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WHET YOUR CLASSICAL MUSIC
APPETITE WITH 7-DISC SET FROM
MUSIC@MENLO'S 2006 SEASON

By Richard Scheinin

Mercury News

There's an entire cottage industry run by media folks who seem to dedicate their lives, and presumably earn their livings, by predicting the death of classical music. A quick Google search on, say, "classical music and death" will send you deep into their gleeful mustering of facts and figures.

Lately, it's chamber music in particular that's getting pounded. Fine. But I'm not here to get caught up in the debate, only to point out that I have just spent nine hours listening to seven CDs recorded at last summer's Music@Menlo chamber music festival. Every concert was sold out and, based on the audience response on the discs, one would have to conclude that some folks still believe this music is alive — and, more than that, live for the music, the same way rock 'n' rollers live for *their* music.

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Magic @Menlo

MENLO | Box set of CDs worthy of 2006 festival

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is an especially easy event to celebrate. Its co-founders and co-artistic directors, Wu Han and David Finckel, know what they're doing.

Not only are they celebrated performers themselves — Wu Han, a pianist; Finckel, a cellist and longtime member of the Emerson String Quartet — but they are artistic directors of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in New York, their hometown. (They are also married, a classical-music power couple.)

Music@Menlo, which takes place at venues in Atherton, Menlo Park and Palo Alto, brings together their musician friends and colleagues, some of the most talented players around. There's a collegial atmosphere at the festival, which is headquartered on the shady campus of the Menlo School in Atherton, and the programs tend to blend the familiar and unfamiliar in a way that satisfies and stretches audiences, a tricky thing to accomplish.

The box set, titled "Music@Menlo Live: Returning to Mozart," illustrates how that happens. (The discs are available individually or as a set at www.musicatmenlo.org.)

For instance, the fifth disc, "Mozart and the Twentieth Century," finds Wu Han and pianist Gilbert Kalish blasting through Stravinsky's "Le Sacre du Printemps (The Rite of Spring)" for piano, four hands — for two pianists sharing the same keyboard, in other words — and follows it with Mozart's Flute Quartet in D major, K. 285.

After taking Stravinsky's wild ride, you're ready for Mozart's centering influence. The quartet, which features the sparkling flute of Carol Wincenc alongside

Finckel, violinist Jennifer Frautschi and violist Paul Neubauer, is among the most enchanting performances in the set. The sprites are dancing.

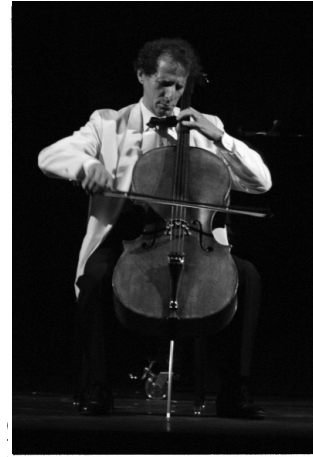
This is how last summer's festival worked: Titled "Returning to Mozart," it operated on the premise that Mozart is a very good thing to "return" to after being soaked in music by Shostakovich or Britten, Messiaen or Schubert. The theme allowed Wu Han and Finckel to exercise their programming smarts, mixing and matching unlike repertoire, while honoring Mozart, who had died 250 years earlier — and was being honored by every classical music programmer on Earth.

On the fourth disc, "Mozart and Winds," opens with Janacek's "Mladi (Youth)" for wind sextet, here including Wincenc, as well as the remarkable young clarinetist Anthony McGill, and bass clarinetist Carey Bell (who takes over the principal clarinet position with the San Francisco Symphony this fall).

A piquant work filled with Janacek's quirky colorings, it is followed by Brahms' Piano Quartet No. 3 in C minor, Op. 60, played by Kalish, Finckel, Frautschi and Neubauer. This is one of the set's best performances, loaded with undulating emotion, which comes at you in waves. After basking in it, returning to Mozart — the Serenade for Winds in C Minor, K. 388 — is a letdown.

Here are a few other "picks" from the box set (on the Music@Menlo Live label), which boasts crisp recorded sound, courtesy of Grammy-winning engineer Da-Hong Seetoo:

Shostakovich's Sonata for Cello and Piano in D minor, Op. 40, given a dark, keen performance by Wu Han and Finckel (disc one); pianist Jeffrey Kahane's in-



TRISTAN COOK

British cellist Colin Carr is shown performing at last summer's Music@Menlo festival.

disc seven, with Messiaen's "Quartet for the End of Time" (McGill's clarinet is out of this world, as is the whole performance) and a soulful reading of Mozart's Clarinet Quintet in A major, K. 581, with McGill, Frautschi, violinist Jorja Fleezanis, violist Carla-Maria Rodrigues and stupendous British cellist Colin Carr.

There are some dry patches amid the nine hours. But mostly, this set reminds me of just how ready I am to return to Menlo.

'Music@Menlo Live: Returning to Mozart'

What: Seven-disc set of live recordings from 2006 Music@Menlo concerts

Price: \$105 at www.musicatmenlo.org