

Notes of an Amateur: Music@Menlo 2010

by Bob Neill

Note: This news release just received from Florestan Trio violinist, Anthony Mazwood:

JANUARY 14, 2011 - FLORESTAN TRIO ANNOUNCES FINAL SEASON

The Florestan Trio has announced its final season of concerts. After 16 years of exceptional achievement and having recorded the major works of the Piano Trio repertoire to great acclaim, the career paths of the members of the Trio are diverging. The Trio's last concerts include a tour in March, the Florestan Festival at Peasmarch in June, and they conclude with a celebratory Beethoven cycle at the Wigmore Hall, London, in January 2012. Their last release, which features the two piano trios of Shostakovich, is expected in May.

Music@Menlo Live 2010, 1-8. Maps and Legends. www.musicatmenlo.org

It's January, so it must be Music@Menlo time again! A 'live' chamber music festival in a box for those of us in the provinces without access to such a richness. Still run by cellist David Finckel and pianist Wu Han, who are also co-direct the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Still engineered by deserving "Six time Grammy winning" Da-Hong Seetto. Still performed by an audibly top-notch roster of professional musicians, some with familiar names (to me), some newcomers. This music, as always was performed and recorded in the summer preceding release.

Festivals must, it seems, have themes: thoughtful listeners will make the connections here without the program notes, though as always they are germane and well written. The Paris in the Twenties CD, Volume 5, is especially successful in this respect.

This is the eighth annual Music@Menlo festival and set of releases and I gladly own them all. I save them for cold snowy/rainy weekends in front of the wood stove and just feed the CD's in one after the other letting the musicians have at me. Because the individual CD's amount to recital programs, listening is a good deal less 'studied' than usual for those who tend to listen to one composer at a time. You can get individual CD's or all eight, at the festival website: www.musicatmenlo.org, where individual program details are spelled out.

One of the most surprising performances is of Vivaldi's Four Seasons on Disc 1, in which the solo violin part is passed among Erin Keefe, Ani Kavafian, Philip Setzer, and Jan Swenson. We've all heard many versions of this great chestnut, but I'll have to say this is the freshest one I've heard in years. Forgive me, but it really is like hearing it for the first time, perhaps in part because of how distinct each of the soloists is. Whatever the reason, this Four Seasons breaks free of our expectations and truly lives—on modern instruments for a nice change. For me, this performance is the highlight of the festival. The Disc 1 program concludes with a (literally) stunning performance of George Crumb's Music for a Summer Night, dancing far out toward the periphery of music but still in sight of Vivaldi. I doubt most of us have heard this work since the old Nonesuch LP.

Other highlights: Meeting new Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen on Disc 8 playing a program of themes and variations by Mozart,

Music@Menlo *LIVE*

Maps and Legends 1-8



Grieg, Handel, Brahms, and Couperin.

Brahms' String Sextet No. 2 on Disc 3, played by Erin Keefe, Joria Fleezanis violins; Lily Francis and John Largess, violas; and Ralph Kirschbaum and David Finckel, cellos combines richness of tone and clarity of articulation in one of the best Brahms performances I've heard.

The Miro Quartet's characteristic tight as a drum style takes enough of the varnish off Elgar's Piano Quintet, Opus 84 on Disc 2 that even Benjamin Britten, whose little Charm of Lullabies is also on the disc, might have enjoyed it. Inon Barnaton joins the Miro's forcefully on piano in the Elgar. I'm no more a fan of the old British gentleman than Britten was, but the clarity and power displayed here gave me second thoughts, as good performances often will. Romanticism's last passionate moment on the stage. This kind of performance is precisely what the Menlo festival is for.

Listening to or watching the nineteenth century turn into the twentieth in the arts can be a fascinating business, in music especially so if the musicians really get it. Alessio Bax, piano; Arnaud Sussman, violin; and Laurence Lesser, cello, really get it in Ravel's Piano Trio on Disc 6. This work is interesting because it is transitional, speaking a musical language that is both traditional and new, but it's also engaging because it has an emotional life independent of its role in music history. The musicians capture sophistication and irony along with power and passion, the latter something that performances of this music often miss. We recognize the complex mood as the one we have lived in since the arrival of modern times. It speaks to us in a more direct and immediate way than pre-modern music can. This is easily the best performance of Ravel's Trio I've ever heard. This disc also introduces us to the Jupiter

Quartet, who play another famous transitional work, Debussy's String Quartet.

There's much more music in this set than I can touch on here. If you've enjoyed this series in the past, have no fear. The festival's still going strong.