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Twin piano trios' contrasts captivate crowd

Music@Menlo

Tonight: Pianist Gary Graffman performs music for the left hand by Scriabin, Brahms, Reger, Corigliano and others, 8 p.m. St. Mark's Episcopal church, 600 Colorado Ave., Palo Alto

Through: Aug. 8 at venues in Palo Alto and Atherton

Tickets: \$10-\$70; (650) 331-0202 or www.musicatmenlo.org



TRISTAN COOK — MUSIC@MENLO



Left to right, Music@Menlo artistic directors David Finckel and Wu Han, along with violinist Philip Setzer, who performed Schubert's two piano trios at Sunday's cherry-picked program.

By Richard Scheinin

Mercury News

Franz Schubert's two piano trios, written at the tail end of his short life, are often said to be a study in contrasts: the one in B-flat, sunny and athletic; the one in E-flat, a trip to the shadowlands.

It's not all that simple, and Sunday's performance of these two masterworks at the Music@Menlo chamber music festival bore out the basic assumptions. Pianist Wu Han, violinist Philip Setzer and cellist David Finckel gave their sold-out audience an exuberant, edifying account of the B-flat,

concertreview

then turned the screws tighter for the E-flat, grabbing listeners, as it were, by the throats.

It was draining. And what a way to start off a Sunday: The program got under way at 10:30 a.m., with coffee and bagels barely digested.

It was one of the festival's special "Carte Blanche" concerts, in which the artists get to cherry-pick some favorite pieces. And it happened at the Menlo School's

Stent Family Hall in Atherton, a salon-like setting with a 19th-century ambience; one could imagine Herr Schubert lurking about.

In its sixth season, Menlo has a devoted following (an understatement), and there was a buzz in the little hall — palpable excitement — as everyone got seated. As a setup to the music, there was a mini-lecture by author and musicologist Michael Steinberg, who for years wrote program notes for the San Francisco Symphony and has become a Menlo regular, erudite and affable.

He set the context for the trios: Schubert began the trios in late 1827, wrapping them up early in 1828 as he was taking on the mantle of the recently deceased Beethoven. He was also composing at an almost unbelievable pace — and would be dead in a matter of months, of syphilis, at age 31.

Steinberg quoted Robert Schumann, who said this of the B-flat trio: "One glance, and the world shines afresh again." As for its twin, the E-flat, it opens with an allegro movement that is "inspired by profound rage,"

Schumann wrote, "as well as boundless longing."

On to the music.

These three performers have a history: Han and Finckel are a working duo, as well as a married couple and the festival's artistic directors; Setzer and Finckel, best known as half of the Emerson String Quartet, have performed together for more than three decades. As a trio, Han, Setzer and Finckel have played, on and off, for years. (Their recording of the Schubert trios is due out on the ArtistLed label in the fall).

The B-flat major trio, Op. 99, in their hands turned out to be exuberant and melancholy, sunlit and introverted. The andante, with its intertwining melodies, was laden with longing, though the sparkling lines and shimmering textures of the rondo, the finale, underlined the work's athleticism and high spirits.

Han was the group's rhythmic glue. And she and Finckel were its singers, she with her gift for contour and melody (and humor), he with his rich, layered tone and bounding lyricism. Less of a "look-at-me" player, Setzer might have been the

odd man out were he not so darn comfortable with Schubert, one of his specialties. He was the ballast, the stabilizer.

From the start, the group painted the E-flat major trio, Op. 100, with a darker, expanded emotional palette and billowing dynamics. The great melody of the second movement — a funeral march, with Finckel in the lead — brought chills.

The third movement, a scherzo, lost focus. But the finale, another rondo, came with a wallop, the march returning twice, the trio wrapping up its cherry-picked program with throat-grabbing vigor.

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