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After Emerson exit, cellist Finckel is busier than ever

By David Weininger



“You know when you see a dog race, there’s this mechanical rabbit that runs in front of them, and they never catch it?” David Finckel, former cellist of the Emerson String Quartet, posed the question during a recent phone conversation from New York’s Lincoln Center. “That’s what being an artist is like. You never catch the rabbit. And if you ever do catch the rabbit, you’re done.

“So ‘May we never catch the rabbit’ is my new slogan,” he continued, laughing. “As exhausting as that may be.”

Exhausting well describes the year that Finckel, who left the Emerson last May after 34 years, has had. He undertook two tours with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, of which he and his wife, pianist Wu Han, have been artistic directors since 2004. They also run two other festivals: the Seoul-based Chamber Music Today and Music@Menlo, which recently released an eight-CD set of recordings from its 2013 iteration. Finckel began teaching at the Juilliard School. He learned new repertoire and played concertos with various orchestras. He and Han founded a chamber music studio at the Aspen Music Festival and played dozens of recitals, from Boston to Berlin. (The pair visits the Rockport Chamber Music Festival on Sunday.)

“One of the biggest surprises for me, post-Emerson, is that I really don’t have the kind of free time that I thought I was going to have,” Finckel said with what seemed a touch of bewilderment. “I can’t remember a busier season, and I didn’t have those 100 concerts with the quartet. I don’t know how I did it before.”

One of the upsides to this frenetic pace is that Finckel now has the feeling that “I’m sort of starting out a career.” That’s a stark contrast to the Emerson, where everything, from the interpersonal dynamics to most of the repertoire to where Finckel sat in the car during travel, was habitual.

Now much, if not everything, is new. “I get nervous before concerts. I practice the cello now more than I have for years.” He even reads reviews.

He also feels more acutely aware of his status as a performer. “You get to this point in my career, and people come to your concert and they expect you to do good. And I expect to do good. So it’s not like when you’re really young and you say, I hope this one turns out OK. No — they all have to turn out great.”

Something that hasn’t changed is the need to maintain the right balance between musical and administrative activity, a sometimes treacherous negotiation between art and business that can all too easily tilt in favor of the latter — especially for someone who, like Finckel, genuinely enjoys that side of his career.

“It has happened far too often for people who are in the position of artistic directing that the playing will begin to fall short of the standard that they aspire to. So I’m constantly reminded that I should sit in this office and I should make this call and I should write this e-mail — and at the same time, I tell myself that if I can’t get up on stage and play at the level that I expect my colleagues to, and even try to lead by example, then I’ve gone over the edge.

“Would I like to spend more time on music? Yes. Would I like to spend more time on administrative stuff? Yes. I’d like to spend more time on all of it but there’s only 24 hours in a day. And one has to sleep.”

He touched on Sunday’s program, pointing out an array of subtle connections on what at first glance looks like a sampler of eras from the Baroque to the mid-20th century. The trio-sonata texture of the Bach G-major sonata — melodies apportioned among the pianist’s left and right hands and the cello — is replicated in Beethoven’s late C-major sonata, Op. 102 No. 1. And the high spirits of Beethoven’s finale are magnified to pure frenzy at the start of Mendelssohn’s Sonata, Op. 58. And the D-major ending of the Mendelssohn echoes in the solid D-minor opening of the Debussy Sonata, before that piece heads off to fresh harmonic territory.

Finishing with the Britten Cello Sonata in some ways represents the reassertion of simplicity, Finckel explained. “The sonata is so easy to grasp, and so plain in its techniques and messaging. But yet it’s 1960, so we have a piece from the second half of the 20th century that represents what I think is some of the best music of our time.”

Finckel’s exit from the Emerson was carefully planned and amiably executed, and he keeps tabs on what his old mates are up to. Ironically, he sees their new cellist, Paul Watkins, more often than the other three. Finckel takes pride in having “discovered” Watkins while the latter was playing with the Nash Ensemble and bringing him to play at Lincoln Center, and he was thrilled when Watkins agreed to join Emerson. “People come to me and say, ‘we miss you in the quartet but you couldn’t have found a better person to replace you than Paul.’ And I just love hearing that.”

So Finckel was delighted to be told that the Emerson was scheduled to open the Rockport festival two days before his and Han’s arrival. (It is the quartet’s debut there.) “I’ll have to make a note to write to them and say, get there early enough to have lunch. I’ll send them down the street for the fried clams and the lobster at that corner place. We look out for each other in those ways all the time.

“I’ll be sorry to miss them,” he added, “but hey, the stage will still be warm by Sunday.”