



THE HEDGEHOGTM

Interview

The Making of a Music Festival

BY LESLIE FRIEDMAN

DAVID FINCKEL, cellist of the acclaimed Emerson String Quartet, and his wife, pianist Wu Han, are co-founders of the Music@Menlo summer chamber music festival and institute, based in Menlo Park, California. The festival competed its seventh season in 2009. David Finckel and Wu Han have also served as Artistic Directors of The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center since 2004. One of the music world's busiest and most accomplished couples, they perform solo and together throughout the world, and launched their own recording label, ArtistLed, in 1997.

Finckel talked with The Hedgehog in the gardens of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto, one of Music@Menlo's venues, in August 2009.

Hedgehog: It was a pleasure to hear you play last night, and to see your daughter Lilian (a young piano student at the festival's institute) turning pages for you on stage. Does she represent the next generation of classical musicians?

David Finckel: Perhaps. What a professional musician is in the coming decades is yet to be determined—concert performer, educator, organizer like Wu Han and me—we probably don't know all the possibilities. I do know that she's comfortable around artists, people performing under stress, and happy in the musical environment.

HH: How did you and Wu Han decide to start this festival? You are such busy artists, it's not as though you had a lot of spare time. Why did you believe there was a niche for a new festival?

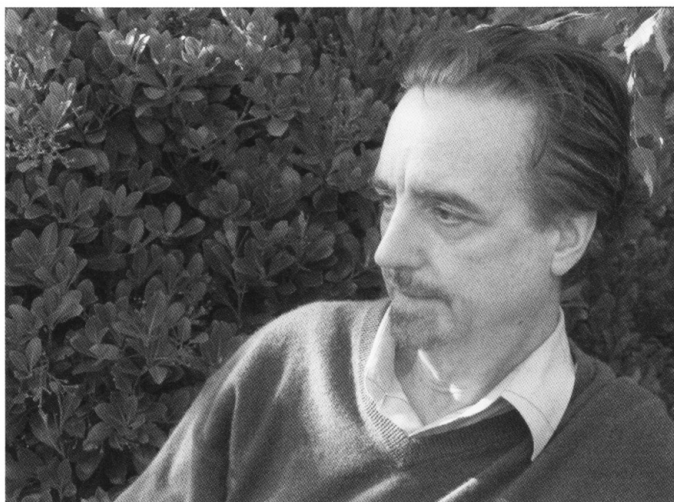
DF: We got a call out of the blue in 1996 to direct SummerFest La Jolla, following Heiichiro Ohyama [see *HH Vol. 1 No. 2*]. Until then we hadn't thought of doing anything like that, but we realized we had a lot of ideas. We stayed on for three seasons, and felt we'd done what we could. Afterwards, we missed the opportunity to cause music to happen, to bring people together. So we talked to Paul Brest, a very good friend

out here who is now president of the Hewlett Foundation, whom we originally knew through Stanford when he was dean of the Law School and a friend of our string quartet. [The Emerson String Quartet was a frequent feature of Stanford's arts presenting seasons.] We asked him, not in a financial sense but in an artistic way, what the possibility would be of a summer festival in the Bay Area. He immediately connected us with the Foundation's artistic director. She advised us to look around and suggested people we should meet.

We drove all over the Bay Area and it turned out that the only place where there was no summer festival was right here. We thought there must be a reason. Do people leave in the summer? No. Is the weather terrible in the summer? No. Are there any youth orchestras? Yes, there were eleven! The place could really use a summer festival.

At that point, the Hewlett Foundation invited us to apply for seed money. They put us through the paces, demanding plans of what everything would cost and how we would do it. We were awarded seed money to put on a one-day demonstration.

That first day had all the elements we have now: a workshop for young musicians, a lecture, professional recording working with the same engineer we have now, an extensive program book. We filled Stent Hall [an auditorium at Menlo School] with an invited audience, and we made a lot of friends in the community.



DAVID FINCKEL

The following year we extended it to the full season, not quite what it is now but the structure was all there—adventurous programming, the most distinguished artists, evening lectures. We had projected that in five years we would hit our target audience numbers. In the first year, we hit 98%. It was a total shock to us that all of a sudden we could mount this full-fledged festival and people would come as though they had been coming for years.

HH: You have an army of volunteers.

DF: Oh, yes, we always wanted volunteers. It's a wonderful way for people to be involved and for us to save money. It sends out a strong message that this is so worthwhile to help that it's worth your time. It's a message we believe in.

HH: How did you decide on the particular age of the young performers? You have students aged eight to eighteen. Most festivals don't start that young.

DF: You have to believe that no musician is too young to play chamber music. That as soon as they are comfortable reading music, keeping their place, it's time to teach them that music is made by more than one person, that it's a social exercise, that through it you learn civility, learn to listen, learn to give and take, to give and get criticism, and to produce something more

than the sum of its parts. When they rehearse, they behave as adults. Sometimes it's amazing what these little kids can do, some of them barely as big as a cello! It's magical, what you will see them produce here. There's something to be said for the enthusiasm and the thrill that these kids get going out on stage. And, you, know, they haven't been through as many ups and downs as many of the rest of us.

HH: *Why did you chose Mendelssohn as your theme, "Being Mendelssohn," this summer? [2009 was the 200th anniversary of Felix Mendelssohn's birth.]*

DF: He was one of the central figures in music history, whose work spanned the ages of Classicism and Romanticism. We had as two previous festival themes Mozart and Beethoven, and Mendelssohn fit.

HH: *Do you pick the repertory first and then find artists you want to work with who also fit the schedule, or do you*



select the artists and work with them to build the repertory?

DF: All of that. We put it all together, but we have a lot of help. Like tonight's concert of Brahms sonatas. Jeffrey Kahane and Joseph Swenson [pianist and violinist] came to us with the idea.

HH: *You're making a major step toward revitalizing Mendelssohn's reputation. I remember hearing when I was very young that he was a "lightweight" who wrote charming but not serious music. I loved A Midsummer Night's*

Dream, and yet can't remember hearing much else. In the quartets performed by the Pacifica Quartet, every movement is so deep and interesting. I don't think I've ever heard them played before.

DF: First of all, they're so difficult! This is amazing, demanding music. It's complex in composition but also in the imagination, the intellect behind it.

HH: *You are doing something important by letting people have the experience of living through that breathtaking music.*

DF: Mendelssohn was one of the first oppressed composers, posthumously even. If you think of oppressed composers, you think of the Holocaust composers; you think of Shostakovich, Ligeti. Mendelssohn had to endure all the absurd anti-Semitism and all the hateful stuff from Wagner. There was so much of that after he was dead and not around to defend himself. I'm going to Leipzig in August; they're having a great festival there. They're putting back up the statue of Mendelssohn that was torn down by the Nazis. It will be great to be there.

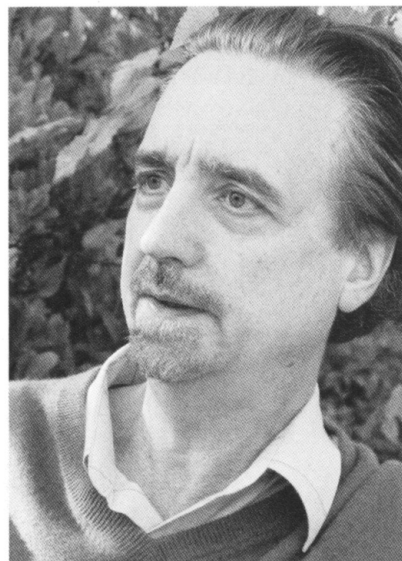
HH: *You maintain an impressive travel schedule!*

DF: Actually, before Leipzig I'm going with Wu Han to Korea for a Lincoln Center Chamber Music Society teaching thing for a week. Then I'm going back to New York for one day to play at the Mostly Mozart Festival. Wu Han will go to Taiwan to audition young Taiwanese musicians for a Mozart workshop. Then, we'll all meet up in Salzburg and the quartet will come along as family. Then a couple of days in Prague. . . [at this point, the itinerary becomes extremely busy with more stops leading up to Leipzig]. Staying in one place for three weeks with the Music@Menlo festival is so different for me. I am crazy busy, but it gives me so much energy to hear these incredible kids play and attend all the amazing concerts.

HH: *Is what you do at Music@Menlo similar to what you do with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center?*

DF: No. There it's a whole nine month season, and there are festivals within

those nine months, but nothing with the intensity or density of what we do here. In New York, we don't work with just one idea; there's a whole different



set of people who will come to hear one repertory or another but not all. Here we have one audience that comes to hear it all.

HH: *How did you and Wu Han meet?*

DF: We met at the University of Hartford where she was a graduate student and I was coaching chamber music. It was my first teaching thing with the Emerson Quartet. She won a competition that the quartet had, and she played the Schumann quintet with me. I asked her to play some other concerts with me. We had amazing communication. Music is still the defining cement between us, and now it's not just playing together, it's the programming, too.

We evolved a duo partnership and that led to other things, to enjoying the work of other musicians, to creating these things as a musical team. It's just expanded outward, to the creation of this festival, Lincoln Center, playing in foreign countries, the programming, the recordings. It's all blossomed out of the Schumann quintet!

At this point, we began to hear applause and cheers coming from the church. David Finckel rushed off to hear the young musicians play. ~