

# San Jose Mercury News

August 7, 2008

## It's been a marvelous, magical summer @Menlo

### A MUSICAL LOVE AFFAIR CONTINUES

By Richard Scheinin

*Mercury News*

As the Music@Menlo chamber music festival winds down its sixth season, I'm mulling over what it is that makes Menlo such a cherished event. It's become

### concertreview

more than a summertime fixture on the Peninsula. It's more like an annual reminder of why we all fell in love with music to begin with.

There's its ambitiousness. Its way of gathering together great players who, more than a few times per season, achieve a chemistry that feels almost unbelievably perfect. There's the affection and sense of ownership the audience feels for the proceedings, and the friendships struck between listeners and musicians. There's the festival's intimacy.

I've heard people complain about the occasional under-rehearsed performance and high ticket prices. All true. Yet where else in the Bay Area have you been able to attend the sorts of programs offered by Menlo over the last several days? The festival's players took on the music of the first half of the 20th century, zigzagging through genius repertory that rarely gets performed; music that's shocking, joyful, swollen with spirit.

Sunday, the Borromeo String Quartet played all six string quartets by Bela



TRISTAN COOK

Clarinetist Anthony McGill surprised Music@Menlo co-founder David Finckel, right; Monday night when he played a solo piece written by Finckel's father, Edwin Finckel,

Bartok. This is practically a wacky undertaking, the music is so grueling to perform in a single gulp. Composed between 1908 and 1939, it reflects those violent times: harrowing, as well as technically formidable, dense with detail.

The Borromeo, making its festival debut, was heroic. The group began at 10 a.m. in front of the usual (for Menlo) sold-out house and, breaking twice for intermissions, navigated nearly three hours of music: emotionally heightened, with savage rhythms, or evoking ghost-worlds, wind through fog, isolation, fear.

It's relevant music for the post-9/11 world. And beyond the fear, it's music of persistence and survival, darkly beautiful. The Borromeo flagged here and there - they're human - but mostly succeeded in making Bartok's music a vivid thing.

### Music@Menlo

**Final programs of the season:** "Music Now: Voices of Our Time"

**Where:** St. Mark's Church, 600 Colorado Ave., Palo Alto

**When:** 8 tonight and Friday

**Tickets:** For ticket information, go to [www.musicatmenlo.org](http://www.musicatmenlo.org).

The middle movement of the sixth quartet was humidly Expressionistic, delicate and sticky; you could feel it on your skin.

That the performance took place in little Stent Family Hall in Atherton, at the Menlo School, heightened its impact. Monday, I returned to Stent for a program titled "The Rise of Modernism," which was even better.

It was a perfect Menlo evening: performances of unrestrained beauty and whimsy. The size of the en-

sembles kept growing, the performances taking on new emotional hues until the concert ended with a rendering of Shostakovich's Two Pieces for String Octet, Op. 11, that was garage-band wild.

Other high points included violinist Ian Swensen and pianist Anna Polonsky performing Debussy's Violin Sonata: gorgeous, each note perfectly weighted. The Escher Quartet's burnished performance of Louis Gruenberg's extremely zany Four Diversions for String Quartet brought to mind Buster Keaton, hanging from a ledge.

Baritone Robert Gardner turned songs by Ives into musical theater: brawny, tender, nostalgic. There were rare pieces by Britten (his Phantasy, Op. 2) and Prokofiev (the Overture on Hebrew Themes, Op. 34), each pretty overwhelming.

But the biggest surprise came from clarinetist Anthony McGill, performing something that wasn't programmed: "Spring Suite" for solo clarinet by the late Edwin Finckel -- father of cellist David Finckel, Menlo's co-founder, who was seated next to McGill on stage and looked stunned.

Edwin Finckel composed concertos, arranged for Gene Krupa and played piano with Lester Young. And this gently warbling, midnight-blue piece established a warm, pensive mood in the room. It was a gift from McGill to his friend Finckel who, with pianist Wu Han (Finckel's wife and co-conspirator), has created one special festival.