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Music@Menlo offers high notes in intimate space

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After the death of British Baroque composer Henry Purcell in 1695, England's classical music scene became a non-scene. The "land without music," they called it. Why, England had to import composers: i.e. Handel, Haydn and Mendelssohn. And the dry spell persisted for a good 200 years, until the

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emergence of Edward Elgar and a new school of genuinely English composition.

The music got juicy, fast. And Music@Menlo's latest program — which had its first performance Sunday in Stent Family Hall in Atherton — is about that welling up of English sounds after the turn of the 20th century. Specifically it's about Elgar, William Walton and Benjamin Britten, whose song cycle "A Charm of Lullabies" drew Sunday's audience into the sensuous aura of mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke, an artist in the prime of her talents.

Only 28, Cooke recently performed Berlioz's "Les Nuits d'Ete" and Stravinsky's "Pulcinella" at Davies Symphony Hall with Michael Tilson Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony. I saw one of the "Pulcinella" performances; her voice was luscious. But experiencing Cooke inside 148-seat Stent Family Hall — a reverberant, salon-like venue on the campus of the Menlo School — was something else entirely.

That voice seemed to be moving solid columns of air; I swear you could feel the vibrations. And Cooke, in the manner of a cabaret singer, kept moving across the tiny stage toward the audience; she communicates. She de-



livered Britten's sometimes tender, sometimes strangely unsettling lullabies — settings of poems by William Blake, Robert Burns and others — with a deep luster and enfolding warmth that recalled one of the greats, the late Jan DeGaetani.

Accompanied by pianist Inon Barnatan, an elegant virtuoso, Cooke was plenty enough reason to see the program, which repeats tonight at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto. But "The English Voice," as the program is titled, is all about dispelling the notion that British chamber music lacks vivaciousness, and so two additional reasons were on the way: Walton's Piano Quartet and Elgar's Piano Quintet in A minor, Op. 84.

Walton's quartet, composed when he was a teenager and later revised, was given a commanding (and sometimes hair-raising) performance by pianist Wu Han, violinist Ani Kavafian, violist Lily Francis and cellist David Finckel. It begins with an English country air over a robust cello drone and doesn't take long to swell into its many gallant gestures and huge melodies, rapturously served up by the band.

It's sentimental, and it courts the cornball, this piece, but resisting its sheer gorgeousness is hard to do. There are the influences of Ravel, Gershwin and Harold Arlen. The rhythms — fierce ones — derive from jazz and Stravinsky. The harmonies take unexpected turns, even

drawing on Schoenbergian dissonance. And Walton balls it all up, rambunctiously and sweetly, to make something uniquely English, at times like the soundtrack to a Thomas Hardy novel.

The first two movements are tightly drawn. In the last two, the piece spins out and loses some of its narrative thread — and the group played too clobberingly down the final stretch. Which made the night's finale — Elgar's masterly piano quintet, performed by Barnatan and the Miró Quartet — all the more satisfying.

Composed in the immediate aftermath of World War I, this piece is as tightly structured as it is passionate, and Barnatan — who likewise matches precision and emotion — was its North Star for Sunday's performance.

He guided the superb Miró — violinists Daniel Ching and Sandy Yamamoto, violist John Largess, cellist Joshua Gindele — through Elgar's three-part journey. Gradually opening the steam vents, the five players prowled around the work's ghostly beginnings; uncorked the rhapsodic Romanticism of the Adagio, with its opulent Brahmsian harmonies; and at last drove full-throttle through the darkly agitated finale.

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