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Youth sparkles at Menlo festival

STUDENTS STEP UP AFTER SOPRANO CANCELS

By Georgia Rowe
for the Mercury News

The idea that classical music is the province of the older generation got a bracing comeuppance at Saturday's splendid opening night performance of the Music@Menlo Festival.

True, more than a few seniors were in the capacity crowd at Palo Alto's St. Mark's Episcopal Church. On-stage, though, it looked like some sort of youth movement.

Of course, young artists have always been a significant component of this annual South Bay chamber music extravaganza, now in its sixth summer season. Founded by cellist David Finckel and his wife, pianist Wu Han — who continue to serve as co-artistic directors — Music@Menlo is a three-week immersion experience. It's a stunning lineup of concerts, master classes, symposiums, cafe conversations and prelude performances in Palo Alto and Atherton.

Even so, a group of this year's young artists found themselves taking center stage rather unexpectedly. And the thrill of the evening was seeing just how ready they were.

Here's how it happened:

Saturday's program, titled "Towards Bach," was to have featured soprano Celena Shafer in a performance of Bach's

The Music@Menlo Festival

Where: St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Palo Alto, and Menlo School, Atherton.

When: Through Aug. 8

Tickets: \$32-\$50 Adult, \$10-25 student/youth

Call: (650) 331-0202, or visit www.musicatmenlo.org

"Wedding Cantata." But when Shafer came down with laryngitis and had to cancel, there was a hole in the program that needed to be filled.

Corelli's Concerto Grosso in D Major, one of the works on the evening's prelude performance, fit the bill nicely. So the 11 students from Music@Menlo's Chamber Music Institute, who had just finished playing the concerto for the pre-show crowd, came on-stage midway through the main concert and played it again.

It was a dazzling performance, made all the more exciting by the spontaneous feel of the last-minute switch. The young musicians — violinists Isaac Allen, Areta Zhulla, Bram Goldstein and Grace Park; violists Youming Chen and Angela Choong; cellists Dmitri Atapine, Sunny Yang and Yuan Zhang; bassist DaXun Zhang, and harpsichordist Qing Jiang — tore into the piece with unity, amazing focus and ferocious energy.

concertreview

Entrances were elegant and precise, individual parts were clearly articulated, and each movement sounded dynamic and shapely. If this is the future of music, let's have more of it.

The program's other works exerted their own appeal. "Towards Bach" featured three works by its namesake, including Bach's Concerto No. 1 in D Major, a transcription of a Vivaldi violin concerto arranged for harpsichord by Kenneth Cooper, who also served as soloist with the Escher String Quartet.

Two of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos — Nos. 3 and 4 — were also included. The latter, which featured violinist Erin Keefe and flutists Demarre McGill and Sooyun Kim as soloists, sounded especially vibrant.

The work's outer movements were brisk and sweet-toned; the slow movement, one of Bach's finest, came across with an exquisite combination of poise and grandeur.

The evening began with short works by Bach's predecessors, composers who paved the way from the Renaissance to the Baroque. These included Salamone Rossi's Sonata No. 4, Giovanni Legrenzi's Sonata "La Foscari," Henry Purcell's "Fantasia upon One

Note," and Benedetto Marcello's Concerto in C minor for oboe and strings, with Kathryn Greenbank as soloist. Each received a committed performance.

Still, nothing compared to the brilliance of the Corelli concerto. Shafer, according to festival representatives, is expected to sing at tonight's repeat performance at Stent Family Hall in Atherton, which means that the revised program will revert to the originally scheduled one.

But those young artists will also play the Corelli on the prelude concert at 6. If you go, get there early so you don't miss it.

Music@Menlo continues through Aug. 8, with additional programs devoted to Haydn and Schubert (Wednesday to Friday), Romantic composers Brahms, Schumann, Dvorak and Wolf (next Monday to July 30), modern composers including Stravinsky, Shostakovich and Ives (Aug. 2-6), and contemporary composers Tan Dun, Jennifer Higdon, Kenneth Frazelle and Gabriela Lena Frank (Aug. 7-8.)

In addition to Finckel and Wu Han, performers will include violinists Jorja Fleezanis and Philip Setzer, pianists Derek Han and Stephen Prutsmann, oboist William Bennett, and the Borromeo String Quartet. For a complete schedule, visit www.musicatmenlo.org.