FINANCIAL TIMES

July 30, 2008

From classroom to concert hall

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Music@Menlo

Atherton/Palo Alto, California

Whether it is attributable to hubris, inertia or meteorological contrarianism (the city is wet and damp; everybody else roasts in the warm months), San Francisco remains inhospitable terrain for extended summer music festivals, especially of the al fresco variety. Matters change if you journey 30 miles south to the posh Menlo School, nestled deep in the environs of Silicon Valley, where the temperature is salubrious, the audiences are enthusiastic and the funding is relatively plentiful. A remarkable festival thrives here, one that for three weeks every summer guarantees an immersion in the monuments and back alleys of the chamber music repertory.

Immersion is the word. David Finckel, longtime cellist of the Emerson Quartet, and his wife, pianist Wu Han, founded Music at Menlo six seasons ago, planning to explore the more intimate kinds of music and to train and develop younger musicians; the two goals, the pair says, cannot be separated. So when they invite elite figures (32, plus two string quartets this year) from the American chamber music sphere, these worthies are expected both to fiddle for the public and to head a series of masterclasses and coaching sessions. Finckel and Han have invited students to participate in either the pre-conservatory category or the international programme; in a matter of weeks, they emerge sounding like vintage ensembles. On the festival's first evening, a Corelli Concerto Grosso found 10 young musicians of a single, sublime interpretive mind. Wonders are possible here.

Casual festival visitors might start the day by auditing a masterclass given by the Minnesota Orchestra's concertmaster Jorja Fleezanis, whose sage advice on the young professionals' Beethoven included a plea to frame a performance within a context of "reserved elegance". Next one might eavesdrop on a seminar on career planning for musicians, delivered over meatball sandwiches, or join a noontime café conversation with a resident artist. In the early evening, those musicians from the masterclasses reprise the music in public. If you wander beforehand through the back rooms of St Mark's Episcopal Church, the main concert venue, the cacophony of musicians warming up suggests the ghost of John Cage has descended on suburbia.

Finckel planned the 2008 mainstage concerts around "The Unfolding of Music", a chronological canter through the history of the art. Nothing in my experience quite hit the mark like the glorious go at the Schubert Octet that dominated the second programme. Rarely has this paradigmatic chamber music festival work sounded so spontaneous, serene or delectably discursive. The violinist Arnaud Sussmann and the clarinettist Anthony McGill led their colleagues with distinction; the Octet's heavenly length has never lifted the spirit so effortlessly. Haydn (in the guise of the "Sunrise" Quartet) summoned a tightly knit response from New York's young Escher Quartet, but the foursome rarely let the music breathe in the 18th-century manner.

The festival's tussle with the baroque provided mixed satisfaction. In spite of an errant harpsichord, Kenneth Cooper dazzled in his own arrangement of a Bach Concerto "after" Vivaldi. Kathryn Greenback proved a heroic exponent of a Marcello oboe concerto, planned at the 11th hour, but too much of the string-playing merely winked at authentic performance practice. Still, the capacity audiences suggest the festival may need to grow in 2009. The focus will not change, as Finckel stands by his conviction that there is "more diversity in chamber music than in all the other forms of the art". ★★★★☆

Until August 8; tel +1 650 331 0202

Allan Ulrich

Perfect pitch: Laurence Lesser tutors a young cellist at Menlo Tristan Cook