

Talich Quartet's soft sound lessens impact

By Avigdor Zoromp
special writer

Among chamber pianists, one would have to look long and hard to find someone whose appeal and charm can approach that of Menahem Pressler.

He is primarily known as the pianist of the Beaux Arts Trio, a group established 30 years ago. This group was here twice during the current Chamber Music Society of Detroit (CMS) season. The second visit on March 12 featured works by Mozart, Zemlinsky and Schubert.

A week later — on March 19 — Pressler appeared with another group — the Talich String Quartet. The latter, formed in Prague in 1964, is far less well known in this coun-

try, where it had its debut in 1987.

IT IS hard to match the degree of artistic communication witnessed in the Beaux Arts Trio. This was amply evident on this latter occasion. Mozart's Trio in G major K. 496 was delicately woven, with all its components meshing perfectly, without any loose ends.

Zemlinsky (1872-1942) lived during the era between Brahms and Schoenberg and knew them both. His early D minor Trio reflects more of Brahms' influence, making it appealing if not quite profound.

Schubert's Trio in E flat major received an uncharacteristic performance on this occasion. The tempo in the first and final movements was substantially slower than one in



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most recorded versions. Few other trios, however, would take the pains required to get beneath the surface of this inspired music. Here there was a sincere attempt to savor every note, to a degree that would be impossible with a faster tempo. It presented Schubert in a more serious and reflective style, rather than the more common light and carefree spirit.

THE TALICH QUARTET is most sincere in its artistic appreciation and dedication. One uncomfortable aspect in its approach was the extremely low volume of its sound. It was as if members were used to practicing in a small flat of a poorly soundproofed apartment complex, where they had to exercise extreme caution in order not to raise the ire of their neighbors.

If this is the case, I can fully sympathize with them — I used to live under such circumstances myself (and this is by no means an attempt to put myself in their league). The sound level of Beethoven's Quartet No. 10, Op. 74 ("Harp") was rarely above pianissimo. Moreover, the muffled sound obscured the clarity of the themes, making this work come off as overly brooding. Mozart's texture is lighter than Beethoven's, to be sure. But this could hardly apply in a performance of a Mozart piano concerto in which a quartet replaces a full string orchestra. Mozart's music does lend itself to smaller chamber combinations, as long as the orchestral original is kept in mind.

IN THIS PERFORMANCE of the Piano Concerto No. 12, K. 414 in A major, Pressler's tone sounded loud and harsh compared to the muted introductor. This was in spite of Pressler's notoriously delicate and refined touch. On its own, however, Pressler's role deserves the highest grade for this inspired performance. Only in Dvorak's Quintet for Piano and Strings in A major did the Talich members dare to venture beyond a whisper. Could it be that they tended to feel more at home with the music of their compatriot? I don't know the answer to that, but this proved to be the most satisfying joint venture on this program. The Talich Quartet seems to have substantial artistic assets to offer, but it should be less inhibited in sharing them with the audience.



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