



music

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Music@Menlo Live: Take Two - 2005 Festival

by Bob Neill

Schubert's Trout Quintet

Artistic Directors David Finckel and Wu Han, Recording Engineer extraordinaire Da-Hong Seetoo, and another group of very fine musicians are back with the second Music@Menlo Live recording series, these recordings made at the 2004 festival held at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto, California. For those of you who have heard any of the 2003 series, fear not, the recording quality is still shockingly good. Naturally warm and immediate, with instrumental timbres to die for. These recordings prove, once again, that digital done right and on CDR (and not screwed up in the CD manufacturing process!) can rival analogue. The sense of physicality and ease that we prize in vinyl is here in spades.



As in 2003, Music@Menlo Live is available in several different 'cuts,' depending on your interest: an Artist series which organizes music by principal performer; a Focus series (examples: Music for Three, Music for Winds); and a Microcosms series offering a representative sampling of the festival on each of its discs. You can choose your 'cut' when you order from the Music@Menlo website, exclusive source for the recordings. They are on CDR and packaged with very brief notes in flat plastic casings: \$15 each.

As I wrote in reviewing the 2003 offerings, I really do believe that for those of us who love classical music and the energy and sound quality of live recitals and concerts in particular, projects like Music@Menlo Live are the future of classical music recording. The performances are fresh, the musicians are among the very best, and the sound is as close to perfect as I've

yet to hear from digital. In many respects, it beats a lot of vinyl. If all digital recording sounded this good, many of us would likely not have returned to vinyl.

This year I chose to come at the Festival mainly through the Artists series. Here is my take on four of the six discs I copped. I am reviewing only four because there is some overlap on performances, so almost all of the music on the six will be covered.

Philip Setzer, violin

Puccini: Chrysanthemums. Setzer and Ian Swensen, violins; Hsin-Yun Huang, viola; Peter Wyrick, cello.

Steffani: Two arias from Tassilone. Setzer, violin; Josephine Mongiardo, soprano; Huang, viola; Wyrick, cello; Charles Chandler, bass; Kenneth Cooper, harpsichord.

Verdi: Selected Canzon. Mongiardo, Setzer, Huang, Wyrick, and Chandler.

Vivaldi: Concerto for Three Violins, RV 551. Setzer, Ani Kavafian, and Ian Swensen, solo violins; Miho Saegusa, Tee Khon Tang, violins; David Kim, viola; David Finckel, cello, Chandler, bass. Cooper, harpsichord.

Schubert: Piano Quintet in A Major, D. 667, The Trout.' Setzer, Huang, Finckel, Chandler; Wu Han, piano.

Philip Setzer is the brilliant first (and second!) violinist of the Emerson Quartet. His principal appearances in this set are in Vivaldi's Concerto for Three Violins and the Schubert Trout. The 'warm-up' works are delightful and likely served that role at the festival. The Vivaldi concerto, played on modern instruments, of course, is richer and more resonant sounding than we have grown accustomed to hearing it on period instruments. Da-Hong Seetoo's miking keeps the voices of the individual instruments clear, making another eloquent case for beating back the most outspoken of the HIP crowd. It is a great pleasure to hear Vivaldi beautiful again rather than simply robust and urgent. Veteran harpsichordist Kenneth Cooper provides a pleasing and unobtrusive continuo. Setzer's solo work, insofar as I can pick it out from the trio of soloists, is lively and clear. The closest I've heard him to baroque before is Haydn,

but he seems absolutely at home with Vivaldi.

I've heard several Trouts lately—most recently a very bold and moving one by Thomas Adès and the Belcea Quartet on EMI. Setzer and his colleagues give us a flowing, sonorous one. Setzer and pianist Wu Han keep the lights on so the darker tones of the viola, cello, and bass don't dominate the proceedings. A very fine Trout, which is wonderfully present. What Seetoo can do with strings is breathtaking. Setzer's trills are exquisite.

Carol Wincenc, flute

Vivaldi: Concerto in D Major, RV 95, La Pastorella. Wincenc, flute; Allan Vogel, oboe; Barry Shiffman, violin; Colin Carr, cello; Kenneth Cooper, harpsichord.

Bach: Brandenburg Concerto no. 5. Wincenc, Setzer, Geoff Nuttall and Shiffman, violins; Lesley Robertson, viola; Finckel, Chandler, and Cooper.

Bach: Brandenburg Concerto no. 2. David Washburn, trumpet; Wincenc, Vogel, Nuttall, Setzer, Shiffman, Robertson, Alberto Parrini, cello; Chandler, and Cooper.

Platti: Sonata for Flute and Continuos. Wincenc and Cooper.

Vivaldi: Concerto in D Major for Flute and Strings, RV 90. Wincenc, Arik Braude and Kavafian, violins; Kim, Finckel, Chandler, and Cooper.

Dutilleux: Sonatina for Flute and Piano. Wincenc and Derek Han, piano.

Carol Wincenc is great flute player, to many discerning ears, today's best; and on this recording, she is in great form. Her principal pieces here are the sonata by Platti, two concertos by Vivaldi, and a sonatina by Dutilleux. As a bonus, we get to hear her warm up on two of Bach's Brandenburgs! Wincenc's performing style is immediately evident in Vivaldi's well known Pastorella, where in contrast to the indulgent hyper-breathiness of some others, we hear ravishingly unaffected clarity. Her flute solo in Brandenburg 5 is radiant. This is an eight-performer version, which the marvelous acoustics of St. Mark's Church and engineering help to make both surprisingly full and predictably clear.

St. Marks Church, Palo Alto, CA.

Giovanni Platti is not a name we are likely to know unless we are students of the baroque; which is part of what music festivals are for. His Sonata for Flute and Continuo, Opus 3, no. 6 displays Ms. Wincenc's skills well. It is a musical confection nonetheless enjoyable for that. But it is nice to move from it into a richer one, one of Vivaldi's most pleasurable flute concertos. I know them mainly through Carolyn See's performances with Nicholas McGegan's Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, where she uses a wooden period instrument to great and brusque effect. Wincenc's silver instrument is less rustic and more aethereal sounding. Again, it is gratifying to hear beauty retake its position in the baroque repertoire. And once again, it is a delight to hear what small forces can do with and for this music. Here we have just seven musicians, and the sound is full with all of the musical details well defined and present.

The recital concludes with a modern piece for flute and piano by Dutilleux. Impressionism belongs to the flute and this piece of late impressionism flies through the room like a well articulated zephyr. This is the kind of piece for which a musician of Wincenc's calibre is invited to a music festival. It is more elusive than *Afternoon of a Faun*, and there is an appealing 'lateness' to its arch games of hide and seek with our expectations.

All in all, a rich and varied program with a wonderful musician at its center.

Colin Carr, cello

Fauré: Piano Quartet no. 1 in c minor, op. 15. Ian Swensen, violin; Geraldine Walther, viola; Carr, cello; Jeffrey Kahane, piano.

Dvořák: Piano Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 87. Jorja Fleezanis, violin; Walther, Carr, and Gilbert Kalish, piano. This disc is made up of two romantic piano quartets, both of which show off Carr's lyric gifts generously.

Fauré is some people's entrance into classical music, as is a lot of late nineteenth century romanticism, and from the first delicious notes of the Piano Quartet No. 1 it is easy to remember why. Fauré lives in string timbres, which, as you have grown weary of hearing by now, seem to benefit most from Seetoo's particular engineering genius. The warm, husky sound

that comes off the low strings here is irresistible; the sweetness of the violin complements them perfectly; the liquid clarity of the piano seems almost an added gift. This is elegantly sensuous music, which is why all the fuss about sound. Without the near absolute resolution of this recording, there would be almost too much beauty. Music like this is generally more interesting to listen to 'live' than recorded for this very reason. But Seetoo bridges the gap: this recording is very near 'live' sounding, so it never cloys.

I could put together a whole program of Dvořák that would astonish those who consider him a minor composer—and much of it would be music they'd never heard. The E flat Major piano quartet has many unequivocally Dvořák moments—the easy sweeping melodic strains that cause his detractors to roll their eyes. And then there is a long, meditative, slow passage building into an almost Schubert-like swell and then returning to its reflective meandering, all of which changes the musical stakes entirely. And it is one of these, in the second movement, where we remember who our featured artist is! Carr leads us through this passage with ease and quiet beauty, accompanied by pianist Kahane and his other strong colleagues. This is the Dvořák I treasure. Like him or not, he has an instantly recognizable and utterly musical voice that is present in both his easy and his more elusive moments. For me, that is what defines major composers. This is one of the best discs in the series.

Music for Three

Poulenc: Trio for Oboe, Bassoon, and Piano. Allan Vogel, oboe; Dennis Godburn, bassoon; Jeffrey Kahane, piano.

Bartók: Contrasts. Jorja Fleezanis, violin; Anthony McGill, clarinet; Derek Han, piano.

Smetana: Piano Trio in g minor, op 15. Ian Swensen, violin; Christopher Costanza, cello; Wu Han, piano.

I have saved my favorite recording for last. I love Wu Han's Artist series disc as much, but most of the performances on it are available on the ones I've included.

The Poulenc is good fun; and reproduced by a good digital source, double reeds and a piano can be pure sonic and hence musical joy. From Fauré to Poulenc in the French tradition is for some of us a joyful escape into the twentieth century. Wit and sophistication frame lyricism in ways we have grown used to in our literature and in our lives. Poulenc always brings

modern French film to mind: there is much good life to be lived, relished even, after loss of innocence. Vogel, Godburn, and Kahane do the music as well as I could imagine.

Bartók's Contrasts for violin and clarinet is by definition a more bristly work, but there is more than the sonic differences of the principal instruments to attend to here. The piece was written for American jazz clarinet player Benny Goodman and Bartók's countryman, Hungarian violinist Joseph Szigeti; so we have two contrasting musical traditions at work here as well. Bartók hears much in Gershwin that he wants to marry to Hungarian folk music but is also much interested in working the darker, meditative veins of jazz, where he presumably feels the two traditions cross with equal effectiveness. The third and final movement is where the union is most moving. The three musicians clearly "get" the piece and deliver it with spirited authority.

Smetana's Piano Trio sits on the edge of the trio repertoire, often serving to conclude a program to give audiences an unfamiliar, idiosyncratic, and palette cleansing experience with which to leave the recital hall. It is an olio of musical moods held together by a romantic rhetoric that in a more single-minded work would be overwhelming. The core of the work is lyric and plaintive (it commemorates the death of the composer's young daughter). This comes out especially in the central movement, where there are moments of surprisingly unapologetic sentiment that cut through the rhetoric. And it may be these disarmingly sincere passages which are the secret to the trio's success. The piano lays a crucial foundation in these parts of the work, and thanks to both pianist Wu Han and engineer Seetoo, it is wonderfully authoritative and present.

So thank you, Artistic Directors Wu Han and David Finckel once again for bringing together such a satisfying group of musicians. And thank you, Recording Engineer Da-Hong Seetoo, 'the musicians' friend,' for delivering them to us. I urge you all to visit the Music@Menlo website and sample the musical feast in any form you like. Next year (this past summer's festival) it's all Beethoven, including a complete cycle of the string quartets by the Miro, St. Lawrence, the Miami, and Emerson Quartets!