

# The Washington Post

Tuesday, October 28, 2008

## Peabody Trio

By Joe Banno

**A** nose-thumbing sense of humor ripples through much of Mauricio Kagel's music. But while his Piano Trio No. 2 in One Movement – especially with its desolately beautiful finale, written in the wake of 9/11 – is a far cry from his more puckishly absurdist pieces, there's unmistakable mischief in the little marching figures and creepy-crawly slitherings at the opening of the work. The Peabody Trio, in its program at the Corcoran Gallery on Sunday, conjured smiles in those early passages, kept pace with the music's restlessly changing moods and found a touching stillness in the elegiac finale.

No less ear-catching was composer Stephen Coxe's conjectural reconstruction of the (now lost) original piano trio

version of Janáček's String Quartet No. 1, the "Kreutzer Sonata." Inspired by a Tolstoy novella about a love triangle that ends in jealous murder, the quartet's impassioned lyricism translates arrestingly to the roiling piano and operatic treatment of the violin and cello lines in Coxe's retooling.

The Peabody performed the Janáček with trenchancy and kept the emotional temperature high in Dvorák's rapturous, often Brahmsian F-Minor Trio, Op. 65. With throaty, robust tone from violinist Violaine Melançon and cellist Natasha Brofsky, and rock-solid keyboard work from pianist Seth Knopp (who rode the crests of Dvorák's writing in the bigger moments without ever overwhelming his partners), the ensemble brought an edge-of-the-seat excitement to this exuberantly romantic score.

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# GRAMOPHONE

March 2008



## Beethoven

Piano Trios, Op 1 — No 1; No 3

**Peabody Trio** (Violaine Melançon *vn*

Natasha Brofsky *vc* Seth Knopp *pf*)

**Artek AR0038-2 (64' DDD)**

The distance from the three piano trios that Beethoven called Op 1 to his pieces 135 or so numbers later is vast. But even within those first catalogued creations, the musical world shifts mightily. As the Peabody Trio demonstrate to exceptional effect on their newest recording, the Op 1 Trios in E flat, No 1, and the C minor, No 3, reveal how lickety-spit the composer developed from Classical champion to titanic artist of the future.

That is not to say that Beethoven was ever an imitator of past masters, especially Haydn. Instead, as can be heard in No 1, the German composer honoured traditional forms and harmonic gestures while instilling them with fresh twists. This trio is charming, tender and jaunty, with little of the emotional turbulence Beethoven was soon to divulge. By the time he arrived at No 3, he was ready to

stoke the expressive fires to almost fierce dramatic degree. Virtually everything is unsettled, brooding or at least affecting in ways that the previous two trios are not. Clouds gather often in this forward-looking score, which has hints of more striking things to come.

The Peabody take the varied pulses of these two works and instil them with the requisite artistic blood. In the early trio, violinist Violaine Melançon, cellist Natasha Brofsky and pianist Seth Knopp provide the panoply of sparkling sonorities and lightness of touch that the music implies. Their interplay is close and seamless.

The ensemble heighten the intensity level in No 3, in keeping with the more vehement nature of the material. Yet the musicians never sacrifice clarity or nuance amid the urgency. The performance is bold, flexible and vibrant, assuring Beethoven that the innovations are noted even as the music's overall impact receives consummate consideration.

**Donald Rosenberg**

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# STRINGS

March 2008

**Beethoven: Trios, Opus 1, Nos. 1 and 3.**  
**The Peabody Trio: Violaine Melançon,**  
**violin; Natasha Brofsky, cello; Seth**  
**Knopp, piano. (Artek 0038-2)**

This recording marks the Peabody Trio's second release of works by Beethoven (the group recorded the Opus 70 trios in 2004). With this effort, the trio, celebrating its 20th anniversary, hits a home run. The members' extreme focus, lack of ego, and purity of sound testify to their commitment to serving the music first. The performances on this album effervesce, take flight, and soar.

The transition Beethoven makes in these two trios, published in 1795, is a fascinating study — from the perfected Viennese Classical style (influenced by this teacher Joseph Haydn) in Trio No. 1 — to the great No. 3 Trio in C minor, which asserts itself in the moody, fiery vernacular associated with his most famous works, such as the Fifth Symphony. With these trios, his first works to carry an opus number, the composer announces to all that a new era has arrived.

Clocking in around 33 minutes, Trio No. 1 in E-flat major displays an expanse of form and substantive writing that includes extended cello lines and an added

movement that raises chamber music to a higher level. In the first movement, Allegro, pianist Seth Knopp is brilliant: his playing is super-crisp, clean, and articulate.

In the sweet and somewhat regretful Adagio cantabile, all three players seem fused as one, perfectly balanced in dynamics and sound color, their voices gentle, sincere, and heartfelt. Violinist Violaine Melançon's restraint of vibrato and simple cantabile tone enhances the longing, aching emotion of the movement. Natasha Brofsky's cello blends beautifully as well, her phrasing sensitively matched to that of Melançon, though she should have asserted herself more, especially in dialogue with the violin.

Some of my favorite moments here are Knopp's sparkling, light staccato at the end of the Andante cantabile con variazioni of Trio No. 3, as well as the humorous finale of Trio No. 1. The players deftly navigate the waves of constant rhythmic zig-zags and heart-pounding presto passagework. It's during the faster movements in both trios that the Peabodys really show their maturity, their unfaltering focus as a group never wavering.

—Cindi Kazarian



January 8, 2008

**REVIEWS: CDS**

The Peabody Trio's new release of Beethoven Trios (Artek) finds the ensemble in excellent form. Violinist Violaine Melançon, cellist Natasha Brofsky and pianist Seth Knopp tap elegantly into the lingering traces of Mozart and Haydn in Op. 1, No. 1. And in Op. 1, No. 3, the musicians unleash the provocative traces of the mold-breaker Beethoven would soon become.

There is throughout the disc a vibrancy and expressive flair from the performers, with phrases beautifully sculpted, the interplay between instruments finely balanced.

—*Tim Smith*

# The Strad

January 2005

## REVIEWS: CDS

**Beethoven** Piano Trios no. 5 in D major op. 70 no. 1 'Ghost' & no. 6 in E-flat major op. 70 no. 2  
Peabody Trio  
ARTEK AR-0018-2

Here is some of the most accomplished Beethoven trio playing that I have heard in many a year. The Peabody ensemble, which has been going for about 15 years, is clearly among the best trios on the scene.

Having listened to the 'Ghost' quite a few times recently, I began with the E-flat major Trio. Via one of Judith Sherman's straightforwardly clear recordings, I immediately registered delightful touches from pianist Seth Knopp and noted how well violinist Violaine Melançon and cellist Natasha Brofsky combine. The two string players both have distinctive tones but make a point of matching their phrasing where necessary. They also know when to get out of each other's way — this goes for the pianist too. In fact,

although the playing bursts with personality it is never selfish. These people have studied the music closely and they always put it first, shaping and pacing of the individual movements are also exemplary in the E flat major Trio.

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### *Exemplary shaping and phrasing.*

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When it comes to the D major, the players go at the outer movements hammer-and-tongs but never overstep the mark, as at least one overpraised rival trio regularly does. The famous Largo is drawn out to 13 minutes but does not sound too slow, because the musicians have such a sure sense of the rhythmic pulse underlying it.

In short, I am moved, excited and gratified by the musicianship of the Peabody Trio. What a shame the booklet cover is so grim — these three paragons deserve the best.

—TULLY POTTER

# The Times - Picayune

Friday, March 3, 2006

By Chris Waddington

**A**lthough the Peabody Trio has not set dates for a return, the world-touring ensemble used its recent concert to seal an expanding relationship with Louisiana.

The trio — Violaine Melançon on violin, cellist Natasha Brofsky and pianist Seth Kopp — presented a post-Katrina benefit concert for New Orleans Friends of Music in March 2006. They returned to Tulane University's Dixon Hall on Tuesday with another well-conceived program — works by Janáček, Ravel, and contemporary composer Zhou Long. Those selections offered plenty of musical variety — from Czech melodies to Asian scales — knit together in a delightful program that emphasized open musical textures, rare harmonies and nimble handoffs between musical partners who often played alone or in very exposed positions.

The centerpiece was a work of musical reconstruction commissioned by the Friends — a first for the all-volunteer organization that has showcased classical chamber works at Tulane for 53 seasons.

Janáček had written a piano trio in 1908. He destroyed the manuscript after the premiere — or did he? Many ideas from the early piece turned up in his famed 1923 string quartet titled “The Kreutzer Sonata.” When scholars discovered a few pages of Janáček’s “lost” trio, the Peabody joined with colleagues in the Weilerstein Trio, and asked composer Stephen Coxe to reconstruct the 1908 work — a project financed by the Friends.

They got their money's worth on Tuesday, with a performance that captured Janáček's tough, clashing style, and which smartly encapsulated the themes of the “Kreutzer”: jealousy and yearning in a love triangle.

# The Times - Picayune

Friday, March 3, 2006

## Classical music never felt so contemporary Peabody Trio makes Schubert sizzle, gives Beethoven bounce

By Chris Waddington

**D**ecked in evening wear worthy of an Oscar night runway, the elegant young players of the Peabody Trio turned in star performances at Tulane University's Dixon Hall on Wednesday. It was the second of five post-Katrina benefit concerts organized by New Orleans Friends of Music.

Playing with choreographed abandon, the Peabody enlivened a potentially stodgy program of Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert piano trios, delivering musical stunts as astounding as anything in an action flick. Their readings were full of dramatic rests, dynamic changes and daring tempos, and reminded one that written scores, like screenplays, are recipes that allow plenty of room for personal interpretation.

Although the Peabody Trio's performance felt utterly contemporary, it had none of the forced qualities of Shakespeare-in-modern-dress. The trio conjured their effects by selectively emphasizing details in the scores, aided by a well-balanced group sound in which every instrument's part came through clearly.

When Seth Knopp unrolled the trancelike, slow-building piano figures in Beethoven's "Ghost" trio, was he thinking about the minimalist compositions of Philip Glass? Would Violaine Melançon and Natasha Brofsky have conjured such haunting overtones from violin and cello, without knowing the harmonic

explorations of Bartók and Shostakovich?

And what about the Peabody's rhythmic elan? When a passage turned on a single sawed note from the cello, or a melody rode on a repeated violin figure, one couldn't help but imagine these conservatory-trained players riding on subways surrounded by the emphatic pops and scratches of hip-hop.

In Wednesday's performance, they underscored every dance rhythm in each composition and behaved a bit like dancers themselves. They stretched certain notes and let them snap back elastically.

In the opening Allegro of Schubert's Trio in B-Flat major, both piano and cello laid out for a few bars, letting Melançon's violin edge up higher and higher, drawing out the note until, at last, the piano returned to catch her. It was playing meant to keep an audience on the edge of its seat — an intention which seems pretty close to the desires of three composers who were also known for performing their own work.

Those who search for the grail of historic authenticity could also find plenty to appreciate in the Peabody Trio's interpretations.

In Knopp's hands, the elaborate filigree of Mozart's piano writing (in the Trio in B-Flat major) brought to mind the rococo decoration of 18th century architecture, while Melançon's singing violin lines reminded one that Mozart's greatest accomplishments are in his operas.

B E S E N  A R T S

# THE PLAIN DEALER

April 8, 2005

## Trio awards crowd with unique sound

By Zachary Lewis

The song “Happy Birthday” may never sound the same again to some, not after the Peabody Trio’s performance of Alfred Schnittke’s Piano Trio, the musical high point of the group’s concert Wednesday night at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Schnittke’s Trio, the composer’s adaptation of his 1985 String Trio honoring the 100th birthday of Alban Berg, opens with an emotionally and musically inverted allusion to the beloved birthday melody, then follows the haunting idea to its gloomiest and harshest conclusions.

There was no such thing as passive listening as violinist Violaine Melancon, cellist Natasha Brofsky and pianist Seth Knopp injected shots of bracing polytonality, strains of genteel classicism and pointed fits of minimalist thumping.

The same warped tune informs the trio’s second movement but in slower, bleaker and more dissonant terms. Feathery piano passages hovered in the Peabody’s performance above string music that was the sonic equivalent of grinding stones.

More upbeat and theatrical, if less satisfying musically, was the world’s

second hearing of American composer Harold Meltzer’s new “Sinbad for Narrator and Piano Trio,” based on an eccentric and highly amusing text by Donald Barthelme.

Dressed like one of the tale’s main characters, actor Walter van Dyk embodied many animated personalities and voices as he read alternating scenes contrasting the colorful heroics of Sinbad the adventurer with the sad-sack existence of a night-school teacher who’s unused to sunlight.

Mozart’s B-flat major Piano Trio and Beethoven’s D-major Piano Trio, the “Ghost,” fleshed out the evening substantially. Overly dramatized or rushed accounts of the outer movements of both pieces were the bookends to two glorious largos. An exception was the Peabody’s playful, gamelike take on the last movement of the Mozart.

Melancon’s and Brofsky’s buoyant strings combined with Knopp’s crystalline piano to lend Mozart’s slow movement an extra measure of fragility. And their Beethoven was a captivating ride from beginning to end, from somber opening dialogue to that electrifying final descent down the scale.

# San Francisco Chronicle

February 14, 2004

## *Peabody plays the ever-elusive Schnittke*

By Joshua Kosman

**Y**ou have to love a composer who fulfills a commission for the Alban Berg centennial with a piece that mixes chunks of Shostakovich, Philip Glass, Stravinsky — and even taps — into one big mournful elegy.

That's what the late Alfred Schnittke did in his 1985 Piano Trio, and it was the high point of Thursday's recital by the Peabody Trio, presented by San Francisco Performances in Herbst Theatre.

Like nearly all of Schnittke's music, this 20-minute score offers an elusive blend of musical styles and emotional tones. The main theme, aptly described by one of the musicians as "Happy Birthday" played upside down and in a minor key, runs through the entire piece like a benevolent but lugubrious ghost, inciting the players to everything from still-voiced chorales to frenzied dissonant outbursts.

The attitude underlying Schnittke's stylistic restlessness is as hard as ever to pin down. Is it meant ironically? Is it a frantic search for new avenues of expression? And is the haunting beauty of the score's tonal episodes actually merited, or is it simply a tribute to the easy potency of cheap music?

The Peabody deftly evaded these tricky questions, producing a performance that

was both fervent and dry-eyed, and left listeners to make up their own minds about Schnittke's intricate rhetoric. From the chugging Glass chords that pop up midway through the piece to the violin's final fade into the ether, the performance found its way with surefooted precision.

Though it's been in residence at Baltimore's Peabody Conservatory since 1989, the ensemble has roots in the Bay Area — the husband-and-wife team of pianist Seth Knopp and violinist Violaine Melançon were students at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music in the 1980s and performed here frequently. Cellist Natasha Brofsky contributes a passionate intensity to the mix.

A crisp, delightfully fleet-footed rendition of Mozart's B-Flat Trio, K. 502, opened the program. There was more memorializing during the second ball, with Tchaikovsky's enormous and strange Piano Trio in A Minor, written in 1881-82 to commemorate the death of pianist Nikolai Rubinstein.

The music's expansive frame and torrentially expressive material, an unbridled outpouring of grief, came through eloquently in the ensemble's performance.

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# The Oxford Times

3 JUNE 2005  
(Oxford, England)

## OXFORD CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY: HOLYWELL MUSIC ROOM

By Hugh Vickers

The Oxford Chamber Music Society brought us one of their most original and intriguing concerts for a long time with the Peabody Piano Trio. This first-class American group gave us fine performances of Mozart's K 502 and Beethoven's 'Archduke', sandwiching a startling and deeply interesting modern work written specially for them, Harold Meltzer's *Sindbad*.

The Mozart, written in the miraculous Figaro year, revealed the Peabody as a superbly integrated trio, Seth Knopp's piano playing never overwhelming the two strings, even in the *Larghetto*, whose simple theme he invested with such meaning. Violin and cello (Violaine Melançon and Natasha Brofsky) were also listening closely to one another, particularly in the subtle contrapuntal moments in the *Allegretto*. A lovely performance which did not exaggerate the touches of grandeur which link this work to Mozart's earlier B-flat Piano Concerto.

Meltzer's *Sindbad* was, in every possible sense, a knockout. Apart from anything else, it's years since I heard a modern work which kept one laughing all the way through. This was a 'melodrama'

in the Victorian sense, with a virtuoso narrator (the actor Walter Van Dyk), declaiming ten short prose-poems by David Barthelme, in which he contrasts the traditional narrative of Sindbad the Sailor with a second character, a hopeless, ineffective American night-school teacher, the whole punctuated with telling (often powerful) interjections by the piano trio.

Unlikely? But in Barthelme's hands, this is the world of 'magic realism' *par excellence*. And, in Meltzer's, added musical magic (the penultimate *Waltzes* section was truly lovely). However, most credit must go to Van Dyk, whose almost Rory Bremner range of voices ran from disillusioned New York professor (*Experience*) to a gloriously shocked ultra-English (*Tennis* - though it must be added that Sindbad's opponents are a couple of one-eyed ogres). Tremendous stuff.

It's a tribute to Beethoven that after this startling offering, the 'Archduke' Trio seemed just as experimental, just as bold. The Peabody gave maximum energy to the outer movements and a special inwardness to the *Andante*.

B E S E N  A R T S

# The Birmingham News

Monday, March 6, 2006

## Peabody Trio Plays Beethoven Like Mad

By Michael Huebner

**A**nalysis of a lock of Beethoven's hair, done in the 1990s, showed that he was toxic. Lead poisoning was the likely culprit for his reputed stomach pains, fatigue and foul temper. The Peabody Trio must have known that he was an angry man.

The ensemble's take-no-prisoners approach to its all-Beethoven program Saturday left no note unturned. Even in the relatively natty language of two early trios, they played with anguished intensity and with singular expression.

Hailing from the famed Baltimore music conservatory of the same name, the Peabody has been on a roll over Beethoven lately, recording or touring all seven of the piano trios. Two aspects of the composer's temperament were set in sharp relief at this concert.

In the Op. 1, No. 1, in E-flat, delicate exchanges in the Adagio were a mere setup for the forceful accents and sharp

contrasts in the Scherzo and Finale. Pianist Seth Knopp dominated, as he did most of the evening, sometimes to the detriment of instrumental balance.

The Trio in C minor, Op. 1, No. 3, revealed more of the musical personalities of violinist Violaine Melançon and cellist Natasha Brofsky. Melançon has a lovely, focused tone, as she expressed in several short solo passages. Brofsky is especially appealing for the singing qualities she draws. Together with Knopp, they're more gritty than pretty, but then, Beethoven is rarely about prettiness.

A case in point was the "Ghost" Trio, Op. 70, No. 1. With their sights set on the work's architectural pillars, they mastered its tonal vagaries and devilish difficulties with startling accents and dynamic swells and exaggerated dissonances. With the fiery-eyed Knopp's low-pitched humming and constant eye contact with his partners, the trio formed a dramatic tableau, made musical with aggressive tension cordoned off by passages of sweet lyricism.

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# The Des Moines Register

April 11, 2005

## *Peabody Trio takes listeners on an invigorating ride*

By Ben Alloway

**O**n Stage at the Art Center hosted a ravishing program superbly delivered Saturday night by the Peabody Trio, with guest narrator Walter Van Dyk.

Named for the conservatory where they are resident artists, the trio members are Violaine Melancon, violin, Natasha Brofsky, cello, and Seth Knopp, piano.

As ensembles go, the piano trio is versatile, colorful and efficient, and requires composers to deal with the instruments more individually than, for example, a string quartet.

Mozart's Piano Trio in B flat major, K. 502, began the evening, an engaging work with attractive rhythmic play in the opening allegro theme.

The piano dominates in this score, being given most of the faster notes and transitional material, handled enthusiastically by Knopp. There was one transition in the larghetto back to a major key in which Knopp's fingers were exquisitely sensitive to the subtle shifts in voicing.

The movement had two gorgeous themes traded between piano and violin. Melancon offers her gift in an opulent, singing tone welcome in the listener's inner world.

The closing allegretto let cellist Brofsky play a bit more in this active but never flashy movement. Next came the Midwest premiere of Harold Meltzer's "Sindbad" for piano trio and narrator.

The composition, based on a short story by Donald Barthelme, features vignettes about the seafaring hero interspersed with

those of a new character, a jaded night-school teacher who has been asked suddenly to teach a class during the day.

Both characters were portrayed brilliantly by English actor/singer Walter Van Dyk. Sindbad and supporting characters were given various English accents, while the teacher was American. He was completely convincing delivering such lines as, "Night-class teachers aren't allowed to be married," and "I have a room somewhere with one of those refrigerators that sits upon a table."

Barthelme's fantastic story found a great match in Meltzer, who created a vivid, undulating backdrop of atonal music capturing the adventure, peril, irony, resignation and exasperation of the characters.

All players dazzled with their handling of this difficult score, but the cello seemed closest to the two main characters, and Brofsky reveled in this task with strapping tone and multifarious colors for their exploits.

Not to be outdone, Beethoven made his presence known with the "Ghost" trio, which turned all instruments loose from the start. The players had their "game faces" on as if pumped up for a championship game. Theme after theme of Beethoven at his best came forth, the group seeming to channel his fiery spirit with each passage.

No encore was needed after such an invigorating musical ride. The Peabody Trio's rare depth of talent and expressive range are simply breathtaking.

# TULSA WORLD

October 31, 2005

## *Music of Ives Comes Alive Peabody Trio provides thrilling ride*

By James D. Watts Jr.

The Ives had it Sunday afternoon, as the Peabody Trio opened Chamber Music Tulsa's 2005-06 season at the Tulsa Performing Arts Center.

Charles Ives, that is, the uniquely American unique, period — composer whose sole Piano Trio was sandwiched between two works by Beethoven.

Ives' music rarely gets played in Tulsa. His experiments with sound — collages of competing tunes, rhythms and keys that attempt to capture all at once the joyous cacophony of American life — aren't to everyone's tastes. One woman at Sunday's concert went so far as to announce that the Ives Trio sounded to her like "music by savages."

No, it didn't. It sounded bloody marvelous, to tell you the truth.

A lot of that success is due to the extraordinary talents of the Peabody Trio, making their first visit to Tulsa in more than a decade. The ensemble of Seth Knapp on piano, violinist Violaine Melancon and Natasha Brofsky, cello, is one of the best around. Their interaction with, and understanding of, each other's playing was wondrous to hear. Their mastery of the all-too-delicate balance between the whisper and cry of the strings and the tinkle and thunder of the piano is just about perfect.

And they invest everything they play with an energy and urgency that is irresistible.

All of which comes in handy when tackling something like the Ives Trio. It

was pointed out in both the pre-concert lecture by Leonard Garrison and Knopp's own comments before the performance that this piece is a kind of musical autobiography of Ives' memories of his college days at Yale.

Spirited philosophical arguments are the subject of the first movement, represented by Knopp's playing only with his right hand to accompany the cello's opening statement, and only with his left when the violin made its reply. The cacophony builds until the very end, when all three instruments come together in a conventional melody, as if the parties have agreed to disagree.

The second movement is a rambunctious collage of popular songs and hymns, the sound of an old-fashioned Victrola record player running down, the furious and aimless energy of youth. The finale is studded with surprising moments of tonal tenderness before it concludes with a hushed, unfinished reading of the hymn "Rock of Ages."

A wild tide, to be sure, but thrilling to hear.

For those who like their music more conventional, the Peabody's performances of the Beethoven trios more than satisfied.

The Trio in B-flat Major, Op. 1, No. 1, is a determinedly playful piece of music. The bright and energetic first movement is built around an ascending five-note phrase that fairly skips along. The scherzo is fast and percussive, a "joke" in

the best sense of the word, and the finale truly sounds like children at play.

Only the second movement tempers the atmosphere, with mournful songs for the violin and cello punctuated by dramatic, deliberate, Pinter-esque pauses.

It's doubtful that the Peabody Trio chose to perform Beethoven's Piano Trio in D Major, Op. 70, No. 1, the "Ghost," in honor of Halloween.

There's nothing spooky about the piece — it gets its nickname from the haunting second movement, which is filled with evanescent melodies and gently dissonant harmonies that create a feeling of loss and unease, and that prompted a student of Beethoven to compare it to the ghost in "Hamlet."

Yet the trio's first and third movements are full of life and energy. The first movement's main theme, a six-note melody from the cello, is continually interrupted by passionate outbursts from the violin and piano (which is a little frustrating, because I loved the gorgeous, supple tone of Brofsky's cello, and would have loved to hear more of it so showcased).

And the Peabody's performance of the finale was an excellent demonstration of the group's wonderful sense of interaction and communication. You never got the sense of watching three individuals on stage — you may have seen three players, but you heard one voice.

B E S E N  A R T S

# The Record

Stockton, California

Monday, April 2, 2001

## *Peabody Trio ends chamber music series on high note*

By Sherman Spencer

**E**ven when, you consider the consistently high standard of the Friends of Chamber Music concert artists, the Peabody Trio must be judged as exceptional.

In the final concert of this year's series Saturday evening, their performances of works by Shulamit Ran, Ravel and Beethoven set new benchmarks of technical expertise and interpretation for a rapt audience of 137.

The world-famed ensemble, formed in 1989 and since then in residence at Baltimore's Peabody Conservatory, consists of violinist Violaine Melancon, cellist Natasha Brofsky and pianist Seth Knopp.

The salient feature of this trio lies in a certain unique quality of their interpretations. They have a subtlety of phrasing plus an amazing control of dynamics that seem to imbue each work with a special inward glow.

Through the three works played, representing the modern, impressionistic and classical eras, did not differ radically from traditional interpretive styles, they each were suffused with the group's special aura.

Ran's "Soliloquy" for Piano Trio abounded in special effects for the strings. Melodies played in high harmonics, tremolos and sudden and unexpected attacks were intermingled with longer melodic lines. The piano served principally as an accompaniment.

The piece, written for them in 1997, was played with obvious insight and conviction.

Ravel's 1915 Trio in A Minor provides one of the masterpieces of the piano trio repertory. The superb performance by these artists rendered its virtuoso demands, its sudden dynamic contrasts and its amazingly full — almost orchestral — sound with an incomparable lushness and elegance.

Beethoven's Trio in B-flat Major Op. 97 "Archduke" contrasts the composer's rather formal development style of the early movements with a rondo in the final section that only can be called arch. The "archduke" referred to in the title, however, refers to its 1811 dedication to his friend Archduke Rudolph.

It was during this final fanciful section that the full force of the Peabody could be best observed.

Knopp, for whom technical problems seem not to exist, maintains a perfect balance with the strings. The demands of the fiendishly difficult piano parts in the Ravel and Beethoven works came through with perfect articulation.

Brofsky exhibits facial expressions and body language that so mirror her cello contribution you almost don't need to hear her play. But that would be a pity, for she obtains a wondrously sonorous sound from her cello.

Melancon has a more reserved stage presence, but this is not reflected in the impressive range of dynamic and tonal qualities she displays with her violin.

The group's ensemble is awesome, as is the seemingly effortless musicality of their interpretations.

# The Salt Lake Tribune

March 30, 2001

## *Peabody Trio Shines at Gardner Hall*

By Jeff Manookian

It was an odd juxtaposition of events when Edward Epstein, president of the Chamber Music Society of Salt Lake City, grieved the loss of classical music on KUER-FM radio before a most memorable classical concert. The Peabody Trio — violinist Violaine Melançon, cellist Natasha Brofsky and pianist Seth Knopp — was the society's ensemble du jour Wednesday in the Libby Gardner Concert Hall. A sizable and enthusiastic crowd was in complete support of Epstein's lamentation.

What looked like brilliant programming on paper indeed became ingenious in its live presentation. The Peabody Trio was stellar in its performance of Beethoven's "Archduke" Trio. Ravel's only contribution to this genre and a contemporary work — written especially for the Peabody Trio — Shulamit Ran's "Soliloquy."

The pointillist pitches in Ran's evocative "Soliloquy" brilliantly played off each other in composition and execution. This remarkable romantic evocation of contemporary time owed much of its flavor to the composer's homeland, Israel, coming across with an original and captivating voice.

The Peabody championed the work with virtuosity and insightful conceptualizations. The instrumentalists presented

breathhtaking musical climaxes amid the composition's poignant and intimate fabrics.

Ravel's only work for this ensemble's configuration was a high point in the evening's music-making. Although the performance of the Beethoven Trio was a brilliant finale, there was a sense of personal identification coming from the performers with the Ravel.

The luscious timbres coming from Melançon's violin and her overall solid intonation, amid some tricky scoring, made her musical traversal of the piece a dynamic experience.

Brofsky's collaboration complemented the ensemble's uncanny sense of balance and counterpoint. She is an obvious soloist, but never hogged the spotlight, although her presence was ever indisputable, she is a team player in the best sense of the word.

Pianist Knopp's sensitivity was near-perfection. It seemed that the Ravel was his personal friend. This is not to say that Knopp wasn't amazing with the Ran and Beethoven works. There was just a special spark with this particular composition.

The Peabody Trio reinforced the Chamber Music Society's acumen for bringing our community some of its best musical exhibitions.

# THE INDIANAPOLIS STAR

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## *Trio's convergence thrills, captivates*

By Whitney Smith

Chamber music on any level is an exercise in synergy, and at its best, the intimate style of concert hall playing often showcases various methods of bringing things together.

Such was the case with the Ensemble Music Society's presentation of The Peabody Trio with clarinetist Charles Neidich on Wednesday night at the Indiana Historical Society.

Their program of two enduring melodic works from the romantic era, flanked by thought-provoking, lesser-known 20th century pieces, added up to an exceptional concertgoing experience. Each piece offered listeners fascinating, yet distinctly different examples of how musical materials or talent can come together.

*Contrasts*, which Bartok wrote for clarinetist Benny Goodman and violinist Joseph Szygeti, is structured something like a dance suite — starting with a fast movement based on an old military 'recruiting dance' — and proceeding to a nocturne-like slow movement, and then a quick dance. But blended into that age-old form are Bartok's contrasting tonalities, energy levels and textures.

The dominant partnership is clarinet and violin, with much of the piano work coming off as accompaniment. In this case, the collaboration of Neidich and violinist Violaine Melancon often seemed a match of wits to keep up with steady shifts in roles, dynamics and instruments tuned at various pitches. The playing was carried off intelligently and expressively.

In the Brahms Clarinet Trio, which came right before intermission, teamwork between Neidich and cellist Natasha Brofsky was often breathtaking, whether it was their precise attacks, matched phrasing, superb blend, singing melodies or richness of tone.

Following the break, the Peabody Trio — a resident ensemble at the Baltimore-based conservatory by that name — stood on its own. First, they performed Beethoven's *Archduke* Piano Trio, then came through with a bonus not on the program: a piano trio adaptation of *Between Two Worlds (The Dybbuk)*, a 1997 opera commissioned by the Lyric Opera of Chicago from Israeli-American composer Shulamit Ran.

In the Beethoven, the collaboration often featured pianist Seth Knopp, whose wide-ranging contributions went from virtuosity to seamless dialogue with parallel harmony in the strings, to an almost hypnotic expressiveness in prominent piano work. The deliberate, deliciously slow phrasing in the *Andante cantabile* third movement was captivating.

The pianist described *Between Two Worlds* as an opera that tells a story of unrequited love, in which the woman was married off to someone else. The man died, but returned in spirit to possess her husband. The piano trio version certainly has haunting, anguished and ethereal moments that seem to effectively support such a tale.

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