

The Solo Violist, at Menlo

BY DAVID BRATMAN

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MUSIC AT MENLO



Encores are a rare treat at any Music@Menlo concert | *Credit: Geoff Sheil/Music@Menlo*

Menlo was fortunate to have Paul Neubauer available to perform this program. He is a violist of boldness and strong presence. His plucking of the hushed opening pizzicato in the Shostakovich sonata was strong and full. He kept up his attention-riveting presence throughout the concert, and only managed to sound retiring in a few places. A passage of harmonics at the end of the Penderecki formed the only moment in the concert when he seemed possibly tentative and unsure.

A strong sense of line is Neubauer's most sterling quality. His determination to make the music flow made the long melodies in the Shostakovich sonata into a firm and direct narrative. He could display eloquence in unpromising passages of two notes alternating back and forth, and found the sequential line in successive difficult pizzicato chords. He was even more impressive in crafting a strong narrative from the disjointed fragments of Penderecki's Cadenza.

In the opening descending phrase of the Bloch, Neubauer dropped through all four strings of the viola, exhibiting a tremendous variety of tone color, from piercingly metallic to deep and hollow. Abrupt switching between strings throughout the Bloch further exploited this variety, as did a crafty choice of strings for Shostakovich's and Penderecki's frequent double-stops. Like his sense of line, this kept the dark and somber music continually interesting.

In the lighthearted Boulanger salon pieces, Neubauer seemed to alter his technique of

changing color by placing the bow at various distances from the bridge, creating sour or gruff sounds. He also displayed a little note-bending and some outright slides. In an encore — a rare treat at a Menlo concert — a folk piece he announced as “the Rumanian canary” (a bird already honored at the **“Leipzig” concert**), he created canary song by fluttering his left hand fingers around the very tops of the strings.

Throughout all of this, Michael Brown kept pace at the piano in what was almost invariably a supporting role. The heavy but sparse chords in the Shostakovich sonata were particularly well suited for Brown’s style. He could also do everything else up through light and bouncy.

***David Bratman** is a librarian who lives with his lawfully wedded soprano and a wall full of symphony recordings.*