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The Sonic And Scenic Delights Of A Rockport Sunday With David Finckel And Wu Han

By Ed Siegel



ROCKPORT, Mass. — A comprehensive history of classical music might not be the first thing on your wish list for a hot Sunday afternoon. But what if that history lesson was being entertainingly performed in about two hours by a charismatic cello and piano team with impeccable taste in one of the area's great concert venues with a gorgeous view of Sandy Bay in Rockport?

That was the scenic and sonic treat in store for Sunday's David Finckel and Wu Han concert, as the husband and wife went from the baroque of Bach to the modernism of Britten, with energetic tours of Classical (Beethoven), Romantic (Mendelssohn) and Impressionistic (Debussy) eras along the way. Call it "The Complete History of Classical Music for Piano and Cello (Abridged)."

But while this was not a comedic romp through the repertoire, everything about it was good-humored, starting with Finckel and Han. Finckel is the former cellist of the Emerson String Quartet, who opened the Rockport Chamber Music Festival at the stunning Shalin Liu Performance Center a couple of nights earlier.

I was sorry to see that the Globe's Jeremy Eichler didn't think the new Emerson ensemble was as formidable, at least Friday night, with their new cellist, but Finckel was obviously overcommitted with his myriad projects, including his lively husband-and-wife duo deliberations.

If anything, Finckel seems like an even freer spirit than in the Emerson entourage. He and Han make exceptional music together. If he's the more virtuosic of the two, her playing is always rich, assertive and pleasurable. And while he punctuates his bowing with impish body language, she keeps the dialogue going with the audience — “You sure have a great view, and it's not us. It's so hard to concentrate.”

Nothing wrong with their concentration from what I could tell. Or with their communication.



David Finckel and Wu Han at the Shalin Liu Performance Center Sunday. (John Waite)

It's remarkable, though the Bach Sonata for Viola da Gamba and Keyboard No. 1 seemed more like a warmup, maybe even calling for original instruments. (And I'm not a period person, generally.)

If the cello came across as overly assertive in Bach, nothing was out of sync in the next two centuries. Beethoven's Sonata No. 4 spoke of lively argument and make-up romance while Mendelssohn's No. 2 was pure joy, save for the ruminative adagio.

While the post-intermission rhythms got more complex, Debussy and Britten were no less easy on the ears, thanks to the musicians.

The less predictable development of the dialogue in Debussy had a kind of “Waiting for Godot” quality to it and Finckel's technique was extraordinary in both the Debussy and more dramatic Britten sonatas.



David Finckel and Wu Han at the Shalin Liu Performance Center Sunday.
(John Waite)

It would have been nice to finish off with a 21st century encore of one of the composers they've championed on their ArtistLed recordings, such as Lera Auerbach, but nobody was complaining about Rachmaninoff. I'm sure not.

Rockport has a lively looking season coming up and not just for classical music. Tom (“Rockport Sunday”) Rush is coming by, so are the likes of Christian McBride, Dweezil Zappa, Shawn Colvin and even Tina Turner is coming east from Lenox. Here's the schedule.

Between the arts in Gloucester and Rockport, those Cape Ann folks have a good thing going in the summer. The gorgeous views don't hurt, either.