

San Mateo County Times

August 8, 2006

Chamber music sounds great in hands of Music@Menlo players of all ages

By Keith Kreitman

CONTRIBUTOR

WHAT causes performers from 8 to 80 to gather together in harmony?

Music, of course. And that is what Music@Menlo has been doing for the past four years.

Once a speculative chamber music venture by the artistic directors — the married team of cellist David Finckel and pianist Wu Han — Music@Menlo is now becoming imbedded in the cultural landscape of the Peninsula and is well on its way to becoming a national musical institution. With many sell-out performances during its three-week run, it may now be called a success.

What brings 30 nationally famous professionals, 12 pre-professionals ages 18 to 28 and 27 performers younger than 19 here from all around the country?

According to co-founder Han, it is the joy of performing chamber music in a relaxed and positive environment and learning from and teaching each other.

The Menlo School in Atherton, an impeccably neat campus with two performing auditoriums ideal for chamber music, and acoustically-favored St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto, are such dream environments.

What thrills Han the most, is how, unexpectedly by the second week, so many of the pre-professionals unselfishly began to take the younger ones



YOUNG VIRTUOSOS: Twins Stephen (left) and Michael Waarts, who are 10, were among the many talented performers Saturday at Music@Menlo's Visitor's Day.

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If you go

► **Music@Menlo**

► **Where:** Menlo School, 50 Valparaiso Ave., Atherton or St. Mark's Episcopal Church, 600 Colorado Ave., Palo Alto

► **When:** Various programs daily through Friday

► **Tickets:** \$10-\$68

► **Contact:** (650) 330-2030; (650) 725-ARTS; www.musicatmenlo.org

under their wings for tutoring.

So the bonding is "love." The love of chamber music and each other that reaches from the youngest musical apprentice to the eldest of the professional masters.

On Visitor's Day, last Saturday, the public was invited to attend open rehearsals and representative concerts from each of the three groups.

Of course, I expected the older groups, the professionals and the younger performers from such famed musical institutions as Curtis Institute, Juilliard School, New England Conservatory and the Yale School of Music, to be outstanding.

But when violinists Heejung Chung, 8, and Ellie Fukui, 11, along with 10-year-old cellist Spencer Kim, opened the afternoon's young performer's program with a knockout two movements from Mozart's "Divertimento in C Major, K. 439b," that really grabbed my attention.

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These kids are rewriting the books on precocious maturity.

For example, when the toughest piece of the afternoon, Shostakovich's "Piano Quintet in g minor, op. 57" was performed flawlessly and with astonishing maturity by teenagers: Peter Asimov (piano), Eunice Kim and Alexi Kenney (violins), Leonard Chiang (viola) and Jaime Feldman (cello), this aged performer became very humbled.

Two 14-year-old pianists, Asimov from New York and Nicolas van Poucke from the Netherlands, are already approaching mature and polished chamber music styles, and 12-year-old Lillian Finckel is hot on their heels.

And van Poucke's 12-year-old sister Ella, who performed the second piece on the program, Bach's "Sonata no. 1 in G Major" with 10-year-old Hilda Huang on the piano, proved to

be only one among a remarkable gathering of young cellists. The others are 12-year-olds Sarah Ghandour, Juan-Salvador Carrasco and Will Chow, 15-year-old Jaime Feldman and 16-year-old Camden Shaw.

Shaw, preparing to enroll at the Curtis Institute, provided one of the most interesting comments when I asked about one session where all three age groups mixed talent in a combined chamber music program: "It's like tennis. The best way to improve is to play with people better than you."

Right on, Camden! Obviously, it worked, because he was outstanding in the other tough number on the program, "Mozart's String Quintet in c minor, K. 406," along with the oldest teens of among the group, violinists Laura Keller and her sister Mary, violists Christina Simpson and Alexander Lin.

Scattered throughout the program were other notable violin talents, including 9-year-old Marisa Yang; the 10-year-old Waarts twins, Michael and Stephen; Yujin Ariza, Alex van der Veen; Ashvin Swaminathan; 12-year-old Alexi Kenney and 13-year-old Kendall Fisher.

It's strange that these youngsters should steal the day from their elders. Watch out you guys, these kids are on hot on your tails.

Beside chamber music concerts and training classes for the younger members, Music@Menlo also programs six lectures for the public, called "Encounters" this year honoring Mozart — and other more informal conversations with experienced musicians.