

Famed pianist and chamber musician Menahem Pressler is dead at age of 99

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The world of classical music has been paying tribute to Menahem Pressler, the internationally renowned pianist and chamber musician, the co-founder and leading member of the Beaux Arts Trio for 53 years, who died May 6 at the age of 99. This world-famous musician, who was born in Germany and escaped the Nazis 84 years ago, lived through the terror of Kristallnacht, the murderous antisemitic pogrom that took place in 1938.

Surviving the Holocaust, Pressler had by 1946 come to the United States and begun his career as a pianist. He won the Debussy International Piano Competition, moved to New York City, and debuted at Carnegie Hall with the Philadelphia Orchestra, playing Schumann's Piano Concerto.

Pressler not only lived to be almost 100 years old, but remained active until nearly the end of his life. He was associated with the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University for almost 70 years.

His own longevity was also paralleled by that of the piano trio that he founded in 1955 with violinist Daniel Guilet and cellist Bernard Greenhouse. While Guilet and Greenhouse were followed by other violinists and cellists, Pressler was the constant presence, his name and charisma becoming synonymous with the ensemble.

The most common form of chamber music is that featuring the string quartet of two violins, viola and cello. The highly collaborative nature of chamber music is one of its distinguishing characteristics, and this is especially the case in piano trios (usually a piano with a violin and a cello), which combine instruments of different sonorities. Pressler played a decisive role in unifying and leading his colleagues.

The Beaux Arts Trio did more than any other group to popularize the piano trio literature. The Trio

recorded a 60-CD set of the entire repertoire of 122 works, from Haydn's famous efforts to the popular works of Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Dvorak and other 19th century composers, and works of the 20th century, such as the trios of Ravel, Shostakovich and those of less well-known composers.

Pressler and his colleagues—who later included violinists Isidore Cohen, Ida Kavafian, Yung Uck Kim and Daniel Hope and cellists Peter Wiley and Antonio Meneses—had a busy international career. The Beaux Arts was rivaled among trios for the length of its existence only by the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio, founded in 1977 and lasting until the death of pianist Joseph Kalichstein one year ago.

Pressler was the recipient of many awards, including lifetime achievement awards from Gramophone Magazine and the International Chamber Music Association, Chamber Music America's Distinguished Service Award and numerous other honors and accolades.

The Beaux Arts set high standards and also helped blaze the trail for younger musicians, including, among those active in the United States today, the Claremont, Junction and Horszowski Trios. Pressler was close to the young Russian pianist Daniil Trifonov, and played with cellist Gautier Capuçon and many other younger European musicians, including the French Quatuor Ebène, who played with him at a 90th birthday concert that was recorded on CD.

Pressler continued to teach after the Trio disbanded. He wrote a memoir in 2008, with William Brown, *Artistry in Piano Teaching*, and said, in a recent interview, "Teaching has been important to me all my life. I have been a teacher for over 65 years. ... It has been very special for me to find out which is the best way for a particular student in a particular piece. Every

student is different—and that’s what makes it so interesting; not just interesting, but it requires your interest to be there from that minute on for that particular person.”

In the course of his career Pressler collaborated with many famous ensembles, including the Juilliard, Emerson, American and Cleveland Quartets. He also continued to play as a solo pianist after the final performances of the Beaux Arts Trio. When he was close to 90, he collaborated with tenor Christoph Prégardien in Schubert’s famous song cycle *Winterreise*.

Pressler returned to Germany in 2008, on the 70th anniversary of Kristallnacht, and he made his debut with the Berlin Philharmonic in 2014, at the age of 90. As the WSWs noted on that occasion:

In January, an audience of thousands experienced a moving event: a slight, 90-year-old man sat nimbly at the piano in a Berlin concert hall and played Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 17 in G Major (1784). During his performance, he was visibly cheerful, communicated with the orchestra, particularly with the wind section, and spoke through Mozart’s music to the audience—urging the listener to enjoy every trill.

The pianist was Menahem Pressler, born Max Jacob Pressler in 1923 in Magdeburg, Germany. Seventy-five years ago, in 1939, he and his family were barely able to flee the Nazi terror against the Jewish population.

His family’s clothing store was ransacked and destroyed on November 9, 1938, during the Nazi’s Kristallnacht pogroms, and Max Jacob was expelled from high school. He continued to take piano lessons in secret. His uncles, aunts and grandparents were murdered in Auschwitz. His family, via Italy, fled to Palestine and thereafter to the US.

When he was 17, Max Jacob adopted the name Menahem (Hebrew for comfort or solace). He studied piano under fellow émigrés Leo Kestenberg and Eliahu Rudiakov, among others. In the US, he founded the renowned Beaux Arts Trio in 1955, an ensemble in which he

performed internationally, including in Germany, until its dissolution in 2008.

After 73 years, on September 27, 2012, Menahem Pressler’s German citizenship was restored. At the ceremony in Berlin, he said that Germany had remained his cultural home throughout. He had always spoken German at home with his family, had read Goethe and Heine and played Beethoven, Schubert and Mozart on the piano. “I can understand those who could not face all that after Auschwitz,” said Pressler, “but for me, there has always been this land of culture that I clung on to.”

Pressler’s three concerts January 10-12 [2014] were his first performances with the Berlin Philharmonic, the elite orchestra that performed for the Nazi dictatorship up until 1945. One had the impression that both he and his audience realised this concert was a historic occasion.



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