

News



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By Robert Moon

Preconcert Enlightenment

Google the phrase preconcert lectures, and 131,000 articles appear, describing the myriad of musical organizations — mostly classical — that hire speakers to precede performances. The last few years have seen a proliferation of these learned attempts to inform and educate concertgoers about the music they are set to hear. The San Francisco Opera offered more than 30 lectures, seminars, films, and exhibitions last year before the world premiere of John Adam's opera *Dr. Atomic*. San Francisco Performances was one of two U.S. venues that offered Midori's daylong contemporary music workshop that previewed her



concert, given here in April. San Francisco Performance's Bob Greenberg regularly speaks about music, live and on CD; and the San Francisco Symphony employs a variety of experts to talk before subscription concerts.

What difference do these preperformance events make to the concertgoer? Music@Menlo, the world-class chamber music festival currently under way at Menlo School on the Peninsula, operates on the assumption that they can make a huge difference. By showcasing its educational component, the festival gives concertgoers the opportunity to immerse themselves for three weeks in this year's theme, "Returning to Mozart." The result is a superb example of the current

trend, one that is conceptually innovative and fascinating in its details. Perhaps its most important quality is the way the presenters connect with their audience through humor and a passion for the music. These are not mere demonstrations of ego, but rather displays of reverence.

The festival offers listeners two distinct ways to broaden the context of concerts. Advance-ticket holders receive a copy of Audio Notes, full-length CDs that act as recorded guides to each of the main concerts, which have titles like "Mozart and Shostakovich" and "Mozart and the Piano" (see the reviews in this issue). They can also attend five "Encounters" — live, two-hour evening presentations given on separate nights from the concerts by musical experts and musicians. The Encounters amplify aspects of the festival's theme and strive to be both informative and entertaining.

"When we offered the Encounters in the first year, we were prepared to set up 25 chairs in a circle around the fireplace in Stent Family Hall, if only that many people showed up," says Suzanne Field, executive director of the festival, which is now in its fourth year. "The most remarkable thing is that all of them sold out that first year. Last year, the first event to sell out was an Encounter."

What has made these events such a success? Reasons include nationally known speakers who devote a full evening to a presentation, musicians (both professional and preprofessional students) who give live musical examples, and an intimate setting (the 200-seat Martin Family Hall). This year's presenters include Bruce Adolphe, composer, author, and educator; Jeffrey Kahane, pianist and conductor; author Robert Marshall; Ara Guzelimian, senior director and artistic advisor of Carnegie Hall; and author David Cairns.

Mozart, at trial and at the piano

This year's first Encounter, "Why We Still Listen to Mozart and the Mozart Murder Trial," was given by Bruce Adolphe on Monday, July 24. He entered and greeted the audience of 200 with the mock aristocratic bow of a "serious musician." Adolphe juxtaposed humorous but relevant metaphors to illustrate in musical terms how Mozart wrote his music and why it is relevant today. He spoke and mimed a voice-over narrative, a story of a man waking up in the morning, brushing his teeth, and having breakfast, while a recording of the C-Minor Adagio from the "Dissonant" Quartet played. When the C-Major Allegro began, Adolphe simulated throwing open the curtains and letting the sun into the room.

Likening the Classical period's sonata form to the perfect medium for telling a story (covering exposition, development, and recapitulation), Adolphe took the first movement of Mozart's G-Minor Piano Quartet and compared it to a murder trial in court. Pianist Wu Han, cellist Peter Wiley, violist CarlaMaria Rodrigues, and violinist Ani Kavafian were on stage to demonstrate musical passages. The declarative first four bars became the charge to the jury (minor key); the piano response was the defendant pleading not guilty (major key). Bar 37 initiated an argument between the defendant and the prosecution; at bar 45, the court stenographer entered the drama.

Adolphe's metaphor was musically precise and hilarious, and the audience loved it. It was obvious in the recapitulation that the defendant was guilty, because the music returned in a minor key, contrasting with the major-key exposition. Was there a confession? Yes, the high E-flat in the coda was the dramatic culmination of the court scenario. The "sentence" was that musicians had to play the work over and over again in concert. (One audience member asked if Adolphe's mother wanted him to be a lawyer, and he shot back, "Did your father want you to be a psychiatrist?") The Encounter ended with a performance of the first movement, without commentary.

Adolphe must have been a stand-up comedian in another life. His comedy entertained and created a gateway to understanding, but sometimes the laughs blurred the musical distinctions they were meant to illuminate. In an interview, Adolphe commented on the ideal relationship between enjoyment, appreciation, and understanding of classical music. "The music comes first," he explained. "We should be driven to want to know something about the social and political environment because we found the music stimulating. After we are touched by the music, then we might rush off to a lecture or the library to learn about the music."

When I heard the concert performance of the Mozart Piano Quartet the following evening by the same musicians, I did think of the court trial metaphor, but after a few minutes the metaphor disappeared and the music took over. A few of the relevant musical distinctions that made Mozart a great composer remained with me, but the jury is out as to whether the lecture will make a difference to my understanding or enjoyment of this work in the future.

At the second Encounter on July 27, titled "Mozart's Piano Concerti: Operas Without Words," pianist and conductor Jeffrey Kahane won me over immediately when he walked out on stage and played the first few bars of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 27. "Music of farewell, as if he was smiling through the tears," he spoke quietly. Modestly admitting that there wasn't a single original thought in what he was about to say, Kahane launched into one of the most informative and moving presentations on Mozart's piano concertos that I have ever experienced. (I'll also admit here, for what it's worth, that I am a reviewer but not a musician.) Starting with K. 175, which Mozart wrote at age 16, Kahane selectively chose and demonstrated piano concerto movements that revealed how the composer expanded the musical and emotional possibilities of the form.

After playing a recording of the opening of the Piano Concerto No. 15, he asked the audience what was different about it. Someone answered, "It was scored for only woodwinds." Kahane responded, "Mozart was the Abraham Lincoln of woodwinds; he emancipates them for a major role in the piano concerto." The contrast was striking between Kahane's passionate yet reverentially reserved delivery, his sensitive piano playing, and the big, audiophile sound quality of the piano concerto recordings in Martin Family Hall. Although the technique of juxtaposing arias and excerpts from concertos to make the connection between Mozart's operas and piano concertos is not a new device, Kahane's experience as a conductor and pianist commu-

nicated a comfort and presence of authority that made it seem as if he were delivering a fireside chat. His personality never overshadowed the composer's music. At the conclusion, I wanted to rush home and start listening to every one of Mozart's piano concertos.

Recordings as educators

The Encounters provide context for different aspects of the festival's theme, but the Audio Notes CDs are designed to prepare the listener for an individual concert. "After slowing the music to a tranquil halt, slow, spooky footsteps are heard and the cello, like a ghost of its former self, plays the opening theme, now devoid of life as if drained of its blood," narrates cellist David Finckel in the Audio Notes preview of the first Music@Menlo concert. Finckel is referring to the theme of the second movement of Shostakovich's Cello Sonata, which he and pianist Wu Han played on July 25 and 26.

Coauthored and narrated by Patrick Castillo (the festival's artistic administrator), Finckel, and Wu Han, the CDs provide a structural analysis and historical context for the works performed in each of the six main concert programs and the two Carte Blanche concerts. "Musical examples and insights from festival artists who will perform the compositions add to the narrative," Castillo says. "We've integrated more of the artist's perspectives on the music this year, and less musical analysis than in the past. They have lived with this music for decades and can offer a unique point of view that engages the listener." Commenting on the second movement of the Shostakovich Piano Trio, Op. 67, violinist Ani Kavafian comments, "It's really fun to play, [because] it's so bizarre. A dance marked *Allegro non troppo*, it goes like a bat out of hell, churning up tremendous excitement."

Of course, there is no guarantee that concertgoers will listen to Audio Notes before the concert. (Those who aren't able to listen to the CDs can avail themselves of old-fashioned printed program notes, authored by Patrick Castillo, available before each festival concert.) But so far the results have exceeded the organizers' expectations. "When we sent out our CDs in the first year, we got a call from the local librarian — why was there a run on the books that related to the theme of the festival," Wu Han says. "That was the first indication that people were listening to them and interested in finding more about the music and its history." She adds that some audience members report listening both before and after the concert.

To test out the concept, I listened to the first concert's Audio Notes while driving down Highway 101 on my way to the performance. Radio and theater became one as the script tread a middle road between entertainment and information. Musical terms were mentioned when appropriate, and they were clearly explained. The metaphorical references and adjectives used to describe the music were often insightful as well as descriptive. Clarinetist Anthony McGill described the Mozart Quintet for Piano and Winds from the musicians' point of view: "There is a quality about this piece that floats above the earth. ... It's never quite grounded. We're never quite sitting, no matter how fast or slow we're playing."

Still, for all their flair, the Audio Notes lack the insouciant references to current culture that made Leonard Bernstein's educational efforts unique — for example, in a 1969 Young People's Concert titled "Berlioz Takes a Trip," Bernstein called Berlioz' *Symphonie Fantastique* "the first psychedelic symphony." They more than make up for this minor shortcoming, however. The balance between music and commentary is ideal in these CDs, and the use of multiple narrators avoids monotony. Audio Notes take written program notes a step further, because they can illustrate verbal analysis with musical examples, in addition to offering the listener the choice of when and where to listen. They are unique examples of what can happen when an organization puts the same level of artistic and financial resources (in this case, funds from the Barnard/Fain Foundation) into preconcert education as they put into the concerts themselves. The quality of these CDs — their sound, commentary, music, and performers — deserve a separate category in the classical Grammy Awards.

Does it work?

But does it matter if, when you hear the pizzicato theme in the final movement of Shostakovich's Piano Trio, you remember David Finckel's description of the violin "sounding like a theme from Fiddler on the Roof ... a blatant statement of solidarity with Jewish culture and tradition [and] a risky position for Shostakovich to take in Soviet Russia"? In this instance, the historical context and the musical metaphor brought a smile to my face and increased my respect for a composer and work I already loved.

Preconcert experiences, whether live or recorded, are a partnership between words and music. It's clear that the best examples use only enough words to maximize the music's impact. The most striking advocacy comes from expertise, through performance or composition rather than through lectures and other displays of knowledge. Passion and love for the music draw the audience in more effectively than showcases of ego. And a liberal sprinkling of metaphors, humor, and live music adds variety. Creatively used, media and presentations can bring the audience closer to the music.

Michael Steinberg, in an article titled "Why We Are Here," writes that "the elevation of the spirit is the ultimate reward [of listening to music], the one that comes after we have learned to take that nourishment of the senses, the brain, and the heart. ..." Audio Notes and the live Encounters engage the concertgoer's senses, brain, and heart, so that the spirit of music can come through. It's up to the individual to decide on the level of immersion that will make a concert a meaningful experience.