



Violinist James Ehnes and pianist Orion Weiss are captivating collaborators in Oberlin recital

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OBERLIN – Recitals featuring eminent soloists often give short shrift to the musician seated at the nearby keyboard, sometimes for good reason. Pianists can be too deferential when partnering with a forceful personality.

Not so the concert that violinist James Ehnes and pianist Orion Weiss gave Tuesday at Finney Chapel in Oberlin College's Artist Recital Series. There wasn't a trace of inequality. The Canadian violinist and Lyndhurst native made music with what appeared to be collegial gratification, as if immersed in a series of fascinating conversations.

Their program provided them with ample opportunity to interact, step forth and place the music in multiple perspectives. With works by Stravinsky, Grieg, Mozart and Saint-Saens on the bill, the audience was promised a varied evening that avoided any sense of routine.

To everything, Ehnes and Weiss applied artistry of heightened sophistication and urgency. The violinist eschews showmanship, except when it's called for (as in the dizzying finale of Saint-Saens' Sonata No. 1 in D minor, Op. 75), preferring to seek out gradations of color and nuance. His intonation is impeccable, his technique up to any challenge.

Weiss, who studied at the Cleveland Institute of Music before pursuing graduate studies at the Juilliard School, produces torrents of sound or scales his playing down for the subtlest gestures. Teaming with Ehnes, he balanced piano lines to suit the expressive needs of each piece.

Stravinsky wove the Suite Italienne from material in his "Pulcinella," for which he tweaked early 18th-century music by a composer who hasn't been confirmed (it's not Pergolesi, as long was believed). The momentary pungencies and inventive turns of phrase make it pure, neo-classical Stravinsky, and Ehnes and Weiss gave the score charming and invigorating emphasis.

They switched gears without a blink for Grieg's Sonata No. 3 in C minor, Op. 45, an outpouring of temperamental drama and exquisite lyricism. Ehnes' sound was warm and focused, and he shaded phrases intensely, minus a hint of indulgence. Weiss also was keenly sensitive to Grieg's generous Romanticism.

Ehnes broke an inordinate number of bow hairs during the concert's first half and returned after intermission with a different bow. He didn't need to do much more than go along for the ride in Mozart's Sonata No. 20 in C major, K. 303, in which the piano has the prominent role. The performance of this short, two-movement gem was animated in particular by Weiss' sparkling pianism.

The Saint-Saens sonata also has an unusual structure – four movements grouped in two connected episodes. The music is quintessentially tasteful and swashbuckling, and Ehnes and Weiss made a gourmet meal of it, relishing both the delicacies and the savory sensations. They were – how to put it? – dazzling in the perpetual-motion finale.