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Review: Clarinetist David Shifrin probes for meaning in Brahms' works at Music@Menlo

by Richard Scheinin

Johannes Brahms was threatening retirement in 1890, feeling un-inspired until he took a road trip the next spring to the central German town of Meiningen. There he discovered a clarinetist named Richard Mühlfeld, whose artistry made Brahms, then 57, fall in love with the clarinet -- fall hard, as he might fall in love with a woman. And so Brahms' composing pen began to flow anew.

He composed a number of pieces showcasing the clarinet ("Fräulein Klarinette," he called it), which are among his most enduring. People call them "autumnal." They are wise and sad works, suffused with an air of lost love and yearning, those Brahmsian specialties. And the distinguished clarinetist David Shifrin has been performing them -- living them, is a better way to put it -- at the Music@Menlo chamber music festival, where he "curated" his own "Carte Blanche" recital Monday.

He returns Friday and Saturday for the festival's final program, featuring more late works by Brahms, who has been this year's Menlo focus. Appropriately titled "Farewell," the program will end with the Clarinet Quintet in B minor, Op. 115, that most autumnal of Brahms' clarinet opuses. With help from violinists Philip Setzer and Ani Kavafian, violist Yura Lee and cellist Paul Watkins, Shifrin is likely to do something special with it.

It will be hard for him to outdo what he accomplished Monday at the Center for Performing Arts at Menlo-Atherton High School. The 2-year-old venue isn't an especially cozy place, but Shifrin warmed it up with cellist David Finckel and a pair of pianists, Jon Kimura Parker and Wu Han. They made it their salon.

The program began with Brahms' Sonata for Clarinet and Piano in F minor, Op. 120, No. 1, performed by Shifrin and Parker. Dating to 1894, the piece is a strong example of Brahms' almost religious devotion to traditional form and rigorous structure: the opening four-note motto is woven through the score, infusing textures, generating much of the musical discourse.

And from the opening statement of that motif, there was something special going on with the performance. In fact, it didn't feel like a performance. Rather, the two players seemed to be probing the music, in a comfortable way, for meaning.

The sonata goes beyond bittersweet to a "knowingness" about life, and a thankfulness, and the musicians were gently holding onto that. They were playing beneficently, mirroring each other's phrasing -- and perhaps mirroring something of Brahms' own experiences.

That same sort of generous, un-showy playing characterized the recital when Wu Han and Finckel joined Shifrin.



First they played selections from Max Bruch's Eight Pieces, Op. 83, works from 1909 that are Brahmsian in their warmth and introspection -- their autumnal-ness. The Andante con moto, the third selection, opened with a big ripe pronouncement from Finckel's cello, and then Shifrin made his entrance, like a kindly ghost entering a room -- a smoky sound, vaporously lyric. The conversation was triangulated through the rolling flow of Wu Han's piano.

The senior member of the group, Shifrin played years ago under Leopold Stokowski in the American Symphony Orchestra and was principal clarinet with the Cleveland Orchestra. Widely admired for his chamber playing, he was Monday's music shaper in subtle ways, riding solid columns of air at a whisper. His tone is richly layered, like the accumulation of pigments in a fresco.

In Monday's final piece, Brahms' Clarinet Trio in A minor, Op. 114 (from 1891), the trio breathed through the music. The performance had a deep naturalness about it; the Adagio was like speech, one singing utterance after the next. And the waltz-like ländler of the Andante grazioso was beyond mellow. It carried the sweetness, or bittersweetness, of autumn.