

## The Rebirth of the English “Voice”

*By Georgia Rowe*

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PALO ALTO, California -- Music@Menlo, the three-week chamber music festival and teaching institute that convenes each summer in the Silicon Valley, has often built its seasons around a single composer (last year, it was Felix Mendelssohn.) This year, under founding artistic directors cellist David Finckel and pianist Wu Han, its offerings are more panoramic and wide-ranging; before the final performance on Aug. 14, audiences will have heard programs titled “Vienna,” “La Ville-Lumiere: Paris, 1920-1928,” “Spanish Inspirations” and “Dvorák’s America,” among others. Each one yields congenial collaborations and often incendiary performances, making the annual event, for aficionados, one of the West Coast’s premier musical destinations.

“The English Voice,” which received three performances July 25-27, was a fine example of the approach. Featuring works by Edward Elgar, Benjamin Britten and William Walton, the program illuminated the early 20th-century’s role in the rebirth of English musical tradition. It was a renaissance that had been a long time coming: for the two centuries after the death of Henry Purcell in 1695, England became “a land without music” until Elgar and his contemporaries got the revival started.

In the July 27 performance at St. Mark’s Episcopal Church in Palo Alto, concertgoers familiar with Elgar only from the ubiquitous “Enigma Variations” doubtless registered surprise at the composer’s Piano Quintet in A minor, Op. 84. As performed by the Miró Quartet, joined by the brilliant young pianist Inon Barnatan, this inventive 1919 score fairly throbbed with urgency and vigor.

The Mirós – violinists Daniel Ching and Sandy Yamamoto, violist John Largess, and cellist Joshua Gindele – waded gingerly into the somber music of the first movement’s introduction. But with the first theme, steeped in Brahms-ian harmonies, the quartet’s sound bloomed. The lush salon music, crisp dancing rhythms and that rakish little melody introduced by the viola all came across with disarming passion and precision.

The long, lyrical lines of the central Adagio spoke of serenity, but also sophistication; Barnatan played with poise, and the quartet reveled in rich textures. The finale was bracing: tinged with the sweetness of parlor tunes and pastoral melodies, summoning nostalgia while looking unabashedly to the future.

Walton’s Piano Quartet, written during roughly the same period as Elgar’s Quintet, made an excellent program mate. Finckel and Wu Han teamed with violinist Ani Kavafian and violist Lily Francis to traverse the grand vistas and intimate spaces of this youthful score. This was a performance notable for its unflinching energy. Finckel’s honeyed tone and alert phrasing are assets in any repertoire, and the others met him with strong, emphatic playing all around. With Wu Han’s muscular pianism supplying secure rhythmic footing, Kavafian and Francis voiced with firm tone and apt tenderness, particularly in the lovely Andante tranquillo. The finale, which invokes a dizzying array of influences from Ravel to Vaughan Williams, radiated reckless high spirits; the audience responded with the kind of cheers usually reserved for rock stars.

The program opened with Britten’s “A Charm of Lullabies,” Op. 41, in a beguiling reading by Barnatan and soprano Sasha Cooke. Britten’s status as the 20th century’s most artful proponent of the British song tradition is affirmed in this extraordinary 1947 cycle, which incorporates texts by William Blake, Robert Burns, Robert Greene, Thomas Randolph and John Philip. Despite its title, the settings of lullabies suggest unease rather than repose; throughout, references to weeping parents, lightning storms, boiling lakes and other atmospheric effects evoke a chilly sense of foreboding. Cooke’s velvety instrument was ideally suited to the work; the soprano never strained for volume, and she captured each setting’s mood with pointed expression, sounding comforting in the soft imprecations of “sleep” in Blake’s “A Cradle Song,” which opens the cycle, ardent and articulate in the repeated phrases of Burns’ “Highland Balou” and penetrating in the florid word painting of Randolph’s “A Charm.” For his part, Barnatan lent the piano writing a rhythmically propulsive, crystalline eloquence. It was a rare performance, one that demonstrated why music lovers look forward all year to Music@Menlo.

And now it appears they won’t have to: Finckel and Wu Han have just announced a three-concert Winter Series, with the Emerson Quartet leading it off Oct. 3 in nearby Atherton.