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Chamber Music's Power Couple Summer in Silicon Valley

By Melvyn Krauss

The new appointment of Wu Han and David Finckel as joint artistic directors of the prestigious Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center makes this husband-and-wife team America's power couple of chamber music. Only last year Ms. Wu, the striking and effervescent pianist, and Mr. Finckel, cellist of the Emerson String Quartet and his wife's sometime collaborator, established a firm foothold on the West Coast by founding Music@Menlo, a summer festival of chamber music at Menlo Park in California's Silicon Valley. The new West Coast festival sold out in its very first season. The second season, which runs from July 29 to Aug. 15, promises more of the same.

This is an eye-catching accomplishment. Until Music@Menlo came along, the San Francisco peninsula, if not the entire Bay Area, had been bereft of qual-

MUSIC@MENLO

Menlo Park, Calif.
July 29-Aug. 15

ity classical music during July and August, when the San Francisco Symphony closes down for the summer.

Into this vacuum stepped Mr. Finckel and Ms. Wu—who, it should be noted, were no strangers to Silicon Valley. The two had performed regularly at Stanford University's Lively Arts Concerts, and were giving private concerts in people's homes to build up local support for chamber music and their own efforts. The Emerson String Quartet has a very big following here.

One reason for Music@Menlo's success, then, is that the couple had assiduously developed a network of local supporters even before festival plans were on the drawing boards. Recently, this network helped Music@Menlo/2004 obtain a renewed two-year leadership grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation for \$150,000 a year, as well as support from numerous individuals and organizations throughout the area. The festival's

budget this year will be \$750,000 and balanced. This is quite a feat with public arts funding in California virtually down to zero—and one aided by a stroke of luck: The market for high-tech stocks recovered just as their initial efforts for the festival were beginning. Had the stock market stayed down, the Silicon Valley-based festival might not have gotten off the ground.

Of course, luck always plays a part in any successful venture. But Mr. Finckel and Ms. Wu clearly knew what it would take to loosen local pursestrings and fill the seats—and they went out and did it.

It was not only the first-class chamber players—like Colin Carr, Kenneth Cooper, Gilbert Kalish, Ani Kavafian, Elmar Oliveira, Cynthia Phelps, Geraldine Walther, Carol Wincenc and many, many others—whom the couple has been able to attract to Menlo Park during the normally slow month of August that accounts for the festival's success. It also was the packaging and marketing of the festival.

"Silicon Valley is very keen on education and self-improvement," Ms. Wu told me in a recent interview in a local coffee house. "These people don't go to a concert just to enjoy themselves—they go to improve and empower themselves. They want to learn something from their musical experiences, or else feel they are wasting their time."

No one wastes their time at Music@Menlo, where concerts are surrounded with lectures, workshops and prelude performances. Musicologists and scholars play an important role in the proceedings. This year's nonplaying experts—Robert Winter, Michael Steinberg and

Ara Guzelimian, among others—host full-evening Encounter sessions to explore the different musical styles and cultural histories behind each of the concert programs.

These programs are structured just as a college course might be—one night Italian music, the next Russian music, then the music of Vienna, and so on. Indeed, the entire festival has the slightly dusty feel of a summer school course on chamber music about it.

There are, in fact, young students taking part in intensive two-week chamber-music workshops on campus at the Menlo School, where much of the festival takes place. (Concerts also are performed in a local church.)

This year the workshops will have 37 kids ranging in age from eight to 18. They will come from surrounding communities and from as far away as London and Singapore. Mr. Finckel and Ms. Wu tell me they are keen on expanding the workshop part of the festival in future years, funding permitted.

The highlight of this year's concerts promises to be the Schubertiade (music from Vienna). Works included on the program are the famous "Trout Piano Quintet," the Piano Trio in E-flat Major, Selected Piano for Four Hands, and Selected Lieder for Baritone and Piano featuring Nathaniel Webster. Other artists scheduled to appear are, in addition to Ms. Wu and Mr. Finckel, Derek Han, Philip Setzer, Hsin-Yun Huang and Charles Chandler.

With their success at Music@Menlo, Mr. Finckel and Ms. Wu have proved themselves to be energetic entrepreneurs for chamber music with a solid business sense. Obviously, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center noticed.

Mr. Krauss last wrote about the San Francisco Symphony's Beethoven Festival for Leisure and Arts.



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