In Memory of Isaac Stern,
Celebrating His 101st Birthday

EMANUEL AX, piano
LEONIDAS KAVAKOS, violin
YO-YO MA, cello

MON, MAR 7, 8pm
KENNEDY CENTER CONCERT HALL
Symphony No. 6 in F major, Op. 68 “Pastorale”
Allegro ma non troppo: Erwachen heiterer Empfindungen bei der Ankunft auf dem Lande
Andante molto mosso: Szene am Bach
Allegro: Lustiges Zusammensein der Landleute
Allegro: Gewitter, Sturm
Allegretto: Hirtengesang. Frohe und dankbare Gefühle nach dem Sturm

Piano Trio No. 4 in B-flat Major, Op. 11 “Gassenhauer”
Allegro con brio
Adagio
Allegretto: Tema: Pria ch’io l’impegno

Piano Trio No. 5 in D Major, Op. 70, No. 1 “Ghost”
Allegro vivace e con brio
Largo assai ed espressivo
Presto

In Memory of Isaac Stern, Celebrating His 101st Birthday
Emanuel Ax – Leonidas Kavakos – Yo-Yo Ma

World-renowned musicians Emanuel Ax, Leonidas Kavakos, and Yo-Yo Ma unite to perform an evening of Beethoven trios. The group’s previous tour and recording of Brahms trios on Sony Classics were met with rave reviews around the world. *The Boston Globe* declared “At every juncture...it was clear the musicians were of three unique minds, and with that, three unique and brilliant approaches that made for fascinating musical conversations onstage. For their distinct individuality, they were no less harmonious” while the *Chicago Tribune* raved “Chamber music playing doesn’t get any better than this.” Pianist Emanuel Ax, known for his “thoughtful, lyrical, lustrous” pianism (*The Washington Post*) that is “strong on bravura, [and] ravishing in finesse” (*The Guardian*), is an ardent collaborator whose commitment to chamber music has fostered acclaimed partnerships with a variety of musical luminaries. Violinist Leonidas Kavakos, “a spectacular artist” (*Philadelphia Inquirer*), was awarded the Léonie Sonning Music Prize in 2017. His inspired music-making with pianist partners has resulted in several critically-acclaimed recordings. Cellist Yo-Yo Ma is known for being one of the most prolific artists in the world, seeking to expand the reach of the cello by joining forces with a variety of artists and musicians across several genres. Ma’s “performances are wonderfully eloquent and sophisticated” (*Los Angeles Times*) and marked with “beautifully calibrated dynamic detailing” (*Chicago Classical Review*).
Born in modern day Lvov, Poland, Emanuel Ax moved to Winnipeg, Canada, with his family when he was a young boy. Mr. Ax made his New York debut in the Young Concert Artists Series, and in 1974 won the first Arthur Rubinstein International Piano Competition in Tel Aviv. In 1975 he won the Michaels Award of Young Concert Artists, followed four years later by the Avery Fisher Prize. Highlights of the 2019/20 season included a European summer festivals tour with the Vienna Philharmonic and Bernard Haitink, an Asian tour with the London Symphony and Sir Simon Rattle and concerts with Leonidas Kavakos and Yo-Yo Ma at Carnegie Hall in March 2020. Additional recitals and orchestral appearances were postponed due to Covid-19 and like many artists around the world, Mr. Ax responded to these unprecedented circumstances creatively. He hosted “The Legacy of Great Pianists,” part of the online Live with Carnegie Hall series highlighting legendary pianists who have performed at Carnegie Hall. He joined Yo-Yo Ma in a series of surprise pop-up concerts for essential workers in venues throughout the Berkshires community. With the resumption of concert activity, he appeared in the reopening weekend of Tanglewood both with the Boston Symphony and in a Beethoven trio program with Leonidas Kavakos and Yo-Yo Ma. Concerts with the Colorado, Pacific, Cincinnati and Houston symphonies as well as Minnesota, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia and Cleveland orchestras follow throughout the 21/22 season. Mr. Ax has been a Sony Classical exclusive recording artist since 1987. He has received multiple GRAMMY® Awards and the Echo Klassik Award for Solo Recording of the Year. Mr. Ax is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and holds honorary doctorates of music from Skidmore College, Yale University, and Columbia University.

Leonidas Kavakos is recognized as a violinist and artist of rare quality, known for his virtuosity, musicianship and the integrity of his playing. He works with the world’s greatest orchestras and conductors and plays as recitalist in the world’s premier recital halls and festivals. By age 21, Kavakos had won three major competitions: the Sibelius (1985), Paganini, and Naumburg competitions (1988). This success led to his recording the original Sibelius Violin Concerto (1903/4), the first recording of this work in history, which won Gramophone Concerto of the Year Award in 1991. Kavakos is a Carnegie Hall “Perspectives” Artist in 21/22, performing in a variety of concerts over the season, which includes a recital with pianist Yuja Wang; the North American premiere of a violin concerto by composer Unsuk Chin; and a chamber music trio concert with Emanuel Ax and Yo-Yo Ma, which will also be performed on tour. The recital program with Ms. Wang was toured across the US in November 2021. In recent years, Kavakos has succeeded in building a strong profile as a conductor. This season he will return to the Dallas Symphony and has collaborated with the New York Philharmonic, Houston Symphony, and the Vienna Symphony, among others. Leonidas Kavakos is an exclusive recording artist with Sony Classics and recently re-released his 2007 recording of the complete Beethoven Sonatas with Enrico Pace, for which he was named Echo Klassik Instrumentalist of the year. Kavakos was awarded Gramophone Artist of the Year 2014 and the 2017 Léonie Sonning Music Prize, Denmark’s highest musical honor. Born and brought up in a musical family in Athens, Greece, Kavakos curates an annual violin and chamber-music masterclass in his native city, which attracts violinists and ensembles from all over the world. He plays the Willemotte Stradivarius violin of 1734.
Yo-Yo Ma’s multi-faceted career is testament to his enduring belief in culture’s power to generate trust and understanding. Whether performing new or familiar works from the cello repertoire, collaborating with communities and institutions to explore culture’s role in society, or engaging unexpected musical forms, Yo-Yo strives to foster connections that stimulate the imagination and reinforce our humanity. With partners from around the world and across disciplines, he creates programs that stretch the boundaries of genre and tradition to explore music-making as a means not only to share and express meaning, but also as a model for the cultural collaboration he considers essential to a strong society. It was this belief that inspired Yo-Yo to establish Silkroad, a collective of artists from around the world who create music that engages their many traditions. In 2018, Yo-Yo began a new journey, setting out to perform Johann Sebastian Bach’s six suites for solo cello in one sitting in 36 locations around the world, iconic venues that encompass our cultural heritage, our current creativity, and the challenges of peace and understanding that will shape our future. Yo-Yo was born in 1955 to Chinese parents living in Paris. He began to study the cello with his father at age four and three years later moved with his family to New York City, where he continued his cello studies with Leonard Rose at the Juilliard School. After his conservatory training, he sought out a liberal arts education, graduating from Harvard in 1976. He has performed for nine American presidents, most recently on the occasion of President Biden’s inauguration.

PROGRAM NOTES

Beethoven’s “Pastoral” Symphony as piano trio?
Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony is a rare exception in the output of a composer whose almost every work is a rare exception. In the case of the “Pastoral”, the most obvious exception is in Beethoven’s revealing to us the source of his inspiration. He was reluctant to give specific titles (“Moonlight” was someone else’s title for the famous piano sonata) and although his music almost always conveys a sense of a story, he preferred to keep that story more abstract. But he was also an idealist so perhaps it’s shouldn’t surprise us that one of his rare choices for a detailed narrative focuses on the idyllic.

Of course, what’s become known as the “pastoral style” wasn’t new and even Beethoven had used it in earlier works - folk elements such as bagpipe drones (the very first notes of the piece), country dance rhythms, bird calls and the like. What’s perhaps most striking about the Symphony is that Beethoven manages to have it both ways - you get the familiar folksy gestures and imagery but it all has an elevated, almost philosophical aura to it. It’s not so much the cinematic effects he is after as much as an “effect on the soul”, as he wrote in his sketches.

The Beethoven biographer Jan Swafford notes that instead of the more conventional “four seasons” trajectory Beethoven opts for a series of vignette movements, depicting a single day in the country:

1. “Awakening of cheerful feelings on arriving in the country” (this is written from a city guy’s point of view).

2. “Scene by the brook” - the burbling figurations in the accompaniment represent water of course, but the movement’s deeper ‘effect on the soul’ is that of timeless meditation on the glories of daydreaming - an idle idyll.

Photos: © Nigel Parry
3. “Merry gathering of the countryfolk” - this melody is more loosely structured than others but this movement serves as the official Scherzo.

4. “Storm” - abruptly following the scherzo, breaking up the party. At first, it isn’t even clear whether it’s a separate movement, an effect designed to unsettle the order of things. But then, it all clears and we hear a...

5. “Shepherd’s song. Happy and grateful feelings after the storm” - one of Beethoven most unusual finales (if there is such a thing at all). It is more expansive than driving and Beethoven seems to achieve the impossible: the entire movement is almost devoid of any tension yet somehow he builds up climaxes that are some of the most exhilarating and uplifting moments in all of music.

Approaching the symphony from a chamber music angle may seem to us today counterintuitive - isn’t the very essence of a symphony that it’s an orchestral work? When Manny Ax first mentioned the idea that was my initial reaction, too. But Beethoven himself might have disagreed - after all, he arranged his Second Symphony for piano trio and obviously not because he thought there was anything wrong with the bigger version. At the time, it was very common to have multiple versions of great and popular works.

One reason was that there were no recordings and orchestral performances were still relatively rare. But another reason is perhaps the view that the core ideas in the music should be experienced across multiple formats both by listeners and musicians.

So, in following Beethoven’s lead, a chamber version wouldn’t make a piano trio play the same amount of notes as does an orchestra of 65, but rather highlight the dialogue in the music and experience Beethoven’s ingenious transformation of themes through the conversational mode of chamber music.

And speaking of looking through different lenses, there is another dimension to this miraculous piece which is perhaps worth mentioning. The folk-like style that Beethoven emulates - the era’s idealization of country life - all that may seem almost naive to us today. But in our own times, the idea of pure happiness in nature’s open spaces is far more loaded. For the audience in the crowded Viennese theater circa 1808, it connected instinctively to lilting rhythms and blissful tunes. For us, just the word ‘nature’ seems to poignantly link to what we stand to lose. That alone makes Beethoven’s musical idealism all the more relevant and meaningful. The “pastoral” in the Pastoral Symphony is less an outright depiction and more of a mindset of looking at and experiencing the world - “effect on the soul”. Its trio version, if you will, is less a county fair and more a picnic for three.

— Shai Wosner

**Piano Trio in B-flat Major, Opus 11**

Beethoven originally wrote this gentle trio for clarinet, cello, and piano, completing it in 1798, during his first years in Vienna. Much of his early chamber music included piano, perhaps to give Beethoven more opportunities to perform in his adopted city. This particular combination of instruments is unusual, and Beethoven may have chosen it with the Austrian clarinet virtuoso Joseph Beer in mind (a century later, Brahms would write a trio using these same three instruments for the German clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld). Aware that this combination of instruments might mean infrequent performances, Beethoven prepared a version in which violin replaces the clarinet, and the trio is heard in this version at the present concert.

The *Allegro con brio* opens with a jaunty unison statement four octaves deep. The music seems so innocent and straightforward that it is easy to overlook Beethoven’s harmonic surprises: when the second theme arrives, it is in the unexpected key of D major, which sounds striking after the F-major cadence that preceded it. The *Adagio* is based on one central idea, heard immediately in the cello and marked *con espressione*. This song-like melody is quickly picked up by the violin and embellished as the movement proceeds. Beethoven must have had a particular fondness for this theme, for he used it—in slightly altered form—in his *Septet* of 1800 and his *Piano Sonata in G Major, Opus 49, No. 2*, written in 1795.

The finale, marked *Allegretto* and titled *Tema: Pria ch’io l’impegno*, is a set of variations on a theme announced at the beginning by the piano. This sprightly tune was originally a vocal trio in the opera *L’amor marinaro* (also known as *Il Corsaro*, or *The Corsair*) by the Austrian composer Joseph Weigl, and that title translates: “Before I begin work, I must have something to eat.” The opera had something of a vogue in Vienna at the time (it was premiered there on October 15, 1797), and Hummel and Paganini later wrote variations of their own on this same theme. Beethoven’s movement consists of the theme, nine variations, and a coda. The first variation is for piano alone, but the second is for violin and cello duet, virtually the only time in the entire
trio when the piano is silent. Subsequent variations alternate between major and minor keys, and a coda based on Weigl’s theme brings the trio to a quick-paced conclusion.

**Piano Trio in D Major, Opus 70, No. 1 “Ghost”**

The exact source of the nickname “Ghost” for this trio is unknown, but it clearly refers to the middle movement, a striking Largo in D minor. This is dark, almost murky music—the piano murmurs a complex accompaniment while the strings twist and extend bits of melody above it. This unusual music (Beethoven rarely marked a movement Largo) has excited a great deal of curiosity about its inspiration. One possibility is particularly intriguing.

Beethoven had worked on his opera Leonore (later renamed Fidelio) from 1804 until 1806. It had not achieved success, and—anxious to try another opera—Beethoven explored many possible subjects. One of these was Shakespeare’s Macbeth, and he and the playwright Heinrich Collin went so far as to discuss a libretto. In fact, Beethoven actually began work on the music for Macbeth, for there are sketches in D minor marked “Macbeth.” Nothing ever came of them, though the idea of an opera based on this play continued to fascinate Beethoven, even in his final years.

But on the same sheet that contains the sketches for Macbeth are the first sketches for the Largo assai ed espressivo movement of this trio, also in D minor. Whether this somber and brooding music, written in 1808, grew out of Beethoven’s projected music for Macbeth cannot be known for sure, but the connection—however distant—is clearly there, and this movement may be our one hint as to what Beethoven’s music for that tragedy might have been like. Surely it is not too great a leap to imagine this music in conjunction with the witches or Macbeth’s dark final days.

Beethoven frames this remarkable Largo with two fast movements, both in radiant D major. The middle movement is so powerful that the outer movements seem a little light by comparison, and some observers have gone so far as to suggest that they should be seen as prelude and postlude to the Largo. The Allegro vivace e con brio opens with a pithy rhythmic figure that recurs throughout the movement and finally brings it to a close. The main theme is a flowing, elegant idea heard first in the cello and quickly passed between all three instruments. This theme dominates the opening movement, giving it an atmosphere of easy expansiveness. The concluding Presto sounds innocent after the grim pizzicato strokes that end the Largo. It offers long melodic lines, a graceful partnership between the instruments, and a smooth flow of good-spirited music throughout.

— Eric Bromberger

Please note: Links to Ax, Kavakos & Ma videos, recordings, and more are available on the Washington Performing Arts website.
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