



UAPRESENTS STUDENT CRITIC PROGRAM

Menahem Pressler and the New York Chamber Soloists with Richard Stoltzman

Review by Alysa Smith

Menahem Pressler and Richard Stoltzman traveled to Tucson on November 21, 2010 to share their musical motives with the Southern Arizona orchestral-inspired community. Each musician performed with the New York Chamber Soloists Orchestra and in the finale the masters came together to perform a duet that stunned everyone into cheering for an encore.

The concert opened with Pressler and the Soloists Orchestra performing “Piano Concerto No. 17, K. 453” by Mozart. For those of you who may not know, Pressler is an 87-year old prodigy who has been playing piano professionally since his 20s. He stands a whole five feet tall (okay, maybe a little taller, but from row X that’s about as tall as he could make himself look to me) but nevertheless commands the attention of the audience when he walks onto stage because of the radiant smile that graces his face whenever he’s within 100 feet of a piano. I could comment on the musicians’ flowing easy tug-and-pull rhythm, but the truth is I paid more attention to Pressler’s passion while he was sitting at the piano. The keys seemed to move half a second before his fingers got there, as if he was composing the music right then and there from whatever he was feeling at the moment. He controlled the piano, the music, his fellow musicians, and the entire concert house.

Menahem Pressler is truly one of the most passionate musicians I have been privileged to view at a live performance. I flashed back to one of my own early piano recitals when I couldn’t focus on anything else except getting all the notes right (which probably caused me to miss a note or two because of all the self-inflicted pressure). I couldn’t imagine what would make me so focused on the notes written on the page when Pressler clearly didn’t worry about anything except the *music*. It was a bit of a rude awakening to see him play a twenty or thirty minute concerto without missing a note and hardly glancing at his music, while I worry about forgetting a few notes in a two or three page piece of music. Pressler’s performance inflicted in me, and presumably others, the ability to think outside myself when I perform an instrument, the ability to put myself in the music and in the mind of the composer. Menahem Pressler gave the audience the most valuable piano (or perhaps life) lesson without saying a single word directly to the house.

Next came Richard Stoltzman performing Mozart’s “Clarinet Concerto, K. 622” with the NYSO. Stoltzman stands six feet plus and is another strong, demanding personality on the stage. His charisma and positive attitude came through in his playful melody that he shared with the orchestra. Although he had a special spark that made him fun to watch, I didn’t feel the same passion and empathy that Menahem Pressler gave in his performance.

The program ended with a duet of the two gentleman stars: “Sonata No. 2 for Clarinet and Piano, Op. 120” by Brahms. When put together onstage, these two could blow Brahms himself out of the water. Each staccato, each legato, each forte-piano was imaginatively brought to life and not once did they break their concentration from the notes on the page. Although Pressler had been my initial favorite, the two together made the night one to truly remember. Seeing Stoltzman and Pressler together is like seeing Cher and Madonna on the same stage – even if you don’t like listening to either of their albums, you can’t deny their power when they are in a room full of people. The zeal radiating from the Centennial Hall stage was indeed tangible and remained in the hearts of the concert-goers (mine at least) for many hours, even days after.

The audience obviously loved this duet as much as I did, because they were on their feet in no time. After many minutes and many stage entrances and exits by the stars to acknowledge the applause they came out one last time, Stoltzman with clarinet in hand, and performed an encore piece. This piece was a bit more jazzy, but the audience reacted quite positively to the change in tone. The short encore left the audience on their feet yet again, and once it became clear the musicians would not be entering for another performance, the house started to clear with a feeling of reluctance. Even on the trip to the car, the spirit of creativity and imagination was kept alive through avid discussion by the concert attendees.