

The result was that it emerged more obviously symphonic than just an exercise in excess. Old Jupiter, the Royal Albert Hall's organ, sounded a bit asthmatic rumbling through the famous opening, but apart from that this was a fine-tuned and tonally sumptuous performance.

Matthew Rye reviews Tonhalle Orchestra Zurich with David Zinman at the Albert Hall

Emanuel Ax
Los Angeles Times • December 8, 2004

Ax, Ma: aligned in magic

BY CHRIS PASLES

The friendship of the pianist and the cellist enriches Beethoven compositions, as well as a Chopin encore, at UCLA's Royce Hall.

How do you define a great musical partnership? For pianist Emanuel Ax and cellist Yo-Yo Ma, longtime friends and colleagues, you can catch a subtle hint as early as their billing. The names of both artists — who were cheered to the rafters when they stepped onto the Royce Hall stage Monday as part of the UCLA Live series — appeared in type of equal size in the evening's program. And Ax's came first, even though Ma is usually regarded as the superstar.

More significant, Ma abandoned a cellist's usual position in front of the piano to sit behind Ax's back, so that the sound of both instruments emerged equally from along the same line. Although he had his own music stand and often played from memory, with his eyes closed, Ma also frequently appeared to glance over Ax's right shoulder at the score on the piano.

He would listen intently, lean toward his friend and stretch back in delight, both at what he heard and what he could contribute. When he looked forward, smiled and bent toward the audience, everyone was brought into a magical, intimate circle. It didn't hurt that the playing was superb.

The positioning made sense in terms of most of the programming. All the works were by Beethoven, who, according to program notes by Los Angeles Philharmonic annotator John Mangum, made the cello sonata a vehicle for serious expression.

But the composer made it that way in stages. In the order in which they were played: The Sonata No. 1 explores the possibilities of the relationship, with the piano leading and the cello only beginning to find its voice. By Sonata No. 4, the two are old friends who don't have to talk about important things to communicate (at least at first) but who also don't hesitate to venture together into undiscovered, even dangerous, territory.

The Sonata No. 3 benefits from more polarized, dramatic tension. But Ma's position here minimized the opposition and sounded a weaker voice.

Ax played throughout with pearly, rippling, understated evenness. He provided the wit and the gleaming architecture. Ma added the passion. In two sets of variations on arias from Mozart's "The Magic Flute" ("Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen" and "Bei Männern, welche Liebe fühlen"), the two joked and charmed each other and entranced the audience.

They played the slow movement from Chopin's Sonata in G minor for cello and piano as their single encore. Note: cello *and* piano. The partnership remained intact to the end.

Emanuel Ax

Boston Globe • November 7, 2007

Beethoven's music speaks for itself through Emanuel Ax's hands

By MATTHEW GUERRIERI

You need a lot of technique to take Ludwig van Beethoven at his word. On Sunday afternoon, pianist Emanuel Ax tackled the familiar yet formidable "Waldstein" Sonata in C Major (Op. 53), and he achieved the not inconsiderable feat of letting the music speak for itself, in all its stubborn, maddening glory.

The dense, obsessive passagework of the first movement had clarity and bite; the bass tremolo leading into the coda was a precise avalanche. Steady, deliberate austerity marked the slow movement, with eloquent pauses juxtaposed against the transfixed, pedal-blurred cantabile line that opened the closing rondo. The muscular grandeur of the finale was paced like a thoroughbred, each dramatic crest building on the last.

Ax's brand of virtuosity - command rather than flash - was manifested throughout his recital at Jordan Hall, presented by Celebrity Series of Boston. Rhythms were flexible, but with authority and momentum; accumulations of notes were shaded into pellucid clarity, each pitch ringing with purpose, even amidst thick chords or contrapuntal traffic. To seem simply a conduit for the music, as Ax did, demonstrated a deep and seamless artistry.

Ax opened with early Beethoven, the Sonata in A Major (Op. 2, No. 2). The young Beethoven was in aural love with the piano's multiple sonic personalities. Themes bounce from high to low, accompaniments are embroidered in a multitude of patterns, scintillating ornamentation becomes a resonant end in itself. Ax did justice to the full range. He started out by pointing up each contrast in dynamics and articulation: Beethoven the awkward guest, excitable, moody, and disdaining small talk. As the piece went on, he shifted the dichotomies from moment-by-moment to section-by-section, the temperamental rhetoric coalescing into confident sculpture.

In between the sonatas was music by Robert Schumann, whose mercurial, protean forms were well-served by Ax's direct, robust phrasing: He immediately found the core of each new mood, making vibrant and entrancing what, in lesser hands, could be merely attention-deficient.

Ax used a near-continuous but unobtrusive rubato to stitch the variegated sections of the Op. 20 "Humoreske" into a convincing whole that still gave free rein to Schumann's unorthodox whim. With drive and lilt, Ax emphasized the choreography in the masked-ball snapshots of the Op. 2 "Papillons." The dancers returned for an encore, Frédéric Chopin's Waltz in A Minor (Op. 34, No. 2). Like the rest of the program, one felt that this simply was how the music should go.

Emanuel Ax
Philadelphia Inquirer • March 22, 2007

A different Ax offers same great moments

By DAVID PATRICK STEARNS

Is there a more comfortable presence than Emanuel Ax? A frequent visitor to Philadelphia's concert halls, the 58-year-old pianist always transcends nonmusical obstacles - snowstorms, summer heat, antiseptic sound systems - with his velvet legato and amiable presence. Never, in my experience, has he phoned in a performance. But without a concert to salvage and with conditions ideal (Kimmel Center's Verizon Hall, thanks to Philadelphia Chamber Music Society) and a program of his choosing, a different Ax emerged Tuesday. He was on so many edges that when he reverted to his nice old self for an encore, you wished he hadn't.

Ax is an original. He doesn't allow his Chopin-esque manner to become a one-size-fits-all approach. Where other pianists want to be grand and profound with slow tempos and big, sloshy sonorities, Ax goes in the opposite direction with escalating speed and crispness. The more he increases tension, the more intently you listen - and perceive the profundity. In Schumann's Papillons (Op. 2), where melodies from two different worlds are sounding simultaneously, other pianists tend to pedal generously, suggesting those two worlds are distant but adjacent mountainsides. Ax put them in close, sweaty proximity. Charles Ives would have loved it.

In other great moments, performance heat was fused with intelligent strategy. Even the greatest pianists can't keep Schumann's Fantasy in C, with all its unguarded, openhearted rhapsody, from being a letdown after the first movement. Ax left no room for that. Movements jumped on each other's backs without pause and with such emphatic concentration that your brain hadn't time to ask if the last two movements measured up to the first.

The velvet legato was kept in his back pocket for a pair of Beethoven sonatas, Op. 2 (No. 2) and Op. 57, "Appassionata." But the coloristic abilities that create this trademark sonority joined forces with Ax's equally keen ability to clearly show the audience how the composer got from one stunning event to another: Unusually firm pianissimos and even pregnant silences became arresting, effective transitional techniques. In the "Appassionata," the two chords that succinctly usher in the final movement had such a different timbre, you could barely believe they came from the same instrument - this, while maintaining a sonic kinship that convinced you they belonged in the same piece. Beethoven's volatility became so apparent that Ax narrowly avoided train wrecks, taking the music's rage to the verge of chaos - with great effect. He played the final movement not as a virtuoso romp that happens to be in a minor key, but as a furious journey to hell.

Chopin's Waltz in A minor, which is core repertoire for Ax, was the technically sure but emotionally absent encore. After that kind of "Appassionata," how can you be charming when the earth has been scorched?

Emanuel Ax
Denver Post • March 14, 2007

Veteran pianist keys audience in

By SABINE KORTALS

Translating inner worlds to an external audience is no easy feat.

But veteran pianist Emanuel Ax achieved just that in a solo recital of two Beethoven sonatas paired with two complementary sonatas composed by Robert Schumann.

Playing from memory to another sold-out posse of Friends of Chamber Music patrons at Gates Concert Hall on Tuesday night, Ax - a familiar face to Colorado concertgoers - was masterful in his evenhanded approach to making each well-known work sound fresh.

Intellectually adroit as he is technically dexterous, Ax delivered a reading of Beethoven's Sonata No. 2 in A Major that was slow and pondering in the second of four movements, even academic at times. Yet Ax didn't stop there - his capacity to grasp the theoretical construct of music serves only to undergird his stirring delivery of the emotional heart of it.

Sinking into each note with careful deliberation and just the right measure of intensity, the unassuming virtuoso deftly drew out the melodic lines that, in less capable hands, are too easily hidden among clustered harmonies. The extended scherzo movement was played with swift precision, and the final rondo movement was brilliantly crisp.

In Schumann's improvisational Fantasy in C Major, Ax's poetic impulses illuminated the harmonically lush, if fragmented, themes. Arguably Schumann's greatest piano work, it is unified by a musical motive from Beethoven's song cycle "An die ferne Geliebte."

Continuing with Schumann's character piece "Papillons" after intermission, Ax delved into the colorful carnival feeling of the airy, playful work. Here, too, he not only shaped each delicate nuance with tenderness and exactitude, but held the silences between musical thoughts with exquisite timing.

In Beethoven's furious and fervent "Appassionata," Ax's extraordinary endurance bore out the trills, tremolos and deep rumbles of the mighty work with controlled ardor.

The only distraction to the sheer artistry that unfolded on stage was a mysterious high-pitched ambient sound that recurred throughout the evening.

Emanuel Ax**New York Times • February 19, 2007****Piece by Piece, a Festival Takes Shape**

By ALLAN KOZINN

The New York Philharmonic is having it both ways in its festival Brahms the Romantic. By the end of the season the orchestra will have hit all the major orchestral works, including the “German Requiem,” and in the aggregate this traversal unquestionably has the critical mass to constitute a festival.



There are more inventive and enterprising festivals an orchestra might offer of course, but if Brahms is what the Philharmonic wants to explore, then Brahms it is. So why did the orchestra wimp out, scheduling its Brahms in isolated clumps, scattered through the season?

A festival usually explores its theme in a concentrated run of concerts, so that its subject's full scope can be absorbed in a single, hedonistic burst. The music is transformed into an evolving structure. Relationships become apparent. And listeners who want either to study the music or simply to revel in it can do so in a context that means something. That is the difference between a festival and a bunch of related concerts adrift in a sea of unrelated ones, which is what the Philharmonic is doing.

The first installment was a single subscription week split into two programs. In Part 1, earlier in the week, Lorin Maazel led Brahms's First Serenade and First Piano Concerto, with Emanuel Ax as the soloist at Avery Fisher Hall. Part 2, beginning on Saturday evening, was the logical sequel: the Second Serenade and the Second Piano Concerto, with Mr. Ax again at the piano.

It takes considerable stamina and focus for a pianist to play both Brahms piano concertos in a week, but Mr. Ax has always been a superb Brahmsian, and he clearly didn't find the task daunting. The salient feature of his account of the Concerto No. 2 in B flat was a fluid rubato that created the impression of a natural, organic breath and helped make this war horse sound fresh and alive.

Striking as well was his sense of detail, evident in everything from his sharply accented phrasing in the opening movement and his supple unfolding of the Andante, to the vividness and sheer electricity in his pulse-quicken rendering of the Allegro appassionato.

There was a lively sense of give-and-take between Mr. Ax and Mr. Maazel, and the orchestra matched Mr. Ax in vitality. There was also much to admire in Mr. Maazel's leisurely reading of the Serenade No. 2 in A, a work that takes its title seriously some of the time, affording entertaining moments of shapely melody and almost danceable rhythms, but that also offers moments of greater depth and barely suppressed symphonic ambition. Brahms scored the work for reduced orchestra, with only woodwinds and low strings, and the Philharmonic played it with an appealing warmth of tone.

Emanuel Ax

The Philadelphia Inquirer • June 23, 2006

Orchestra has a Jekyll-and Hyde night at the Mann

By DAVID PATRICK STEARNS

Many musical mysteries resolve themselves if only given enough time and thought. But I'll bet that in my final moments, as my life is flashing before me, I'll still be baffled by the acoustics and sound design at the Mann Center for the Performing Arts.

On Night Two of the Philadelphia Orchestra summer season on Wednesday, the two halves of the concert were completely different experiences, seemingly played by vastly different orchestras. The size of the ensembles varied from one half to the next, the first having a smaller group appropriate to Mozart's Don Giovanni overture and Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 5, known as The Emperor, with the ever-welcome soloist Emanuel Ax.

Whether the fault lay with the performance, the acoustics or amplification, the orchestral sound was miserable. It had no body; in plainer terms, it was scrawny. Rhythms felt heavy-footed. Luckily, Ax is the sort of artist who never lets an audience down, and not only did he deliver an artistic experience, but you could hear it, thanks no doubt to the microphone stuck into the body of his piano.

The performance's soul lay in the second movement, where Beethoven's orchestra writing so often casts the pianist adrift into soliloquy-like solo passages. In such moments, Ax created his own time zone, with each phrase unfolding in a way that had its own mind. While his playing didn't exactly defy the meter of the music, he seemed to make its time increments grow on their own accord.

Such interpretive wizardry gives the impression of something unique happening before your very ears, as opposed to a vivid run-through of what happened in rehearsal. And in repertoire as frequently heard as this, you're grateful for a soloist who is able to bring your ears into the present moment without resorting to perversity.

In the concert's second half, guest conductor Peter Oundjian seemed transformed from a congenial routinier to a musician of temperament. He brought great detail and color to an even more often heard "greatest hit," Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition in the Ravel orchestration. Here, the orchestra sounded like its glamorous self, each of the piece's episodes established with its own beautifully delineated sound world.

Of course, there were many more musicians onstage. And it must be said that the quality of sound is relative; this wasn't up to what you would hear at the Kimmel Center, but it facilitated a consistently absorbing experience. Maybe the artificial sound boosting was minimized because the orchestra could

Emanuel Ax

The Philadelphia Inquirer • June 23, 2006

page 2 of 2

project with sheer brute strength. But is brute strength enough to keep the sound from getting lost in the Mann Center's ultra-high ceiling? A mystery indeed.

Emanuel Ax
Chicago Tribune • May 13, 2006

Dohnanyi energizes CSO

Maestro had the orchestra playing with an elegance

By JOHN VON RHEIN

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's need to maintain strong ties to a tradition that reaches back to the earliest years of the institution has brought a number of Old World masters into the Symphony Center fold. None is more welcome than Bernard Haitink, whose highly anticipated tenure as principal conductor begins this fall.

But there's also Christoph von Dohnanyi. If not a peerless technician in the Haitink manner, the Berlin-born Dohnanyi, 76, is an honest, serious, thorough musician whose recent successes with the CSO earned him return invitations this year as well as in the following two seasons.

His concert Thursday night was one of those memorable occasions when players and podium inspire and energize each other so completely that a standard symphonic program suddenly becomes anything but standard.

Mozart's Symphony No. 25, the so-called "little" G Minor symphony, showed Dohnanyi's impeccable ear for balancing and clarifying the sound of a Classical orchestra. The restless syncopations of the opening movement had a darkly dramatic intensity that looked ahead to Beethoven. Mozart's unusual scoring includes four horns, and Dohnanyi put their saturated color to telling use.

Then it was on to "Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks." The Strauss tone poem has been one of our orchestra's signature showpieces practically since it gave the American premiere in 1895. Indeed, the CSO performs this demanding score with such practiced virtuosity that one forgets how easy it is for lesser orchestras to make a hash of it.

Dohnanyi had the CSO playing with an elegance, lucidity and proportion that brought out the music's humor and high spirits. He's too sober an artist to elbow the listener in the ribs, as have such heavy-handed interpreters as David Robertson and Daniel Barenboim. The Chicago woodwinds were a joy, light and full of character, while our lithe strings found the chamber music in the opulent orchestration. Not for ages have I heard a more refined or enjoyable "Till."

After intermission there followed another absorbing performance, that of Brahms' First Piano Concerto, with Emanuel Ax as soloist.

The massive scale of this masterpiece, with its thick scoring, makes it an unwieldy challenge for even the best pianists and conductors to bring off successfully. Ax recorded the Brahms Concerto No. 1 a

Emanuel Ax

Chicago Tribune • May 13, 2006

page 2 of 2

couple of decades ago with James Levine and the CSO, but that performance is nowhere near as commanding as the Brahms he, Dohnanyi and the orchestra gave Orchestra Hall on Thursday night.

The qualities that make Ax a major Brahms interpreter were all there: the big and pliant sonority, stamina, intelligence, poetic feeling and deep musicality. Brahms requires a lot of heavy lifting from the soloist in the outer movements, yet Ax balanced his command of the big bravura passages with great sensitivity to the delicate inflections that shape the raptly beautiful Adagio.

Dohnanyi led an incisive and caring accompaniment, creating a spontaneous sense of dialogue in which the piano and orchestra spoke to each other as respected equals. The audience went wild.

Emanuel Ax

The Telegraph • August 30, 2005

Proms 2005: a fine-tuned and sumptuous performance

By MATTHEW RYE

With the Geneva-based Suisse Romande Orchestra rarely heard from these days on disc or on tour, Zurich's Tonhalle Orchestra can comfortably be regarded as Switzerland's leading ensemble, especially in the 10 years since the American conductor David Zinman took over.

His electrifying spirit has led to some acclaimed recordings of Beethoven and Strauss and both composers featured in the orchestra's Prom last night, its first since its debut here in 2003.

But first came Wagner's Flying Dutchman overture - a gift from a nation with no coastline to the season's maritime theme (but then the Swiss, unfortunately, know a thing or two about storms and an excess of water after the last couple of weeks). Zinman directed a turbulent account, one with plenty of drama and atmosphere.

Emanuel Ax was then the soloist in Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto and gave a performance that revealed as much about the accompaniment as it did of the solo part.

From the very beginning, with the first theme presented in unusually clipped notes by the orchestra, this was obviously going to be an absorbing listen, and so it proved, with Zinman bringing as much insight to the music as Ax.

The opening movement had less of the portentousness of Beethoven's later C minor music and more the lighter touch of the work's main inspiration, Mozart.

The slow movement had a rapt quality about it, with a refreshing sense of looseness to the metric flow in Ax's playing of the opening theme, which was followed up in the orchestra's development of the same music.

The finale, eschewing anything flashy, reiterated the perfect balance between Ax and the orchestra in its playfulness and exuberance.

Strauss's blockbuster, Also sprach Zarathustra, came across with renewed life, too. The piece is not exactly a work that can take a subtle approach, but Zinman and his virtuoso orchestra explored more of its inner detail than one often hears.

The result was that it emerged more obviously symphonic than just an exercise in excess. Old Jupiter, the Royal Albert Hall's organ, sounded a bit asthmatic rumbling through the famous opening, but apart from that this was a fine-tuned and tonally sumptuous performance.

Matthew Rye reviews Tonhalle Orchestra Zurich with David Zinman at the Albert Hall

Emanuel Ax

Gazeta (Moscow) • June 29, 2005

Emanuel Ax gave his first performance in St. Petersburg

By GULNARA SADYCH-ZADE

A renowned pianist Emanuel Ax gave two concerts during the "June Stars" Festival. The program of the first night included the works by Beethoven and Chopin, while for the second concert Ax performed the Second Concerto by Brahms accompanied by the First Philharmonic orchestra with Yuri Temirkanov as conductor.

"June Stars" is the name of a new festival organized by St.-Petersburg Philharmonia. The highlights of this festival are concerts of famous conductors Yuri Temirkanov, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Neeme Jarvi, Zoltan Kocsis and Krzysztof Penderecki (who is as active as conductor as he is as composer). Among other festival events were the concerts of famous and relatively "expensive" pianists: Emmanuel Ax, Helen Grimaud and young Finnish pianist Antti Siirala, whose international career had a swift start. Ax was the first performer in the piano series. An American of Polish origins who studied in Julliard, he is now one of the top pianists of the highest rank.

Despite his extraordinary popularity there were empty seats in the audience during the Ax's solo concert. The gap between the local philharmonic life and the global music stage has become so wide during the last 15 years, that St.-Petersburg music lovers do not follow any more the international development. They do not know what is going on at the academic stages of Europe and the rest of the World, who holds the first place in the unofficial "ranking", who are the first choice of record companies. And nobody wants to go to the Philharmonia if it is only to listen to Beethoven's sonatas and Chopin's ballads, worn out by numerous performances.

Those who ignored Ax's concerts lost out. It has been a long time since we last heard such a refined and at the same time noble and simple performance: no exaggerations, no wobbling, no moaning or sugariness. The performance that wiped the cheap sentimentalism off hackneyed Chopin's works. From the very beginning of the First Ballad, heartfelt, performed in an undertone as if speaking to a close friend, one could see what to expect. Soft touch, sincere dialogue with music text and impeccable technique all made Ax's performance unrepeatable.

The first part featured Beethoven's Second and Third sonatas. These are performed by everybody from high school students to conservatoire graduates. It is very difficult to find a new interpretation and almost impossible to find that fine line, that divides the style of early Beethoven from for example Haydn or Mozart. Ax brilliantly completed this task: without deviating from the classicist style, he could develop in these sonatas that "light breathing" that rendered extreme clarity to the technique. The pianist created the wide canvas of the sonatas in four parts, painting a sunny and typically classicist picture of the world. Listening to the pianist one is forced to agree with his interpretation and dreams of the shining world without problems or suffering.

EMANUEL AX
Los Angeles Times • December 8, 2004

Ax, Ma: aligned in magic

The friendship of the pianist and the cellist enriches Beethoven compositions, as well as a Chopin encore, at UCLA's Royce Hall.

By CHRIS PASLES

How do you define a great musical partnership? For pianist Emanuel Ax and cellist Yo-Yo Ma, longtime friends and colleagues, you can catch a subtle hint as early as their billing. The names of both artists — who were cheered to the rafters when they stepped onto the Royce Hall stage Monday as part of the UCLA Live series — appeared in type of equal size in the evening's program. And Ax's came first, even though Ma is usually regarded as the superstar.

More significant, Ma abandoned a cellist's usual position in front of the piano to sit behind Ax's back, so that the sound of both instruments emerged equally from along the same line. Although he had his own music stand and often played from memory, with his eyes closed, Ma also frequently appeared to glance over Ax's right shoulder at the score on the piano.

He would listen intently, lean toward his friend and stretch back in delight, both at what he heard and what he could contribute. When he looked forward, smiled and bent toward the audience, everyone was brought into a magical, intimate circle. It didn't hurt that the playing was superb.

The positioning made sense in terms of most of the programming. All the works were by Beethoven, who, according to program notes by Los Angeles Philharmonic annotator John Mangum, made the cello sonata a vehicle for serious expression.

But the composer made it that way in stages. In the order in which they were played: The Sonata No. 1 explores the possibilities of the relationship, with the piano leading and the cello only beginning to find its voice. By Sonata No. 4, the two are old friends who don't have to talk about important things to communicate (at least at first) but who also don't hesitate to venture together into undiscovered, even dangerous, territory.

The Sonata No. 3 benefits from more polarized, dramatic tension. But Ma's position here minimized the opposition and sounded a weaker voice.

Ax played throughout with pearly, rippling, understated evenness. He provided the wit and the gleaming architecture. Ma added the passion. In two sets of variations on arias from Mozart's "The Magic Flute" ("Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen" and "Bei Männern, welche Liebe fühlen"), the two joked and charmed each other and entranced the audience.

They played the slow movement from Chopin's Sonata in G minor for cello and piano as their single encore. Note: cello and piano. The partnership remained intact to the end.

Emanuel Ax
The Plain Dealer • March 9, 2004

After early stumble, ensemble turns out stunning performance

BY DONALD ROSENBERG

Cleveland has hardly been a magnet for visiting orchestras. Until last year, for example, when it made its Severance Hall debut, the Vienna Philharmonic hadn't come our way since 1967.

Coincidentally, that was the same year the Israel Philharmonic last appeared in Cleveland - and at the same location, the Music Hall. So it was a delayed joy to encounter the Israeli ensemble Sunday during its debut at Severance Hall, which was packed.

Led by principal guest conductor Yoel Levi, who served as resident conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra in the early 1980s, the program largely had a stunning impact, especially when the musicians dug into works by Beethoven and Shostakovich.

Founded in 1936 as the Palestine Orchestra, the Israel Philharmonic has provided a besieged nation with artistic enrichment. The ensemble's dedication can be heard in the penetrating sonority and corporate purpose it brings to everything.

Sunday's concert was the first in the orchestra's three-week U.S. tour, and a bit of jet lag could be heard in the opening work, Prokofiev's "Classical" Symphony (which followed both the American and Israeli national anthems). Levi led a leisurely account that lacked the requisite spark and charm. Tempos were sleepy until the finale, which still sounded tight and overly controlled.

With this warm-up done, Levi and company came to caffeinated life. They joined pianist Emanuel Ax in a reading of Beethoven's "Emperor" concerto that probed the work's grandeur and delicacy in equal measure.

Ax may be the sunniest pianist on Earth; he is also one of the most thoughtful. He exuded majesty in the first movement's flourishes and lavished his special brand of dignity and finesse over the aristocratic demands.

The slow movement was a sublime hush to which Ax and his colleagues also brought subtle nobility. And the pianist proved how tastefully acrobatic and ebullient he can be, relishing the finale's leaps and fleet lines.

Levi, who conducted the entire program from memory, was as alert to classical decorum as he was to his soloist's flexibility. The winds sounded subdued much of the time, as if they hadn't had quite figured out the hall's acoustics. But this was Beethoven on an extremely high level.

The same could be said, to put it mildly, for the performance of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 after intermission. The fifth is a devastating indictment of Soviet oppression and hypocrisy, as well as an eloquent plea for human compassion.

Levi brought the conflicting emotions to the boiling point, always mindful of the inexorable narrative flow and never resorting to empty bombast. The first movement came across as the brave, biting and tender outpouring it should be. Shostakovich's subversive side emerged to brilliant effect in the Allegretto, with cellos and basses marvelously earthy and brasses full of gleaming chutzpah.

Emanuel Ax

The Plain Dealer • March 9, 2004

page 2 of 2

The heart of the fifth is the Largo, a lament for the ills of society. Here, the winds sang with yearning beauty and the ensemble conveyed the defiance that makes this music so potent. By the time Levi and the orchestra placed their fervent stamp on the finale, it was clear these artists must return soon to share their intensely vivid artistry.

Emanuel Ax

The New York Times • December 23, 2003

Colorful and Pictorial Works From France

BY ALLAN KOZINN

As one of his Perspectives programs at Carnegie Hall, Emanuel Ax gave an eloquent and interestingly organized recital of French music on Dec. 16.

He began the first half with Debussy's "Images, Book I," a set of three colorful works in which the second is an homage to the 18th-century composer Jean-Philippe Rameau. As a kind of musical hyperlink, Mr. Ax followed that book of "Images" with three pieces from Rameau's "Pièces de Clavecin," works that, like the "Images," are character sketches with vividly pictorial qualities. He then turned to the second book of "Images," with Ravel's "Valses Nobles et Sentimentales" dancing toward the intermission with a warm-hued, graceful nostalgia.

Mr. Ax recorded works by the Impressionists early in his career but has lately been exploring elsewhere, including contemporary works and the sonatas of Haydn. But it took only a few pages of "Reflets dans l'eau," the first of the "Images," to establish that he is entirely at home in Debussy as well. His weighting of the shimmering fragments that suggest the play of water and his supple, phrase-by-phrase rebalancing of Debussy's layers of evocative filigree were thoroughly considered, yet gave the impression of a spontaneous flood of sound. His coloration of "Mouvement: Anime" had a three-dimensional quality as well, its textures suggesting speed and motion, and the blurriness of, say, a spinning top.

The Rameau worked less consistently. Mr. Ax played the three movements with clarity and style, and he wisely took advantage of the piano's coloristic and dynamic breadth, instead of trying to imitate Rameau's harpsichord. But some of Rameau's tone painting required the sharper attacks and more brittle timbres of the older instrument. "La Poule," for example, is a lively sketch of a hen when heard on the harpsichord; on the piano, it is far less vivid. On the other hand, pianistic hues have a liberating effect on the forward-looking chromatic "L'Enharmonique."

After the intermission, Mr. Ax played Chopin's four Scherzos. The performances were poetic and full of illuminating touches, including a passage in the Scherzo No. 1 (Op. 20) in which a sudden chordal splash momentarily recalled an effect in "Reflets dans l'eau." Nearly as striking was Mr. Ax's deft balancing, in the Scherzo No. 3 (Op. 39), of Chopin's hymnlike chordal theme and the decorative detailing that swirls around it.

Emanuel Ax
Rocky Mountain News • December 12, 2003

Ax serves up astonishing recital with keyboard gems

BY MARC SHULGOLD

Standing before a full house in Gates Concert Hall crowd at the end of his piano recital on Wednesday, Emanuel Ax sported an impish, almost embarrassed grin as he acknowledged the cheers - looking like a kid who'd unexpectedly been named homecoming king.

It was a disarming sight, following such an astonishing performance.

Concluding his Friends of Chamber Music recital, Ax had just delivered Chopin's four diabolical Scherzi - works which, individually, are intimidating challenges, but collectively, stand with the Four Ballades as one of the keyboard's most monumental hills to climb.

Ax, however, seemed hardly bothered by the music's cruel demands, although he did playfully wipe his brow or breathe a small sigh of relief at the conclusion of each Scherzo.

Beyond the sheer muscularity of his playing, there was a refreshing intelligence that steered his playing away from the pounding and toward the poetic. Chopin's manic mood shifts were tamed, resulting in a reading of communicativeness.

When the applause refused to die, the pianist added a dreamy encore of Debussy's *Clair de Lune*, drawing sighs of pleasure from the crowd.

That bit of impressionistic warmth proved a perfect bookend to the recital's all-French first half: two sets of *Images* by Debussy, the *Valses nobles et sentimentales* of Ravel and, sandwiched between the *Images*, a trio of *Pieces de Clavecin* by the French Baroque composer Jean-Philippe Rameau (honored in a piece from *Images*' first set).

In this feathery light music, Ax's amazing dynamic range was displayed, complemented by judicious pedaling that brought a clarity and transparency to these miniatures.

There was a relaxed virtuosity in the Ravel and Debussy selections - works that are, in their understated way, just as demanding as those thundering Chopin Scherzi.

The muted colors of these impressionistic gems emerged spontaneously.

Rameau's brilliant pieces (leading off with a charming tribute to the chicken) also benefitted from Ax's musicality.

Rather than attempt to re-create the brittle sound of the harpsichord, he made them sound quite at home on the Gates' shiny new Steinway.

What made this stellar performance even more enjoyable was the fine acoustics and sightlines of the hall, which has proven to be a first-class venue for intimate music-making.

But, above all, it was the endearing warmth and accessibility of the evening's solo-ist that elevated Wednesday's recital into a special place of honor in our memory.

Emanuel Ax

The Chicago Sun Times • November 4, 2003

Emanuel Ax at Symphony Center

BY WYNNE DELACOMA

Between the Ravinia Festival and Chicago Symphony Orchestra seasons, pianist Emanuel Ax is a frequent visitor to Chicago. With his zest for contemporary music and his thoughtful, clear-eyed approach to standard repertoire, he is a pianist who always brings fresh ideas to a performance whether the work at hand is a Beethoven concerto or a world premiere by John Adams or Melinda Wagner.

Local audiences hear him most often as a concerto soloist with the CSO, however, so his solo recital kicking off the 2003-04 season of the Symphony Center Presents' piano series Sunday afternoon was a rare pleasure. He opened with a set of three pieces from Book 1 of Debussy's "Images," works that also opened his most recent Ravinia recital, in 2002. Sunday's program of Debussy, Rameau, Ravel and Chopin required the kind of understated virtuosity that is Ax's specialty.

There is something open and engaging about Ax's performance style. A chunky man with an easy smile, curly hair and a tendency to bow quickly like a pleased but embarrassed teenager, he isn't interested in imposing himself or his ideas on the audience. Rather, he invites us to travel along with him, to share his fascination with the limpid turn of a Debussy phrase or the sudden shifts between sunshine and storm in a Chopin scherzo. His performances have a clarity and unpretentiousness that direct our focus to the music itself and not the interpreter at the keyboard.

Ravel's amiable "Valses nobles et sentimentales" was appropriately unsentimental, and every note of Ravel's lilting waltz melodies was meticulously carved. But the piece unfolded with a sense of emotional freedom that swept us happily into Ravel's world of insouciant languor and playfulness.

A worldly elegance suffused Chopin's four scherzos, with their more dramatic landscape and volatile changes of mood. This was not the unpredictable, out-of-control universe that young piano virtuosos typically present but a weightier, more complicated world in which abrupt shifts between darkness and light are somehow inevitable. Small, crisp pauses divided the wistful phrases of the Scherzo No. 1 in B Minor, Op. 20, hinting at a heart momentarily stopped in its tracks. In the Scherzo No. 3 in C-sharp Minor, Op. 39, however, Chopin's heartstopping melancholy and stormy anger were more tightly woven, and Ax illuminated both with seamless, expressive virtuosity.

The recital's six excerpts from Books 1 and 2 of Debussy's "Images" were luminous and unaffected, creating the most delicate and nuanced musical portraits by way of full-bodied phrasing and tone. Three of Rameau's "Pieces de clavecin," originally written for harpsichord, were an elegant balance of crisp phrasing and lyrical flow.

Emanuel Ax

The Chicago Tribune • November 4, 2003

Ax puts on a pleasing display of Debussy, Ravel, Chopin

BY JOHN VON RHEIN

The rock-solid dependability of pianist Emanuel Ax is a virtue to be prized in this day of keyboard flashes in the pan who burn brightly early in their careers but fail to go the distance.

Ax announced his musical sensitivity and integrity at his debut at age 25 (he is now 54) and, since then, those virtues have deepened as his repertory has grown.

All this has made him one of the most popular of visiting pianists at Symphony Center and Ravinia, so it was no surprise to find a large and appreciative crowd at Orchestra Hall on Sunday to cheer Ax as he opened the new season of Piano Series recitals. The pianist was in top form, and if there were no revelations in his playing, his program yielded many satisfactions.

This happens to be the pianist's Debussy season, and he brought along both books of the composer's "Images," just as he had done for his most recent recital here in 2001.

Color and atmosphere are the hallmarks of Ax's Debussy and you would have to look far to find these qualities better displayed. The rippling fluency of the two "water" pieces, "Reflets dans l'eau" and "Poissons d'or," was nicely achieved alongside a shimmering beauty of sonority that, in the case of Ax's darting goldfish, also had as much virtuosic flair as the music demanded. Occasionally I would have preferred an edgier, less velvety sound, but that was a matter of personal taste.

Since one of the "Images" was Debussy's homage to Jean-Philippe Rameau, it made sense for Ax to sandwich the six "Images" around three of the Baroque composer's keyboard pieces. The staccato imitation of a chicken clucking in "La poule" translated well to the modern piano, as did the flying scales and arpeggios of "L'egyptienne" ("The Gypsy").

Ravel's "Valses nobles et sentimentales" took their elegant charm here from the subtle rubato Ax brought to the ever-changing waltz rhythms. His slow, dreamlike treatment of the final waltz could not have sounded more Debussyan, with liberal washes of sound from the sustaining pedal.

It takes a formidable pianist, of course, to program all four Chopin Scherzos back to back and emerge unscathed from the challenge. Ax did so with fingers flying and a wealth of poetic feeling that has been central to his Chopin playing since his gold-medal triumph at the 1974 Rubinstein Piano Competition.

Ax can strut his virtuoso stuff with the best of them and did so in the stormy codas that sorely test any interpreter's technique and stamina.

But this pianist has never been one to try and impress you with the mechanics of his playing. What set his scherzos apart was his sensitive but never perfumed way with the slow middle

Emanuel Ax

The Chicago Tribune • November 4, 2003

page 2 of 2

sections. Each was a finely controlled example of Chopinesque bel canto--the phrasing supple, the singing lines poised, the range of dynamics and tone color varied.

After Ax's 40-minute Chopin marathon, he rewarded the appreciative (albeit cough-happy) audience with some more Debussy--"Pagodes," outlining its delicate orientalisms gently and beautifully.

If you want to hear more, his new Sony Classical recording of Haydn sonatas can be highly recommended.

EMANUEL AX

The Washington Post • September 19, 2003

Revelatory Respighi From Slatkin & NSO

By Tim Page

The National Symphony Orchestra's Wednesday night program at the Kennedy Center -- part of the ensemble's long march to its official Opening Night tomorrow -- contained one performance that was downright revelatory.

For the second time in five years, Music Director Leonard Slatkin elected to present Ottorino Respighi's "Feste Romane" ("Roman Festivals") -- generally judged the loudest, last and least of the composer's "Rome" trilogy. The series also contains the musical travelogues "Pines of Rome" and "Fountains of Rome."

What made the Slatkin interpretation memorable was the way he treated Respighi as a full-scale modernist -- indeed, such was its glare and fury that this "Feste" might have been written by Edgard Varese. Slatkin minimized the melodies (which are not very impressive to begin with) and instead conducted the work as a construction in pure, gleaming orchestral *sound*. There were brass in the balconies; a grand piano and the Kennedy Center pipe organ revved up from opposite sides of the stage; and the NSO players threw themselves headlong into a performance notable for brilliance and aggressiveness.

I have never been one to put down Respighi -- his orchestral showpieces have always struck me as models of their kind -- but this "Feste" made the case for the composer as a much more audacious and radical musical thinker than he is customarily given credit. This may not be a great piece but, in Slatkin's hands, it is a fascinating one.

The world premiere of a specially commissioned "encore" piece by the prodigiously gifted American composer Daron Hagen followed immediately. Titled "Susurrus," this deliciously orchestrated four-minute composition was noteworthy for its ethereal delicacy. Imagine the gentlest of ticklings, administered by a feather that is more often anticipated and imagined than actually felt.

Slatkin was also at his best in the Symphony No. 1 by Samuel Barber, the long-undervalued American romantic composer who now seems to be creeping slowly but surely toward overvaluation. One of Barber's central problems -- never more obvious than in this early piece -- is that he never learned how to write fast music. The first half of the symphony, for all of its flailing attempts to convey energy and passion, sinks like a stone. It is only when the oboe enters with one of Barber's long, languorous melodies (beautifully played by Rudolph Vrbsky) that a listener's interest is piqued. The remainder of the work combines urgency and lyricism in Barber's distinctive manner, all leading to a climax that is, paradoxically, both tidy and cathartic, and which Slatkin milked for at least all it was worth.

The program began with "Three Slavonic Dances" by Antonin Dvorak -- comfy, slightly disheveled performances of comfy, unpretentious music. Emanuel Ax was the soloist in Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 25 in C (K. 503) -- an agreeable performance by an eminently musical artist, made all the more sweet by the incorporation of a cadenza by the late Robert Casadesus. "Music box" Mozart is out of fashion these days -- we are more likely to emphasize the grandeur and drama of the composer's later work than the prettified charms of a periwigged "boy wonder." Still, the Casadesus cadenza -- and the gentle interpretation it punctuated -- served as a welcome reminder that, if Mozart contains unfathomable depths, he also contains some delightful and intricate surfaces as well. And, if there were times when I felt like I was listening to two old pros -- Ax and Slatkin -- going through the motions, they are very good pros and the motions still persuade.

EMANUEL AX

The Philadelphia Inquirer • June 30, 2003

Brandes, Ax positively enhance Absolutely Mozart

By DAVID PATRICK STEARNS

Nobody can accuse the Philadelphia Orchestra's Absolutely Mozart festival of flying on greatest-hits autopilot. Saturday's program was loosely wrapped around Mozart in his gothic *Don Giovanni* mode, with the usual overture and concerto separated by concert arias, art songs, plus some Mozart-inspired Chopin. An odd program, yet the corners of the repertoire were what challenged the musicians to surpass themselves.

That happened most tangibly with guest soprano Christine Brandes - in a most Mozartean way. Though always good in her Opera Company of Philadelphia appearances, Brandes can be impersonal. She sang six tastefully and smartly vocalized Mozart aria performances, "Ch'io mi scordi di te?," in particular, benefiting from conversational directness.

Then, in the Mozart songs, one of the more modest corners of the composer's output, Brandes' voice took on a distinctive, full-bodied glow. Her command of the German text gave each phrase its own expressive color. Singers can condescend to Mozart's songs by overselling them, but matters of size and scope were not on Brandes' mind. She approached each one as if she had a more fundamental question: What did Mozart need to say when he wrote this? From there, meaning took on dimension and urgency. With most composers, the question is "What do the notes say?" With Mozart, it's "What *more* do the notes say?" Brandes had answers at every turn.

Elsewhere in the program, guest conductor Peter Oundjian repeated his success in coaxing the orchestra into a sympathetic Mozart style, adding extra surface sheen in the *Don Giovanni* overture. Young pianist Shai Wosner tossed off Chopin's hectic *Variations in B-flat major (Op. 2)* on "La ci darem la mano" with some marvelously sculpted phrases.

Emanuel Ax closed and climaxed the concert with Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 20*, his interpretation sounding as if informed primarily by the cadenza written for the first movement by a certain Ludwig van Beethoven. In doing so, Ax went beyond "What do the notes say?" into "What will the notes say to the future?"

Though not temperamentally an innovator, Mozart was ahead of his time on this one, a fact made obvious not simply because Ax played the concerto like something Beethoven should have written. More dramatically, Ax showed Mozart far beyond his usual comfort zone. (Even the normally dreamy slow movement had an edge.) Ax was particularly alert to question-and-answer passages among the instruments, and established a tense dialogue between melody and rhythm, which made the performance anything but a summer rerun.