

ARTS

HOT TICKET

## Classical Dissonance

Composer Bruce Adolphe riffs on the beauty of discordant sounds at this summer's Music@Menlo.

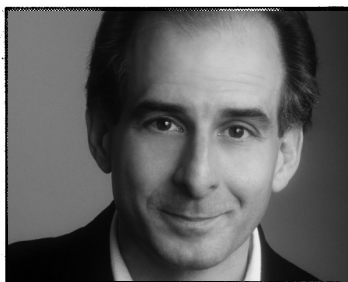
BY MICHAEL J. VAUGHN

One of the more poetic lines in Music@Menlo's 2008 brochure appears in the description for "Delicious Dissonance," a lecture by renowned composer Bruce Adolphe (pictured) that will take place Aug. 1 as part of the festival's Encounters series: "A speck of dust in your eye, a car alarm in the street at night while you are trying to sleep, an elevator stuck between floors, and a flirtatious glance from a stranger – all of that is dissonance."

Defined by *Merriam-Webster* as "a mingling of discordant sound, esp. a clashing or unresolved musical interval or chord," dissonance was arguably the pivot point of 20<sup>th</sup> century music. Yet to this day, a common response from purists and laymen alike is, "Why would you take the near tonal perfections of artists like Haydn and Mozart and throw all that *junk* in there?" And yet, that "junk" has *always* been there, even in classical and romantic compositions.

"All music is propelled, even defined, by dissonance," explains Adolphe, who has composed works for Itzhak Perlman, Yo-Yo Ma, Sylvia McNair and many other prominent artists and orchestras. "Haydn's sense of drama, and also his humor, is based on dissonances of varying kinds: the single dissonant note that forces a key change; the structural dissonance that breaks up a symmetrical phrase, often for laughs; the spicy *appoggiatura* [an embellishing note preceding an essential melodic note] that creates the sound of mocking. Mozart was particularly proud of his experiments with dissonance. The opening of his famous 'Dissonance Quartet' [*String Quartet No. 19 in C major*] is so nicknamed because of the volume of unprepared and misleading dissonances that purposely disorient the listener, creating great mystery and suspense."

Adolphe says dissonance is an essential part of the composer's toolkit. "Dissonance and consonance are simply part of the vocabulary and syntax of musical thought," he continues. "Tension means dissonance, either in terms of a single tone or a group [chord] of tones or in terms of displacement, accent, silence and surprise. All drama is about dissonance; all comedy is about



TICKET INFO

"Delicious Dissonance: Melodic, Harmonic and Rhythmic Dissonance in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century," Aug. 1, 7:30pm, \$15-\$35, Martin Family Hall, Menlo School, 50 Valparaiso Ave., Atherton (650) 331-0202, [www.music@menlo.org](http://www.music@menlo.org)

dissonance. Where would we be without the sword and the banana peel?"

For some, dissonance can be downright irresistible – they can't help seeking out that beautiful friction. But that leads to the trickiest question of all: Physically and scientifically speaking, what is that friction? Adolphe himself is undecided, fully versed on the arithmetic formulae first worked out by Pythagoras and his single-string monochord, but also guessing that some of what we call "dissonance" is a matter of culturally bred expectations. He is in hot pursuit of the subject, though. In addition to collaborating on a piece with neuroscientist Antonio Damasio for a 2009 Kennedy Center premiere with Ma, he assumed the post of composer-in-residence at LA's Brain and Creativity Institute in 2008 to explore just such matters.

Music@Menlo continues its look at musical history that began in its 2003 season. Besides a wide variety of chamber performances, artist conversations and master classes, the festival will afford three other lectures in its Encounters series: Stuart Isacoff's "Temperament: How Music Became a Battleground for the Great Minds of Western Civilization" (Jul. 18), Michael Steinberg's "Nostalgia is Not Enough: What is Romantic?" (Jul. 26) and Ara Guzelimian's "Future Forward: Exploring the Here and Now" (Aug. 6). **EW**