



Music@Menlo Starts Friday with Focus On Brahms

by Edward Reichel

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A decade ago, when pianist Wu Han and her husband David Finckel (cellist of the Emerson Quartet) decided to start a festival in northern California, the odds that it would succeed weren't in their favor. People were advising them against it. And, bottom line, the economic and cultural climates at the start of the new century weren't conducive to supporting yet another summer chamber music festival. "That was at the time of the first dot com crash," Wu Han said in a phone interview. "The San Jose Symphony had filed for bankruptcy around that time and it was the start of symphony failures around the country."

Undaunted, she and Finckel pressed ahead with their plans, and nine years ago their Silicon Valley area Music@Menlo Chamber Music Festival was born, which this year runs from July 22 through Aug. 13 at various venues in and around Palo Alto, Calif.

In a testimony to their vision and goals, the festival never went through any growing pains before catching on with audiences and musicians. It was an unqualified success right from the start. "We gave ourselves five years to hit capacity, but we were at 98 percent capacity in our first year," Wu Han said.

Speaking with Reichel Recommends from Aspen, Colo., where she was performing at the Aspen Music Festival, Wu Han said they had a full fledged festival operating from day one. "We didn't go through the usual progression for a festival. By that I mean, we didn't start playing concerts in a living room, then move into a church then a hall. And maybe 10 years later we would have our first recording. No, we started from the top with our own record label, lectures and everything we have today. The festival was designed that way. And it has worked."

Part of the immediate popularity of the festival was no doubt the fact that there was (and still is) no other large chamber music festival in the area. "The reasons we chose the Bay Area was because there were no major festivals in sight there. And the weather is great and there is a great community" eager to immerse itself in chamber music.

That did play a part, but the most important reason for Music@Menlo's success is what Wu Han and Finckel wanted to do with it. "We do what we have to to serve the music well," she said. To that end they offer their audiences "something unusual and special" through audience contact with the music and musicians. "Festival attendees mingle with the musicians," Wu Han said. "They often have lunch with them, which gives them a chance to chat with them."

And every year the festival prepares a CD with excerpts of the works that will be performed and which each concertgoer will get.



“This year it has 70 minutes of music. This helps prepare the public for the concerts.” And contrary to what one might think, participants are eager to immerse themselves in the music, which delights Wu Han. “There is a lot of study involved, but nobody minds it, thank God.”

In fact, there is a core audience which comes to Menlo and stays for the entire three weeks of the festival. “We have people who stay with us throughout the festival, and we have many who have been with us from the beginning,” Wu Han said. “It’s an intense community that has an incredible desire to understand and appreciate the music. They know it’s not the place for quick entertainment.”

Each year the festival focuses on a specific composer or era. This summer the music of Johannes Brahms is in the spotlight, although the concerts aren’t limited to just his music. They encompass a broad range of composers and periods. “We try to discover and re-discover his music,” she said. “We will look at the way he carries on traditions and how he pushes boundaries and we will explore this natural progression. We will look at all this through one or two specific areas.”

An important part of the festival is its young performers institute, where young musicians study with the guest artists and also give concerts, both side-by-side and on their own. “From the beginning David said that it would be a shame if we don’t have the musicians teach these kids,” Wu Han said. “Our musicians are generous, they give their time to the youngsters.” This year there are around 40 youthful musicians ranging in age from 8 to 28. “What these students experience during the festival is an incredible journey to discover themselves,” she said.

For a complete listing of festival events, guest artist roster and ticket information, log on to www.musicatmenlo.org or download the free iPad app that is now available on iTunes.