

Music@Menlo Institute in Atherton attracts top young talent

By Joshua Falk
Special to The Almanac

They hail from all over the world.

They've appeared in concert with legendary ensembles such as the Chicago Symphony, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Cleveland Orchestra, and the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra.

They've graced the stages of some of the most prestigious venues in the world, including the Gewandhaus in Leipzig, Carnegie and Avery Fisher halls in New York, Wigmore Hall in London, and the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

They range in age from 18 to 29.

While the Music@Menlo Chamber Music Festival attracts some of the biggest names in classical music performance, the Music@Menlo Chamber Music Institute's International Program for Advanced String Players and Pianists attracts some of classical music's most promising young talents.

This highly competitive program — which accepts only one in 10 applicants — brings musicians from some of the

world's leading conservatories to perform and study under the tutelage of Music@Menlo Festival artists for three weeks on the grounds of Menlo School in Atherton every summer. International Program artists receive fellowships to attend and live with host families in the area during the program.

Artistic directors David Finckel and Wu Han — who also serve as artistic directors of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center — insist on hearing each applicant live. Because the artistic directors maintain a busy international touring schedule, it is not uncommon for them to arrange to hear applicants while they are on tour abroad.

David Finckel and Wu Han “really take great care in getting to know the kids and really trying to see if they are the right ones for the program,” says Chamber Music Institute Director Gloria Chien. “What I really admire about them is that they really think, is this program the right program for this kid at the right time in their careers? Is this what they need right now? What can we offer them and what can they offer us?”



Courtesy of Music@Menlo.

Australian pianist David Fung, 26, has appeared with the Sydney Symphony, the Israel Philharmonic, and the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, among others.

Real-world preparation

Conservatory students may devote an entire semester to a single piece. International Program artists, on the other hand, often have only a few days to prepare a piece for performance.

“It’s sort of like a practice run for real life, for professional life, where you come together and you have three rehearsals and you have to be onstage,” Ms. Chien says.

“We have on average about four days to prepare something for a concert, which is exactly what the senior artists do,” says violinist Timothy Braun, a recent graduate of the Colburn School Conservatory of Music in Los Angeles who now studies at the Hochschule fur Musik in Cologne, Germany.

“It’s like your entire academic year — master classes, coachings, watching the artists’ concerts — rolled into about a three-week period,” says 26-year-old Australian pianist David Fung, who has appeared with the Sydney Symphony, the Israel Philharmonic and the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, among others.

“I think this kind of program moves past teacher-student,” Mr. Braun says. “I think it moves a little bit more into mentorship.”

One challenge that International Program participants face is deciding how to incorporate their mentors’ suggestions while retaining their own musical personality, Mr. Braun notes.

“There’s lots of opinions fly-

ing at you. People like giving you their input,” he says. “But they still don’t want you to lose your individuality here.”

“It’s a question of putting all the information through a giant sieve and basically keeping what you really feel is truly what benefits you,” Mr. Fung says.

Passing the baton

David Finckel and Wu Han hope that the festival’s senior artists pass down their chamber music knowledge to the International Program artists — the next generation of classical musicians, Ms. Chien says.

“Their vision for this place is to have (the festival) musicians pass down the tradition of chamber music, one generation to the next,” Ms. Chien says. “I think it’s done beautifully here.”

“To be a part of that link — which they really make you a part of here, you can’t shy away from it — it’s very special,” Mr. Fung adds.

So special, in fact, that many International Program alumni have sought to find ways to return to the institute, since artists can attend only once. Ms. Chien, an International Program alumna, returned to the festival as a chamber music coach in 2007.

“It was the most exhilarating experience I’ve ever had musically,” Ms. Chien says of her time as an International Program artist. “It’s great to see how the place grows.”

“We really grow together,” Mr. Fung says. “I think this is one of the most inspiring places I’ve ever been.”



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