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Jason Vieaux, Guitar

With Mezzo-Soprano Sasha Cooke at the Music@Menlo Festival

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Review: Intoxicating sounds from Spain and France in excellent Music@Menlo program

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Posted: 08/10/2010 02:17:54 PM PDT

Updated: 08/10/2010 02:33:34 PM PDT



Guitarist Jason Vieaux, performing at Music@Menlo. Photo by Kimberly Hsu

Intoxication by music is completely legal, especially under controlled circumstances -- for instance, while sitting in a posh retro salon, dosed by seductive sounds from Spain and France. This was the set-up for Monday night's Music@Menlo program at Stent Family Hall in Atherton.

Titled "Spanish Inspirations," the experiment rested on that most Spanish of instruments, the guitar, here played by virtuoso Jason Vieaux. He extracted a jewel-like trove of colors from his instrument, utilizing a magic arsenal of attacks: flicks and back-flicks with fingertips or long manicured fingernails. (He actually extends his right thumb nail with the sharpened fragment of a ping pong ball, attached with Krazy Glue). And then unleashing flamboyant flamenco-style strums (known as "rasgueados") and flourishes ("falsetas") in order to maintain that state of arousal among the listeners in the 148-seat hall on the campus of the Menlo School in Atherton.

A talked-about recitalist who visited Menlo last summer, too, Vieaux played his own arrangements for solo guitar of three piano works by Spanish composer Isaac Albeniz. In all three, the composer drew inspiration from Spanish songs and festive dances -- and from Spanish street guitar, which he merged into the classical tradition with exquisite results. Monday, best of all was "Mallorca: Barcarola, Op. 202," which dates to 1891 and from which Vieaux milked every iota of slow, Mediterranean romance.

The sorcery was magnified when Vieaux accompanied 28-year-old mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke in a set of seven songs by Manuel de Falla, his "Siete canciones populares espanolas" from 1914. Originally scored for piano and voice, these songs, too, were arranged by Vieaux.

Just over two weeks ago, when the festival was starting up, Cooke stunned listeners with her performance of songs by Benjamin Britten. She is the next big thing in mezzos, singing with cut-glass precision and luminous depth -- and here bringing a world of ultimate sorrow and longing to these Spanish songs. A genuine stage presence and actor, she embraced the false surface jubilation of "Cancion," a song about treachery in love, while pushing the underbelly of heartbreak up toward the surface. With its multiple levels, it's a gorgeous trickster



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song, like Stephen Sondheim's "Every Day a Little Death," and Cooke (who also sings Sondheim) knows just how to handle it.

Repeating tonight at the larger Center for Performing Arts at Menlo-Atherton High School, the program segued from de Falla to Debussy's String Quartet in G minor. This was clever programming, as Debussy's very opening theme draws inspiration from Spanish folk music, and the work's second movement, with its strummed and pizzicato effects, is evocative of flamenco guitars.

That second movement was dazzling -- the high point of the performance by the youthful Jupiter String Quartet, which excelled at shaping Debussy's most subtle and finely detailed passages. The opening moments of the third movement were extraordinarily delicate and sensual. The spell continued during an aria-like solo turn by violist Liz Freivogel (her younger sister, Megan, is second violinist), but some of the work's gustier passages, including the finale, exhibited less solid ensemble work with spots of mushy tuning.

The program ended with Maurice Ravel's Piano Trio, composed in 1914 with inspiration from Spanish and Basque dances and rhythms. It's a rapturous masterwork, a perfect piece of music, but it was given a too raucous, at times teetering performance by violinist Arnaud Sussmann, cellist Laurence Lesser and pianist Alessio Bax. Of the three, 32-year-old Bax -- dressed like an executive out of "Mad Men" -- was the charmer, playing early on with a shimmering lilt, a sort of soulful insouciance that was more than appealing. It was "... what's that word, again? Oh, intoxicating.

The Music@Menlo chamber music festival continues through Saturday: www.musicatmenlo.org.

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