

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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## ‘Chamber’ of Musical Secrets



Chamber Music Society Artistic Directors David Finckel and Wu Han. *TRISTAN COOK*

By **STUART ISACOFF**

Updated Oct. 6, 2014 7:10 p.m. ET

As it marks the opening of its new season on Oct. 15 with concerts in New York and Denver, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center stands apart from most other arts organizations. While many orchestras, concert series and opera companies across the U.S.—from the New York City Opera to the Syracuse Symphony—have reduced their presence or shut down entirely, the venerable Chamber Music Society has been expanding its activities at a dizzying pace. Since taking over the organization in 2004, the husband and wife team of cellist David Finckel and pianist Wu Han has forged it into an unstoppable entity—an exploding star in the musical firmament. Its directors seem incapable of anything but success.

The changes they brought have been dramatic: In 2009-10 the Chamber Music Society gave 35 concerts along with 31 tour dates; the 2014-15 season boasts 54 concerts at home and 68 on tour. In 2009-10 the

Society's ensembles featured 84 artists from 12 countries; today, there are 120 artists from 18 countries. Over the past five years their endowment has risen to \$37 million from \$31 million; contributor income is up 88%, and subscription sales have increased by 31%.

That's only part of the story. Broadening the Society's reach meant creating new offerings, including new-music concerts and late-night programs; establishing eight residencies at locations from Boston, Chicago and Grand Rapids, Mich., to rural Kentucky and Georgia; producing three European tours, two tours to East Asia, and two cruises; and founding a Chamber Music School in South Korea sponsored by LG Corp. And let's not forget the organization's growing output of recordings, radio productions and live streams.

What is the secret of this success? And can these accomplishments be replicated? These questions were foremost on my mind as I sat in the Saratoga Performing Arts Center's Little Theater on Aug. 26 in anticipation of one of the organization's summer satellite concerts. Before the music began, Marcia White, SPAC's president and executive director, took to the stage. The introduction of the Chamber Music Society to the center's summer offerings, she told the audience, had produced an increase in attendance of over 50%.

As it turned out, what I saw and heard at the event provided some clues as to why.

The first came in the form of introductory remarks from Ms. Wu. A resplendent dresser and attractive presence, she spoke thoughtfully about how the evening's program had been put together. Beethoven's Trio, Op.1 No. 1, was included, she explained, because of its greatness. "KnickKnacks" for violin and viola, a 2001 piece by George Tsontakis, represented the organization's belief in the importance of new music. And Brahms's Sextet No. 2 in G Major was simply "yummy—so you will leave with that hot chocolate feeling in your heart."

Those comments may appear innocuous, but they suggested important aspects of what the Chamber Music Society does. First lesson: Make patrons feel welcome—not by talking down to them, but by establishing that you care about both the music and its listeners.

Second lesson: Stand by your principles, and trust the audience. "I can fill the hall easily," Ms. Wu said to me earlier in the day. "Just put on the greatest hits of chamber music. But a sense of balance is important to us. We want people to come and have a great musical journey, and a sense of discovery. Some

programmers bring in pop music and hope that people will come. We do none of that. We are here for people who want the best in this art form. Music at Marlboro has been doing the same thing for 70 years. I don't think the music needs sugarcoating."

Explaining the impetus for their efforts, Mr. Finckel chimed in: "There are still so many pieces by Beethoven, Schubert and Haydn that even I have not heard. As long as someone like me still has so much to look forward to, why shouldn't we be excited? We look at our work as an industry-building project—we want to see opportunities in chamber music flourish."

Once the concert was under way, another aspect of the group's success became evident. From the first notes of the Beethoven, there was an impeccable sense of ensemble, with carefully matched articulations and balanced dynamics. Ms. Wu's piano playing was simply gorgeous. The Tsontakis had playful, rhythmically complex effects that kept you on the edge of your seat. ("These young players are fearless!" the composer exclaimed after the performance.) The Brahms, filled with pizzicato textures and creamy harmonies, was spellbinding.

That brings us to the third lesson: Deliver artistic excellence. "Our musicians work really hard," Ms. Wu told me. "Someone came to us here in Saratoga Springs and asked what we would like them to arrange in the way of outdoor activities, visiting hot springs, and so on. I told them: "My musicians can't go anywhere. They need to practice—all day."

The husband-and-wife team offered one final lesson for success: Remain flexible. A great advantage of presenting chamber music is that it can be performed by any number of musicians. "The quality is not less because it is smaller," Ms. Wu noted. "The other day we were taking part in a global presentation, alongside other, larger performing organizations. Ballet is expensive to present. An orchestra is large and expensive. I explained that we are cheap. We can start with two musicians or expand to 20."

Indeed, for this stellar group, little else is needed beyond a simple stage and some seats. "I'm not looking for a fancy building," she added. "Just a place with wonderful acoustics. Once I have that, I know the audience can be built."

*Mr. Isacoff's latest book is "A Natural History of the Piano" (Knopf/Vintage).*