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Order, order! Part II

by Jay Nordlinger

My previous post was headed “Order, order!” Well, here is Part II. That previous post had to do with Beethoven’s violin sonatas, i.e., sonatas for violin and piano. Or are they sonatas for piano and violin?

The last concert I attended, as I mentioned in my previous post, was in Carnegie Hall on March 6. Three prominent soloists appeared for an evening of chamber music—sonatas and a trio. The players were Emanuel Ax, piano; Leonidas Kavakos, violin; and Yo-Yo Ma, cello.

Note that order. And that is the order that was written on Carnegie Hall’s program: pianist, violinist, cellist. This, despite the fact that the cellist—Ma—is the best-known, the starriest of those three players.

There is a famous story concerning the “Million-Dollar Trio.” This was the ensemble composed of Arthur Rubinstein, piano; Jascha Heifetz, violin; and Gregor Piatigorsky, cello. Heifetz—may we be frank here?—was impossible. Insufferable. Rubinstein may have been no slouch himself in the ego department, but not like Heifetz.

Anyway, publicity for the Million-Dollar Trio always put the names in the same order: Rubinstein, Heifetz, Piatigorsky. This rubbed Heifetz the wrong way. I will quote the pianist’s account of the matter, which, though possibly biased, is certainly credible:

“Why can’t we change it and give each one of us a chance to be the first-named?” said Jascha.

“I couldn’t care less,” I answered indifferently, “but as far as I know, all trios are published for piano, violin, and violoncello, and it is the tradition to publicize the players in this order.”

Jascha didn’t want to give in so soon.

“I have seen some trios printed for violin and violoncello, accompanied by the piano,” he said.

“They must have been printed by yourself, Jascha.”

“What do you mean?” he said indignantly. “I’ve really seen them.”

I began to see red.

“Jascha,” I shouted, “if God played the violin, it would still be printed Rubinstein, God, and Piatigorsky!”

No reply from Jascha.

The Million-Dollar Trio disbanded soon after.

Rubinstein’s written account is quoted in Terry King’s book about Piatigorsky: *Gregor Piatigorsky: The Life and Career of the Virtuoso Cellist*. No matter what the order of a piano trio, the cellist is always last. And Piatigorsky said, of his million-dollar partners, “They wanted me to play like a mouse.”

Here is a story to prize. In the midst of a recording session, the starry trio did some rehearsing, for the purpose of checking the balance. Suddenly, Heifetz stopped playing and said, “No, it’s all wrong. I can hear the cello.”

This will remind opera-lovers of a famous story about Richard Strauss. He was listening to a rehearsal of his *Elektra*, when he called out to the conductor, “Louder, louder the orchestra! I can still hear the Heink!” (He meant Ernestine Schumann-Heink, the great contralto.)

Back to piano trios. I went online to check out album covers. Almost all of them observe the convention: pianist, violinist, cellist. But there are exceptions. Here is one: Isaac Stern (violin), Pablo Casals (cello), and Dame Myra Hess (piano). Hess last? Almost unconscionable. Here is one that goes Stern, Ma, Ax.

Clearly, I was wrong, above: the cellist is not *invariably* last.

Here is one that goes Renaud Capuçon (violin), Frank Braley (piano), and Gautier Capuçon (cello).

As the Lord intended, the cellist is bringing up the rear. But the violinist is in first place.

I should not leave the impression that Isaac Stern is *always* in first place. Not at all. Here, we see the prescribed order: Eugene Istomin, Stern, and Leonard Rose.

Well, that is enough for Part II of “Order, order!” I have a third one in mind, actually, and I’m not sure I’d rule out a fourth . . .

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His podcast with *The New Criterion*, titled “Music for a While,” can be found [here](#).