

Arts & Entertainment

A weekly guide to music, theater, art, movies and more, edited by Rebecca Wallace

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TRIO ON THE GO

Saint Michael Trio
makes music in the
midst of fast-paced
Silicon Valley careers

by Diana Reynolds Roome



Danielle Vernon

The musicians prepare for a concert at Menlo College. Clockwise from left, they are: cellist Michel Flexer, pianist Russell Hancock and violinist Daniel Cher.

In a mellifluous explosion of sound, the Saint Michael Trio brings to life the atmospheric harmonies of Debussy's Trio en Sol. The three instrumentalists — pianist Russell Hancock, violinist Daniel Cher and cellist Michel Flexer — play with a zest that can arise only from people doing what they love most.

(continued on next page)



Danielle Vernon



Danielle Vernon

CHARLES: "I'm lost without you."

HOPE: "Then you need a map not a relationship."

A Hip Musical Romance from the creators of STRIKING 12

Long Story Short

WORLD PREMIERE

co-produced with **CITY THEATRE, Pittsburgh**

By **Brendan Milburn & Valerie Vigoda**

Based on the play *An Infinite Ache* by David Schulner

Directed by Tracy Brigden

A non-stop roller-coaster romance, this charming pop musical transcends two twenty-somethings' disastrous first date to whirl, for better or worse, into a lifetime of love. One Jewish, one Asian-American, this funny, frazzled couple careens from new-found desire to old-time commitment, balancing the promise and compromise of an affair you will always remember. *Contains mature language.*

December 3–28

Lucie Stern Theatre, Palo Alto

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**Theatre
works**

THE NATIONALLY-ACCLAIMED THEATRE OF SILICON VALLEY



From left, Daniel Cher, Russell Hancock and Michel Flexer strike a pose with their instruments before a Menlo College concert.

Saint Michael Trio

(continued from previous page)

Deep, sonorous passages from the cello usher in a joyous, lyrical violin, as the piano shimmers like light bouncing off water. The excitement of this music is contagious.

In the year or so since they officially became the Saint Michael Trio, the three musicians have been building the group's repertoire and reputation at a pace that is typical of their multifaceted lives. They have played at venues including country clubs, Stanford Medical Center (in the atrium), Channing House and the Palo Alto City Council.

"They're all first-class musicians individually, and obviously they love playing together. The chemistry of the three just works together magically," said Palo Alto council member Yoriko Kishimoto, who invited the trio to her home to play for her holiday party last year. "The guests totally loved it."

Recently, the Saint Michael Trio members played their inaugural recital as artists in residence at Menlo College, where they will teach master classes and provide a stream of musical events. Another concert there celebrated their first CD, "Debut."

This evening's rehearsal takes place in the living room of Hancock's Palo Alto home, which has become another concert venue. Here, the first 40 people to sign up at www.saintmichaeltrio.com get the chance to hear varied musical offerings, ranging from classical trios by Beethoven or Mendelssohn to exuberant, jazzy pieces by Charles Bolling; the "Hiccup de Tango" by Cameron Wilson; or John Williams' poignant music for "Schindler's List."

Always on the prowl for new music, the three players don't hesitate to search in nontraditional areas to find and adapt pieces they like. Intimate settings are perfect for chamber music but also suit Hancock, who has a passion for divulging interesting details to his audience about the pieces they are about to hear. He might talk about how a composer writes his life into his music ("While Brahms was tragically in love with Clara Schu-

mann he filled his music with sighs, shudders and screams," Hancock noted), or use sports metaphors to help audiences understand musical terms.

At this rehearsal, after briefly discussing nuances of the Debussy piece — dynamics, pace, tone, timbre — the trio easily runs through Stanley Myers' "Cavatina," which Hancock just handed them for the first time after arranging it especially for their instruments.

They need to be this fast and this good, as all three lead double lives. Hancock, president and CEO of Joint Venture: Silicon Valley Network, recently left for Beijing to speak to 1,200 people at a conference. The day he returned, the Saint Michael Trio was scheduled to perform for the prestigious Steinway Society at Le Petit Trianon in San Jose.

"I got off the plane from Beijing and proceeded directly to the concert. ... That's what you do when you have two lives," Hancock said.

Despite their talent and training, Hancock, Flexer and Cher all decided to pursue primary careers other than music. Cher, a doctor, recently traveled to Budapest, where he is conducting trials for Menlo Park-based Chestnut Medical Technologies. He had learned piano at a tender age and studied violin.

Flexer is a software engineer and serial entrepreneur who this year is a software architect for a Menlo Park start-up. He studied at the New England Conservatory while he was a computer science student at Harvard. Growing up in Palo Alto, he was principal cellist and a soloist with the Palo Alto Chamber Orchestra. He married another member of PACO, Caroline Hu, and now their two young daughters are shaping up as mini-musicians — one already plays a one-eighth size violin. (Among them, the three musicians have seven children.)

Hancock studied at Harvard and has a doctorate in political science from Stanford, where he still teaches in the public policy program. He has played piano solo for audiences from his early years, and performed major concertos with numerous orchestras. His mother, Kay Gardner Hancock, was his primary teacher, urging him to "reach out, educate,

invite audiences to be a partner," he said.

"Russell is a natural-born, gifted keyboard player," said Jim Welch, a Palo Alto concert organist who teaches at Santa Clara University and has performed organ-piano duos with Hancock up and down the country. "He's got finger technique to burn — it's phenomenal."

While pursuing their careers, Cher and Flexer, friends since the early 1980s, kept their musical skills alive by playing in a Palo Alto-based group called "Beet" (a pun involving the first syllable of a famous composer's name, an essential component of rhythm, and a red vegetable). The group could be heard serenading the Farmers' Market a decade or so ago.

While Hancock was a soloist, he dreamed of making music with a small, regular group of consummate musicians, as dedicated as he was, yet who played for the joy of it. "The fun of the music is the interaction," he said. And, as he put it, needing a full orchestra to play concertos was "very inconvenient."

So when Hancock and Cher met two years ago, they clicked immediately. Cher quickly brought in Flexer, making the harmony complete. "I want to grow old with these guys," Hancock said. "We made a pact that we were going to become a piano trio — and we're a trio with a vengeance. We want to be Palo Alto's unique and special asset. We want to be a resource, a treasure, a commodity to Palo Alto, to Silicon Valley and to Northern California."

While the musicians have a standard fee, they say this is not an important motivation and that they often waive or reduce it for good causes. Their goal is to achieve a professional standard without playing professionally (i.e., for money), which means they have more musical freedom. Hancock's next idea is to celebrate other musicians who play at a high level but earn a living some other way, by organizing a festival for them. ■

Info: For more information about the Saint Michael Trio, go to www.saintmichaeltrio.com. The site has audio and video clips, as well as a concert schedule.