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## Music@Menlo chamber music festival boasts rousing take off

By Richard Scheinin

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ATHERTON — The Music@Menlo chamber music festival took off here Friday with a rousing and exotic program, counter-posing music from across the centuries. And typically for this recession-busting festival, the 16 players assembled for opening night at Menlo-Atherton High School's glitzy performing arts center played everything — from Antonio Vivaldi to George Crumb — with a flair that shows if classical music is presented with smarts and commitment, people will eagerly come.

So, go figure: The Lilith Fair tour is fading. The American Idols tour is cutting back. But Music@Menlo, with more than 70 events on the Peninsula over the next three weeks — a slew of concerts (including some free ones), plus master classes, multimedia lectures and informal “café conversations” — is ramping up in its eighth season. Directed by pianist Wu Han and cellist David Finckel, who also lead the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in New York, this summer festival has a way of making all the right moves.

Friday's sold-out program began with Vivaldi's “The Four Seasons,” which seemed to be the wrong move, at least before the concert began. Who wants to hear that again? Well, from the first few measures, everybody did. The small orchestra on stage in the year-old hall — a dozen strings, plus harpsichord — took much of the piece at blazing tempos. There was a sense of the musicians being out on a limb, rediscovering Vivaldi's evocative and almost physical tone-painting of summer storms and bone-freezing winter sleet. This virtuoso performance was gusty angutsy, then delicate and transparent, pin-drop quiet and always lyrical.

### Ethereal atmosphere

Also, the soloist changed from movement to movement, a master stroke. For “Spring” there was Erin Keefe, rock-solid and beyond exquisite, trilling like a rare songbird. For “Summer,” there was Ani Kavafian, much darker, in imitation of those driving sheets of rain. Philip Setzer led “Autumn,” its slow middle movement practically vanishing into ethereal atmospherics, the high point of the entire performance. Finally, Ian Swensen was the mad fiddler of “Winter,” strongly capping this orgy of string playing, which was enhanced by the presence of the Miro Quartet, a top ensemble whose members were embedded in the little orchestra.

What an exuberant “welcome to the festival” this performance turned out to be. The audience kept breaking into applause between movements. And after “The Four Seasons” had ended, people were commenting around the 492-seat hall: “I guess Vivaldi got Menlo'd,” one man said, laughing.



Erin Keefe was the soloist for the “Spring” movement of Vivaldi's “The Four Seasons,” which opened the Music@Menlo chamber music festival Friday.

After intermission, this unusually creative program continued with George Crumb's "Music for a Summer Evening (Makrokosmos III)," composed in 1974, two and a half centuries after Vivaldi's work. Though in many ways worlds apart, it shares a similar devotion to atmospherics; it's a feast of sound that becomes almost physical. The ace performers, who played the first few notes in pitch darkness, were Gilbert Kalish (who premiered the work 36 years ago) and Wu Han on amplified acoustic grand pianos, along with whirlwind percussionists Christopher Froh and Ayano Kataoka. Their percussion arsenal included xylophone, glockenspiel, tubular bells, gongs, maracas, sleigh bells, slide whistles, lots of drums, a metal thunder sheet, the jawbone of an ass, Tibetan prayer stones and a musical jug.

## Regal sounds

The performance was a spectacle. And over 40 minutes, its eerie beauties kept building, vanishing and reappearing like galactic phenomena. In the beginning, the quartet seemed to tune into faraway radio transmissions and cosmic birdsong. Often, Kalish and Wu Han — staring at each other like wrestlers — reached inside the pianos to tamp, pluck and strum the strings, which sometimes were covered with sheets of newspaper to expand the protean array of timbres. As the drama continued, there were invented languages — spine-straightening shouts and chants, the ritual music of an ancient court. The final movement, "Music of the Starry Night," delivered exotic, whistled anthems, a beautifully reiterated bit of a Bach fugue, regal and chilling sounds arriving across vast distances of space and time.

What a cool program. Especially in a recession, it isn't exactly mainstream thinking to pair Antonio Vivaldi and George Crumb. But it worked, big time. At Menlo, probably because the performers are game, the audience is, too.



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