

Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio Review November 9, 2018

By Morgan Luethe

The Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio delivered a world-class listening experience at McDougall United Church on the evening of November 9th. While this is not surprising (the group has become internationally renowned since their debut concert at the 1977 presidential Inauguration of Jimmy Carter), what *was* fascinating were the various often unarticulated elements of the music brought to life and highlighted so well by these musicians. Equally impressive was the way in which these players were able to go about doing so effectively, with keen attentiveness to the respective style and period of each piece they played. Through their performance, the K-L-R Trio clearly affirmed for the audience that they remain an ensemble whose obvious inter-personal cohesion and sensitivity to each other's playing allows them to feel at ease across a broad range of piano trio repertoire.

Opening the evening was a seldom-heard set of study pieces by Robert Schumann. While, quite honestly, a footnote the composer's overall chamber oeuvre (which includes some of the greatest works in the genre), the *Sechs Stücke in kanonischer Form* gave great insight into Schumann's own understanding of counterpoint (a course for which these pieces are the resulting technical exercises), they also clearly contain the seeds of which early Brahms is the fruit; a few times throughout the performance it was possible to pick up on textures and turns of musical phrase that were more than a little suggestive of the latter composer's youthful Op. 8 Trio. For pieces of musical homework, these six canonic studies held the ear with surprising ease and look forward to the thicker textures and folk influences that were to grow in importance for composers of the later Romantic Period. The Trio brought of these works with clarity and purpose and their performance raised these neglected works beyond the level of technical exercises to a fully-formed artistic statement in their own right.

The second offering of the program's first half was the beloved *Piano Trio* of Maurice Ravel. The piece marked an interesting change in technical and aesthetical gears for the performers and offered a stark contrast to the more subdued sound-world of the Schumann work prior. The fragrant atmosphere of Ravel's pre-war harmonic language finds expression in this, his last completed work before volunteering for the multinational conflict that was rapidly consuming the European continent. Here the influence of Ravel's Basque heritage pervades a work that's overall melancholy in tone. After an emotionally charged first movement the Trio launched into an impressive account of the work's musically and technically astounding second movement. The work's emotional center, the slow passacaglia passes around a desolate eight-bar bassline utterance among the instruments, beginning with the piano and soon joined by the cello and violin. Relentlessly heightening tensions, the powerful climax of the movement contains some of Ravel's most penetrating material. The K-L-R Trio brought this part of the work off with a sense of deep understanding and the shape of their overall sound had a burnished, reverent quality that fit the tone of the movement well. Balancing the emotional intensity of the slow movement, the frenetic and technically astounding finale brought the trio to a thrilling close. Taxing all three performers to their limits (this really *is* some of the most difficult chamber music written), it was impressive to see these veteran performers still able to make the ferocious musical and technical demands of this material look easy.

The final work on the program was a tried and true warhorse of the chamber genre, Mendelssohn's Op. 49 *Piano Trio*. Mendelssohn, while universally regarded as having been a great musical genius

sometimes (and unfairly) comes under fire for not writing music with the overt emotional-musical struggles of contemporaries Schumann and Chopin. To some extent, this is true; Mendelssohn's keyword is restraint, though it doesn't exclude his music from also being deeply rooted in the early-Romantic artistic atmosphere into which he was born and in which he matured as an artist. In many ways, the Op.49 *Trio* is like Mozart's piano concerto in the same key; while the respective composition of these two works is separated by several decades, both are stamped with airtight stylistic and formal classical restraint (though in Mendelssohn this is far less overt), with deep emotional tendencies tangible under the surface. The first movement of Mendelssohn's *Trio* begins with a gaunt, unindulgent melody played over syncopated accompaniment. The real import of Mendelssohn's music is (and his *trio* is just one example from many in his chamber-music oeuvre) its balance of emotional expression; he was not a man of extremes and neither is his music. The bittersweet-ness of the work's slow movement is undeniable, without becoming sentimental and, while both the scherzo and finales are conceived with an eye on musical athleticism and compositional virtuosity, both movements too are stamped with a clearly individual music character. The K-L-R *Trio's* account of this well-worn piece was the most compelling of the evening's program and highlighted the crystalline intelligence and emotional depth married in this music.

It's always a real treat to see and hear such internationally-renowned artists play repertoire staples, and the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson *Trio* was no exception. Each presented work was given a compelling account and the audience was left hugely satisfied. For a brief encore, the *trio* gave an arranged rendition of *Summertime*, from Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* which, apart from being great music, looked like real fun to play, judging by the faces of the players. We look forward the 2019-half of the ECMS' regular season with bated breath, and with the expectation that we'll be hearing performances of this caliber again, soon enough.