

The Almanac

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Artscene

PEOPLE AND PERFORMANCES IN ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Speaking of music

Public invited to discuss music at festival's Cafe Conversations

By Katie Bearman

Special to the Almanac

Combine music, academia, whimsical questions from laypeople, and a bit of coffee, and you'll get an experience akin to floating in a hot-air balloon.

That's how Michael Steinberg, a German-born, Princeton-educated musicologist, sums up Cafe Conversations, the free discussion series that's part of the Music@Menlo chamber music festival opening this week at Menlo School in Atherton.

"When I give lectures, I am the person who is totally in charge of the steering wheel," Mr. Steinberg says. "But with Cafe Conversations, it's more like being up in a hot-air balloon — you don't know where the various breezes will take you."

Cafe Conversations are led by accomplished musicians and musicologists, and have a range of themes, such as practice techniques or the exploration of a specific string quartet. But audience members' impulses determine much of the direction the dialogue takes, says Mr. Steinberg, who for years nourished local music lovers with a feast of lectures and program notes for San Francisco Symphony concerts.

Music@Menlo, launched in 2003 by cellist David Finckel and pianist Wu Han, draws music students as well as professional soloists and

ensembles to Menlo School in Atherton and St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto for two weeks of concerts, lectures, and master classes.

This year's festival runs from Wednesday, July 27, to Friday, August 12.

Cafe Conversations were incorporated into the festival last year. Their free admission opens the festival's doors to a wider community of music lovers, as well as to the uninitiated who might be curious about the world of classical music.

Wu Han says she enjoys the festival's intensity, but wanted to build Cafe Conversations into the program to help cultivate audience members' understanding and enjoyment of classical music in a more comfortable setting. The discussions introduce participants to active thinkers in the music community, she adds.

"Cafe Conversations are a relaxed way for all of us to gather together," she explains. "They're not only for students and musicians, but also for anyone interested in the history and future of music."

Participants have told Wu Han they feel as if they've gained entry to an "artist's studio" during the events, she says.

"There are many issues facing

performing musicians," Wu Han continues. "Without going behind the scenes, it's very difficult for the public to detect their struggle and accomplishment."

Diverse discussions

This year, there will be 10 Cafe Conversation sessions, covering

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MUSICOLOGIST MICHAEL STEINBERG



Mr. Steinberg is set to host two sessions. In the first, a poetry reading workshop, he will bring poems about various facets of music that attendees can read aloud. They will also talk about reading styles and nuances that can be conveyed through the voice.

Mr. Steinberg has conducted such readings at Music@Menlo and other festivals.

"The experience helps people think about music in new ways," he says. "It's also interesting for music students, because they're

so used to performing with a piece of hardware between them and the audience."

Facing audiences without their instruments gives students different forms of confidence and under-

standing, he says.

In his second session, "How I Fell in Love with Music," he will discuss his career as a writer, teacher, critic, and program annotator for various symphony orchestras.

everything from the process of recording pieces, led by the Miro String Quartet, to retelling the 1947 film about Robert and Clara Schumann — "Song of Love" — guided by pianist Claude Frank.

Cafe Conversations begin Friday

Mr. Steinberg says music fills a corner of his life that no other art form can. Through Cafe Conversations and lectures, Mr. Steinberg says, he uses certain methods to try to convey his knowledge and love of music to others.

"I begin by trying to get people in touch with and unafraid of their emotional responses to music," he says. "I give them very specific things to listen for, and when I say listen, I don't mean overhear. I mean listening to the unfolding of events in a piece of music, as attentively as you might while reading a spy novel, so as not to miss clues."

Of Cafe Conversations in general, both Mr. Steinberg and Wu Han say they enjoy the opportunity to communicate with and get to know students and community members.

And Mr. Steinberg remarks that the Cafe Conversations program is the spinal column for the whole intellectual and artistic structure of the festival.

"The more you know, the more you will appreciate this art form — this incredible treasure of classical music," Wu Han says.

Most Cafe Conversations are held at Menlo School, 50 Valparaiso Ave. in Atherton. The campus sessions are free, though a \$5 donation is encouraged. Locations may shift, so once on campus, just follow the signs to find the room.

The only off-campus session will take participants to the South Bay: a tour of the Ira F. Brilliant

Center for Beethoven Studies at San Jose State University at 3 p.m. August 5. There is an admission charge of \$4, and space is limited. Reserve tickets online at musicatmenlo.org, or through the Stanford ticket office at 725-2787.

Here's the schedule for the Menlo School sessions:

Making Interpretive Decisions in a Festival Situation, with violinist Joseph Silverstein, Friday, July 29, 1:30 p.m.

Facing Your Public: The Artist on View, with Jorja Fleezanis, concertmaster, Minnesota Orchestra, Saturday, July 30, 1:30 p.m.

From Locks to Leonore: The Collections and Work of the Ira F. Brilliant Center for Beethoven Studies, with William Meredith, director, Beethoven Center, Monday, August 1, 1:30 p.m.

Shadows and Light: Exploring a Mozart Quartet, with Ara Guzelimian, senior director and artistic adviser, Carnegie Hall, featuring the Attacca and Kashii string quartets, Tuesday, August 2, 1:30 p.m.

Recording the Beethoven String Quartets with the Miro String Quartet, Wednesday, August 3, 1:30 p.m.

Poetry Reading Workshop, with Michael Steinberg, author and musicologist, Thursday, August 4, 1:30 p.m.

How I Fell in Love with Music: Recollections and Opinions, with Michael Steinberg, author and musicologist, Monday, August 8, 1:30 p.m.

How to Practice, with violinist Pamela Frank, Wednesday, August 10, 1:30 p.m.

Song of Love: A Retelling of the 1947 Film about Robert and Clara Schumann, with pianist Claude Frank, Thursday, August 11, 1:30 p.m.