

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Music review: Music@Menlo

Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic

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It's one thing to read about the traumatic global upheavals of the mid-20th century, and quite another to hear them expressed as forcefully as they were in the music of Wednesday night's superb chamber concert at the Music@Menlo Festival.

The program, presented in the Stent Family Hall of the Menlo School in Atherton, comprised two powerful works from 1945 - Britten's "Holy Sonnets of John Donne" cycle and Richard Strauss' "Metamorphosen" - as well as Shostakovich's tormented, autobiographical Eighth String Quartet from 1960. In Wednesday's first-rate performances, all three served as eloquent testaments of the period.

The great revelation was the Shostakovich, which opened the program in a marvelously sensitive and balanced performance by the Miró Quartet (violinists Daniel Ching and Sandy Yamamoto, violist John Largess and cellist Joshua Gindele). With its obsessive repetitions of the four-note melodic motif that denotes the composer's initials, this is a piece that in the wrong hands can too often sound hectoring and solipsistic.

But the Miró lavished it with tenderness and delicacy, from the slow Beethovenian fugue that opens the work (rendered with rich, gorgeous tone) to the sardonic but light-footed waltz at its center. Suddenly, a piece whose emotional rawness had often struck me as embarrassing took on an arresting pathos.

Britten's settings of Donne's urgent, death-haunted poems - cast with fervent intensity amid a few rhapsodic interludes - got a formidable reading by tenor Matthew Plenk and pianist Ken Noda. Plenk, a young singer affiliated with the Metropolitan Opera, has the bright, piercing tone and flawless diction needed to make this music work, and he shaped the songs with dramatic sureness.

After intermission came a rarity, a mysterious alternate version of "Metamorphosen" scored for seven strings rather than the canonical 23. The septet, premiered in 1994, sustains the same elegiac tone over the destruction of German culture, symbolized by a melodic snippet from the funeral march of Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony.

But in packing that material into such a small instrumental space, Strauss necessarily keeps the entire ensemble in motion nearly without pause. The result feels overstuffed in a way that the standard version never does.

Still, the performance caught the music's contrapuntal dexterity and rhythmic tirelessness, and the ensemble - comprising violinists Jorja Fleezanis and Lily Francis, violists Beth Guterman and Erin Keefe, cellists David Finckel and Ralph Kirshbaum, and bassist Scott Pingel - mustered a plush and evocative sound.

Music@Menlo: Through Aug. 14 at locations in Atherton and Palo Alto. \$20-\$72. (650) 331-0202, [www.musicatmenlo.org](http://www.musicatmenlo.org).