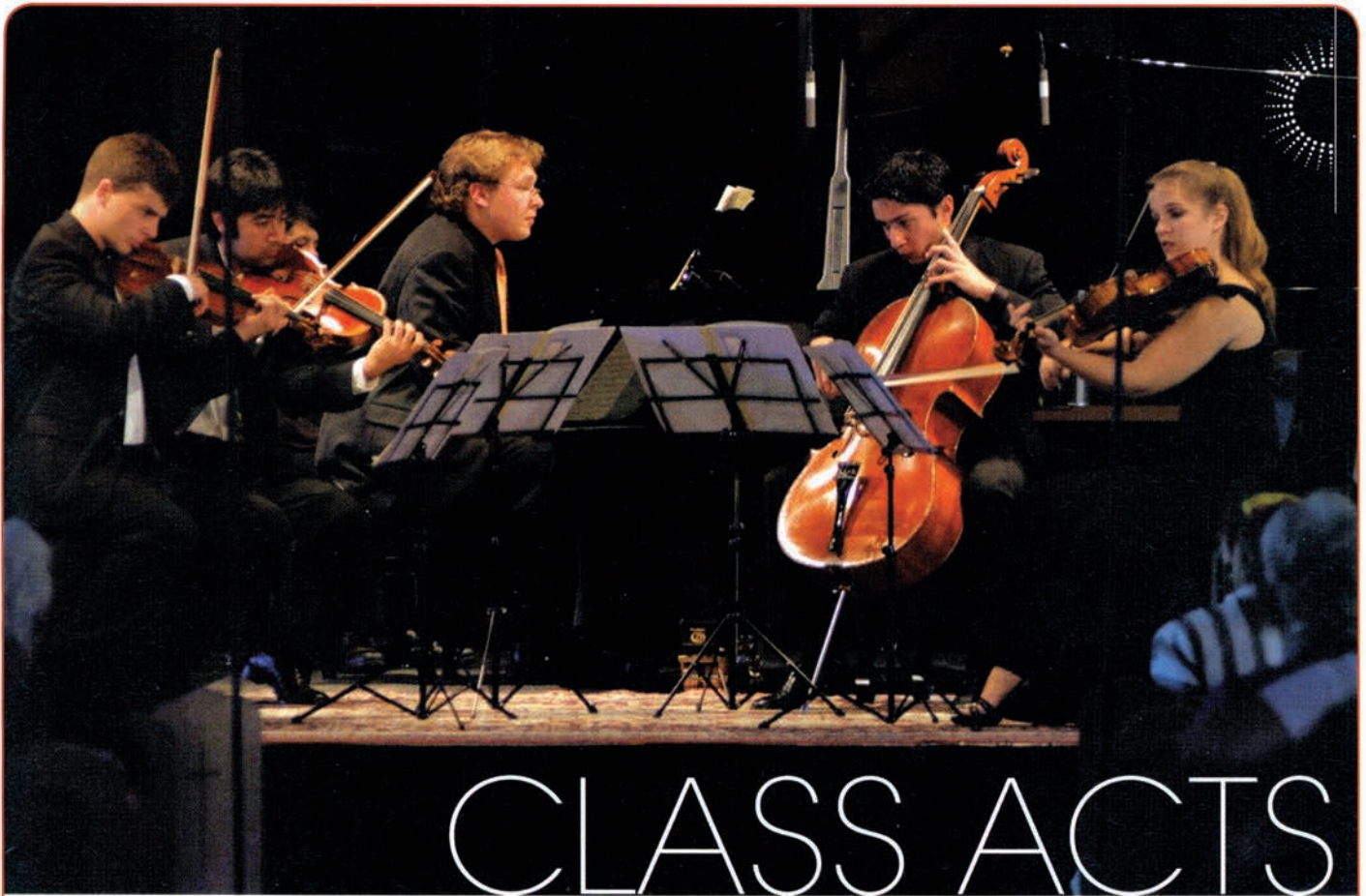


STRINGS

March, 2006



At the annual Chamber Music Institute, students get up close and personal with some of the world's greatest musicians

At one end of the cavernous Spieker Ballroom a quiet storm is erupting. Inside the famous chamber music hall located on the sprawling campus of the Menlo School in Atherton, California, award-winning violinist Ian Swenson—head of the strings department at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music—is clapping his hands, bobbing and weaving around the room, gesturing wildly, alternately leaping into the air, skipping in place, yelling, whispering, and jumping up and down as he shouts “Go! Wait! Go!” and “Throw it! Throw it! Throw it!”

Admirers of Swenson need not be alarmed—the esteemed musician and educator has not lost his mind.

All of this frantic bobbing and waving and pogoing is for the benefit of three teen-aged players (violinist Nigel Armstrong, cellist Camden Shaw, and pianist Elizabeth Dorman), who are locked in an epic struggle with Mendelssohn’s Piano Trio, No. 2, in C minor. Swenson, ever so sane, is conducting a standing-room-only master class on this cloudy afternoon in August, all part of the annual Music@Menlo Festival’s celebrated Chamber Music Institute program.

Since its inception three years ago, Music@Menlo—founded by cellist David Finckel of the Emerson Quartet and his wife, pianist Wu Han—CMI has brought young musicians, many in their teens, face to face with some of the finest chamber musicians in the world. The students, selected from applicants from

around the country, spend a concentrated two weeks on and around the Menlo campus, taking master classes, sitting in on lectures and casual panel discussions, and constantly working on assigned pieces—quartets, trios, or solos—that they will end up performing as part of the acclaimed festival’s grand Young Performers Concert series.

During the day, students work in classroom settings with a parade of world-class chamber musicians as teachers. By and large, the teachers are always drawn from those in town to play concerts at the music festival. The roster at the 2005 festival featured Finckel’s New York-based Emerson Quartet, the Miami String Quartet (Hartt School of Music, Hartford, Connecticut), the Miró Quartet (University of Texas in Austin), and the St. Lawrence String Quartet (Stanford University), along with four “pre-professional” quartets brought in as part of CMI’s International Program. The exulta-

By David Templeton

tion of musical masters also included violinist Pamela Frank, cellist Ralph Kirshbaum, and pianist Jeffrey Kahane. Each musician had been asked to contribute some time to the institute while in Silicon Valley, time spent working with students in the classroom and conducting popular, free-to-the-public master classes like the one Swenson spent cart-wheeling his entertaining way through this very afternoon.

As Armstrong—a young and very serious player from Sonoma, California—tackles a particularly grand passage from the

Mendelssohn, Swenson again leaps into the air, pointing, pointing, pointing to the back wall of the room. “Throw it! Throw it!” he commands, smiling as he jumps in place. “Play to every corner of the room!” The rest of the class goes by in a rush, with the energetic Swenson unleashing a torrent of whimsical, encouraging, and practical advice.

During a slow passage, he intones, “Relax more. Play like you’re humming the tune to yourself.” To the young cellist, Camden Shaw, he commands: “Don’t worry so much! Don’t work it so hard. Remember to enjoy it!”



ARTISTIC CONNECTIONS: Violinist Geoff Nuttall and a student ensemble.

And on and on.

“Take that phrase more slowly! Take that phrase more quickly! It’s more dramatic when it’s not so loud,” Swenson instructs. “Play that part like it’s *scary*! Play *that* part like it’s something from a Harry Potter movie!”

Once the piece has ended, and the exhausted players stand to receive their ovation from an appreciative audience, Swenson shouts, “Isn’t that great? Didn’t that feel great? That was *so* great!”

Finckel points out that the seed of the Chamber Music Institute was planted when he and Wu Han were directing SummerFest La Jolla, near San Diego. “We looked at the collection of musicians showing up to perform, and we saw that from a certain perspective, these people were the greatest conservatory faculty one could ever imagine,” he says, taking a break from observing a rehearsal for one of the festival’s Prelude Performances, free nighttime concerts featuring performances by one of the visiting International Program quartets.

As to the impulse to involve world-class musicians in a hands-on educational program that could have a tremendous impact on the future of the students involved, it was an idea the renowned chamber players couldn’t shake.

Says Finckel, “We said, how can we possibly allow ourselves to bring these people together in one place, without somehow taking advantage of their collective knowledge and individual experience, without passing that on to the next generation of performers? We felt an obligation to serve musical youth, and saw the potential for helping young people to make connections—important artistic and social connections.”

To that end, the CMI experience is purposefully set up, with field trips and vari-

ous “mixers,” so that the workshop students spend social time with the visiting “super-stars” as well as in structured educational and practice-studio environments.

“It’s very valuable to these kids,” Finckel says. “Getting experience, hearing what it’s really like ‘out there,’ is probably one of the most important things a young musician can learn. We feel that through these connections we can provide that here.”

There’s no shortage of innovative and colorful teaching methods in evidence. “Play this next part jolly and fat, like Santa Claus,” suggests violist John Largess of the Miró Quartet. Largess is conducting a small class—no audience, no applause—with young cellist Kendall Fischer, violinist Eric Wang, and pianist Ian Zalles, who are working today on Beethoven’s Piano Trio in B-flat major.

“Pretend you are the child prodigy Beethoven,” says Largess. “You’ve just been invited to the Emperor’s palace, and you want to be all proper, but all the time you know that in a few minutes, once you’re done performing, you get to let all that properness go and just get really, really weird. *That’s* how I want you to play this next piece.”

Whatever it was that Largess said, the players seemed to understand, because on the next spin through the passage in question, they take on a vibrant energy and boldness that was absent the first time.

That’s how Largess teaches: he says strange things that carry a lot of meaning—at least, they do for the kids he’s working with. For instance, when Wang states that he doesn’t understand how to achieve the right amount of drama in one semi-ominous passage, Largess thinks a minute before saying, “Play it slow and depressing, but not. Don’t think of it like everyone’s dead or something. It’s more like, everyone is pretending to be dead!”

“Oh,” says Wang, and next time through, his face is evidence enough that he’s gotten closer to where he wanted to be.

Later that afternoon, 15-year-old Armstrong takes a short break between CMI classes to answer a question about whether two weeks of different teachers and conflicting advice can be confusing.

“Yes!” he laughs. “But that’s okay. Every coach has a different personality, so every coach points out different things, advocates different bowings, fingerings, phrasings, whatever, and it’s up to us as the musicians to work it through and decide what we are going for as we play the piece. The process of getting a lot of conflicting advice about the same piece of music can actually speed up the formative process of becoming our own musician.

“I’ve grown so much while being here,” Armstrong says, “mainly by being exposed to so many musicians, seeing what motivates them, seeing who they are as people, and asking myself how I can relate to all that, to think about who I can, who I will be, as a musician. You can’t believe how fun that is.”

Finckel is glad to hear that the students see CMI as a fun experience. “Fun is good. I always try to impress upon them the joy of what they’re doing,” he says. “Fun helps them get through the rough parts. There

was a group that I coached yesterday, and at the start, they were pretty rocky. They hit rock after rock after rock, and it didn’t sound good. This was the first time they’d been coached on this particular movement. But in 45 minutes, they were playing it like they’d been playing it for *weeks*. They’re young, and they’re so flexible—and they’re good. It’s scary how good these kids are.” □

For registration information, call 650-330-2030, email info@musicatmenlo.org, or visit Music@Menlo.org on the web at www.musicatmenlo.org.

