

Back story: Richard Festinger on composing, the Morrison chamber music series and Woodstock

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Composer Richard Festinger is a professor at San Francisco State University, where he directs the Morrison Artists Series, presenting top chamber music groups to the public -- for free. (For details go to <http://morrison.sfsu.edu>, and click on "Morrison Artists Series.") The founding director of Earplay, the contemporary music ensemble, Festinger, 64, had an early career as a folk and jazz musician. As a guitarist, he even performed at Woodstock with Joan Baez.

Q We're in the midst of a down economy, and you're running this terrific chamber music series that doesn't cost people a dime. You've presented Eighth Blackbird; Chanticleer; the Eroica Trio; the Kronos, Alexander and St. Lawrence string quartets; and so many others. What a deal.

A One of the founding ideas of the Morrison Artists Series was that concerts of great chamber music should not be a privilege of the few.... In today's economy, many of us have to think carefully about expensive ticket prices, and our concerts offer an extraordinary solution to that problem. But the quality of the artists and repertoire we present should be an enticement in any economic climate.

Q What's your audience like?

A Pretty varied. There are people in the neighborhood of San Francisco State who are long-time audience members. And many members of the university community -- students, faculty and staff -- come to the concerts. Then there is the general chamber music audience, as well as people who are interested in particular kinds of ensembles or particular instruments or performers. We are making a strong effort to develop as large and diverse an audience as we can by just trying to get the word out about the great programs we are offering.

Q What music did you listen to growing up?

A My mother was a piano teacher, and my first teacher. When I wasn't at the piano myself, I often sat on the stairs listening to her teaching, taking in the strains of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin. My mother was a remarkable woman, insatiably curious about music. It was she who first introduced me to

modern music. I remember one birthday her gift to me was the scores to Stravinsky's "Firebird," "Petroushka" and "The Rite of Spring." She never stopped exploring, and that certainly rubbed off on me.

Q You studied jazz at the Berklee College of Music. What was it like having Gary Burton as a teacher?

A During my student years I had opportunities to study and work with a lot of great people. Gary Burton was one, and was a remarkable teacher for the incredible variety of approaches and ways of thinking about improvisation that he brought to the table. He had an exceptionally open ear and mind, and found ideas and inspiration in all kinds of music. Another major influence was my composition teacher at UC Berkeley, Andrew Imbrie, one of the master composers of his generation.

Q Do you still listen to jazz? Who are some of your favorites?

A I will always love jazz. My current favorite is pianist Gonzalo Rubalcaba.

Q What was your route from jazz to classical composition? You've collaborated with so many interesting folks: Speculum Musicae, the novelist Denis Johnson and others.

A Composing is the path that really stuck for me once I discovered it -- I've been an active composer for over 35 years now. The move to composing was partly driven at first by a desire to understand the music of composers like Igor Stravinsky, Béla Bartok, Aaron Copland and Elliott Carter -- music that my background in folk music and jazz hadn't quite prepared me for. But also, as a composer I could make each new piece complete in every detail. Each piece became a kind of mirror, or reflection, of what I could accomplish through the powers of my own imagination.

Q OK, the big one: How did you wind up playing guitar at Woodstock with Joan Baez?

A People often ask me about my experiences playing at Woodstock and other locales with Joan Baez. It was an exciting opportunity for a young man intent on pursuing a life in music. Joan was and is a wonderful and naturally talented musician, as well as a person with a highly developed sense of social and ethical consciousness. It was a real honor to work with her. Woodstock itself was almost too big to comprehend, an incredibly exciting cultural event to have been a part of.

Q Do you get asked about Woodstock too much?

A Yes.

Q Who have you never presented in the Morrison series? Who do you dream of someday presenting?

A It's about the closest thing I can think of to being like a little kid in a candy store. There are so incredibly many extraordinary chamber ensembles in the world; with only six concerts per season, there are some truly great ones I will probably never have time to present. And I'm always looking out for ensembles that are new, or new to me, and especially for artists who are clearly excited by the most modern repertoire as well as by the outstanding musical works of past eras.