

Getting the Ax

Emanuel Ax is on a crusade. He wants you to clap in between movements, and you should not feel embarrassed or ashamed by doing so. With this prophetic idea, Mr. Ax has begun to preach a gospel of tolerance towards enthusiasm. Enthusiasm that is often missing in a culture that is bound by chains of misunderstanding.

The misunderstanding comes from years of common practice that clapping is reserved for the beginning and ending of symphonies, concerti, and chamber works. Not so, says history, with countless examples of audiences clapping at will up until the twentieth century. And before we dismiss the prophet for speaking heresy, let us spend some time with his credentials.

Ax's career spans 35 years, beginning in 1974 as first prize-winner of the Arthur Rubinstein Piano Competition in Tel Aviv and in 1979 winning the Avery Fisher Prize (company he shares with notable performers such as Lynn Harrell, Murray Perahia, the Emerson String Quartet, and Joshua Bell). As an exclusive recording artist with Sony Classical, Ax spent years playing with Isaac Stern, Jaime Laredo, and Yo-Yo Ma recording the chamber music of Brahms, Fauré, Beethoven, Schumann, and Mozart.

Next to solo piano literature, his work with Yo-Yo Ma accounts for most of the available recordings on the market and all six of the Grammys to his name for Best Chamber Music Performance. Their performance relationship encompasses 33 years, and began when Ax met Ma while the latter was working with legendary cellist Leonard Rose. It is difficult to find a more stable partnership in classical music, and these two certainly have the awards and recordings to show for it.

Emanuel Ax's appearance at the Speed Concert Series on November 8th will showcase two composers, or poets of the piano: Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849) and Robert Schumann (1810-1856). Schumann was only three months younger than Chopin, but possessed an influence on the modern music scene in Europe through his writings and reviews (our eternal thanks to Schumann for Brahms!). After a music critic from Berlin criticized Chopin for a set of variations on Mozart's "Là ci darem la mano," it was Schumann who came to his defense, calling Chopin "a genius." Mr. Ax's familiarity with Chopin is evidenced in a series of Sony recordings, two of which feature a piano from the nineteenth century.

The two Schumann fantasies Mr. Ax has chosen for his Speed performance (Opp. 12 & 17) come from a period when the composer was falling in love with Clara Wieck (also a composer), who would become his lifelong companion and champion of his work. She would be the one who would nurture him and eventually care for his failing health, both physical and mental. The most interesting anecdote for this performance is that Mr. Ax has yet to record any solo piano literature of Robert Schumann.

As Schumann and Chopin would have welcomed applause at any appropriate time within their concerts, so does Emanuel Ax welcome your applause when you are so moved by his playing. Not only will he be impressed, but also we may have a chance to change the course of concert attitude and perception. With this, breathe new life into music making.

Daniel Gilliam is a composer (danielgilliam.com), music director and host on classical 90.5 (wuol.org). You can hear him weekdays from 3-7pm and Saturdays after the opera.

Speed Concert Series presents Emanuel Ax

Sunday, November 8, 2009 at 3p

University of Louisville
School of Music, Comstock Hall
members \$10, non-members \$20
and

Ian Bostridge

Saturday, March 27, 2010 at 8p

University of Louisville
School of Music, Comstock Hall
members free, non-members \$20

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