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Menahem Pressler and the Oxford Philomusica: The Sheldonian Theatre

By Nicola Lisle

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Absolutely sensational. Legendary German-born pianist Menahem Pressler prompted such an enthusiastic ovation on Tuesday night that it seemed to shake the very foundations of the Sheldonian Theatre, and he was obliged to give an encore before the audience reluctantly let him go. Now an incredible 86 years of age, Pressler still has the dexterity of a man half his age, underpinned by a formidable technique, thoughtful interpretation and a seemingly effortless stylishness.

His playing of Mozart's Piano Concerto No.17 in G Major was utterly compelling; from the moment his fingers touched the keyboard he commanded the attention, teasing the audience with a vivid exploration of the constantly shifting emotions, one minute flirtatiously joyful, the next restless and agitated. There was also a noticeable rapport with the orchestra, with whom he happily engaged in a lively dialogue, and with conductor Marios Papadopoulos, who moved things along with his customary strong sense of purpose.

Small wonder the audience erupted into a standing ovation when the piece came skitting triumphantly to a light-hearted and upbeat conclusion.

It was a timely reminder of just how privileged we are to have the piano festival on our doorstep when it presents us with such jewels as this.

But the evening was not just about Menahem Pressler. The Philomusica's orchestra played a starring role too, opening this Mozart feast with a gloriously sunny rendition of the Divertimento in D Major. The players were in sparkling form, with Marios Papadopoulos conducting with his usual precision and expressiveness. Later came one of the most familiar of Mozart's symphonies, the 'Sturm and Drang'-inspired No.40 in G Minor, and both Papadopoulos and the orchestra once again proved to be adept at capturing the mood in a scintillating and stirring performance that brought the evening to a thrilling conclusion.