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Britten, Stravinsky enliven Peninsula Mozart festival



PHOTO: TRISTIAN COOK

Music@Menlo musicians with students at Menlo School.

By Joshua Kosman
CHRONICLE MUSIC CRITIC

It's 2006, and that means we all need to keep our Mozart hats on for the anniversary year. Cellist David Finckel and pianist Wu Han, the husband-and-wife artistic directors of Music@Menlo, have that one down to an art.

For the fourth season of the Peninsula chamber music festival, they've assembled a calendar of "Mozart and . . ." Each concert on the three-week schedule has paired Mozart's music with that of his predecessors or successors (no contemporaries, oddly enough), and if the connections are sometimes a stretch, the high quality of musicianship on display more than compensates.

Monday's concert at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto was a case in point. This final week of the festival brings combinations of Mozart with 20th century masterpieces, and no one even made an attempt to connect the dots between Mozart and the programmed works by Britten and Stravinsky (the final pairing of Messiaen's "Quartet for the End of Time" with Mozart's Clarinet Quintet is more congenial).

But when the playing is this good, themes are for rubes. Colin Carr began the evening in fine fashion with a probing account of Britten's Third Cello Suite.

Written in 1971 for Mstislav Rostropovich (like all five of the composer's big cello pieces), the Third Suite is a varied, quasi-improvisational affair that touches on a variety of ideas over the course of nine linked movements.

There's a march and a fugue and a big concluding passacaglia, as well as homages to Bach and Shostakovich (the latter a mutual friend of Britten and Rostropovich). There are stretches of seemingly free-form oratory and quotations from Russian folk and litur-

REVIEW

Music@Menlo: The festival concludes with music of Bach, Messiaen and Mozart at 8 p.m. Thursday in St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto and 8 p.m. Friday in Stent Family Hall, Menlo School, Atherton. Tickets: \$10-\$68. Call (650) 725-2787 or go to www.musicatmenlo.org.

gical melodies. All of it is infused with a certain dark, moody splendor, and Carr delivered it with eloquence and passion.

Wu Han and Gilbert Kalish then combined forces for a thunderous account of Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" in the arrangement for four-hand piano. This is very much like a black-and-white reproduction of an oil painting — it only takes a minute or two to be struck by how much of the missing orchestral color is essential to Stravinsky's score — but it had its own kind of primal urgency.

At times this rude force spilled over its bounds (less pedal might have helped), but the familiar melodies came through thrillingly, and the two performers seemed unmistakably on the same musical wavelength.

And there was plenty of sheer technical virtuosity on display, a visual as well as aural treat for anyone with a view of the keyboard. To watch the two pianists' arms and hands wind around each other, like the players in some musical game of Twister, was to be reminded of just how dense and multilayered Stravinsky's writing is.

After intermission, the clarity and tenderness of Mozart's chamber voice came as sweet balm. The Quintet for Piano and Winds, K. 452, drew an elegant and balanced performance from Kalish, oboist Allan Vogel, clarinetist Anthony McGill, bassoonist Dennis Godburn and hornist Richard Todd.

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