

The Chamber Music Scene in San Francisco

*A Morrison Chamber Music Center post
from Artistic Director Richard Festinger*



The weekend of September 20-21 was the occasion of the 8th annual SFMusic Day, sponsored by the San Francisco Friends of Chamber Music. It was a great opportunity to get my fingers firmly on the pulse of the current state of chamber music in the San Francisco Bay Area. Some 40 ensembles participated, beginning with a Saturday evening concert, and continuing on Sunday with simultaneous performances running nearly continuously in three different venues at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, from noon to almost 7 o'clock in the evening.

Founded in 1998, the San Francisco Friends of Chamber Music is a non-profit whose mission is “to ensure the vitality of small ensemble music within the cultural landscape of the San Francisco Bay Area”, and in the process they support performers, composers, and presenting venues across a stylistic spectrum that encompasses early music, chamber music, new music, jazz, and creative music (the current designation for what used to be called world music). Make no mistake, the SFFCM is a great asset to our musical community, with a serious, knowledgeable, experienced and dedicated board of directors, and the highly imaginative leadership of executive director Dominique Pellety.

I'm not going to write a review of this event – I suspect some others may do so. In the first place, I don't see myself as a music critic – I'm a composer above all else, and often find myself at odds with the critics' perspective. In the second place, I really hope you'll seek out opportunities to hear these local ensembles yourself. You can scroll through a list of SF Friends of Chamber Music's affiliated ensembles on their web site, www.sffcm.org.

In fact, one important reason I attended SFMusic Day was to scout the territory. If you've perused the Morrison Artists Series offerings this season you know that on



December 7 we are presenting the brilliant four-hand piano team Zofo, in a special Showcase Concert intended to feature a local ensemble of exceptional accomplishment. I think it's important for the Morrison Artists Series to play a role in helping to raise the Bay Area's chamber music scene to the next level of professionalism, and I hope to devote a concert each year to this purpose.

Zofo

So I took the opportunity on Sunday to hear some dozen ensembles in back-to-back, half-hour long performances. It was a richly rewarding day. It's impressive how the professional chamber music scene here has grown in the past few years (and the SF Friends of Chamber Music deserve a lot of credit for helping to nurture it). Our metropolitan area is home to more top-notch, well-established ensembles who tour nationally and internationally than it was even just a few years ago.

It's not quick or easy or a sure thing to establish an ensemble as an ongoing concern. The difficulties are legion, and many ensembles disband after only a couple of years due of the difficulty of finding good and remunerative performance opportunities. I think the touring aspect is a key factor: in order to mature as an ensemble, and



Windscape

hopefully earn some small portion of its members' incomes, an ensemble needs to perform often, and the number of opportunities for ensembles to perform here in the immediate area is frankly limited.

One thing is abundantly clear though: there are some young ensembles in the Bay Area with a high level of accomplishment and an even higher potential. I'll be watching with keen interest to see how they evolve. And I hope you'll be at McKenna Theater when Zofo takes the stage in our first-ever local showcase concert. I hope I'll see you before that, though – on November 7 we present Windscape, one of the best wind quintets on the planet. Not to be missed!