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Early Music Celebration Reviews; Trios Anchored By the Fortepiano

By JEREMY EICHLER

Mozartean Players
Frick Collection

The pianist Steven Lubin once gambled correctly that if he built one, they would come. The object in question was a fortepiano, modeled after those used in Mozart's day. Mr. Lubin was one of the first New Yorkers to perform widely on the fortepiano. In 1979, he founded the Mozartean Players, a period-instrument ensemble that performed on Sunday evening as part of the New York Early Music Celebration.

The group expands and contracts as the occasion demands, but at its core is a trio formed by Mr. Lubin, the violinist Stanley Ritchie and the cellist Myron Lutzke. On Sunday, these players offered a program of four works written within roughly a decade of each other, including a late Mozart trio and an early Beethoven trio. A Haydn trio opened the concert, and Haydn's remarkable F-minor Piano Variations, played by Mr. Lubin with equal portions of vigor and grace, was the highlight.

The piano part dominates the trios, but Mr. Lubin's fortepiano never overpowered. Its sound is soft yet not hazy, and he maintained a well-defined rhythmic profile and sparkling clarity, especially in the bass.

Contributions from the string players were more uneven: Mr. Lutzke rendered expressive passages with a rich and creamy tone, but Mr. Ritchie struggled periodically with pitch and fluidity of phrasing. Still, one appreciated the lively approach the group brought to this repertory.

JEREMY EICHLER

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Teddington Studios, Broom Road, Teddington, Middlesex TW11 9BE, United Kingdom
e-mail gramophone@haynet.com website www.gramophone.co.uk

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PIANO ROUND-UP

PIANO MASH

Jed Distler on the right way and the wrong way to decide recording priorities

Steven Lubin's Beethoven concerto cycle with Christopher Hogwood was one of the first original-instrument versions. Although everyone forgot about it when the heavily publicised Levin/Gardiner set hit town, its virtues wear well. The interpretations are fast, lean, and incisive as hell, yet always governed by shapely, flexible phrasing far removed from the metronomic rigidity and mannered dynamic swells that certain period performers hold on to for dear life. Other selling points include Lubin's use of different fortepianos from one work to the next, his own vivacious cadenzas based on Beethoven's sketches, and equally stylish readings of three 'name' sonatas (*Moonlight*, *Pathétique*, *Appassionata*).

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Hunstein Artist Services, Inc.

65 West 90th Street, Suite 13F, New York, NY 10024
Phone (212) 724-2693 Fax (212) 724-9393

DeeAnne@HunsteinArtists.com
www.HunsteinArtists.com

Classical Soundings, new release (January 2006):

Mozart: Fortepiano Concertos Nos. 14 and 21, (K. 449 and 467)

Steven Lubin fortepiano and conductor

The Mozartean Players Classical Orchestra

„His playing is sharply etched and ruthlessly good.”

~Robert Strobl, Toccata, Germany

„Mr. Lubin played that wonderfully!”

~David Dubal, Reflections from the Keyboard (WQXR)

„For this Mozart year we have distinguished performances of the Concertos Nos. 14 and 21, played and conducted by the fortepianist Steven Lubin. These are crisp, vital distillations of Mozart, enhanced by Lubin,s stylish playing.”

~Andrew M. Pincus, Berkshire Eagle

„Extremely enjoyable. Lubin is a skilled and talented artist (wonderful clarity in the solo line.”

~Robert W. Plyler, Jamestown (NY) Post-Journal

„With certain pieces of music, so many fine recordings have already been made that a performer really needs to bring something new to the studio to justify yet another. Mozart's Concerto No. 21 is such a piece and, happily, Steven Lubin is such a performer. Simply playing the work on period instruments is not sufficient; it,s been done before. Lubin and his ensemble bring a lightness of sound and a rich complexity to Mozart. Superb technique is wedded throughout to revelations of meaning, and that's justification enough for both the works on this disc.

I don't want to slight the excellent orchestra, but it,s Lubin's intimate mastery of the fortepiano that makes this recording such a standout. While a modern piano is loud enough to compete directly with the orchestra, the fortepiano must achieve a harmonious balance (the technical aspects of which are handled very well here). Lubin uses its more subtle palette as a way to peel back the layers of Mozart's music, uncovering surprising abstractions in No. 14 and virtuosity even in the scalework in the outer, robust movements of No. 21. Even the Andante in that concerto, one of the most oft-played Mozart movements, sounds fresh and tender, yet without a trace of sentimentality.”

Lubin and The Mozartean Players are among the pioneers in bringing Mozart back to period



instruments, and his recordings of several Mozart concertos for Arabesque are touchstones of this repertoire. It,s a delight to hear the series continued on Classical Soundings.”

~Beth Adelman, Early Music America Magazine

„Fortepianist Lubin's recording of these great middle-period Mozart concertos with the Mozartean Players Classical Orchestra has finally made me understand the strong appeal of period instruments. The tonal palette of the 18th-century fortepiano is more muted, more „pastel,% if you will, than a modern Steinway grand. Meanwhile, period orchestra instruments are more pungent. So Lubin's performances avoid the modern, brilliant, music-box Mozart sound in favor of renditions, especially the „Elvira Madigan% concerto (K. 467), that are warmly expressive. This is Mozart at its best.”

~John Pitcher, Rochester Democrat and Chronicle

„Steven Lubin is a superb fortepianist, and that obviously places him in the historically informed performance camp. Though the instrument is less sonorous, it achieves unexpected blends with the orchestra and has an extra ping that gives the music extra edge. Most important, Lubin has much to say in every phrase.”

~David Patrick Stearns, Philadelphia Inquirer

“[Lubin,s] Mozart is delightful listening from start to finish. Its optimistic outlook is infectious; there,s a real rhythmic spring in its step. The rhythmic fire, like a tennis ball, bounces from keyboard to orchestra and back, never losing its vitality. Lubin is astonishingly expressive and imaginative (Through Classical Soundings), Lubin will re-release his other Mozart concertos previously issued by Arabesque. A more attractive set would be hard to imagine.”

~Sharon McDaniel, Palm Beach Post

