

## Music@Menlo Chamber Festival's Ninth Edition Will Focus on Brahms

by Richard Scheinin

Like a 21st-century salon, the Music@Menlo chamber music festival returns this month for its ninth season. Let's call it a salon on steroids, because Menlo has an alluring retro intimacy, but in bulk: It stretches across three intense weeks of concerts (featuring about three dozen world-class players) and lectures (by respected scholars, breaking out the PowerPoint).

Much of it happens on the campus of the Menlo School in Atherton, where the musicians and their students (the festival has its own institute) wander about, mingling and schmoozing with audience members.

This summer's edition (July 22-Aug. 13) focuses on Brahms: "He is the great connector between Bach and Schoenberg," says cellist David Finckel, the festival's co-founder. "The art of classical music passed through his hands into the 20th century and the age of modernism."

Pianist Wu Han is festival co-founder and, with Finckel, co-artistic director (they are also wife and husband). They recently sat down to talk about "Through Brahms," as this year's festival is titled. Its aim is to position broad swathes of chamber music by other composers alongside Brahms, and to hear their works through Brahms, recognizing him as a prism. The programs should "refract his artistry backwards and forward in a radical way," says Finckel, beginning, say, with J.S. Bach (a foremost Brahms hero) and moving through Brahms on to such modernists as Leon Kirchner (one of Schoenberg's proteges). In Brahms, Finckel says, there always is a clear sense of "building on the past, partaking of the present and looking forward."

In their conversation about Brahms, the names of Bach and Schoenberg keep coming up. All three, say Wu Han and Finckel, epitomize economy and integrity of composition, with tremendous force of detail, form and structure. The festival's opening program -- "The Young Eagle" (what Robert Schumann dubbed Brahms) -- begins with works by Mozart, Schubert and Schumann. This is music that surrounded and influenced the young Brahms ("who comes along and pushes everybody aside," says Wu Han), preparing us for what will follow at Menlo.

That thrust should be audible in the program's final two works: Brahms' Scherzo in C minor and his Piano Trio in B major, Op. 8, each penned by Brahms when he was about 20. "And when I hear that trio," says Finckel, "I still can't believe it's the work of a young musician. It's like something from his final years --magisterial."

"You can hear why Schumann said he was carrying the mantle of Beethoven," adds Wu Han.

And it was only five or six years later that Brahms composed his Sextet in B-flat major, Op. 18 -- virtually "symphonic" in complexity and power, says Finckel -- which caps another of the festival's six core programs.



Another program will be devoted to lieder (songs) by Schubert, Schumann, Berg and Brahms. Yet another will explore the Gypsy-inspired music of Haydn, Brahms, Ravel and half a dozen others. "Brahms grew up in the most squalid conditions in Hamburg, Germany," Finckel explains, "and to make it, to survive, the family sent this 12-year-old out to play music in brothels and bars, where he learned this earthy music. And I think as a result he never lost his bond with the common man.

"Even much later, when he was living in Vienna, he would go out to the park and listen to the bands. He never lost that earthy side."

One of the musicians in this program, violist Paul Neubauer, years ago learned traditional Gypsy repertoire from elderly musicians on New York's Lower East Side.

Titled "Alla Zingarese," the program also features Finckel, violinist Elmar Oliveira, Wu Han and pianist Jon Kimura Parker. The final "Farewell" program is an all-star affair with 87-year-old pianist Menahem Pressler (of Beaux Arts Trio fame); clarinetist David Shifrin (the ex-Cleveland Orchestra principal will play Brahms' Clarinet Quintet in B minor); violinists Ani Kavafian, Yura Lee and Philip Setzer (a member with Finckel of the Emerson String Quartet) and others.

Wu Han and Finckel, also the artistic directors of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, have drawn on their broad contacts to bring together the Menlo performers. Some of the other marvelous players this summer are pianists Alessio Bax, Gilbert Kalish and Juho Pohjonen; violinists Jorja Fleezanis, Daniel Hope and Arnaud Sussmann; cellist Laurence Lesser; clarinetist Carey Bell; and mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke.

The Orion String Quartet will perform two programs of works by Brahms, Beethoven, Webern and Kirchner. And Bax, Hope, Shifrin and Pressler each will cherry-pick repertory for his own "Carte Blanche" recital.

Concerts happen at the Menlo School's intimate Stent Family Hall, at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto and at the less intimate and (at least to this writer) less acoustically appealing Center for Performing Arts at Menlo-Atherton High School.

Regardless of venue, the festival is a hot ticket, so, if you're interested, get on the stick. Even the "Encounter" series of multimedia lectures was largely sold out at press time. The four lectures culminate Aug. 11 with "Music in Autumn: The Late Works of Brahms," led by Ara Guzelimian, former artistic advisor of Carnegie Hall and now provost and dean of the Juilliard School.

Of course, we haven't even mentioned the many concerts by the young performers of the festival's Chamber Music Institute, or the master classes led by featured performers, or the informal "Listening Room" sessions and "Cafe Conversations."

Last year, Finckel -- a really good storyteller -- led one such conversation, reminiscing about cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, a towering figure of the 20th century and one of his mentors. Finckel's talk was streamed live over the festival's website ([www.musicatmenlo.org](http://www.musicatmenlo.org)), where right now you can get all the details about this summer's tantalizing events.