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## SUMMER CLASSICS

With Music@Menlo about to begin, here's a sampling of CDs for lovers of classical music

By Richard Scheinin, [rscheinin@mercurynews.com](mailto:rscheinin@mercurynews.com) | The Music@Menlo chamber music festival has set high marks for itself in its first seven seasons on the Peninsula. Its formula works: Gather two or three dozen of the best chamber players in the nation, and set them in intimate venues to play a smart and often revelatory mix of repertory. Maybe even let a few of them design their own programs.

Fireworks ensue. Audiences flock. The eighth annual festival opens Friday. To get you in the mood, we thought it would make sense to review the new six-CD compendium of live recordings from Menlo's 2009 edition. And just in case you're looking to relax this summer with a few new classical recordings, we've also included brief reviews of some other recommended releases.

**"Being Mendelssohn"** (Music@Menlo LIVE). Unless you've seen cellist David Finckel smiling like the Cheshire cat as a performance starts taking off at the Music@Menlo chamber music festival, it's hard to "get" what this annual event is about. It's about putting a bunch of killer players into a hothouse environment, where they basically can't wait to roll up their sleeves (I'm speaking figuratively; they wear tuxedos and gowns) and get down to making music for a crowd that understands the eruptive chemistry that often breaks out during Menlo performances.

You can hear it happen time and again on this 6-CD compendium of live recordings from the 2009 festival on the Peninsula. It happens on the first disc, when pianist Wu Han (she and Finckel are the festival's co-artistic directors) performs Mendelssohn's Sextet in D major, Op. 110, with a specially assembled cast. It includes three-quarters of the St. Lawrence String Quartet, along with young French violinist Arnaud Sussman and bassist (and San Francisco Symphony principal) Scott Pingel.

The chemistry works: The performance is rippling, gorgeously lyrical and, above all, conversational as it zooms through the *Allegro vivace*. Anyone who thinks classical music is about the mere replication of notes on the written page should listen to this: Something vast and ineffable is released through the notes — and through the camaraderie of the musicians.

Likewise, on disc two, Mendelssohn's Octet for Strings in E-flat major, Op. 20, groups Finckel with members of the St. Lawrence and Pacifica string quartets. Their performance surges through the astonishing melodies that Mendelssohn — the prime subject of last year's festival — composed at age 16. On disc four, the Nonet in F major, Op. 31, by Louis Spohr — as famous as Beethoven in his day — will be a revelation for some listeners. It has one of the most charmingly mischievous and tuneful finales imagin-

able. And then there's disc six, with soulful performances of Mendelssohn trios by an all-star group: Finckel and violinist Eugene Drucker (both members of the Emerson String Quartet) with grand master pianist Menahem Pressler.

Not every one of the performances on this box set is eruptive; music doesn't work that way. I've had trouble penetrating disc three, which looks great on paper, with works by Ligeti, Brahms and Pierre Jalbert. But, for me, the performances don't move far enough beyond those notes on paper. Of course, others will hear it differently; Menlo paints a wide canvas each summer, with plenty of room for debate among listeners and, I bet, the performers, too.

The box set is available for \$90 at [www.musicatmenlo.org](http://www.musicatmenlo.org). (A downloadable MP3 version of the set is also available, for a limited time price of \$39.99.) The set's individual discs are also available for \$17 apiece.



**MUSIC@MENLO**  
**FESTIVAL**  
**PREVIEW** Eighth edition kicks off Friday in Atherton. **PAGE 7**