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Shooting Stars: A Season of Music@Menlo

By Michelle Dulak Thomson

For all the obvious advantages of stable ensembles whose members play and work together over long stretches of time, I suspect that a lot of the best chamber-music playing takes place at chamber-music festivals, where top instrumentalists, thrown together in the atmosphere of a musical half-holiday, learn and enjoy each other and the music at once. When the participants are at the starry level of Music@Menlo's invitees, something extraordinary is almost bound to happen. In fact, as the Bay Area's festival's 6-CD retrospective of 2007's concerts (Bridging the Ages, available via the festival's Web site) makes clear, the extraordinary at Music@Menlo is nearly routine.

The discs don't include every performance on the 2007 festival's five evening programs, but the large majority are there. The pieces are regrouped on logical and space-efficiency grounds (piano trios from three different concerts are grouped on one disc, for example, while performances by the participating Miami and Escher Quartets occupy a disc apiece).

The repertoire preserved here varies from the familiar to the rare to the almost-new. The warhorses would ordinarily be the least enticing segment of a set like this, but for the quality of the best performances here. The Wu Han-led performance of the Tchaikovsky Piano Trio, with violinist Joseph Swensen and cellist Ralph Kirshbaum (from July 23), for one, has a splendid sweep on a level with the best I've heard, in recording or live. The Miami Quartet's Schubert "Death and the Maiden" (from Aug. 3) is devastatingly refined and yet urgent; the Escher Quartet's Mendelssohn Op. 13 (July 23 again), while a shade generic, is still high-level quartet playing. And baritone Christophersen Nomura sings a heartfelt Bach *Ich habe genug*.

The San Francisco Conservatory's Ian Swensen (brother of Joseph) contributes a characteristically nervy Ravel Sonata with pianist Gilbert Kalish (from Aug. 9), while a Brahms G-Minor Piano Quartet from the same program, led by Kalish, tempers impetuosity with fierce control. Saint-Saëns' *Le carnaval des animaux* (from July 27) finds everyone having a grand good time, though composer Bruce Adolphe's new verses (recited in the performance) have, sadly, been edited out.

Still, it's the rarer material here that's the real treasure. Pride of place, for me, goes to a Bottesini *Gran duo concertante* for solo violin and double bass with string quartet (from July 29):



bassist Daxun Zhang lightly working impossibilities, violinist Erin Keefe tossing off rows of octaves so purely tuned that you have to strain to perceive the upper note, and the Eschers lending juicy support. Then there's a febrile Korngold Suite for piano left hand, two violins, and cello from the same concert, led by pianist Gary Graffman, and a sharply turned out performance of Copland's seldom played, quarter-tone-laced piano trio Vitebsk from Aug. 9.

A Boccherini guitar quintet, with Jason Vieux and the Eschers, shows its partial origins in a cello quintet with a wickedly high cello part, tossed off by Escher cellist Andrew Janss without apparent effort. Soprano Heidi Grant Murphy sounds just right, light and pert and ever alert to words, in a handful of Beethoven's Scottish song settings with piano trio. ("Oh! sweet were the hours" turns out to be the tune better known, in Haydn's setting, as "O can ye sew cushions"; Beethoven's accompaniment is delightful, more intricate than Haydn's.)

The two most recent pieces here both get performances of striking polish and confidence. The Miami Quartet imparts to Bruce Adolphe's 1992 Quartet No. 4, "Whispers of Mortality," a sustained intensity through which the ensemble's native beauty of sound nonetheless never wavers. The Adolphe — a five-movement meditation on human physical frailty, prompted by the serious illness of a family member — is a piece I want to hear again, and soon. Heidi Grant Murphy and her husband, Kevin, meanwhile, perform Marc Neikrug's slender 1995 Pueblo Children's Songs with the loving dedication you'd expect, given that the soprano commissioned and premiered the work.

There's more in there, too much to mention, and all of it terrific (well, maybe not the disconcertingly steely, brawny rendition of a Handel keyboard concerto, though even that is oddly fascinating). The recordings, all produced by Da-Hong Seetoo, are lovely — fairly close but resonant, and with a minimum of audience noise. Good, if terse, program notes are provided, but no texts or translations for the vocal works, which is too bad; notwithstanding the excellence of the singers' diction, we could use a little help even with the Scots, never mind the German and the Tewa. Maybe next year?