



Music@Menlo proves to be a classical act

By Keith Powers

Sunday, August 1, 2010

MENLO PARK, Calif. - The loud thud was definitely not a sound you usually hear in a chamber music recital. And when the Amphion Quartet stopped playing in the middle of the Mendelssohn, something obviously was wrong.

"This is where the theme from the first movement is supposed to come back in," said cellist Mihai Marica. "But I just snapped my D-string." That may have been the only thing that went wrong at Music@Menlo, the three-week idyll for chamber music fans tucked away on the peninsula south of San Francisco.

The weather is Bay Area beautiful, the folks friendly and relaxed, and a world of possibilities - chamber music only one of them - is within the reach of your imagination. And if your imagination is resting, just get in the car and drive. It's a half-hour to the beaches, along a winding route through the peninsula hills. If you don't want to see the surf, more than a dozen parks are within an hour's drive - including Big Basin Redwoods State Park, California's oldest, a vast expanse of forest that leads out to Point Ano Nuevo. Wine country is close by. San Francisco? Twenty miles. Even a trip to Monterey, where hippies still live, is only an hour and a half.

You get the idea. Like they don't say in Vermont, you can get there from here.

Which makes a visit to Music@Menlo, set on the campus of Menlo School, both frustrating and delightful. Delightful, with musical events morning, afternoon and evening, in a relaxed, collegial setting where the performers - when they're not onstage or in the classroom - wander by and might just stop a while to chat. Frustrating because, even after three weeks, there's plenty left on the must-see list.

Music@Menlo celebrates its eighth season this summer, and by any measure the festival is thriving. It was founded by husband and wife team David Finckel and Wu Han. He's the cellist in the esteemed Emerson Quartet; she's an equally esteemed pianist. They are also the directors of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in New York. The festival attracts some of the best players in the world, as well as students eager to hone their chops with them.

The festival began as one concert eight years ago, but as Wu Han puts it, "Right away we knew we wanted to do a festival, and that Menlo Park was the place." With loads of community support and major funding from the Hewlett Foundation and others, each summer 40 students take residence, enjoying private lessons, group coaching, master classes and more than two dozen concerts by acclaimed professionals such as Finckel and Wu Han, Ani Kavafian, Ian Swensen and the Jupiter String Quartet.



MUSICAL FOUNDATION: The Center for Performing Arts at Menlo-Atherton, designed to look like a stylized treehouse.

The students live near the campus, usually with area families who have hosted musicians since the festival began, and have become part of the fabric. For visitors who want to immerse themselves in the peninsula lifestyle, Palo Alto is the next town over. Yes, it's home to Stanford, but during the summer the students are gone, and the trendy downtown has a mellow feel. You can enjoy any number of upscale restaurants, shops and hang-outs - but you're still only 10 minutes from places where bicycles rule and the signs say Watch for Mountain Lions. Everything is close by here.

Music@Menlo holds some of its events at the Center for Performing Arts at Menlo-Atherton, a Hodgetts+Fung designed building made to look like a stylized treehouse, set in a historic valley oak grove. There is no shortage of other arts and cultural venues in the area. The Lucie Stern Community Theatre in Palo Alto hosts a number of groups, including TheatreWorks, the Palo Alto Players and West Bay Opera. The Bing Concert Hall, due to open in 2012 on the Stanford campus, will offer a high-end, large performance space for visiting orchestras and large ensembles.