

The legend plays on

The celebrated piano virtuoso Menahem Pressler is 86. So is it time to retire to the golf course? Not likely

By Jessica Duchen, February 25, 2010

Pressler's career began in Israel after the Second World War. There "I became a pianist — but I also became a human being," he says

When the Beaux Arts Trio announced last year that it was disbanding, music-lovers the world over felt that it was the end of an era. Since 1955, without pause, the Trio had been the life and soul of the chamber music world, playing its way into listeners' hearts with irrepressible vigour and making more than 50 recordings. But only one of its three members remained constant over its entire lifespan - the pianist Menahem Pressler.

Pressler, a living legend, is now 86, and when his Trio "retired", he might have been expected to have done likewise. But nothing could be further from the truth. The Beaux Arts' driving force was essentially his, and it is still there.

"I am running around like a chicken with its head cut off!" Pressler declares. He is speaking on the phone from his studio at the University of Indiana in Bloomington, where he has been a professor on the faculty for 53 years; he still maintains a full teaching schedule. "I am playing more than ever. I thought that after the Trio retired I would not be so busy, but I am in fact busier! That is because I'm playing a different repertoire now."

Instead of playing trios, he is giving solo recitals and exploring other types of chamber music with partners new and old. Next week he will be in London to perform Dvorak's glorious Piano Quintet No. 2 with the Emerson String Quartet at the Queen Elizabeth Hall.

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But why the demise of the Trio? "Our young violinist, Daniel Hope, told me that he would have to resign because he was so busy with his solo work," Pressler explains. "I could have continued the Trio; we could have had as many dates as we wanted with another violinist. But I didn't want to - because the Trio with

Daniel and our cellist Antonio Meneses sounded so wonderful that I would always be let down just to play a concert with someone else for the sake of it. And I didn't want to do that, so I decided to call it quits. After all, it was 53 years, and they went by in a jiffy."

Besides, it was better, he felt, for the Trio to bow out while still at its peak. "It is good that it finished on top form - our final concerts last summer were really a celebration. And after all, I am not a youngster any more, to say the least. I don't know if there's another pianist of my age playing concerts right now."

Pressler's story began in Magdeburg, where he was born in 1923, and from where his family escaped the Nazis by the skin of its teeth. "My parents had Polish passports and said that we were going on vacation; so the Germans let us through," he recalls. "It was only weeks before the war started. We went to Trieste and there 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."

In Palestine and then Israel, Pressler enjoyed an exceptional musical education before heading to America for further studies. He and his wife were married in Israel by the country's chief rabbi, and subsequently settled permanently in the States, where they raised their two children - their son is now an X-ray technician and their daughter a clinical psychologist. Pressler still returns to Israel whenever concert schedules allow.

"My Jewish background means everything to me," he declares. "In Palestine and Israel I was taken in with open arms, I was educated and I became a pianist - but I also became a human being, someone who has values, someone for whom life and living means a great deal."

Last year he returned at last to Magdeburg, where he became only the fourth person since the war to be awarded the 1,200-year-old town's honorary citizenship. Commemorative stones were laid in the pavement at the same time in the name of his uncle and aunt, who were deported from Magdeburg to Auschwitz. "The mayor was there, the interior minister, about 100 people and a brass band," he says. "It was a very dignified and wonderful occasion, and for me it represented a closing of the circle after I had to run away in 1939. A true reconciliation."

Retirement from music, he says, is simply not an issue. "This season alone I have played five concerts in New York City and visited South America. Next week I'm in London for the Dvorak concert and then I will go to Bonn to give a solo recital and Munich for a concerto." Doesn't the travelling bother him? "Not at all." To him, music always has been, and remains, a true vocation, so why should he stop? "The joy of music-making is an incredible gift and I am extremely happy that I can do it even at my age," he says.

"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?' But 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 - 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."

And loved he is. Generations of young musicians have flocked to study with him at his Bloomington studio and his masterclasses around the world. Innumerable awards and honours have attached themselves to the Trio and its recordings - among them Gramophone's Record of the Year for their Haydn trios, three Grand Prix du Disques, and various Grammy nominations - while Pressler himself has been awarded five honorary doctorates, Gramophone's Lifetime Achievement Award and the highest national honours of both France and Germany. He is still recording: the Beethoven Cello Sonatas with Meneses will be out soon on the Avie label, and he reveals that he hopes to make some solo recordings as well.

But now he is looking forward to his London concert with the Emerson Quartet. "I love them," he says of the distinguished American ensemble. "I have known them for over 30 years. They played all the chamber works with piano for the first time with me, so I actually coached them for a long time and feel very close to them in every respect. Also they're lovely people, wonderful human beings."

Menahem Pressler and the Emerson Quartet perform at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London SE1 on March 2. Tel: 0844 875 0073