

# STRINGS

## Sparks Fly at Music@Menlo Finale Living composers share new works with players and receptive audience

By Graham Pellettieri  
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The stage emitted a red glow when the final three performers for the evening walked out of the wings dressed in fiery red shirts. As violinist Areta Zhulla, cellist Dmitri Atapine, and pianist Qing Jiang launched into a dauntingly fast movement riddled with rhythmic complexities, colorful harmonies, and extreme dynamics, it became apparent that the character of the music and the musicians' choice of clothing were no coincidence. As the tempo quickened, the intensity rose and their shirts burned brighter. The trio was playing *Fiery Red*, the second movement of Jennifer Higdon's *Piano Trio*, and everyone knew this was not music from some distant era, but rather music from our time, written for our time.



Having completed its sixth season, the Music@Menlo festival, held July 17–August 8 in Menlo Park, California, once again succeeded in uniting brilliant musicians from all ages to collaborate through teaching, master classes, conversations, and performances. This year's programs focused on music that ranges through time, from Bach to modernism, and the refreshing finale was a look into the world of living composers and the music of our time.

Contributions came from four living composers: Jennifer Higdon, Kenneth Frazelle, Gabriela Frank, and Tan Dun. The quartet of composers offered a diverse pallet of music that communicated cultural, geographic, and stylistic differences.

All of the works performed during the last evening concert were premieres. Higdon's *Scenes from the Poet's Dreams* marked the West Coast premiere of the work, and was executed brilliantly by the well-oiled machine that is the Borromeo String Quartet, joined by Gary Graffman on piano. Gabriela Frank's selections of *Songs of Cifar* and the *Sweet Sea* also celebrated its West Coast debut, and added unique Nicaraguan flair to the program. Kenneth Frazelle had the honor of seeing the world premiere of his *Piano Trio*—which is Music@Menlo's first ever commission—performed by Jeffrey Kahane, Joseph Swensen, and David Finckel. Tan Dun's *Elegy: Snow in June* employed Andrés Díaz on amplified acoustic cello, accompanied by four percussionists with an arsenal of drums, cymbals, bells, gongs, newspaper, mallets, and loads of other percussive equipment. It was arguably the most interesting piece on the program.

Together, the music of these composers resonated with the audience and the spirit of Music@Menlo. The interpretations and performances of this music today will help define the future of music tomorrow.