



CMS Chamber Music Encounters - On a perpetual quest for inspired music making

By: Ilona Oltuski
June 21, 2016



American cellist David Finckel and Taiwanese pianist Wu Han need no further introduction to visitors of “Chamber Music Encounters,” an intense 6-day educational chamber music workshop, and their latest brainchild under the auspices of Chamber Music Society at Lincoln Center. Culminating in a free concert performance at Alice Tully Hall, audiences shared the results of a dynamic coaching effort focused on communal mentorship between CMS’ Encounters renowned faculty and new talent. In the sessions, which implement paradigm-shifting coaching conduct based on workshops led by the late Isaac Stern, students are chal-

lenged to relate to multiple masters’ viewpoints while making the music their own. With live-streamed workshop sessions, CMS indulges even remote audiences with a behind-the-scenes peek into their chambers of music making, brimming with eagerness and motivation.

Wu Han and David Finckel (Photo credit: Lisa-Marie Mazzucco)

David Finckel and Wu Han, the powerhouse couple of chamber music named “Musicians of the Year” by Musical America in 2012, have spearheaded artistic leadership at CMS since 2004. Chamber Music Encounters, presented in collaboration with The Juilliard School, represents yet another educational initiative in their ever-growing New York performance series. A blend of artistic excellence and savvy entrepreneurship, the secret of this series’ enduring success is not only found in the sauce: a meaty title of largest worldwide producer and presenter of chamber music, but in the spice, as the institution has gained substantial critical acclaim for its omnipresent high standards, and inspiring artistic verve and vision.



Together with Wu Han, his partner in life and music, Finckel began establishing a network of chamber music institutions during the early days of his busy touring and recording schedule with the eminent Emerson String Quartet, which he only just left in 2013. Educating young musicians has always front-lined the duo’s activities. Han and Finckel began their appointment as Artistic Directors of CMS at Lincoln Center not long after founding Music@Menlo in 2003 in San Francisco’s Bay area. Their beginnings at Lincoln Center in 2004 opened up the prospect of a dynamic bi-coastal artistic exchange.

When Han was approached in 2009 to bring the culture of chamber music to Taiwan and Korea, the infinite potential of leading international artistic and educational initiatives became apparent, and the pair set off. Backed by a grant-supported effort to provide performance culture and give back to its local music community, Chamber Music Today was established in Seoul in 2011 as an annual music festival with its own Chamber Music School supported by LG. With recent enterprises that include co-commissions of new works with London's Wigmore Hall, and the latest addition of CMS' residence at SPAC, the artistic summer retreat of New York City Ballet and the Philadelphia Orchestra at Saratoga in 2014, a spider web of alliances continues to spring up throughout Europe and the US, solidifying the pair's identities as engineers of chamber music education and collaboration. "We are chamber musicians and there is a whole new generation out there that needs to perform; that's what we do. It's a constant work in progress and to keep it in flux these 'satellite' venues, as we call them, are vitally important to the growth and emanation of the work," explains Finckel.



Hands on approach: David Finckel during an Encounter session (Photo credit: Lilian Finckel)

To perform chamber music, musicians require not only the talent and technique to master great accountability for their own instruments' parts, but they must navigate nuanced musical and inter-relational sensitivity to convincingly communicate their engagement with both the score and one another. Intimate settings showcasing each of the individual ensemble members demand immensely interpretative coherence and individual artistry.

"In its original definition thought of as music performed in a private group setting for pleasure by amateur musicians 'in their chamber,' one may argue that the profound interplay of diverse voices virtually defines the entire canon of Western music as chamber music," remarks Arnold Steinhardt, renowned first violinist of the Guarneri String Quartet and a student and later collaborator of Stern, during a spellbinding panel with the eminent CMS Encounters faculty. "I at least think of all musical interplay as chamber music," he adds.

Session in progress, masters discussing details, from right: violinist Arnold Steinhardt, pianist Leon Fleisher, violinist Shmuel Ashkenazi (Photo credit: Lilian Finckel)

To a great extent, chamber music's mounting success in the United States has profited from concepts expanding on it as a communal experience, and it does not come as a surprise that most mentors involved in the Encounters workshops developed their love for this – up until recently - underappreciated art form at one point or another in their lives at Marlboro's Chamber Music School and Festival. Incorporating novices and masters in collaborative rehearsals and performances, Marlboro is a unique educational environment, and Marlboro's alumni play a huge role in cultivating America's greater chamber music scene, infusing it with strong musical and personal relationships forged throughout weeks spent in Vermont's summer hills.





Relating pianistic ideas: Wu Han in a workshop session at CMS Encounters, Photo credit: Lilian Finckel

Wu Han fondly remembers her days at Marlboro: “I was used to performing solo repertoire and big concerti as a soloist with an orchestra. But it’s a lonely road, practicing alone, travelling alone, and when I came to Marlboro, I fell in love with the whole idea of this intimate interaction. Having to match all the strings’ colors, study the others’ scores...it’s a different process and you are not just looking at your own part, but one gets to learn the entire concept of the music and to explore it together; I am so grateful for the discovery. Opening up your own sound world and being

challenged to match the other musicians’ voices changes you every time anew, you become a different pianist each time, and that goes for performing as well as for teaching.”

Now with the inner-city efforts of Chamber Music Encounters, coined after the series of spirited chamber music workshops offered by the late Isaac Stern, CMS continues where Stern has left off, taking up his strategy to implement diverse artistic vision into the coaching process. Stern had commenced this path, with initial workshops held in 1994 in Jerusalem and at Carnegie Hall, and some exemplary sessions in Germany, Holland and Japan. Right up until his passing in 2001, Stern, the iconic violin virtuoso and musical activist whose personal crusade saved Carnegie Hall from looming destruction, passionately taught his workshops shoulder to shoulder with an illustrious faculty of colleagues and friends, tirelessly shaping and inspiring an entire generation of young musicians, including the attending Encounters faculty; most of the Encounters mentors have taught in collaboration with Stern; next to pianist Wu Han and violinist David Finckel, pianist Leon Fleisher, violinists Shmuel Ashkenazi, Ani Kavafian and Arnold Steinhardt, as well as Juilliard’s provost and dean Ara Guzelimian are partaking in the workshops at CMS.

Relying on the same pedagogical cross-pollination of interactive teaching and learning, students are coached by multiple faculty members in various groupings. Bringing differing opinions and solutions to the table allows each student to examine facets of his or her playing in a communal quest, focusing on varying concepts, but with the universal goal of learning how to learn, and how to develop their own artistic perspectives.

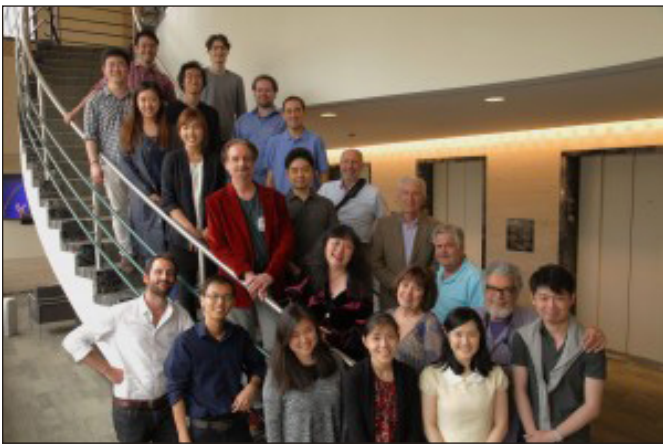
Close up investigation by Leon Fleisher during a workshop (Photo credit: Lilian Finckel)

While different input may be confusing at times, an investigative game plan that leads to the why - instead of blindly following one-dimensional instructions of how to – certainly engages creative responsiveness. Says Wu Han: “I wished something like this had existed when I was a budding musician.” Like Finckel, Steinhardt, Fleisher, Ashkenazy and Kavafian on the faculty of Stern’s sessions, she experienced the impact of the clever concept. “It is so helpful to include some open ended discussions during one’s studies. Sometimes you realize the fruitions of a suggestion only later on. There are so many choices and if one just listens to one teacher during weekly lessons, this curiosity of exploring different possibilities may not get sparked – and then, where is the searching for answers with this incredible ‘aha’ moment that brings one to the next level and makes for a true artist’s development?”



Arnold Steinhardt explains his view of what makes the experience different: “Just like in Stern’s workshops, where he was not only interested in getting to the finished product but rather looked for the kernel of truth that could stand for the general viewpoint of how to look at music, we are focusing on crucial musical elements in the students’ performance that would be easily glossed over in regular lessons, trying to cover a lot of repertoire. Here, varied outlooks can open different points of entry for further artistic exploration.”

“Inquiry was at the center of Stern’s spirit,” explains Ara Guzelimian, who, comparing varying approaches through historic recordings, lectures on the differences in performance styles over time. While working with Stern, serving as artistic director of programming and education at Carnegie Hall, he says he “was hugely influenced by Stern’s unique concept of wrestling with multiple approaches. Stern did not believe in the usual master class setting, promoting submissiveness. Exploring collective inspiration was at the core of his idea of life as a musician.”



Faculty and students at CMS’ Encounters (Photo credit: Lilian Finckel)

This summer, 15 students were geared to experience inspirational encounters with their prominent coaches. Split up into their performance groups for four of the repertoire’s staples: Mozart’s quartet in D minor, K.421, Schubert’s Trio No.1 in B-flat major, Op.99, Beethoven’s trio in B-flat major and Brahms’s quintet in F minor, Op.34, students practiced and were coached together.

The atmosphere is generously friendly, with temperamental discussions and casual jokes varying slightly depending on the different combinations of faculty members and ensemble groups. When it comes to the serious efforts dispersed behind the music stands, doubled up scores and insights shared from heartfelt convictions forged during years of firsthand experiences, there is no business as usual. During a fiery discussion, these mentors, sometimes with hands on demonstration, wild gesticulations, whistling, humming or rhythmic stomping, can sudden upon any minute detail that may unhinge or open up a world of musical ideas.

The characteristic elements of Stern’s workshops continue to live on in these interactions, even during a tight schedule of coaching sessions: “Mr. Stern opposes the idea of the master class and prefers teaching with others. This is chamber teaching of chamber music,” writes Philip Setzer, violinist of the Emerson String Quartet, of his firsthand experience working with Stern in an article, published in 2000 in the New York Times.

Everyone working under CMS’ Encounters faculty has been influenced by decisive moments and prolific individuals in their lives, which led them to careers in music. And while each of the coaches brings their own differently-flavored personalities and viewpoints as well as specific instrumental expertise to the sessions, it becomes obvious early on that the success of the workshops’ structural dynamic comes through its reflection on chamber music’s own distinct platform - making music in intimate collaboration, keeping it fresh for the students and the faculty.

Students’ work is under scrutiny from different angles throughout the sessions. Pianists mixing into strings’ fingerings and violinists suggest the pianist’s singing tone does not project enough. Sound a little intense? Perhaps, but the insightful disagreements between coaches not only keeps the process colorful, but can lead to eye-opening realizations.



Performance at Alice Tully Hall, Sahun Hong, piano; Stephen Waarts, violin; James Jeonghwan Kim, cello - Franz Schubert Trio No.1 in B-flat major, D.898, Op.99 (Photo credit: Cherylynn Tsushima)

Final performance at Alice Tully Hall: Jenny Chen, piano; Petery Ilvonen, violin; Brandon Garbot, violin; Cong Wu, viola; Jiyoung Lee, cello – Johannes Brahms Quintet in F minor, Op.34 (Photo credit: Cherylynn Tsushima)



A better balance between players, more expressiveness and fine-tuned changes in tempi, and coherence in color and rhythm are noticeable after each session, but the students' most important lessons lie deeper than just surface improvements in their playing and collaboration. The students have not just been prepared to perform in a successful concert at Alice Tully Hall, which evidenced much of the sessions' fruitful advice. They have not just partaken in a beautiful performance of a Schubert trio or a Brahms quintet. These students will remember the nods towards exploring further, and look to carry on the musical discussion they've become a part of in these workshops for years to come, and perhaps even inspire others in turn.