

Lucky Charm

Over its 50-year history, the Beaux Arts Trio's lineup has included eight different string players – but only one pianist. Menahem Pressler talks to Jessica Duchen about his eventful career, in which good fortune has often played a crucial role.



It was originally formed for nine concerts, its name picked out of thin air for the occasion. Yet the [Beaux Arts Trio](#) is now celebrating its 50th birthday – marking five decades during which this exceptional group has been the world's leading piano trio. Its two current string players, violinist [Daniel Hope](#) and cellist [Antonio Meneses](#), are recent recruits, considerably younger in years than their ensemble – all the more amazing, then, that the Beaux Arts Trio is still recognisably its old self. That defining touch can be traced to the group's core: its pianist, Menahem Pressler.

Pressler is an extraordinary figure in his own right. He is one of those few pianists whose sound can be recognised at once: smooth, sparkling, mercurial, singing and pure at the same time.

Nor would you ever guess that he is in his eighties. This year his schedule has encompassed a 'Menahem Pressler week' at the Châtelet in Paris; major anniversary concerts with the Trio all over Europe and America, including some new works commissioned especially for its 50th anniversary; and, of course, his busy teaching schedule at the University of Indiana in Bloomington, where he has been based for some 25 years. When I caught up with the Trio in Berlin and was lucky enough to join them for dinner after their concert, Pressler's irrepressible energy found him declaring it was time to turn in only well past 1am. Daniel Hope, who is five decades younger, declares: 'Menahem is always the first to sit down for a rehearsal and the last one to get up at the end!'

Pressler credits much of his good fortune to sheer luck. He was born in Magdeburg, Germany, and his escape from the Nazi regime in 1939 seems little short of miraculous. 'My parents had Polish passports and said that we were going on vacation; so the Germans let us through,' he recounts. 'It was only weeks before the war started. We went to Trieste and here we got visas to go to Palestine just a few

days before Italy joined the war. The boat on which we travelled had to remain in Haifa after the journey because it couldn't go back to Italy. Luck played an enormous role.'

His teachers varied in tradition: among them was Leo Kestenberg, a former pupil of Busoni and a renowned figure in musical education. 'He had come to Israel to be the general manager of the Israel Philharmonic, which was led by Bronislaw Huberman,' Pressler recounts. 'He was an extremely knowledgeable man and guided me not just in piano playing but in a philosophical approach to making music – helping me to understand it more as a way of life than just the playing of the piano. After that I went to America to participate in the Debussy Competition in San Francisco where I won the first prize. I studied with Robert Casadesus in Fontainebleau; I spent a summer with Egon Petri in California; then, when I was already giving concerts, I studied in New York on and off with Eduard Steuermann, the pianist to whom Schoenberg dedicated his Piano Concerto and Webern his Variations.

'Steuermann was a tremendous musician: a difficult man and a difficult musician too, because he'd convince you one way – and then proceed to convince you of exactly the opposite! For me, at that time, it was ideal: it freed me to feel secure that I could find my own way, that something didn't have to be done only in the way I had been told.' The Beaux Arts Trio is now planning to resuscitate Steuermann's trio arrangement of Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht*.

How did the Trio come into being? Pressler answers, with a knowing glint: 'Luck!' He had begun to make solo recordings in the US for MGM and had thought of recording some Mozart piano trios. 'It was 1955, I'd come to the US from Israel and I didn't know anyone. But in the hotel apartments where I lived there was also a violinist from Toscanini's orchestra. We often had coffee and played a little together, so I told him I'd like to make some Mozart recordings and asked who he would suggest. And he said at once: "Go to the concertmaster of our orchestra, Daniel Guilet," and invited me to come to a rehearsal and meet him.' The original lineup was completed by the cellist, Bernard Greenhouse.

Guilet initially wanted to name the group the Guilet Trio, but Pressler and Greenhouse were not in favour. Their manager, however, advised them that 'the Guilet-Pressler-Greenhouse Trio' was too cumbersome to advertise. 'We had a French violinist,' relates Pressler, 'so we just picked a French name: Beaux Arts. It was only going to be for nine concerts, and finished! We didn't know that this name would become synonymous with chamber music.'

So that was that. 'I thought it involved beautiful music, I saw there was something in the chemistry between us that was unusual and that the audience reacted quite accurately. I didn't know that it would be the mainstay of my life, the musical nourishment of my life, the success of my life! The same chemistry is happening now with my two marvellous young men, Daniel and Antonio. It's wonderful.'

When Isidore Cohen took over as violinist, the Trio reached the formation in which its international reputation was consolidated for over 20 years. Among its most famous achievements was a recording of the Mendelssohn D minor Trio and the Dvořák Dumky Trio that has inspired generations of music-lovers. 'We made that recording

in just three hours in Geneva,' Pressler laughs, 'and the company said: "We can give you a good dinner, but we can't give you any money ...". Then around eight months later I got a telegram saying we'd won the Grand Prix du Disque!' Now, in its new formation, the Trio has recorded the same two works again (on Warner Classics) – with results that, while inevitably different, have been just as pleasing in their own way, certainly for Pressler. 'When I listen to that first recording, I think we really played very well – technically and musically it is unified. But then I got this result with my boys and it seems to confirm everything I felt about them.'

After so many personnel changes over the years, can it really be said that the Beaux Arts Trio is still the Beaux Arts Trio? 'Yes, of course,' Pressler declares at once, beaming. 'When the heart is the same. And the heart of the Trio is the pianist.' His eyes twinkle. 'What I find marvellous is that since Daniel joined, my average age [of the Trio] has come down tremendously!'

What is it like, though, to be playing with a violinist from such a different generation? 'Exactly the same,' says Pressler. 'Because when we translate our ideas into living sound, the age of the person doesn't play a role. Why could [Yehudi Menuhin](#) at 16 play the Beethoven Concerto as beautifully as Joachim did at 50, maybe even more beautifully? Our role, especially in chamber music, is not to show how beautiful we are, but how beautiful the work is, and to be servants to these great composers.' He adds that certain aspects of trio life now work more smoothly than ever. 'I can convince my two young friends much more easily of certain ideas; they try it, then they're convinced. The time that is saved by not having the arguments we used to have is immense. And the result is equally beautiful.'

'There is nothing between people as intimate as playing chamber music. The chemistry has to be right; you have to be on the same wavelength. It's not a job. It's not enough that you do something well and that's OK. It is what you are speaking at your best; you are wide open; sometimes even more so than a husband and wife. Because this is a marriage absolutely of the spirit. You can get so insulted when you hear someone is doing the wrong accent on purpose! But when everyone is on the same side, as it is now and as the Trio used to be, it's a great feeling.'

Now the Trio's 50th anniversary celebrations are well underway. Highlights include a Beaux Arts Festival at the [Concertgebouw](#) in Amsterdam this August – including the Beethoven Triple Concerto with the Concertgebouw Orchestra and an expanded chamber music experience in Schubert's Trout Quintet with violist Nobuko Imai and double bassist Annika Hope (Daniel Hope's wife), plus new commissions for the Trio from Mark-Anthony Turnage, György Kurtág and Jan-Müller-Wieland. More commissions are planned, too – contemporary music, not least thanks to Daniel Hope's enthusiasm for it, is now high on the agenda. There are trips to the Schubertiade at Feldkirch, Austria; the Ravinia Festival in Chicago; and to Meneses's native Brazil; and to cap it all, a concert at the [Tanglewood Music Festival](#) on 13 July, 50 years to the day after the Trio's first-ever performance.

In the meantime, each of the three has a flourishing independent career. Hope has been enjoying a meteoric rise as one of Britain's most exciting young violinists; Meneses has recently consolidated his impressive solo agenda with a beautiful recording of the Bach solo cello suites on Avie Records; and Pressler continues his

busy teaching schedule in Bloomington. ‘I have 15 students now – fewer than I used to,’ he explains. ‘It used to be 25 or 30. But I was blessed by the luck of my genes with an enormous amount of energy. I used to do all my teaching, all my trio concerts and solo concerts, but I was never tired. And even now, when I can’t walk as fast as I used to, I can still enjoy five-hour rehearsals.’

He is as sought-after a teacher as ever; and his selection process is unusual, much influenced by the spirit of camaraderie he experienced as a student among young musicians in Israel. ‘At that time, there were many wonderful young players and we all knew each other and talked to each other. There was an excellent atmosphere that one doesn’t see so often. I try to encourage this in my class. I only accept students after they have an interview with my wife! Because in 20 minutes, she recognises more about the person than I can when I listen to them play good or bad octaves. So I have a class of students who are very supportive of each other.’

And will he ever retire? ‘Some friends who are retired and like to play golf said to me: “Menahem, when are you going to come and have fun in your life?”’ Pressler smiles. ‘To me, it’s not fun, hitting a ball into a hole. For me, the fun of life is when I can immerse myself in the extraordinary works that these human beings – if they were human beings: Beethoven, Brahms, Schubert – created. And you can become part of that. Your soul can reverberate with it and you can make people listen to it and love it and then maybe even love you. Because when we play, that’s what we want: to be loved.’

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