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arts & entertainment

In tune with Salida

A festival has brought in top chamber music for 30 years. The tickets are cheap, but the musicians wouldn't miss it.

By Kyle MacMillan

Besides serving as artistic directors of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, cellist David Finckel tours with the famed Emerson String Quartet and pianist Wu Han is an international soloist.

In short, the powerhouse husband-and-wife duo doesn't hurt for plum concert invitations. Yet virtually every year since 2001, one or both of the musicians has made time on their packed schedules for an appearance in Salida.

They were back last Sunday, performing a matinee concert that drew 260 people to the 440-seat John Held Auditorium at the Salida High School.

"There is such a thing as a big venue with a big audience that doesn't feel as important to us as Salida," Finckel said. "You know what I mean: People come for the wrong reasons or to be seen for society - everything but the music. Just because Salida is small does not mean it's unimportant. Not at all."

The historic Arkansas River town of 5,000, best known for kayaking and art galleries, is hardly a classical-music mecca, yet folks there have managed to keep a summer chamber series going for 30 years.

"For Salida, this is a breath of fresh air," said Myke Winter, an artist from Howard who attended Sunday's concert. "People here are appreciative. This is a major treat."

Salida Aspen Concerts is administered by Salida Concerts Inc., an all-volunteer organization. That means when a spotlight needed to be moved from the back of the auditorium before Sunday's concert, there was no staffer to call.

Instead, David Clark, the organization's president, and board member Earle Kittleman just grabbed the bulky instrument and shifted it themselves. Other



Cellist David Finckel and pianist Wu Han are big fans of Salida. "It's a responsibility," said Wu Han. "Every year we have to devote some of our time to places like this, places that you find where people are just hungry for music. And it's so inspiring. It's good for your soul." (Post / Leah Bluntschli)

tasks get done with much the same can-do spirit.

One of the state's smallest fests

With an annual budget of \$41,500, Aspen Salida Concerts ranks among the smallest classical-music festivals in the state. Contributions and program advertisements make up most of its revenue; just 18 percent comes from admissions.

Tickets for concerts are \$10. That's a bargain, considering that prices for Finckel and Wu Han's February recital at Alice Tully Hall in New York City were \$28-\$49.

We want people in the audience," Clark said. "Unfortunately, in a small community like this, they're reticent to pay a lot of money to go to a concert, because they just aren't accustomed to spending \$30-\$40 a ticket."

"Small" certainly doesn't mean mediocre when it comes to Salida's annu-

al lineup. Because of the series' connection with the prestigious Aspen Music Festival and School, it is able to present students, faculty and performers taking part in the annual summer event.

Noted artists who have appeared in Salida includes soprano Renee Fleming, violinists Gil Shaham and Robert McDuffie, violist Lawrence Dutton, harpist Nancy Allen, the American String Quartet and Calder Quartet.

Two-city arrangement

The arrangement is simple. Aspen agrees to provide the artists and transportation for a fee, and Salida Concerts provides everything else, including lodging and meals - usually dinner in a supporter's home.

Deborah Barnekow, the Aspen festival's director of educational outreach, has served as the organization's liaison with the Salida series since 2002 - only the second person to fill that role during the

history of the collaboration.

Barnekow has no problem persuading Aspen musicians to take part. Dovetailing their rehearsal and performance schedules with the Salida concerts is tricky. "I could have given you a 10-concert series this year at least," she said. "I had so many people who said, 'I would love to be a part of this.' I think it is the community. It's the audiences."

The series began in 1977 with a single concert by the Monarch String Quartet as part of an outreach effort undertaken by the Aspen festival.

The next year, with help from Joe Lionelle, an executive with the U.S. Soil Co. in Salida, the schedule jumped to six concerts. That is the number the organization has presented most summers since, including this year's lineup running through Aug. 12.

"There was nothing here, and then this appeared. It was wonderful," said Gail Kahan, who moved to Salida in 1972 with her husband, Andy. They operate Strawberry Door, a nonprofit Salida preschool.

Aspen developed similar links with a number of Colorado communities, including Crested Butte and Carbondale. But Salida is the only one that remains.

"At 30 years, this is a matter of pride that this collaboration has gone on," Barnekow said.

New president signs on

Aspen is eager to keep the alliance going. The festival's new president and chief executive officer, Alan Fletcher, made a point of writing a letter in the Salida program, emphasizing his support.

A little after noon Sunday, Wu Han burst through the auditorium's lobby doors, tossing hellos to festival volunteers and excitedly telling the story of her stop at Bongo Billy's, a local coffee shop. The

owner recognized her and Finckel and wouldn't let them pay.

"I can't tell you, even since I've been here today," Finckel said, "how many people have found out who we are and why we are here, people on the street, and they always finish our conversation by saying, 'Thank you so much for coming to Salida.' We don't say that to people in New York."

No small-town show

The tuner had just finished with the piano, a vintage 5-foot Steinway mini-grand, and Wu Han quickly tested it before the duo sat down to rehearse. The series spent \$8,000 several years to have the piano reconditioned by the same technician who tended the Aspen instruments.

With two volunteers ready to sell tickets at an entry table, the first audience members began trickling through the doors a little after 2 p.m., and the performance got under way at 3 p.m.

Taking turns introducing the three selections, Wu Han and Finckel turned in the kind of intense, extraordinarily cohesive performance for which they are well known. They made no concessions to the small-town setting, delivering a program with two 20th-century works, including a typically dark one by Dmitri Shostakovich.

"We feel like we have to play as well here as we would play anywhere," Finckel said. "There's no exception."

Showing a better sense of etiquette than many Denver audiences, the attendees never once clapped between movements. They did allow themselves a few laughs and exclamations after the couple's highly physical performance of the second movement of the Shostakovich sonata.

Devoted Community

Following an enthusiastic standing ovation, the couple returned for an encore. "It's such a joy to come back to Salida," Wu Han said from the stage. "This series is one of the treasures of the United States. Keep it up."

After the concert, attendees purchased 36 compact discs. The duo patiently signed the albums and good-naturedly conversed with the several dozen people waiting patiently in line.

"I think it's great. The community supports it so much. I love the rapport here with the audience," said 29-year-old pianist Doug Jurs of Chicago, who was visiting relatives in Salida when he learned of the concert.

Afterward, the duo stopped by a donor appreciation reception at the West End Cafe, an upscale restaurant in a historic filling station, before returning to Aspen later that evening.

The Salida series has consistently stayed in the black, but administrator Jean Hanfelt said the organization is facing the aging of longtime donors and increasing competition for funds.

A notice on its website warns that unless the organization can boost donations, it might have to reduce its offerings from six to five in 2007 and eliminate the scholarships it gives to local music students.

But Hanfelt said that at least for now, such cuts won't be necessary.

"Finding new contributions, a new base, that's what we're looking at now," she said.