

# An entire community swimming in Brahms

by Beeri Moalem

Who hasn't heard the story of Robert, Johannes, and Clara-- Romantic music's most oft-gossiped-about menage-a-trois? There's a movie about it (starring Katherine Hepburn as Clara), a historical fiction, and countless analysis in biographies, musicological papers, liner notes, and program notes (I myself wrote about this as part of my coursework at the conservatory). I thought I was tired of this old story, but Michael Parloff, in Music@Menlo's Michael Steinberg Encounters Series told the story in a light that made the whole drama come to life-- it was like watching a favorite movie for the 12th time and still noticing new things.

Using technology with ease, Parloff's talk was accompanied by an animated score projected on the big screen along with recorded musical examples. The score was annotated with red graphics that highlighted hidden symbolism buried in the composition-- Clara's name transcribed to music, or Joachim's famous F-A-E motto. This brought music to life-- I could watch the notes scroll across the screen all day.

Parloff would switch between reverence for Brahms' and the Schumanns' heart-on-the-sleeve dedication to their music and each other but sometimes dipped into mockery of it in the context of our cynical hindsight. The audience found this hilarious and laughed uproariously at every chance. Parloff told a clean version of the story, one that puts the relationship between Brahms and Clara in the platonic sphere-- the same noble level as their pure music. But one has to wonder-- even though it was a different time from our own-- sexual norms were more conservative-- if their relationship was absolutely non-physical. Parloff didn't mention Robert Schumann's law school days where a lot of debauchery went on (speculative: where he contracted syphilis, which led to his mental illness later in life). There was no mention of the hundreds of letters and musical compositions that they all burned-- Brahms was very aware of that future historians would dig deep and cleaned up his musical and personal paper trail accordingly. I'm not saying that Johannes and Clara made more than just music together-- I don't really care and it's not any of our business, but they were human after all even though we tend to deify them.

This lecture was just one aspect of Music@Menlo's cohesive and thoughtfully curated program with multi-generational education. Little prodigies aged as young as 10 and 11 along with young professionals, experienced masters, and community music lovers are all abuzz at this suburban summer music festival that places education of its musicians and audiences as a high priority. Those



of us for whom a full concert of chamber music is not quite enough, or for those who couldn't get tickets to the sold-out events, free Prelude Concerts feature the festival's younger generation of musicians performing with just as much ardor as their mentors. And for those who still can't get enough there is the even younger Koret Concerts and open masterclasses-- also free to the public. There is even an audio guide on CD and a dedicated iPad app with more explanations and insights. Music@Menlo offers a whole lot more than an isolated 2-hour concert event.

Friday night's "Veiled Symphonies" performance at the Stent Family Hall featured Brahms' and Clara's music side by side with a detour to the Baroque justified by Brahms and the Schumanns' admiration of Baroque counterpoint-- not that anyone needs an excuse to play Baroque music in a chamber music concert, but it's just not as common.

Flautist SooYun Kim stole the show, infusing Vivaldi and Bach with virtuosic spirit and warm expression. I have never heard piccolo at a chamber music concert and never thought that it could blend so well with strings, especially playing what is usually a violin part in Vivaldi's La Folia. When with the swing of a pony tail she set off the torrent of turbo 16th's at the finale, the clearly articulated made me wish that we had more chamber music for flute and strings. The only wind player on the program shone like a bright jewel. Supporting string players played (different casts in the Vivaldi and Bach) with a mix of Romantic-style Baroque-style. Both styles work in different ways: Laurence Lesser's rock-solid execution of Bach's bass line brought an imperative urgency to the repeating Ricercare theme, while Arnaud Sussmann took a lighter approach, holding his bow with higher up and achieving a floating, airy sound-- more in line with period performance practice. He was able to get away with it thanks to the intimate acoustics of the hall. This is one of the exciting elements of summer music festivals-- different musicians from all over the world coming together and in a very short time making their different approaches work.

The Brahms Sextet in B-flat also showed these different approaches; It's not every day that a viola overpowers a violin. Yura Lee, fired up after an intense rendition of Clara Schumann's feisty piano trio, switched over to viola for the Brahms. Violists get excited about this piece because it features one of the greatest viola solos of the chamber music repertoire in the second movement. Lee blasted this solo with unbelievable strength while Yehonatan Berick on first violin couldn't quite stand up to the reinforced lower strings-- 2 violins often have a tough time competing with 2 cellos and 2 violas. Eric Lee on first cello was on the same page as Lee, emitting a thick, rich sound.

In a hall that barely packs 140 seats (this seems tiny but the living rooms for which these pieces were intended are even smaller!) is a full-volume concerto tone really necessary? Probably not, and it may have been bordering on insensitive but it was unquestionably thrilling and worth the risk.