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KLR Trio concert brims with virtuosity, charm

By Mary Kunz Goldman
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It would be hard to find a better group of musicians than the legendary Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio. And it would be impossible to find three musicians who were more humble.

The KLR Trio, as they are affectionately known, gave a concert Tuesday evening in Kleinhans Music Hall's Mary Seaton Room, courtesy of the Buffalo Chamber Music Society, that brimmed not only with virtuosity but with charm.

Pianist Joseph Kalichstein, violinist Jaime Laredo and cellist Sharon Robinson trooped out from the wings as casually as if they were your neighbors. They beamed as if surprised by the applause. When they sat down to play, it was without pomp or pretense.

Together since 1977, the trio all but breathes together. **Their timing is impeccable, their unity is natural, and that no doubt feeds into their laid-back vibe.**

They began with the 2012 Trio No. 2 by Andre Previn. You cannot say that this piece needs no introduction, and so it got one. As new music goes, though, it was easy to listen to. I couldn't find the piece to listen to in advance, so I was hearing it for the first time, and although I could not catch a coherent vision, it was easy to like. It is witty and has hints of jazz. I'm happy to hear Previn is writing music into his 80s. I hope he continues.

The KLR Trio commissioned this piece, and it matches their unpretentious vibe. I don't think any other trio could make sense of it the way they did. Kalichstein's light and precise touch on the piano brought out the bluesy trimmings, and Robinson's rich tone emphasized the music's prettiness. Particularly in the second movement, the cello's melodies shone with depth and resonance. (A distinguished Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra violinist pointed out at intermission, "Well, you know, she's playing a Strad.")

Dvorak's Piano Trio No. 2, Op. 26, took us back to 1876. Like the Previn, it spotlighted the musicians' fine sense of timing, an amenity polished over time. There were solid fortes, with all the musicians digging into the piece's robust qualities. Robinson's Strad rang out, and Kalichstein's playing was strong and expansive. It was a thrill to hear Laredo playing his high-treble passages.

There is nothing like hearing these musicians playing a graceful pianissimo. One interlude in the last movement had Kalichstein dancing up the keyboard and the violin and cello accompanying him in a kind of drone. I got the sense that Kalichstein drives the trio, that he sets the pace and the tone.

Beethoven's "Archduke" Trio was the highlight. The trio acknowledged its supremacy by playing it last.

What a magnificent work this is, and the musicians emphasized its delicacies. Kalichstein added subtle embellishments here and there. His crystalline ornaments and trills were a pleasure, particularly in the development section of the first movement, with the strings playing pizzicato. The group has a fine sense of drama and the coda to the first movement was loud and thrilling. The trio of the Scherzo, with its ghostly chromatics, had a good air of suspense.

The slow movement of the "Archduke" Trio is one of the great creations in all of chamber music. Kalichstein sounded the simple, transcendent theme with straightforward grace. The first variation, with its gentle piano triplets, can break your heart, and he played it with wonderful tenderness. Laredo and Robinson, too, rose to the occasion with tremendous nobility.

The tricky last movement came off flawlessly. It is especially exciting to hear this trio when all three are playing soft and fast. The coda, splendidly choreographed, brought the big crowd to its feet.

There was an encore, bless these musicians' hearts. Laredo announced it. "Can we all agree this has been a horrendous winter?" he said. And they gave us Andy Stein's sultry arrangement of George Gershwin's "Summertime."