

Outstanding Live Recordings from one of the Best Chamber Music Festivals in the World

by Robert Moon

MUSIC@MENLO LIVE 2010, MAPS AND LEGENDS: MUSIC BY BRITTEN, WALTON, ELGAR, RAVEL, TURINA, DEBUSSY, SHOSTAKOVICH, PROKOFIEV, SCHOENBERG, DVORAK, BARBER, VIVALDI, CRUMB, HAYDN, BEETHOVEN, BRAHMS, MILHAUD, COPLAND, POULENC & OTHERS - MUSIC@MENLO (8 DISCS)

The emergence of Music at Menlo as a two and a half week chamber music festival in 2002 in the midst of the dot.com meltdown was an entrepreneurial miracle that's a tribute to the vision, leadership and artistic connections of the husband and wife duo of cellist David Finckel and pianist Wu Han. Finckel, cellist of the Emerson Quartet, had developed valuable connections from over 20 years of regular performances in the Bay Area and the duo's track record as Directors of SummerFest La Jolla from 1998-2000 had convinced major Bay Area foundations to back the Festival's inception. Since then, it has gained a reputation for innovative theme based programming, Encounters – evening-long multi-media presentations led by nationally known music experts (e.g. Michael Steinberg, before he passed away in 2009) - and Audio Notes, full length CDs with narration and musical examples that act as recorded guides to each of the concerts. Add to this the Chamber Music Institute – students ages 8 to 29 who come to study with the professionals and give free concerts of their own, and you have a depth of immersion in chamber music unique to the summer festival circuit.

Of course, none of these activities would matter unless top flight professionals could be enticed to participate in the concerts. Their extensive musical experience and current role as co-directors of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center give Finckel and Wu Han access to the best chamber musicians in the world. This reviewer has been to several concerts in each of the festival's eight years and the performances are of the highest professional quality.

Most of the performances on these discs are on that exalted plane, but what impressed me the most in listening to these CDs is the outstanding presence and realism that the recording engineer, six-time Grammy Award winning recording producer Da-Hong Seetoo, brings to these recorded performances. I attended two of the performances in this set and it's a very revealing to experience a concert live and then hear the same program on a CD. Using two different venues – the new Menlo-Atherton Performing Arts Center and St. Marks Church, Seetoo has transcribed performances that sound as good or better than my memory of hearing these performances live. These CDs are a tribute to Seetoo's eight year experience recording at Music at Menlo's festival and his custom-designed microphones, monitor

Music@Menlo **LIVE**

Maps and Legends 1-8



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(8 CDs) each available separately: \$15, or the eight slipcased: \$100, (Distr. by musicatmenlo.org/live) – digital downloads available @ ClassicalArchives.com and other sites) *****

speakers and computer software. These are recordings that put the listener in the concert hall with the clarity, depth and reverberation that convey the excitement of being there.

Then, of course there's the frisson that occurs in live performances that are unique to the moment and often surpass studio recordings.

The programming theme of the 2010 Festival is *Maps and Legends*, which encompasses a wide spectrum of chamber music from these concerts: *The Seasons*; *The English Voice*; *Vienna*; *Aftermath: 1945*; *Paris, 1920-28*; *Spanish Inspirations*; *Dvorak's America* and a piano recital by Juho Pohjonen. These discs are available separately as CDs and MP3 downloads and as a set. In listening to these eight discs, I'm going to concentrate on the four that contain performances that are as great as any available today. And then I'll comment on specific works on the remaining discs that merit praise.

Disc 2, The English Voice, begins with a sizzling performance of Walton's rarely heard teenage composition, the *Piano Quartet*. Especially memorable is Finckel's probing and heartfelt playing in the beautiful andante. The Miro Quartet's performances are always incredibly accurate, but with pianist Inon Barnatan they reveal their Romantic chops in Elgar's Brahmsian *Piano Quintet*. The melt-ingly beautiful adagio sings with the sadness of World War I that affected Elgar so deeply. Mezzo soprano Sasha Cooke, who burst upon the operatic scene with her brilliant performance as Kitty Oppenheimer in the Metropolitan Opera's premiere of John Adam's *Doctor Atomic*, is a star in the making. She sings Britten's charming *A Charm of Lullabies* with a perplexing bitter-sweetness that lies at the root of these songs.

Disc 6, Spanish Inspirations, programs two French chamber music masterpieces with Spanish influences and an example of one from Spain. Ravel's *Piano Trio* receives a sensitive, yet dramatic reading from cellist Lawrence Lesser, pianist Alessio Bax, and violinist Arnaud Sussmann. The melancholic Passacaille is rendered exquisitely by Lesser; there's a chemistry here that is the essence of a great festival performance. The Jupiter String Quartet gives the Debussy *String Quartet* a flawlessly executed, dramatically effective performance that is sheer pleasure. Turina's *La oracion del torero (The Bullfighter's Prayer)* is an evocative addition to this CD.

Disc 7, Dvorak's America offers a performance of Dvorak's *String Quartet No. 12, 'American'* by the Jupiter String Quartet that is played with the spirit of discovery that inspired this masterpiece. Shasha Cooke performs Henry T. Burleigh's arrangements of American spirituals (*Songs*) with affecting vulnerability and verve. In Barber's *Four Songs, Op. 13*, she demonstrates the range and strength of her voice in these gems by one of America's great vocal composers. *Sure on This Shining Night* is especially memorable. Dvorak's *Quintet, Op. 97*, composed one month before his "*American*" *Quartet*, is similar in style and content. The idiomatic performance is highlighted by a pulchritudinous *Larghetto*.

Disc 4 is an excursion through three twentieth century masterpieces. The Miro Quartet's Shostakovich *Eighth Quartet* is scintillating: the opening *Largo* is dark and profoundly sad, the following two movements breathlessly dramatic and precise – war's violence brilliantly expressed. The great transition to the fourth movement is truly frightening and the final *largo* is heartbreakingly devastating. This is a performance to rank with the best. Composed in Paris as a ballet for a circus, Prokofiev's *Quintet, Op. 39*, reflects the diversity of influences that widened his music perspective. Structured like a six movement Baroque suite, it expresses the composer's acerbic wit, klezmer-like rhythms, use of chromatic and diatonic scales and a dour adagio. This underrated work receives a stunning performance and recording. Schoenberg's *Chamber Symphony No. 1*, in a reduced arrangement by Webern, clarifies the harmony so that the listener can appreciate the ambiguity of a work that's a transition from Romanticism to abstraction. There's a passion and forward momentum of this performance that grabs the listener and never let's go.

Other highlights of the remaining discs include Crumb's *Music for a Summer Evening, (Makrokosmos III)* for two pianos and percussion, a masterpiece of impressionistic images evoked by a dreamy summer evening. *Music for a Starry Night*, the final movement, is a brilliant surrealistic expression that transforms the image of falling stars into a moving spiritual event. It's the one instance where the inclusion of applause at the work's conclusion ruins the serene atmosphere. The wacky and wistful *Sonata for Clarinet and Bassoon* by Poulenc is one of many treasures of a disc of Paris in the 1920's that includes Copland's rare *Movement for String Quartet*, the wonderfully quirky *Violin Sonata No. 2* by George Antheil, and a trio of songs by William Bolcom. The final disc is devoted to a recital by the Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen, whose performance of Grieg's *Ballade in g minor in the Form of Variations on a Norwegian Folk Song* captures the stylistic differences of this sad paean to the death of Grieg's parents.

For those who attended any of these concerts, the complete set of 8 discs will bring back superb musical memories. For those who couldn't be there, this set is an opportunity to hear the chamber music of 28 different composers from different periods in superb performances and sound. The highlighted discs above represent the best of these CDs.