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SUMMER CLASSICAL MUSIC FESTIVAL ISSUE

## music@menlo

Brash young festival  
launches its own label  
for live recordings

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STEPHANIE GRACE LIM — MERCURY NEWS



# FROM FESTIVAL DIRECT TO DISC



CHRISTIAN STEINER

Music@Menlo festival directors Wu Han and David Finckel were among the first well-known classical artists to record and market their own music through a Web-based label.

## Thanks to new technology, Music@Menlo joins chorus of artists making own CDs

By Richard Scheinin  
*Mercury News*

As some of the nation's leading chamber musicians performed at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto last summer, recording engineer Da-Hong Seetoo was invisible to the audience, hard at work in the church nursery. It had been turned into a temporary recording studio for the Music@Menlo festival, and Seetoo — surrounded by cables and equipment, headphones on, musical scores in hand — was digitally documenting each performance.

Music@Menlo is about to return for its second season, which runs from July 29 to Aug. 15. And the fruits of Seetoo's hard work will be for sale: 27 CDs recorded at last year's festival for the new Music@Menlo LIVE record label. It's probably the most ambitious recording project of any classical music festival in the world.

It's also a striking example of how new technology can be put to work — by a start-up festival in Silicon Valley, no less — on be-

half of classical music. Increasingly, artists feel abandoned by the major labels; so much so that many musicians and numerous orchestras now produce their own recordings, without expecting to reap the sales and profits typically demanded by the majors.



Seetoo

### OLD WORLD TOUR

Music of Italy, Vienna, France, Eastern Europe and Russia on tap.

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The San Francisco Symphony has its own label (SFS Media), as does the London Symphony Orchestra (LSO Live). Now Music@Menlo is jumping on the digital bandwagon: "Talk about democracy," says Seetoo, "this is it. You can make your own records yourself."

Seetoo, a Grammy-winning engineer and producer for the Emerson String Quartet and other artists, will be back at his recording station for this year's festival. He is a conservatory-trained violinist from Shanghai, where he and his family played classical music in secret, to avoid arrest, during China's Cultural Revolution. Moving to the United States in 1979, he attended the Curtis Institute and the Juilliard

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School, decided against a life on the road and went into the recording end of the business.

Twenty-one summers ago, while a student at the Aspen Music Festival, he met cellist David Finckel of the Emerson Quartet and Finckel's wife-to-be, pianist Wu Han, also a student at the time. New York-based Finckel and Wu Han have since become the founders and artistic directors of Music@Menlo, which attracted national attention last year for its high-quality performances, innovative programming and enterprising way with technology.

### Pioneering musicians

In the mid-'90s, they founded the ArtistLed record label, with Seetoo as engineer and co-producer, becoming two of the first well-known classical artists to record and market their own music through a Web-based label. At Menlo, they offer multimedia lectures by musicologists. They also produce an annual series of "Audio Notes" — concert-by-concert program notes on CD, featuring interviews with performers and musical examples. Advance ticket buyers receive "Audio Notes" for free: Listen to the notes at home or in the car and soak up the lectures before festival concerts.

Now comes the new label.

Finckel says it is an effort to "brand" the non-profit festival; to help fill its coffers for future seasons; and to create a little justice for musicians who have a hard time landing recording contracts.

Starting the label "has a lot to do with the demise of the classical recording industry as we know it and the loss of opportunity for musicians in their prime to make recordings, to document their interpretations," he says. Plus, the label can only help the festival attract artists: "They can walk away with their own album."

Digital technology makes it possible. All the Menlo performances are stored to a single hard drive on a computer. Seetoo uses a single program to record, edit and master the CDs, which are then burned using the same program. The CDs will be sold at the festival and online ([www.musicatmenlo.org](http://www.musicatmenlo.org)), and the label won't do much in the way of advance pressings. Instead, listeners will choose the compilations that interest them, and the appropriate discs will be burned and packaged.

"My dream is to hand somebody a CD that's still warm," says Finckel, "like you get a fresh-baked bagel."

Violinist Barry Shiffman, a member of the St. Lawrence String Quartet, which partici-



TERRENCE MCCARTHY

San Francisco Symphony violist Geraldine Walther will have her own CD on the new label.

pated in last year's festival and is on some of the upcoming recordings, says the new label represents a shrewd step into the changing marketplace. By creating an archive of recordings, he says, Finckel and Wu Han are positioned to market the music via whatever technologies arise in the future.

"Nobody has a better understanding of the business and artistic ends of things than David and Wu Han," Shiffman says. "That's the dream synthesis, those two. Just put some electrodes on those guys and harness their energies and ideas and see what happens."

In the rock music world, live concert discs are sometimes burned and sold the night of the show. Menlo could conceivably do the same but is choosing not to move that fast.

### Why go slow?

There are reasons to go slow:

■ **Legalities:** With a couple dozen participating artists, it takes a while to get all the contractual sign-offs. Once production costs are recouped, royalties from the discs will be divided between the artists and the festival. Menlo nearly sold out all its concerts last year, but if it ever goes out of business, recording rights will revert to the artists.

■ **Chamber music** can be hold-onto-your-seats exciting. But it's acoustic music, and a live recording can be marred by the sound of a cough from the audience.

■ **Chamber music** also needs to be played correctly. Sometimes, mistakes committed in the heat of a passionate performance can be overlooked on a live CD. But the musicians tend to be sticklers; they want all the notes *right*.

For the latter reasons, Seetoo records all dress rehearsals and has edited portions of them into the CDs. A live recording, he says, should have "an electricity. There's sort of a silent communication that the musician has with the audience. You want to preserve that as much as you can. But still, I had to



# MENLO | Festival jumps on digital bandwagon



MILINA BARRY PUBLIC RELATIONS

A perfect venue for venerable music is Menlo School's historic Stent Family Hall in Menlo Park, one of the Music@Menlo concert sites. Concerts will also be held at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto.



The new Music@Menlo *LIVE* record label makes its debut with 27 CDs recorded at last year's festival. Festival directors say it is an effort to "brand" the non-profit festival.

use rehearsal stuff: Someone starts coughing or a dog starts to bark."

Geraldine Walther, principal violist with the San Francisco Symphony and a Music@Menlo musician, says Seetoo's musical background is invaluable during rehearsals. "He'll tell you, 'You're flat here, you're sharp there,'" she says. "He'll say, 'It could be better.' But it's always positive and with a sense of humor."

Knowing the dress rehearsal was being recorded — and that backup material was available to fix major goofs in the actual performance — allowed the players to "relax and just go for it" in concert, she says. "And if you get a little pop on the string, who cares? The emotion will take care of the technique."

Violinist Jorja Fleezanis, concertmaster of the Minnesota Orchestra and another Menlo musician, says turning the

dress rehearsal into a recording session "sharpens the music, so that the concert is actually better. It accelerates the way you go into the piece," she says, predicting the new recordings will be "really special" and capture the "flavor of the festival."

She and Walther will each have their own CD among the 27 on the new label. Sales will inevitably be modest — a couple thousand copies would be huge. But the new label is a step toward breaking the "marketing chokehold" of the industry, notes Fleezanis, who says major labels have too often focused on name players, performing a limited repertoire.

"I'm all for it," she says. "Roll up your sleeves and do it yourself."

## Music@Menlo plans musical world tour

In its second season, Music@Menlo is taking a geographical view of chamber music. Programs will be devoted to music of Italy, Vienna, France, Eastern Europe and Russia. There will also be two Sunday morning-to-afternoon concerts of J.S. Bach's music.

### Highlights:

■ The Italian program ranges from Scarlatti to a Puccini piece for string quartet (July 30, 31).

■ The Vienna program is all-Schubert, with lieder performed by baritone **Nathaniel Webster** (Aug. 2, 3, 4).

■ French works range from Debussy to Dutilleux, including songs (performed by soprano **Milagro Vargas**) by Poulenc and Fauré (Aug. 6, 7).

■ Eastern European works span Smetana, Dvořák and Bartók (Aug. 9, 10).

■ The Russian program features songs by Rachmaninoff and Tchaikovsky, performed by soprano **Dina Kuznetsova** (Aug. 13, 14, 15).

■ Violinist **Ani Kavafian** and harpsichordist **Kenneth Cooper** perform Bach's Six Sonatas for Violin and Keyboard (Aug. 1); cellist **Colin Carr** plays Bach's Six Suites for Solo Cello (Aug. 8).

Concerts are at Stent Family Hall at the Menlo School in Menlo Park and St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto.

— Richard Scheinin

### Music@Menlo tickets

**Tickets** : \$25-\$65 (\$10-\$30 students and children). (650) 725-ARTS or [www.musicatmenlo.org](http://www.musicatmenlo.org)

**For complete information**, including lectures with musicologists, young performers' concerts, and a new "Café Conversations" series led by the artists, go to [www.musicatmenlo.org](http://www.musicatmenlo.org).