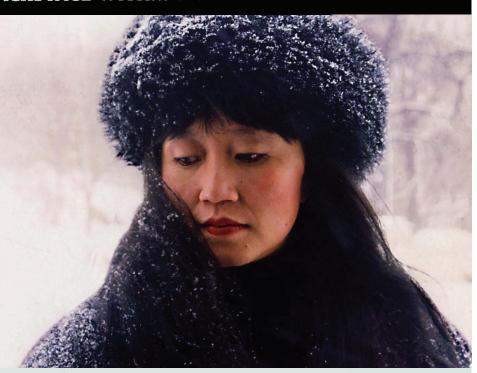


JULY 2013

BACKSTAGE WITH... Wu Han

BEYOND BACH: Wu Han has fun with the Menlo festival



The pianist and artistic director of Music@Menlo on JS Bach

This year's festival is called 'From Bach'. Can you tell us about that theme? Two years ago one of our programmes opened with cellist Larry Lester playing a Bach suite and David Finckel [joint artistic director] and I looked at each other and thought 'what an amazing way to start a programme'. We didn't want to do wall-to-wall Bach because many people have done that. Instead, we wanted to ask 'Why is Bach so incredible? What is his influence on musicians and on audiences? What is the impact of his music?

music by Mozart, Mendelssohn,
Debussy, Gershwin and Britten...
For Bach the Prelude is always very
imaginative. It has a human voice and
becomes a sort of exploration. Then the
Fugue becomes an incredible intellectual
exercise. We put together the composers
who have explored this format including
Haydn, Mozart and, of course, Shostakovich.
But then I thought I would fool around with
the idea so I picked a bunch of Debussy and
Gershwin Preludes and – this is the best part
– the Benjamin Britten Prelude and Fugue

for 18 strings, which I've always wanted

One intriguing programme celebrates

the Prelude and Fugue form, with

to programme. So this concert shows the development of the Prelude and Fugue from Baroque to modern times.

As a pianist, you must know Bach's Preludes and Fugues very well?

I have played probably half the Preludes and Fugues. But I have always found that I feel I'm so diminished in front of the greatness of the music that I haven't had the courage to stand up in front of people and perform them. So I play them a lot in private.

How do you put the festival together?
David and I usually put the programme together before we hire the musicians. It's a big task, there's a lot of research, but hey, there are two of us! Once we've decided on the programme we then ask 'who would be the best person to play this?' So by the time the concert hits the stage it's well designed and the musicians are the best matched to execu those works. Our theory is that if the audient want to give us two hours of their time, I want to make sure that there's always a purpose a a reason to each programme.

Music@Menlo also includes 'Carte blanche' concerts. Can you explain the idea behind them?

The 'Carte Blanche' concerts are the exact opposite of what I've just described. We assign concerts to artists and ask them 'What's the concert programme that no one has ever allowed you to do? Would you like to try it?' So we get the most fantastic crazy programmes. The second concert is by violinist Soovin Kim. I said to him 'Soovin, tell me what you'd like to do.' Next thing, I saw an email outlining a four-hour violin recital! I said, 'Ok, if you want to do that, we'll put it on, that's fine.' These are incredibly creative artists — if you give them a little room they will just fly with any idea you throw at them; it's just wonderful.

See Choice No. 3