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INTERVIEW: DAVID FINCKEL & WU HAN

They demand effort instead of ingratiation: Cellist David Finckel and pianist Wu Han revolutionize chamber music around the world

by Peter Krause



For a quarter century, David Finckel was the star cellist of the Emerson String Quartet. Today, he and his wife, pianist Wu Han, form one of the leading duos in the world. And the “Power Couple of Chamber Music” has founded an entirely new movement for chamber music in the United States, while its presentation in Europe is considered outdated and its audience overly aged.

You helped lend an entirely new relevance to chamber music in America – especially among young listeners. Will you tell us your secret?

Wu Han: The popular method is to use crossover to get people to the concert halls. But the result is: People don't change sides at all when you do this. That's because they don't buy this strategy. Instead, a deeper connection must grow, we must explain why this music is so great. We care about a long-term plan, particularly to help young people self-discover the treasures that classical music holds for them. In the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in New York, we first developed a program for high school students. Those who play an instrument, invite their friends to come to us. Everyone pays five dollars and they come to the concert like they would go to a club, and they socialize. And afterward, they ask phenomenal questions. As they grow older and go to college, we are still with these kids, the mutual contact remains and continues at the various universities through their own clubs there, which are interconnected, so the connection expands and intensifies more and more. That's how it's developed into a real chamber music movement over the years.

Once they start a family, however, the connection to the arts often breaks up...

Han: But when it's their own children's turn to go to college, people tend to find their way back to good music, also because they are often embarrassed to go to a rock concert again at age 50. They don't want to consume fast food anymore in their lives. They want to learn something again, experience the fine and sophisticated things. They also have more money and time – that's the moment of their return to classical music.

In Europe, however, we have the problem that people who find themselves with more time and money in their 50s do not discover good music for themselves because they never had this early connection to classical music during their adolescence.

Han: When we started our concert series and our "Music@Menlo" festival in Silicon Valley, that was exactly the diagnosis and warning I received. People thought everyone was just sitting in front of their computers and only cared about making money. The truth is: Those who do their lonely job all day as an engineer, programmer, scientist or mathematician long for a sense of community at the end of the day. The brain needs a different stimulation. When we dared to go to Silicon Valley, we didn't bring the message that famous musicians would finally come to this remote area. No one would know these names. Instead, we gave them an environment for musical learning and hearing experiences. We consciously didn't start with a small superficial introduction but with 2-hour presentations, in which we talked about broader contexts, historical and personal connections, such as the relationship between Brahms and Clara Schumann and the secret code of their communication. Today, this format is the first to sell out.

In Europe, we rather know the approach of bringing classical music to discos to make it cool and easily consumable.

David Finckel: From a US perspective, the preconception is that Beethoven is old, white and European – and therefore no longer relevant. Consequently, it would seem we have to make his music accessible, play a video, perform it in a bar. What a mistake! After all, good old Beethoven is our Shakespeare! His best music ranks among the greatest creations of mankind. Unless we take exactly this perspective and this firm belief as our starting point, we continuously question our own art. It takes time to understand the complexity of classical music. You're not a great connoisseur after your first wine tasting. You need to build on it, listen and taste again – and then compare.

Do you sense a craving in this economized world for things beyond those you can buy?

Finckel: Silicon Valley, in fact, follows the idea of venture capital, so it is all about investing in ideas! People with crazy ideas later leave this hub with millions in their pocket. Now it is for people like us to convey to the affluent why chamber music can make sense to them and can truly add value to their lives. Those who are interested in artists will look for those things they can't find on supermarket shelves, they look for very different things in life – inspired, unusual people who do not compromise and really take a chance. Many graduates now plan a life in the chamber music field. There are so many new grass roots developing right now: Just take a look around New York – everywhere you turn, there is a poster about some new ensemble giving concerts at new places.

How do you perceive the European music scene in comparison to its American counterpart?

Han: I think in many developments, Europe usually trails the US by five to ten years. Our cultural institutions have built massive fundraising departments, which have carefully researched listener behavior and really maintain close connections to their donors. The dissemination through digital communication also works well. When it comes to marketing, we only work with really young associates: They are capable of reaching a young audience. We are certainly long past the urge of a conscious low-threshold approach with concerts in clubs where people receive a free beer first. We've been there, done that. People show up one time and that's it. That's why we have returned to the core of the music. After all, it is a high form of art and that's why our message is: If you are smart, driven and curious, then you can gain a wonderfully enriching experience with us.

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