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Festival takes a revealing plunge into Beethoven



The Miró String Quartet musicians, from left, are Daniel Ching, Sandy Yamamoto, Joshua Gindele and John Largess.

Tristan Cook

By Joshua Kosman

CHRONICLE MUSIC CRITIC

Beethoven arrived in Vienna as a 21-year-old keyboard virtuoso on the make, determined to conquer the musical capital of Europe. By the time of his death 35 years later, he had done that much and more — he had permanently altered the most basic principles of Western music.

The third season of the chamber festival Music@Menlo, which got off to splendid start over the weekend in St. Mark's Episcopal Church

in Palo Alto, proposes to chart that process through the medium of Beethoven's 16 string quartets. Over two weeks of chamber concerts curated by artistic directors David Finckel and Wu Han, six string quartets will participate in a tag-team relay through these inexhaustible works, with other chamber music by composers from Bach to Ives providing context.

The string quartet, a genre that occupied Beethoven throughout his career, is probably as good a prism as any though which to follow his

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REVIEW

Music@Menlo: The festival continues through Aug. 12 at venues in Atherton and Palo Alto. Tickets \$10-\$65. Call (650) 725-2787 or go to www.musicatmenlo.org.



Tristan Cook

From left to right: Ian Swensen (violin), Derek Han (piano) and David Finckel (cello) perform at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto on Friday as part of the Music@Menlo festival.

Miró Quartet delivers lively renditions

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intellectual and artistic development. From his young days as an ambitious heir to Haydn and Mozart to his final explorations of form and scale, Beethoven used the string quartet as a canvas, on which he could work out his musical ideas in detail.

Saturday's concert by the Miró String Quartet featured lively, elegant renditions of four of the six quartets from Beethoven's Op. 18, his first published works in the genre. The other two quartets were covered in a preconcert appearance by two student ensembles, the Attacca Quartet and the Kashii String Quartet; subsequent concerts will feature the Miami, St. Lawrence and Emerson String Quartets.

To listen to these early works was to hear the young composer assessing the lay of the land in an arena dominated by his teacher Haydn, determining where the opportunities lay for carving out his own turf. The melodic phraseology, the formal concision and the occasional rhythmic hijinks all owe a debt to Haydn, but the new

and individual touches are just as frequent.

Most striking, certainly, is the finale of the last quartet in the set, with its evocation of melancholy set against a gracious dance. But there is also the long-breathed opening of the D-Major Quartet, No. 2, which the Miró delivered with an almost guilt-inducing creaminess.

The dark, muscular writing of the C-Minor Quartet, No. 4, the only minor-key quartet in the set, also offers an early glimpse into a particular mood that recurs throughout Beethoven's career. And in several of these pieces you can hear Beethoven trying out the effects of different kinds of endings, especially the understated fade-out.

All of these attributes came through with exemplary clarity in the quartet's performances. Violinists Daniel Ching and Sandy Yamamoto, violist John Largess and cellist David Finckel — the group's joint efforts outstrip any individual contributions — and together produce an ensemble tone that is smooth and alluring.

Other quartets might probe for some rougher edges in this music,

especially in the C-Minor Quartet, but the overall effect was wonderfully civilized, and there were passages of pure majesty in the B-Flat Quartet.

Friday's concert, also at St. Mark's, provided a telling backdrop for the Op. 18 Quartets with chamber music by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. The knockout here was Haydn's E-Major Piano Trio, Hob. XV:28, as weird and unpredictable a piece as he ever wrote.

The first movement features some standard Haydn-esque humor, including a crystalline opening theme that later gets parodied as a grandiose set-piece. But then things get even more bizarre, with a macabre central movement that sounds like a cross between one of Bach's chromatic fugues and a Chopin funeral march, and a dancelike finale that keeps forgetting what time signature it's in.

Violinist Ian Swensen, cellist David Finckel and pianist Derek Han gave a sharp-edged, forthright performance. Mozart's Horn Quintet and Beethoven's Septet, Op. 20, filled out the program in lively but not especially polished renditions.