

Where the Old World Meets the New

Music@Menlo Chamber Music Festival and Institute's twelfth season took audiences on a journey from Bohemia to America- and included an encounter with a real-life prince. **Chloe Cutts** reports



'THIS AREA IS EXTRAORDINARY.

It's where technology blossomed and where the term start-up was first coined. Here, failure is the best way to learn, the new idea gets everyone excited, and there is an attitude of can-do. No history? Fantastic! Let's make history.'

Pianist Wu Han is describing California's Silicon Valley, where in 2003 she and cellist David Finckel created a start-up of their own, a chamber music festival and institute located on the campus of an independent preparatory school in Atherton, San Francisco Peninsula. At the time, she says, the affluent area of Atherton-Menlo was culturally pretty dry, with no similar events anywhere nearby and plenty of wealthy entrepreneurs who were only too happy to help establish a summer music festival in their neighbourhood. 'We decided that if we wanted to create the festival of our dreams, we'd

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need to start it from scratch,' says Finckel.

Their dream was to create a festival that would focus as much on training and education as on performances and concert-going. WuHan and Finckel are well-known duo partners and avid chamber music champions who believe that for chamber music to endure and thrive in the 21st century, young musicians must become fully immersed in the processes of studying and rehearsing the literature from as young an age as possible- at Music@Menlo that means as young as ten. For students and teachers they have strong words of advice on the perils of relegating chamber music to the sidelines of study.

'Kids auditioning for the Young Performers Program would knock off the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto and blow you away, but give them the second violin part of a Mozart string quartet and they don't know which finger to put down,' says Wu Han. Part of the problem, she says, is that children grow up learning solo repertoire only, and are used to having things worked out for them by their teacher. 'Chamber music is an art form that requires the kids to make up their own mind artistically early on. I ask them to choose their own fingerings and have them discuss the advantages of different options, so it's not about spoon feeding, it's about enabling.'

The Chamber Music Institute, for string players and pianists, runs in tandem with the festival and is divided into two programmes for young players: the International Program (IP), or conservatory-level

and professional musicians aged 18-29; and the

Young Performers Program (YPP) for 9- 18-year-olds. YPP artists work with IP alumni, and both groups receive instruction from festival artists and faculty. Thus, young students learn from musicians just a few years older than they are, who are themselves graduates of the YPP- a system that works very well according to pianist Gloria Chien, an IP graduate and now Chamber Music Institute director. She and cellist Dmitri Atapine, an IP faculty member, confess that as college students they had done little chamber playing until they came to Menlo. For them, being immersed in the rigorous, professional environment here has been key to their development as chamber players. Institute students are expected to select their own programme, rehearse and prepare for a public performance in limited time, and are coached in the art of introducing the repertoire from the stage. It was, says Chien, her closest experience to playing at professional level at that age. 'Nobody is called a student here,' she says. 'Everybody is treated as a professional.'

A DISTINGUISHING FEATURE of Music@Menlo is the approach to themes and programming. Wu Han and Finckel go to extremes to create an enlightening thematic narrative that runs through not just many of the concerts but also the multimedia symposia, lectures and talks. This year's central theme, Around Dvořák, offered a particularly rich tapestry to draw from and multiple historical avenues to explore. The season opener, Dvořák in Context, described how the composer's musical language integrated the Viennese classical tradition with Central European nationalism. I arrived in time to hear the follow-up, Viennese Roots, which delved further into the world of Viennese Classicism and its influence on Dvořák's musical language, through Haydn's Piano Trio in C major from 1797; Schubert's Impromptu op.90 no.4 for solo piano from 1827 and Rondo brilliant in B minor D895 for piano and violin from 1826; and Dvořák's own String Quintet no.2 in G major op.77, written in 1875. This last piece, unusually scored for string quartet with double bass,



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was a particular delight- full of Dvořákian folk rhythms and melodies, here brought vividly to life by violinists Erin Keefe and Kristin Lee, violist Paul Neubauer, cellist Dmitri Atapine and double bassist Scott Pingel. The series went on to explore the music of Smetana, Janacek and Dvořák's advisor Brahms, eventually arriving in America and the folk-inspired songs of Ives.

Bohemian history provided the backdrop to a fascinating encounter with William Lobkowitz, descendent of one of the oldest noble lineages of the Kingdom of Bohemia, who told the dramatic story of his family's collection, its robbery, and its eventual return after the Velvet Revolution of 1989. Lobkowitz's ancestor, the seventh Prince Lobkowitz, was the dedicatee of Beethoven's op.18 string quartets and the 'Eroica', Fifth, and 'Pastoral' symphonies, all of which number among countless belongings (including Czech lands, palaces and castles) Lobkowitz reclaimed in 1990, and whose restoration, preservation and display he has made his life's work.

Alongside, the artist-curated Carte Blanche recital series included the excellent Escher Quartet in the four rarely-performed string quartets of Austrian composer Alexander von Zemlinsky (see CD review, page 96). Zemlinsky was born in Vienna in 1871 and wrote the cycle over the course of four decades, between 1896 and 1936, and their musical language reflects the cultural shift between late Romantic tradition of Brahms and the early 20th-century aesthetic of the Second Viennese School. The pieces are also startlingly autobiographical, reacting and responding to events in Zemlinsky's own turbulent personal life, and the accompanying programme notes made for compulsive reading. Here was uncompromising programming at its best, expertly portrayed. Watching these four young string players at work, I was reminded of something Finckel said to me earlier that day: 'More often than not, the genre in which young musicians attain real mastery of their instrument is through chamber music, because it is at that point that they lose their teacher and have to take the music into their own hands and those of their colleagues.' For young musicians taking their first steps as chamber musicians, there can be hardly a more inspiring grounding than this forward-looking festival.