



CELLIST MICHEL FLEXER performs with the Saint Michael Trio, musicians-in-residence at Menlo College. | PAGE 5

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Photo by Sterling Hancock

Daniel Cher, from left, Russell Hancock and Michel Flexer perform as the Saint Michael Trio at a recent concert. They are musicians-in-residence at Menlo College.

The music imperative

With full-time jobs outside the music world, Saint Michael Trio players are driven to perform and teach

By Renee Batti

Almanac News Editor

What do you get when you put a doctor, a software engineer, and a political scientist in a room and tell them to do what comes most naturally?

It's OK — you really weren't expected to pass this quiz. Who could possibly guess, after all, that when Dr. Daniel Cher, software whiz Michel Flexer, and Joint Venture: Silicon Valley

CEO Russell Hancock join forces, they would have what it takes to produce the high-caliber classical music they regularly create as the Saint Michael Trio?

Each a classically trained musician with a fierce passion for the art, they nevertheless chose careers outside the music world, which made their appointment in 2008 as musicians-in-residence" at Menlo College in Atherton unusual, to say the least.

Unusual, but apt, given the college's focus on developing leaders in the business world. In announcing the appointment, Menlo College

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President G. Timothy Haight said, in a prepared statement: “All three performers are extremely successful in their business careers, and their private sector experience will add significantly to the intellectual life of the college.

“And yet they have simultaneously built successful concert careers and perform on stage to the highest musical standards. They model the type of success and multi-dimensionality we intend for our graduates.”

High praise for an ensemble that had performed together for just over a year at the time.

Joining forces

The trio came together after a mutual friend introduced Mr. Hancock, a pianist, and Mr. Cher, a violinist, and “there was instant rapport — we knew we had to play together,” Mr. Hancock says. “I said, ‘we need a cellist,’ and he said, ‘I know just the person.’”

That person was Michel Flexer, who was part of the Beet Quartet Mr. Cher performed with in casual settings, including the Palo Alto farmers’ market.

Mr. Hancock, who in addition to his leadership role at Joint Venture: Silicon Valley teaches in Stanford’s public policy program, recalls his excitement: “I’d been looking my whole life for collaborating partners.”

A Washington state native, Mr. Hancock performed as a soloist with orchestras in the greater Seattle area when he was still in

high school. He almost “went the conservatory route” after high school, but changed his mind at the last minute, he says.

“I was passionate about music, but I also had other interests,” he said, noting that he was his school’s student body president and was interested in public policy and in having a stable family life rather than life on the road as a performing artist.

Dr. Cher, who leads clinical trials for Chestnut Medical Technologies in Menlo Park, performed with Orchestra New England and the New Haven Symphony when he was in medical school. Before that, he won the undergraduate music prize at Stanford.

Now a software architect for a startup in San Mateo, Mr. Flexer has also worked with Siebel Systems and Gain Technologies. As a youth he performed with the Palo Alto Chamber Orchestra, then studied cello at the New England Conservatory while a student at Harvard.

All three men say music is not only important to them as they pursue non-musical careers, it’s an imperative.

“We need to play. We can’t help it,” Mr. Hancock says. And where does the energy come from, when the work day is long and difficult, and the time to practice an instrument and rehearse as an ensemble is short? “High metabolism,” he responds with a laugh, adding that they all “take a lesson from the kids — they’re always multitasking.”

Among the three of them, they have seven children, so their rehearsals, usually at Mr. Hancock’s Palo Alto home, don’t begin until 8 p.m., “when the kids are in bed,” he says.

Mr. Flexer says his high-stress work and other of life’s pressures make rehearsing more a need than a chore. “I come here, and within minutes, as I start to play, there’s (a sense of) joy ... and calm,” he says during a recent rehearsal break.

Likewise, Mr. Cher feels driven to perform. “The music is in my head all day long — and I need to share it with the world,” he says in an e-mail.

Noting the need to expose modern audiences to “a huge literature of remarkable music” to keep it alive, he says that working with young people is important as well. He described a recent coaching session with Palo Alto Chamber Orchestra violinists as “fabulously fun.”

Conducting master classes, performing concerts and giving lectures at Menlo College are part of the duties of the musicians-in-residence. Last year the trio performed a series of concerts ranging from a “pops and jazz night” to herald in summer, to a two-part event featuring the work of Mendelssohn.

All of their concerts are free, but they welcome donations to help fund projects such as a planned festival at Menlo College for musicians “who play up to industry standards” but are not in the music industry, Mr. Hancock says.

The funds also go toward commissioning original music for the trio. The first commission was to Woodside resident Mary Finlayson for a work the trio premiered last June, he says.

The trio also performs for private parties in homes, clubs and other venues, as well as in public spaces such as schools. On Sunday, Jan. 24, they will perform in Ralston Hall Mansion at Notre Dame de Namur University in Belmont.

They’re planning a second CD to follow “Debut,” which features music ranging from Debussy, Chaminade and Brahms, to Astor Piazzolla. ■

■ INFORMATION

The Saint Michael Trio will perform at 4 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 24, at Ralston Hall Mansion, 1500 Ralston Ave. in Belmont. The concert is free, but donations will support Notre Dame de Namur University music programs. Reservations: 508-3429, or concerts@ndnu.edu.