



POSITIVE FEEDBACK ONLINE

music

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Notes of an Amateur, Part 2

by Bob Neill

Music@Menlo Live, 2007:

Bridging the Ages (Recordings from the 2007 Music @ Menlo Festival, Palo Alto, California)

At the end of the last shelf of a great many classical CD collections these days is a growing collection of 'live' recordings of concerts and festivals because these days in particular it's on records of 'live' music-making where a great many of the most exciting musical performances are found. The largest single group of 'live' CDs in my collection has become the recorded proceedings of Wu Han's and David Finckel's annual Music@Menlo Festival. This year's six-cd set is the fifth produced so far. And I am pleased to report that both musicianship and sound (by inimitable recording engineer Da-Hong Seetoo) remain superb.

The pedagogical point of the 2007 series, if I read it right, is to get the audience out of the traditional historical mindset many of us bring to classical music listening. Part of what we do when we learn about a piece of music is to domesticate it, rob it of its natural force as a unique work. I include myself here. We put it into a period or movement, which gives us one kind of knowledge; but this can also rob us of another kind. "Bridging the Ages" is constructed of programs that juxtapose works from different periods such that we are led (or at least urged) to disconnect them from their usual contexts and associations and hear them synchronously—that is, as if they are of the same moment and place: now and here. (This is how especially literature was taught in the 1950's in an effort to get students to focus on the texts rather than their cultural and social milieu.)

It is an approach that has its virtues, but program design doesn't matter a twit if the

performances aren't good; and all of them in this set are, some spectacularly so. The Miami Quartet's Schubert's Death and the Maiden String Quartet, D. 810 reveals what can happen if musicians set aside this famous quartet's supposed theme and just play the hell out of it. I have never been much moved by this chamber chestnut—it has always struck me as overly dramatic and indulgent. My problem, I'm sure. The Miami musicians up the tempo and let its, at least to my ears, latent life out.

Jan Swenson (violin) and Gilbert Kalish (piano) give us a masterly and magnetic performance of Ravel's Sonata for Violin that's at least as good as any I've heard. It leaves me with nothing to say, just I'll just put it on again!

And then on a single disc, Carol Wincenc (flute), William Bennett (oboe), Corey Bell (clarinet), William Vermeulen (french horn), and Dennis Godburn (bassoon) perform Ravel's over-performed *Le tombeau de Couperin* in an arrangement by Mason Jones that makes it absolutely new and captivating; and Wincenc, Bell, Swensen, Joseph Swenson, Masao Kawasaki (viola), Ralph Kirschbaum (cello), Florian Conzetti and Christopher Froh (percussion), Daxun Zhang (bass), and Wu Han and Inon Baranatan (pianos) deliver a chamber version of Saint-Saens' *Carnival of the Animals* that transforms the work from children's toy into an irresistible sonic tour de force. Putting the Ravel work and the Saint-Saens on the same recording with a concerto grosso by Handel and a cantata by Bach, both state of the performing art, may make the festival's instructional point: it is entirely possible that in addition to being brilliant performances, the freshness of the Ravel and Saint-Saens works seems even fresher in the presence of Handel and Bach. And the Bach and Handel also sound surprisingly new.

Music@Menlo *LIVE*

Bridging the Ages 1-6



While virtually everything in the festival programs each year has something memorable about it, it is for brilliantly idiosyncratic performances like the Schubert, the two Ravel's, and the Saint-Saens that I come to Music@Menlo. This the kind of music making that seldom makes it onto records because, as both pianist Susan Tomes in *Beyond the Notes* and scholar Robert Philip in *Performing Music in the Age of Recording* tell us, musicians just play differently before recording microphones and in an empty venue. They tend, despite their best efforts, to hold something inventive and exploratory back, they suppress whimsy and inspiration. They are reluctant to just let it fly. The musicians of Music@Menlo let it fly.

Other notable musicians who play in the series include Finckel (cello), Christopher Nomura (baritone), Philip Setzer (violin), Paul Neubauer (viola), Colin Carr (cello), Kenneth Cooper (harpsichord), Jason Vieaux (guitar), Adam Barnett, (violin), Wu Jie (violin), Pierre Lapointe (bass), Adam Janss (cello), Heidi Grant Murphy (soprano), Kevin Murphy (piano), Erin Keefe (violin), Gary Graffman (piano), Andrés Díaz (cello), and The Escher Quartet. Better make room at the end of the shelf. These recordings are only available at www.musicatmenlo.org.