



# music

## MAGAZINE

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?'

**One intriguing programme celebrates the Prelude and Fugue form, with 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

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 execute those works. Our theory is that if the audience want to give us two hours of their time, I want to make sure that there's always a purpose and 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*