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Violinist Joseph Silverstein, accompanied by pianist Derek Han, performs eight Mozart sonatas at Menlo School's Stent Family Hall in Atherton.

Mozart marathon

VIOLINIST SILVERSTEIN SHINES IN MUSIC@MENLO'S SONATA REGATTA

By **Richard Scheinin**
Mercury News

Joseph Silverstein is an "old school" violinist. There's no swaying wildly and grimacing as he plays through tense passages, no effort to evoke high drama. He just plays the music — in tune, with silvery tone, and rock-solid technique — and the drama is revealed. And whenever he completes a movement, a look of satisfaction comes over his face, as if he knows he has just wrapped up a good, steady piece of work.

It was a pleasure seeing Silverstein in action Sunday at Menlo School in Atherton, where he and the exceptional pianist Derek Han performed eight — count 'em — of Mozart's sonatas for violin and piano as part of the ongoing Music@Menlo chamber music festival. This seasoned team took its audience on a trip through the music, beginning with a few of Mozart's early, cheery efforts, and, over the course of the day, burrowing into several of the later ones, too, exposing their much deeper and more expansive pleasures.

It was one of the festival's "Carte Blanche" concerts, in which a visiting artist is given a free hand to program whatever he or she fancies. In past years, British cellist Colin Carr spent a day traversing all six solo cello suites



Joseph Silverstein chose Mozart's sonatas Sunday for Music@Menlo's "Carte Blanche" format.

Music@Menlo

continues through Aug. 11 at venues in Atherton and Palo Alto

Tickets: \$10-\$78 for concerts; \$30 for "Encounter" symposiums (\$15 for students); to order online, www.musicatmenlo.org; by phone, (650) 725-2787.

Information: (650) 330-2030, www.musicatmenlo.org.

by J.S. Bach. Another time, violinist Ani Kavafian and keyboardist Kenneth Cooper examined all six Bach sonatas for violin and piano.

The concerts unfold over the course of an entire Sunday at Menlo School's intimate Stent Family Hall, with a break in the middle to amble outside for a picnic lunch. By the time the music ends, artists and audience share the feeling of having accomplished something special and important.

That was absolutely the case Sunday when Silverstein — former concertmaster of the Boston Symphony Orchestra as well as a respected conductor and educator — brought his experience to bear on eight of the "great 15" sonatas, composed from 1778 to 1787 when Mozart was coming into full ripeness as a composer.

Wu Han, the pianist who co-directs the Menlo festival, pointed out in her pre-concert remarks that Silverstein has been playing these pieces for a long time; it's been something like seven decades since he began to approach this music. And if there was one aspect of his Sunday performance that stood out, it was the sense of comfort he brought to

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the sonatas. They felt well lived-in, full of charm and at times touched by melancholy.

Other things stood out, too, as he and Derek Han performed the Sonata in A Major, K. 305, and the Sonata in D Major, K. 306, the first two pieces on the program, both dating to 1778.

There was the sweetness and grit of Silverstein's tone and the way he can unleash a strong, juicy double-stop with a short downward tug of the bow. There was the steady cohesion of violinist and pianist — robust unison passages, well-defined rhythms. In Mozart's sunny fast movements, the two were having an almost jocular conversation.

But even in these somewhat casual early works, Mozart could write a slow, aching melody. In the D Major sonata, the *Andante cantabile* is positively operatic. Silverstein captured that.

In the Sonata in E-flat Major, K. 380, a far more spacious and mature work written in 1781, the violinist almost floated through the second movement's lamenting melody. A whirlwind Rondo followed; the performance was becoming ever more buoyant and exuberant — though not perfect. Mozart's music moves so quickly and steadily and is so loaded with ornamentation that errant notes can happen. Silverstein greeted his with a surprised, furrowed brow, then moved along.

After lunch, the duo set into the best music of the day, three of the late, great sonatas for violin and piano. Silverstein was wobbly, not quite ready to proceed, on the Sonata in B-flat Major, K. 454, from 1784. But then matters settled down. The audience was in for a treat.

The two players were inspired by the Sonata in E-flat Major, K. 481, from 1785. Mozart's music had grown by this time. He had extended his structures, enriched his harmonies, heightened the interaction between the instruments and deepened the potential for emotional expression.

Between Silverstein and Han there was now an intangible balance and feeling of felicity. They delivered the slow second movement as an extended prayer. The theme and variations in the final movement was dexterous and clear.

Their emotional and technical cohesion reached its height in the wondrous Sonata in A Major, K. 526, from 1787, a work filled with inspired melodies. (It was written around the time of "Don Giovanni.") This was a fitting climax to the day: The music, simply, was beautiful. Fun, too. As the sonata drove toward its finish, Silverstein blazed through a Hungarian-style fiddle tune — one last word from Mozart — and, suddenly, the marathon was over.



TRISTAN COOK

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