

# Pamela Hickman's Concert Critique Blog

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## Trio Nota Bene (Switzerland) performs Mendelssohn, Martin and Tchaikovsky at the Jerusalem Music Centre



The Jerusalem Music Centre, in collaboration with Culture Scapes - the Swiss Season in Israel – hosted Trio Nota Bene in a concert at the JMC November 11th, 2011. All three members of the trio – pianist Lionel Monnet, violinist Julien Zufferey and ‘cellist Xavier Pignat – come from the Canton of Valais (Switzerland), receiving diplomas in chamber music from the Lausanne Conservatory in 2000. Trio Nota Bene performs widely in Europe, collaborates with other players and ensembles, records and takes part in festivals. The trio premieres new chamber works and is the recipient of a number of prizes and awards.

Following words of welcome from Hed Sella, executive director of the Jerusalem Music Centre, the concert opened with Felix Mendelssohn’s (1809-1847) Piano Trio no.2 in C minor, opus 66. In the 1844-1845 season, Mendelssohn had taken a year off from his accumulating performing- and conducting obligations in Leipzig, where he served as the first musical director of the Gewandhaus Orchestra; by the beginning of 1845, Mendelssohn was free to devote more time to composition, composing, among other works, the opus 66 C minor Trio. It was dedicated to the renowned conductor, composer and violinist Louis Spohr, who was known to have played through the work with Mendelssohn at least once. Opening with the *Allegro energico e con fuoco*, Trio Nota Bene’s playing of the work was communicative, controlled and clean, Mendelssohn’s powerful utterance of this movement never sounding over-sentimental, Monnet’s use of the sustaining pedal never washing away clear melodic lines. If we were reminded of the “Songs Without Words in the Andante, the third movement – Scherzo - conjured up the charm, lightness and fantasy of the setting of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”, its dreamlike timbres eventually dissolving into minimal vaporous strands . The Finale, a rondo, began with a vivacious, sharp-profiled melody in the ‘cello, but then we hear the piano quoting “Vor Deinem Thron” (Before Thy Throne), a chorale from the Geneva Psalter of 1551, an unexpected element in chamber music, although Mendelssohn had used chorales several times in other instrumental compositions.

The Swiss content of the program consisted mostly of Frank Martin’s (1890-1974) Piano "Trio on Popular Irish Folk Tunes" (1925), a work commissioned by a wealthy Irish-American business man. Living in Paris at the time, Martin

found the ancient Irish melodies in books in the Bibliothèque Nationale (National Library) of Paris and used them as melodic- and rhythmic raw material for the three movements of the work. The work begins with a drone to set off the first Irish melody, setting the scene for a work based on folk music. The Nota Bene players certainly got into the spirit of energy and exuberance of Irish music, emphasizing the work's spicy, asymmetric phrases, sudden changes of melody and textures, Martin's skilful use of thematic variation, syncopations and wild dance rhythms. Zufferey's playing was certainly evocative of the fiddle. The players gave the Gigue (Irish Jig) their all, with plenty of intensity and give-and-take.

When Nadezhda von Meck (Tchaikovsky's patron and confidante) wrote to the composer asking why he had never written a trio, the composer answered that, in this sonority, the instruments formed an unnatural combination and that "any kind of trio or sonata with piano or 'cello is absolute torture for me". P.I.Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) did then write one piano trio – Piano Trio in A minor opus 50 "In Memory of a Great Artist"(1882) – the artist being pianist Nikolai Rubinstein, founder of the Moscow Conservatory of Music, who died at age 45. Rubinstein was a colleague and close friend of the composer and had premiered many of Tchaikovsky's piano works; yet he was also a severe critic of Tchaikovsky and his music. The A minor Piano Trio consists of two movements – an introductory elegy and a vast theme and variations, the last variation constituting an independent finale. Tchaikovsky purposely gave the piano much prominence. The trio is a mammoth work both in length and in its technical demands; in the past, chamber music players have been known to shorten sections...an unorthodox practice! Trio Nota Bene took on board the technical and emotional aspects of the work, opening with sonorous weaving of melodies and gestures, its funereal, darker moments punctuating more intensive sections. The movement ended with a thoughtful rendering of the original theme in a fragmented form. The players presented a range of emotions, styles, associations and references in the Theme and Variations (Tchaikovsky wrote that the variations represented scenes and events of Rubinstein's life) – from dark foreboding, heavy gestures, to feather-light moments, to Viennese-type dance associations, to a Chopinesque Mazurka, from highly orchestrated variations to ghostly arpeggiated textures, finally referring back to the doleful opening theme of the first movement. It was a moving performance. Trio Nota Bene exercises restraint and good taste, avoiding mannerisms and taking trouble to illuminate the musical text. Their playing is direct, focused and sincere.

For an encore, the trio chose the second of Swiss-born composer Ernest Bloch's "Three Nocturnes for Piano Trio" (1924), its serene, lyrical theme expressed in long phrases.

Subscribers to the JMC's 2011-2012 Chamber Music Series were invited to attend the festive concert as guests of the Centre, later enjoying a reception and the chance to chat with the artists.

Posted by Pamela Hickman at 4:49 AM

Labels: [Julien Zufferey-violin](#), [Lionel Monnet-piano](#), [Xavier Pignat-'cello](#)