

Early birds

Children as young as eight are given an inspiring introduction to ensemble playing at the Menlo Chamber Music Summer School in California. Clare Stevens listens in

It is a sunny Sunday morning in Atherton, California, just up the road from Stanford University, and in the elegant reception hall of Menlo School, British cellist Colin Carr is performing the complete Bach solo suites. An attentive audience of Californian music-lovers is ranged on gilt chairs in front of him – and on the staircase at the back of the room clusters another, younger audience: the students of the Music@Menlo Institute. Some of them are already performing professionally, and are enrolled on the international programme; others are high school or conservatoire students, aged 13–20 and enrolled on the young performers programme; but there is a third group of even younger students: the Explorers, aged 8–12.

Cellist David Finckel of the Emerson String Quartet and his pianist wife Wu Han set up Music@Menlo four years ago, to fill a summer gap in the west coast's classical music calendar. Recitals by internationally-famous artists are combined with contextual lectures, intensive coaching sessions and performance opportunities for the students – even the little ones. Seeing and hearing such young children performing in duets, trios and ensembles in a Saturday afternoon Explorers concert was one of the highlights of my visit to Menlo a couple of years ago.

'I think that children should be introduced to the idea of playing together in ensembles as early as possible,' says Finckel. 'Playing together at an early age teaches children to listen to each other and learn to react to what is going on around them. In addition to learning the music, they learn all that is required to make music: discipline, intelligence, how to analyse situations, and how to be good chamber music colleagues.'

The Menlo Explorers programme is non-residential and the children must be chaperoned when not taking part in study or performance sessions. But they receive coaching from members of the main teaching faculty, some of them participate in public masterclasses, and they attend the recitals and lectures.

In order to qualify for the programme, says Finckel, 'they must have sufficient technique, the ability to play in tune, and the ability to count accurately.'

'As far as repertoire is concerned for this level, there are many things available, but I'd like to see even more. As any music educator knows, it takes many trips to the library, music store, and conversations with colleagues to find literature that is technically sufficient.' Finckel and Wu Han often do their own

arrangements in order to suit the needs of their young students.

'The benefits for young musicians are infinite in a programme like Menlo that mixes performers of all ages. Through master classes, lectures, and concerts with world-class artists, they gain invaluable insight into life as a musician. It offers them a community that ranges from age eight to 26 and enables them to aspire to higher playing. They are given the opportunity to escape the vacuum of solo practice and experience repertoire outside what they are studying.'

Finckel says he has not been surprised by the capacity of such young students to cope with such an intense programme. 'The biggest mistake everyone makes is to underestimate the intelligence and capacity of children. We have seen kids succeed to a very high expectation with the right grouping and encouragement.'

The Finckels' own daughter Lilian, now 12, has been a student on the Explorers course for the past three years, giving them an additional perspective on everything that can be gained from it. 'Lilian has really discovered the joy of music making from her time at Menlo. She has made friendships with group mates who are all working towards the same musical goals and dealing with the same challenges and discoveries. It has been fantastic for her to be able to share her own learning and practising experiences with peers who are also serious about classical music.'

'This support system is so important, especially in this age of popular culture. Lilian has gained tremendous amounts of confidence and assurance from everyone's success.'

Asked about the importance of training young performers in concert etiquette, Finckel says that is not exactly what they are doing at Menlo. 'We instead train them in the joy of preparing for a performance, dressing up, presenting their work, and being proud of what they have accomplished. We want them to be part of a community of sharing ideas and achievements and having fun! It is important to enjoy making music and taking pride in whatever they do. They should come out of the experience knowing how to communicate their feelings and emotions to an audience.'

However, the aim is not necessarily just to train the students in music. 'We really value public speaking and encourage the students to speak about the music they are learning. They learn to do the research, shape their own lecture, and have a complete learning experience. Many of the kids are quite shy when they come into the programme. When we first ask them to announce their pieces in public, they are like a deer in headlights. Once they develop this skill, the confidence they gain is extraordinary.'

'I have had countless conversations with parents who say that their children fall in love with music and have been so inspired by the environment at Menlo. Music@Menlo's spirit helps all of the young students to excel and take pride in their excellence.' ■

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Voyage of discovery: Young chamber musicians on the Menlo Explorers programme



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