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Review: Menahem Pressler's message is truly in his music

By Rob Hubbard, March 13, 2012

Menahem Pressler has lived as many years as there are keys on a piano. Yet he continues to perform, teach and dispense priceless wisdom both verbal and musical.

The master pianist and pedagogue spent an hour Tuesday evening relating some of the innumerable insights he's accrued in 65 years as a professional musician. The event was a combination colloquy and concert called "A Life of Music," presented by the Schubert Club at the intimate SPCO Center in downtown St. Paul's Hamm Building. On some level, it felt like an audience with musical royalty, yet Pressler is not one for regal airs. He came off as a direct and down-to-earth storyteller whose focus becomes far loftier and more complex when he communicates through his instrument.

While best known for his half-century manning the keys for the Beaux Arts Trio - the group that set the past century's gold standard in interpreting repertoire for violin, cello and piano - Pressler showed that describing him as a chamber music master is far too limiting. He's a superb musician, an intrepid explorer of emotional landscapes, one who conveys a deep understanding of the many layers within whatever work he plays.

The first of the three works for solo piano was Mozart's A-Minor Rondo, a piece that he confessed he's always played "not to fail," as opposed to endeavoring toward some sort of triumph. But a success it was, its delicate baroque ornamentation leavened by gripping gravitas in the bass.

The stories told going in and out of the music were mostly about beginnings, from his first lessons to the birth of the Beaux Arts Trio. But his performances said much more. During Beethoven's penultimate sonata, the 31st, Pressler conveyed the composer as looking ruefully backward, finding a sense of loss and grief even before a curtain of darkness fell at the final movement's opening. Soon, sadness was drowned by rage, pounding chords sounding like one final weary shake of the fist at the Furies.

His encore was one that will likely linger in the hearts of all present: a Chopin Nocturne played with such tenderness and subtlety that audience members were spellbound, almost afraid to breathe and disperse the spirit. It made the evening's most convincing case that Pressler has accumulated as much wisdom in his soul as he has in his mind.