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Leading a double life [online](#)

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One of the reasons classical music and symphonic concerts are losing their audiences is because “there has to be a common understanding of what is going on, just as there is in football where spectators know the rules,” explains Russell Hancock. He leads a double life as the pianist in the Saint Michael Trio and as the president and CEO of Joint Ventures Silicon Valley. Earlier, he was the vice president of the Bay Area Council. Joint Ventures provides analysis and action on issues affecting the region’s economy and quality of life.

In the days of Haydn, Beethoven and Brahms people knew the rules of music. They understood timing, what adagio, andante, etc. meant. Haydn, Beethoven, Brahms and other famous composers of their age were the rock stars of the day.

To make that connection with the audience and to be interesting and accessible, the Saint Michael Trio offers “informances” rather than performances. They pause between parts of pieces to explain what the composer is doing, to show slides and tell stories about the composer’s life. They mix up the repertoire to include jazz, rock and the classics.

I first heard the trio last month at Stanford University. The program notes as follows: “Vienna, 1792-In a much heralded society gathering, a 22-year-old newcomer from Bonn is presented to the music establishment as the rightful heir to the great classical masters Haydn and Mozart. He offers up a set of piano trios known as Opus 1. The young upstart was Ludwig van Beethoven, who would become the most pivotal figure in music history, marking a transition away from classicism to the romantic, expressive and other movements that followed. ... Can we discern what Beethoven will ultimately become even in his very first published work? “

The informance was so meaningful that I contacted Hancock to find out more about his double life and how the Saint Michael Trio came to be. We met halfway between San Jose, the locale of his day job, and San Mateo at Allied Arts in Menlo Park.

Hancock and the other members of the trio were trained as classical musicians. But when they went to their respective universities, they each majored in another profession. For Hancock, it was government. Even though they did not know each other at the time, the two other members, Daniel Cher, violinist; and Michael Flexer, cello, like Hancock, decided they would continue to perform as classical musicians. Cher is a medical doctor and designs and implements clinical trials for Bay Area medical device companies. Flexer is a software engineer.

Hancock says he practices every day — sometimes 10 minutes, sometimes an hour or more. The group performs about twice a month and practices at Hancock’s home in Palo Alto. There is good chemistry among them, as there has to be in a chamber group. They feel what each other is doing and constantly look at either other while performing. It’s Hancock, however, who does the talking.

The Saint Michael Trio started in 2007. They became artists in residence at Menlo College in 2008 where they quickly outgrew the auditorium and established a loyal fan base. In 2010, they became affiliated artists at Notre Dame de Namur University in Belmont, and now are resident chamber artists at Montalvo

Arts Center in Saratoga. You can check their concert schedule at <http://www.saintmichaeltrio.com/concerts.php>

How do these three manage challenging jobs, family life and continue to be outstanding musicians? For one, they find their music relaxing after a hard day at the office. And two, they each have an abundance of enthusiasm and energy. After the interview, Hancock got on his bike to ride to his San Jose office.

Symphony orchestras are trying to redo the traditional concert hall experience to attract and keep young audiences. The Saint Michael Trio is a step ahead by incorporating short lectures together with visual aides. A memo Beethoven wrote to himself about his deafness is displayed on screen at the concert. It's hard not to think about his words while listening to his music.

"I am compelled to face the prospect of a lasting malady, compelled to isolate myself, to live in loneliness. ... How could I possibly admit such an infirmity in the one sense which should have been more perfect in me than in others, a sense which I once possessed in highest perfection, a perfection such as few surely in my profession enjoy

"Hearing nothing brought me to the verge of despair and I would have put an end to my life — only art it was that withheld me, as it seemed impossible to leave the world until I had produced all that I felt called upon to produce."

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