

Jennifer Koh and Shai Wosner

Rochester NY

What a difference a pianist makes! Playing the same Steinway in the same hall that Paul Lewis used three weeks earlier, Shai Wosner made it sound like a different instrument. The sound was mellow, textures were clear (especially below middle C), and the bass line had a warm, finely balanced presence.

Two of Beethoven's violin sonatas opened (No. 1) and closed (No. 9, *Kreutzer*) the December 5 concert by violinist Jennifer Koh and pianist Wosner. All evening my mind didn't wander once, so unified and compelling were their interpretations. Sonata No. 1, like Mozart's, alternates between being a piano sonata with violin and a violin sonata with piano. They played the opening chord like a fanfare—attention achieved. Following Koh's floating statement of the first theme, Wosner echoed it with matching character. Koh's sound, in a way like Midori's, was not big or pushy but rich in expression and eminently musical. She maintained clarity by playing the opening notes of a phrase without vibrato, but with vibrato increasing toward the peak of the phrase. Wosner's many arpeggios were never on autopilot; he articulated and phrased them elegantly, always shaping them as melodies swelled and waned. He used the pedal only for tone color on individual notes—textures were always clear.

What made the performance so compelling was their alert but unrushed pacing and their natural touches of rubato, making me feel that I was hearing Beethoven the composer rather than Koh and Wosner imposing themselves on the music. Even in the second movement, a Theme and Variations (often the most torturous form to keep interesting), they maintained the sense of always proceeding somewhere. It was here that Wosner's warm, richly present, and balanced bass line served as an utter contrast to Lewis's playing.

Make that ditto for Sonata No. 9, except that in this later work the violin is more front and center. Koh and Wosner's reticent, teasing, flexible tempos in the introduction made me wonder, "And what tempo are they going to take in the exposition?" The sly devils almost imperceptively oozed into a dynamic charge, creating an exciting Presto movement. This work's long Theme and Variations can easily



wear out its welcome; instead, here it was supremely lyrical as Koh leaned into notes and phrases, and the players matched turns and trills perfectly. The coda was the only moment all night when Wosner *held* the pedal—the one spot where Beethoven piled up harmonies to be sustained. The finale didn't feel like "off to the races" because of the players' exquisite articulation, textural clarity, impeccable rhythms, and supreme shading and balances.

This program was the first of four "Bridge to Beethoven" concerts Koh conceived with Wosner where Beethoven's ten violin sonatas are paired with modern works by Vijay Iyer, Andrew Norman, Jörg Widmann, and Anthony Cheung. Perhaps Wosner stated its purpose best: "Beethoven was the first composer to write music where the struggle of creativity is part of the piece. And he was the first composer to do that consistently. The idea of the creative process is very much in the forefront of a lot of today's music, and these new composers are all wildly different and exciting examples of that." The *Kreutzer Sonata* was originally dedicated to Afro-European violinist George Bridgetower, who performed the world premiere with Beethoven. (The composer withdrew the dedication after a perceived insult.) The concert's first half ended with the three-movement *Bridgetower Fantasy* that Iyer describes as imaginings about George Bridgetower: "It is not programmatic, but it takes on an episodic character, assembled from contrasting fragments."

Since there were no program notes on the work and the artists spoke not a word all evening, the audience was clueless as Koh played a soft high harmonic other-worldly pitch and Wosner played a bass note and tapped the

piano lid with knuckles and the underbelly with knees. Sound effects slowly grew into tonality (neither traditional nor 12-tone) as rhythm and pulse, then movement (flow) grew into virtuosity for both players. The elements became traditional enough. But what kept me glued was the total confidence and control of two players who were not just hearing one another but listening to their partner's every nuance. Indeed, I listened to the Iyer the same way I did to the Beethoven: for textures, flow, drama, and who had the lead when. It's the kind of music that probably works better in concert than on a recording.

The 444-seat Kilbourn Hall was only one-fourth to one-third filled. Even student attendance was low; they were headed into semester finals. There were three vigorous rounds of applause, but no encore. As Greta Garbo said, "Don't be stingy, baby!"

GIL FRENCH

Juilliard Quartet

Seattle

What does it mean to be a member of a 70-year old American string quartet, none of whose founding members are still with the ensemble, and whose oldest member, violinist Ronald Copes, has only been with the group for 20 years? Are they coasting on a golden reputation and their position as quartet-in-residence at New York's famed Juilliard School of Music, or are they busy reinventing themselves while continually invigorating standard repertoire?

Judging from the Juilliard String Quartet's recent appearance in what locals call "U-Dub's" 1206-seat Meany Theater, their musicianship and repertoire choices are as vital as ever. Cellist Astrid Schween, who joined the quartet in 2016 after 25 years in the all-female Lark Quartet, has an exceedingly warm sound that blends beautifully with first violinist Joseph Lin (since 2011), second violinist Copes, and violist Roger Tapping (since 2013).

Although it was difficult to get a handle on Schween's sound seated in orchestra row M, just below the start of the balcony, I was able to move down to the first row of the proscenium-style theater after intermission. Although I was still many feet away from her, Schween exhibited no trace of the grainy edge that I've heard from other "star" cellists, Zuill Bailey amongst them. Instead, her sound and fre-

quent attention to the other members of the ensemble evinced consistent warmth, cooperation, and dedication to expression, nuance, and feeling.

The quartet's program, variations of which they are taking on tour this season, began with Beethoven's Quartet No. 5. It then jumped well ahead in time to James MacMillan's 20-year-old Quartet No. 2 (*Why Is This Night Different?*), and culminated with Dvorak's Quartet No. 11. The program affirmed a commitment to contemporary music by a quartet known for its pioneering recordings of Elliot Carter's string quartets and Dutilleux's equally challenging *Ainsi la Nuit*, which the Koussevitzky Foundation commissioned for them.

Assessing the program in the order received, as it were, it was hard not to fall under the spell of Lin's soaring, passionate playing and the quartet's excellent blend. During the Beethoven it felt as though we as audience members had been ushered into a very welcoming circle where high spirits predominated.

Schween's cello helped ground the second movement's song-like seamless lyricism, which was punctuated by surprising, ever-delightful accents. The *Andante Cantabile* enabled the quartet to open its collective heart, as well as inject some humor into its gorgeous playing. The final *Allegro* showed the quartet delighting in Beethoven's demands for rhythmic acuity and boundless invention. That the quartet ended with a wink rather than a punch seemed part of the grand plan.

I confess that I've found the strong Christian emphasis in so many of MacMillan's works off-putting. Here he stuck to that good ole Old Testament religion by asking the traditional Passover question, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" while grappling with some of the more troubling aspects of human existence. These, of course, include religious persecution, the exile of the "other," ethnic cleansing, and all those other delights which seem to be the "modern" world's (and current US administration's) bread and butter.

I also confess that, raw from a trip to a dear friend's bedside as she was being taken off life support (she died 3-1/2 hours after the concert), I was not in the best emotional place to descend deeply into MacMillan's complex, dark-hued, multi-layered argument. Nonetheless, the longing of Schween's cello in some of the opening passages was as moving as the quartet's playing was vigorous. Enigma