

Tristan Cook



**Family affair:** David Finckel, and Wu Han (third and fourth from left) with students, performers and speakers on campus at Menlo

## California calling

Imaginative programming and guaranteed good weather combine to draw audiences and performers alike to the new Music@Menlo chamber music festival.

**Clare Stevens** samples the ingredients

'This festival is astonishing,' says Ara Guzelimian, artistic adviser to Carnegie Hall. 'It seems to have sprung to life fully formed, like the creature in Greek mythology that emerged from the forehead of Zeus. It is an extraordinary achievement.' He is talking about Music@Menlo, founded last summer in Palo Alto, California by David Finckel, cellist of the Emerson String Quartet, and his wife, pianist Wu Han. As a regular commentator on the classical music scene in the US, Guzelimian is well placed to assess the importance of this new venture, to which he makes his own contribution as guest lecturer. He is convinced that it is one of the most positive and significant developments to have taken place on the west coast for many years.

The closest UK equivalent to Music@Menlo is probably Dartington, though the British festival and summer school runs for longer and has a broader scope. But Dartington has evolved over half a century. Menlo was conceived right from the start with a rich programme of ancillary events supporting its core schedule of chamber music concerts.

The festival is based on the tree-shaded campus of Menlo School, Atherton, with performances also taking place in St Mark's Church, Palo Alto, where a larger audience can be accommodated. The area is in the heart of Silicon Valley, about 30 miles south of San Francisco. To the west it is sheltered from the Pacific Ocean by a range of wooded hills; to the east is San Francisco Bay. It is essentially an affluent suburban community, taking its character from the plethora of technology companies based in the neighbourhood (Hewlett-Packard was founded in a garage just a couple of miles from Menlo School) but also from Stanford University, situated between the two festival venues.

Unlike the east coast with its numerous summer festivals – Tanglewood, Marlboro and a host of small-

er events – the San Francisco Bay area suffers from a classical music drought during the summer months. There is the Cabrillo contemporary music festival at Santa Cruz, currently directed by Marin Alsop, and a Midsummer Mozart Festival, but little else while the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, the San Francisco Opera and the local Stanford Live celebrity concert series are on their summer breaks.

It was this situation that David Finckel and Wu Han set out to address by setting up Music @Menlo, inviting colleagues and friends to give a series of chamber music concerts over a two and a half week period spanning July and August.

Last summer's inaugural season took Menlo's audiences on a chronological tour of the chamber music repertoire as it has unfolded over three centuries. This year the focus was on the music of five specific geographical areas: Italy, Vienna, France, Eastern Europe and Russia. A programme of representative chamber works from each area was performed twice by the festival's visiting artists, with one free 'Prelude Performance' of related repertoire, given by advanced students from the festival's international young artists workshop programme.

Each set of concerts is preceded by a full-length lecture the previous evening, under the banner 'Encounters'. Ara Guzelimian, introducing this year's French programmes, provided an introduction to the primary characteristics of French music in the early-to-mid 20th century, looking specifically at featured composers Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Poulenc and Dutilleux. Tim Page, chief music critic of the *Washington Post*, speaking on Eastern

Europe, chose to focus more narrowly on Dvořák, drawing on a CD of contrasting treatments of the *Largo* from the *New World* symphony to illustrate points about the use of folk tunes in the music of all the composers included in the following concerts. Both speakers invited festival musicians to provide some of their musical examples in addition to playing CDs.

So far, so much like any number of music appreciation courses to be found at adult education centres on both sides of the Atlantic. What makes Menlo special is the depth of its commitment to education. Instrumental students aged between eight and 26 follow programmes that are linked to the festival's repertoire, with individual coaching sessions, public masterclasses and performance opportunities. They are resident at Menlo and attend all the concerts and lectures. There are three student programmes: international for pre-professional performers, including postgraduate students from conservatoires such as Juilliard and Curtis; young performers for students of high school age; and the explorers programme, designed to introduce performers aged eight-to-12 to the art of chamber music.

Seeing young pianists in particular, who often find themselves studying in isolation, learning to communicate with their fellow performers, to understand the needs of string players to accommodate changes of bow stroke or wind players to breathe, is one of the most remarkable aspects of the festival, quite apart from the technical ability of the students. Seated on the grand staircase of the Spieker Ballroom in Stent Hall, the youngsters respond to the performances by the professional artists and advanced students with attentiveness and enthusiasm, even at the end of a long, busy day; the inspirational effect is clear.

The schedule also includes 'Café Conversations'

most days, open to and clearly much appreciated by the public, but designed primarily to enhance the students' understanding of practical aspects of the music business. Topics ranged this year from the history and care of stringed instruments to the function of music criticism, music and broadcast media, and an introduction to the music of J S Bach. Following one talk on presentation, some of the student ensembles appeared for their performances the next day in matching T-shirts, and all had evidently taken on board advice about spoken introductions and projecting their personalities to the audience.

Parents and younger siblings are encouraged to attend the student concerts, but the behaviour code is firmly spelled out by Wu Han in her enthusiastic welcome: 'Absolute silence is the rule. Video cameras must be kept low. Flash photography only when the players take their bows, not while they are playing. If you need to run around, you go up the stairs to the back of the auditorium, not across the stage. This is as serious as *Le Grand Macabre*.'

The personalities of the two artistic directors and their level of involvement is a major factor in the festival's success. Both Finckel and Wu Han are completely hands-on – coaching, performing, solving technical problems with lights or CD players, herding errant children in to the lecture theatre ('You have to be a bit of a sheepdog' says Finckel) or skilfully moderating discussions by posing the elementary questions that the audience may be too shy to ask or may not have the vocabulary to express. The couple met at Hartt University, Connecticut, in 1982, when Finckel was a visiting artist and Wu Han a graduate student from Taiwan. Their musical and personal partnership has since included performing and recording as a cello and piano duo, setting up their own record label, Artistled; working for three years as artistic directors of the La Jolla summer festival; and bringing up their daughter, Lilian, now ten and a student on this year's explorers' programme at Menlo.

Launching Music@Menlo was a venture that came about partly as a result of their desire to have a blank canvas on which to create their own festival, drawing on their experience of performing and teaching in contexts where the parameters were firmly established by other people, and on recollections of their own student experiences. 'We were very clear about what we wanted to avoid,' says Wu Han. 'No politics, for example. And we've kept the student numbers very small, so that they all get the attention they need.'

She admits that some of the advanced students find the pressure of facing so much repertoire in a short space of time overwhelming. 'It is very intense, and they all reach a point about two-thirds of the way through where they think they can't cope. But we talk it through with them and help them to see that this will be the reality of their professional lives. There never is enough time to learn and rehearse things as thoroughly as we would like. Being a professional performer is about how you adapt to that situation.'

The festival is also a response to the general malaise in the classical music industry in the US. 'Somebody has to do something about it,' says Finckel, 'and we wanted to make a contribution. We know there is an audience for classical music out there, it's just a matter of finding it and identifying ways of drawing it in.'

Providing more information is one way of doing that, particularly in Silicon Valley where Finckel believes there is a real hunger for music education.

'Many of the people who live and work here are scientists, engineers or mathematicians who perhaps didn't have time to learn much about anything else when they were young but now find themselves in a position to explore other interests such as classical music. They are intelligent, articulate people with enquiring minds, who want to know more about what they are listening to. They are also prepared to go beyond the usual fare of the *Four Seasons* and *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, which means we are able to build really interesting programmes, including repertoire that is not often heard.'

A CD of Audionotes is sent out with every advance ticket order, an innovative aspect of Music@Menlo which has proved hugely popular. 'We realised that people rarely have time to read conventional notes before the concert begins. The idea is that they can listen to our CDs, which include musical illustrations performed where possible by Menlo artists, in the car, in the gym or while cooking or ironing. The concept fits in with people's busy lives, but enables them to come to the concerts much better prepared.'

The festival also has its own CD label, Music@MenloLive. All the main concerts are recorded and a variety of compilation discs are made up, based either on related repertoire or on individual artists, as performer portraits. 'They are superbly engineered and edited by our producer, Da-Hong Seetoo. These days, when it is becoming so rare for classical musicians to be contracted to record labels, it is a real bonus for our faculty members to have these first class recordings that they can add to their portfolios.'

It was their own experience of performing in the area that drew Finckel and Wu Han to the San Francisco Peninsula, which they identified it as a place without a summer festival. Investigating further, they discovered it also had no fewer than nine youth orchestras, offering great scope for recruiting students. A lot of advance preparation was done before the launch, including a one-day pilot event in 2002. 'We can sow the seed, but the people here have to nurture it,' says Finckel. Local families, individuals and businesses have proved to be generous in offering both financial and practical support or gifts in kind. This can range from offering accommodation to visiting artists for extended periods or hosting post-concert parties (to which some of the local villas with their beautiful gardens are ideally suited) to stewarding at concerts, discounting piano hire rates or supplying bagels for the daily Café Conversations. The largest amount of financial support is provided by a leadership grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, with the Koret Foundation assisting with the education aspect. Otherwise, Wu Han says the festival operates on a shoestring (although one local journalist was overheard commenting wryly that it must be an Armani shoestring).

The other great advantage of the location, of course, is the weather. Palo Alto is much sunnier than smog-ridden San Francisco, and unlike their opposite numbers at Dartington or Aldeburgh, the young interns at Menlo can safely set up their ticket or refreshment stalls on an outdoor terrace, knowing it is not going to rain.

[www.musicatmenlo.org](http://www.musicatmenlo.org)



**Menlo memories:**  
Clarinetist Anthony McGill (top) with pianist Derek Han; students listen from the stairs; and British cellist Colin Carr giving a lesson

All pictures Tristan Cook