



# POSITIVE FEEDBACK ONLINE

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music

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## Notes of an Amateur October, 2006 - Part I by Bob Neill

### Music@Menlo Live: *Beethoven, Center of Gravity*. Recordings from the Menlo Music Festival, 2005.

'They're back! David Finckel's and Wu Han's Menlo Musical Festival, which has produced two extremely fine sets of recordings in 2003 and 2004, is back with its 2005 edition. In this festival, Beethoven was the thematic center of the festival; but to make the program's point, performances also included works by Mozart, Haydn, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Weber, and Schumann, as well as the Center of Gravity himself. As a set of four recordings, available singly or as a full set, this is a rich and enormously appealing collection of musical performances. As before, the sound is superb, thanks to continuing recording engineer Da-Hong Seetoo. And this year, the recordings, under the strict supervision of Seetoo, are on CD rather than CDR. And, as the Music@Menlo web site makes clear, both the 2003 and 2004 sets have been remastered by Seetoo and transferred to CD as well. Packaging is also spruced up a bit, for those who are about these things. The former 'homemade' look is utterly gone.

As I've said in reviewing earlier sets in this series, while the musicianship and sound strike me as extremely fine, what really sets the Music@Menlo recordings apart are the freshness and energy that clearly come from their being 'live.' As any musician will tell you, the state of mind in 'live' performing contrasted with sitting before mikes and a recorder is huge. "Live" they must be absolutely in the moment: the performance is now and is disappearing even as it is played. It is once and for all, with no opportunity for fixes. This also means that any missteps caused by 'going for it' will not be there for posterity to wince over, so focus and intensity can be at a premium.

But in 'live' recordings we have it both ways! The performances are for broke and they are for posterity. In the Music@Menlo recordings so far, this has been a pure benefit. (Who knows if there were any blown performances that never made it onto CD? Not us!) Yesterday, it was a lively performance of Mendelssohn's Quintet for Strings, Opus 87, full of polish and panache. This is the Mendelssohn who wowed his contemporaries and who, as the thematic focus of the series suggests, is one of Beethoven's heirs who was not over-

whelmed by him but rather inspired to make something new from his example. Musicians are Ian Swenson and Joria Fleezanis, violins; Cynthia Philips and Geraldine Walther, violas; and David Finckel, cello.

On this same CD is Beethoven's Septet for Winds and Strings, Opus 20. Joseph Silverstein, violin; Walther, viola; Ronald Thomas, cello; Charles Chandler, bass; William Vermuelen, French horn; Dennis Godburn, bassoon; and Anthony McGill, clarinet. And here, for all of your audiophiles, it's not just the freshness and elan of the performance that pulls us in but the clarity and natural warmth of the recording. It is not the kind of sound that draws attention to itself but rather something we notice in passing, as we hear each of the instrumental voices singing along as a fully realized contributor to the seven-voice chorus. This is absolutely great engineering.

Today it is another stunning disc with Claude Frank, best known to many of us as the pianist in the father/daughter duo who made the treasured Brahms and Beethoven violin & piano sonata recordings, playing Beethoven's Sonata No. 32, Opus 111. Radiant and revealing with a wonderfully subtle sense of touch throughout. This is one of the most appealing performances of this sonata I have heard. Accompanying it is the beloved Brahms Quintet for piano and strings, Opus 34, with Wu Han, pianist; Fleezanis and Swenson, violins; Cynthia Philips, viola; and Ralph Kirschbaum, cello. What strikes me most about this performance is its clarity, a quality that Brahms does not always get from musicians! This is the Brahms the composer himself most valued – the nineteenth century composer who looks lovingly back on the eighteenth. Again, the quality of the recording contributes greatly to the beauty of this production.

Other musicians who perform in the set:

Derek Han, piano  
Gilbert Kalish, piano  
The Miro String Quartet!  
Christopher Nomura, baritone (in Schumann's Dichterliebe)

Music@Menlo LIVE

Beethoven: Center of Gravity 1-4



This should give you a pretty clear sense that the standards set by the Music@Menlo 2003 and 2004 series have been met easily. If anything, the recording quality has been bettered: while I loved the sound of the earlier sets, there is an almost analogue sense of ease and gentleness to these new releases the others did not have. I am eager to hear what 2003 and 2004 sets sound like in their remastered versions.

Note: These recordings are only available through the Music@Menlo web site, for \$17 each plus \$2.20 shipping and handling. The four-disc set is \$60 plus \$2.20.

<https://id296.securedata.net/musicatmenlo/live/>

Another Note: I listened to each of the four CDs right out of the slip case and then, as I do with all CDs these days, treated them with Nanotec Systems Intron Protect 8500 CD/DVD Coating Liquid. While they all sounded excellent untreated, there is no denying the added resolution that this latest elixir brings to the proceedings. I have used Optrix, two versions of Auric Illuminator, and RealityDisc in the past; and while each improved the sound of CDs noticeably, Nanotec 8500 to my ears does the best job of making CDs better versions of what they already are, without putting an identifiable stamp on them.

System used for these auditions: Audio Note CDT 2 II transport and Dac 4.1 Balanced Signature, Audio Note M6 preamplifier and Neuro amplifier, Audio Note AN-E/SPx SE speakers. Cabling is Audio Note Sogon, AN-Vx, and SPx.