

CD review: Music@Menlo's 'Maps and Legends'

by Charles T. Downey

Music@Menlo, David Finckel and Wu Han's summer chamber music festival near San Francisco, is generally organized around a theme that guides the programming choices each year. Last year's theme was "Maps and Legends" — music that, according to the program notes, "explored a wide compass of times, places, and universal phenomena." Since 2003, Grammy Award-winning sound engineer Da-Hong Seetoo, who produces the recordings of the Emerson String Quartet (of which Finckel is a member), has recorded all of the festival's concerts in high-quality 24-bit sound. Finckel and Wu Han, the husband-wife musician team who run the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, have started releasing those recordings on Music@Menlo's in-house label. As heard in this recently released eight-CD set of live recordings from the 2010 festival, the results are very good.

The opening-night concert, featured on the first disc, paired Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" with George Crumb's 1974 "Music for a Summer Evening" (the third part of his massive piano opus "Makrokosmos"). The performances highlight the musical energy for which this festival is becoming known, combining veteran performers and teachers with their younger, hungrier counterparts. Ani Kavafian, a noted violinist and CMS regular, has the most adventurous solo outing, on Vivaldi's "Summer" concerto, which gives evidence of her familiarity with current trends in historically informed performance practice (formerly known as the period-instruments movement). More evidence was present in harpsichordist Inon Barnatan's improvisation in the slow movement of the "Autumn" concerto, while violin soloist Philip Setzer hovered over the score in sometimes harmonically disconnected ways. In the dazzling, odd Crumb piece, Wu Han and Gilbert Kalish (one of the work's original dedicatees), on amplified and prepared pianos, joined two multi-tasking percussionists to create a completely different impression of the buzzing insects and heat-exhausted night reverie of summer.

Many of the discs, sometimes uniting pieces from different concerts over the course of the festival, relate to the map theme only by a vague connection to a time or place. The city of Vienna brings together a disc of rather plain Beethoven, Brahms and Haydn, though the latter was at least represented by the unusual C major keyboard concertino. The mere fact of having been composed in the 20th century is enough to join Prokofiev's odd Op. 39 quintet for winds and strings, originally begun as the rather grotesque score for a circus ballet called "Trapeze," to Shostakovich's eighth quartet, in a sharp-edged performance by the Miro Quartet, and Webern's chamber arrangement of Schoenberg's first chamber symphony. The fifth disc lays out a smorgasbord from 1920s Paris, including Milhaud's piano quintet arrangement of his jazz ballet "La creation du monde" and Copland's movement for string quartet, both performed by the Jupiter Quartet, one of the most dynamic young quartets today. (The writer's undergraduate piano teacher happens to be the mother of the Jupiter Quartet's first violinist.)

Other connections are explored, between Spain and France (Turina, Ravel, Debussy) and between the United States and the Czech Republic (Dvorak), leading to other worthy discoveries, such as a piano quartet by William Walton, a piano quintet by Edward Elgar and Poulenc's sonata for the odd couple of clarinet and bassoon. The ardent, versatile mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke contributed memorable sets of songs by Benjamin Britten, William Bolcom and Samuel Barber and spirituals arranged by Harry Burleigh, with Wu Han at the piano. The final disc is devoted to a recital by Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen, more or less identical to the critically acclaimed program he played this year at the Kennedy Center, when he filled in for the ailing Till Fellner.

This summer's Music@Menlo festival runs from July 22 to Aug. 13. Its theme: "Through Brahms."

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Maps and Legends 1-8

