

Classicool

Classical music is alive and well – and thriving on an iPod near you.

By Jo Abbie

Not since the controversial film version of the equally controversial novel *A Clockwork Orange* revived interest in the chap Alex and his “Ludwig Van” droogs has classical music been rising so steadily on the barometer of cool. While we may be a long way from downloads of Chopin outnumbering those of Coldplay, the entertainment and lifestyle landscape is becoming increasingly peppered with classical music, played by (and for) the hip crowd.

When the BBC offered free downloads of Beethoven’s nine symphonies last month, the music was scooped up more than one million times. And iTunes and other sites are making it easier for classical novices to explore the genre and buy one movement at a time, instead of an entire impenetrable album. Classical is finding its way into raps and mash-ups, and it’s being played by musicians who look every bit as hip as Coldplay. The classically-trained vocal group Il Divo (consisting of four very photogenic young men – an American, Frenchman, Spaniard and a Swiss) has an unlikely Top 30 bestseller in their album of opera covers of popular songs like “Unbreak My Heart” and “My Way.”

So, say you’re a passenger on the classicool train. Where can you see the stuff live?

One of the most high profile annual events on Silicon Valley’s classical music calendar is the Music at Menlo Festival. The festival raised its baton in 2003, and its founders David Finckel and Wu Han are passionate about making classical music accessible to people of all ages, and about helping to develop a new generation of classical music aficionados.

With Music at Menlo, Finckel and partner Wu Han pump up the volume on classical-as-approachable. One of the innovative things the festival does is mail out a CD of audio notes with concert tickets – giving listeners background information on the music they are about to experience. This is a clever move to entice those who are new to the classical fold and may find it a bit intimidating.

“I still am intimidated myself,” laughs Finckel. “I am sitting in my office surrounded by thick books on the history of music and composers – and I think, ‘There’s just so much to learn.’ It’s such an incredible world and I don’t think one person could ever know all there is to know about classical music.” And this comes from Finckel, a man who has devoted his career to playing and promoting it.

Music at Menlo, which runs in Menlo Park from July 27 through August 12, concentrates specifically this year on our homie, Ludwig Van Beethoven. The program is packed with informal discussion groups and more structured lectures to get listeners hip to the works and career of the renowned composer.

Also aiming to raise the profile of the classical music realm among younger audiences is the San Jose Chamber Orchestra. The orchestra makes its concerts accessible to those lower on the demographic scale by offering inexpensive group deals for college music classes and high school music programs. The financial incentives appear to be working – music director Barbara Day Turner reveals that “around 25 percent of our audience is 35 or under, depending on the concert.” Not bad, considering the orchestra is competing with the large-scale marketing campaigns and music video-fueled popularity of contemporary acts.

Another local outfit, Symphony Silicon Valley, hasn’t noticed a huge increase in



attendance by younger people – but it has taken to programming concerts with younger audiences in mind. A key example was its Final Fantasy concert series earlier this year, which recreated the soundtrack of Square Enix’s Final Fantasy videogame series. Audiences responded with youthful exuberance. “It was very much the younger demographic,” says Symphony President Andrew Bales. “They were willing to pay top dollar, willing to attend and thoroughly enjoyed the symphony experience.”

While product-specific attendance such as this may not indicate an increase in the popularity of classical music as a whole, what it should do, predicts Bales, is cultivate future interest.

“I don’t think the Final Fantasy audiences will turn around and buy our tickets tomorrow, but I think they will eventually,” Bales says. “At some point down the road it will come up and, having experienced a classical concert, they won’t be afraid of it.”

Currently on tour in the U.S., the Australian Chamber Orchestra offers another example of classical-turned-cool. Widely considered one of the finest chamber orchestras in the world, the ACO has a huge following among the 20- and 30-something set, with tickets to one of their shows considered one of the hottest dates around. It doesn’t hurt that the orchestra’s artistic director and lead violinist Richard Tognetti was named one of Australian People’s Sexiest People in 2004, alongside international celebrities such as Brad Pitt, Paris Hilton and Justin Timberlake.

Classical music may lack the bad boy cool of rock, the bling bling of hip-hop or the toned abs of pop, but in a contemporary musical environment so crowded with over-hyped, manufactured, disposable music, that could just be what sees it become the new musical sensation.