



Review

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Making Music at Menlo

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By Robert Moon

In 2002 the mid Peninsula of the San Francisco Bay Area was in the midst of an economic recession as a result of the dot.com meltdown. It was the most unlikely time to start a chamber music festival, yet three years later Music@Menlo is an internationally acclaimed two-and-a-half-week festival with a budget of \$850,000. It's the musical equivalent of a Silicon Valley entrepreneurial start-up venture that not only survived but flourished.

"Starting Music@Menlo, with David Finckel and Wu Han as Artistic Directors, was like having Bill Gates starting a new software company," said Board member Hugh Martin, who has a 25 year track record of managing leading edge technologies. "In order to be successful a startup needs a leader who is technically brilliant, passionate and is able to sell the project and make it happen." Finckel has been the cellist of the Emerson Quartet for 26 years, and he and pianist (and wife) Wu Han tour together as a cello-piano duo. They had been Artistic Directors of SummerFest La Jolla from 1998-2000 and are now Artistic Directors of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.

"The audience's response to a free concert by the Emerson Quartet in Avery Fisher Hall after 9/11 reinforced for us the healing power of music. Life is short. We wanted to give back by starting a chamber music festival," Wu Han explained. They looked at several possible cities, but found the ideal location for the Festival and an eager partner willing to offer an administrative home in Menlo School in Atherton. There was a dearth of chamber music activity in the South Bay in July and August, and the couple had conducted their own marketing research from the many supporters they knew from the years of concerts they performed in the Bay Area. They found an area with the financial and leadership resources that might support a summer chamber music festival. "We were looking for a place where people would respond to a serious and passionate approach to chamber music, and we found the right spot," they enthused.

"Fabulous concept . . . reputation"

The Festival received a Leadership Grant of \$150,000 from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation in 2002. "They had a fabulous concept and a reputation for great artistic quality, but we were con-

cerned about their long term commitment to the Bay Area given their big international careers.” related Moy Eng, Performing Arts Program Director of the Hewlett Foundation. After programming a pilot one-day event in August of 2002, the couple made several trips to the Bay Area, meeting individually with potential supporters and giving concerts in their homes. “They were able to build relationships with folks that could be involved in many different ways, whether it be volunteers, people who could offer housing to the artists, potential Board members or donors,” Eng said. The festival received \$20,000 from Koret Foundation Funds in the first year, despite a Foundation policy of not funding new organizations. “Very often we see proposals from organizations where artistic quality outdistances administrative quality. In this instance they were both at the highest level. They had ideas I hadn’t seen before and were working closely with Bay Area-based organizations. They made their case and we made the exception,” stated Sheila Baumgarten, Program Director of the Koret Foundation.

Music@Menlo was conceived as a two-and-a-half-week immersing Festival whose components include live performances of chamber music by first-rate musicians, intensive training for pre-professional musicians, and extensive audience engagement in the musical, cultural and historical context of the music performed. “If Schubert was alive today and you asked him to write a piece of music that people could listen to while exercising on a StairMaster, I’m sure that he would have done a fantastic job, but it wouldn’t have been *Die schöne Müllerin*,” mused David Finckel. “Music@Menlo is a place for music lovers to come to experience chamber music in an environment close to what the composer intended.” To that end, tickets to Music@Menlo concerts came with free copies of AudioNotes, CDs with biographical information and musical excerpts that were produced for each of the five concerts of the first season.

Encounters were programmed — evening-long multi-media presentations led by nationally known music experts. “We were told that people wouldn’t come to a lecture for a whole night, but they were the first things to sell out,” Executive Director Suzanne Field observed. Focus groups after the first year confirmed that audiences wanted to be challenged, to learn something in an exciting atmosphere, not just to be entertained in a relaxing environment. The establishment of the Chamber Music Institute for pre-professional young musicians was essential to the mission of the Festival and provided free concerts and master classes with Festival artists, open to the public.

Centering on one musical mind

“In the first year of the Festival, we wanted the audience to see the whole world, so we programmed the five concerts to cover representative repertoire from 1720 to 2002,” Finckel said. The second year focused on the development of chamber music in five different international cultures, and this year the program centers on one musical mind: Beethoven. “He is a great one to focus on because his music shows the transition from classicism to romanticism, and all the way to modernism. Every chamber music audience should hear the Beethoven quartets every five years,” Finckel declared. In choosing the works for each specific program, the Artistic Directors cut CDs

and listen to them as if they were at the concert. "It's like making a good meal: the right number of courses, the right transitions, the right completion," Wu Han says. They observe the audience's reaction and try to balance that with their musical ideas. Then they choose the artists by "finding the best players in the world and begging them to come," she mused.

In marketing the festival in the first year, Field developed a strategy of relationship development. "Because of our limited startup budget and restricted potential ticket income necessitated by the small, intimate concert venues that chamber music requires, we made sure that we acknowledged everyone who helped us so that they became stakeholders in the success of the Festival. The message was 'please join us and experience the power of music,'" she related. They spent 7-8% of their budget on marketing. The strategy worked, as most of the events were sold out in the first year.

Because ticket sales only covered 25% of the expense of the Festival, it was critical to expand the fundraising base beyond foundation grants and a few large donors. Since 2002, the organization has expanded its donor base to 250 people. About 25% of the people attending the concerts make a gift to Music@Menlo in addition to buying tickets. A formal Board of Directors wasn't formed until 2004. "We decided to go slowly and make sure people understood us and our mission," commented Wu Han.

Although the Festival has matured in only three years, it still acts as if it is a start-up. "They're a learning organization, constantly questioning how they can do it better. But given that the Festival lives in Silicon Valley, a 24/7 environment that is about rewriting the rules of the world, are we really surprised?" asked Eng. In the future the organization needs to continue to expand and deepen their fundraising base and continue to build a sustainable model that will support the Festival on a long-term basis.