



Alexander Driskill-Smith's hands are a blur as he flies into a difficult piano composition by Charles-Valentin Alkan.

The fortitude of 'Fortnightly'

Music club continues to thrive in Palo Alto after 99 years

by Rebecca Wallace

In 1908, a circle of Stanford faculty wives formed a music study group. Soon, they were gathering every other week in a private home, and someone would always get up and perform.

Now, 99 years later, the Fortnightly Music Club still meets every other week. Only now it has about 175 members, and holds monthly public concerts in Palo Alto. There are singers, composers, players of piano, violin and other instruments; and listeners. There are even men.

One of those men, pianist Alexander Driskill-Smith, is currently flying into the volatile Etude de bravoure (Scherzo) in B minor, Op. 16, No. 3 by Charles-Valentin Alkan. He's at a grand piano in the sunny West Menlo Park parlor of Fortnightly co-president Deborah Rogers. A page of music — Gregorian chant from the 1400s — hangs on the wall behind him.

While the Alkan piece was written in the 1800s, its unexpected, almost disturbing chords and run-away sequences make it feel modern. Driskill-Smith's hands flash over the keyboard, low to high, high to low. While the music is far from melodic, it's infectious.

The Mountain View pianist offers a boyish grin when describing the piece, which he'll play this Sunday at the club's 99th-anniversary concert. "It's very difficult, both to watch and to play," he says. "The music on the page looks so dense and black — so many notes."

Driskill-Smith is well-schooled to take on Alkan. Hailing from England, he studied piano under the late concert pianist Ronald Smith, a notable advocate of the semi-obscure composer. Driskill-Smith won several honors along the way, including reaching the semi-finals of the BBC Young Musician of the

Year Competition in 1992.

But not every Fortnightly member has such a degree of musical training. Musicians of all levels are welcome, and many members are, as the club puts it, "non-performing music enthusiasts." Musicians must audition to perform at formal concerts, but there are also opportunities to play at informal club meetings.

The club also has an array of professions represented. Driskill-Smith is a physicist, for example, and club co-president Brett Waxdeck is a lawyer. There are also doctors, teachers and many others, Rogers says.

Rogers has the graceful hands and encouraging manner of a long-time piano teacher (which she is), and it's easy to see how she might persuade people to join the club. In fact, membership has grown since it hovered around 140 five years ago, when very few people came to Fortnightly concerts.

"I had to push people to perform," Rogers says. She credits a Weekly cover story on the group a few years ago for giving it "a boost."

Nowadays, Rogers says, there are many new members, including Ti Huang, a clarinet player who was in a symphony orchestra in Taiwan and will take part in Aram Khachaturian's Trio for Clarinet, Violin and Piano this Sunday.

Many members have orchestra experience, but enjoy a change of pace with Fortnightly, where they perform alone or in small groups, Rogers says.

She marvels at the club's growth and at all the time that has passed. "When the club started, this was still farmland, for crying out loud," she says, pointing through the window at her avenue.

A few years after the club started,

its members began allowing men, according to the Fortnightly Web site. In 1912, they set in motion a major development at Stanford: They created a concert series to bring professional musicians to campus. Only one musician performed the first year, but the series eventually grew into Stanford Lively Arts.

Fortnightly's monthly concerts are free, in keeping with the mission of sharing music with the community. Some members simply join to support the club with their dues, even if they don't perform or regularly attend concerts, Rogers says.

One member even lives in Florida. Rogers says the member used to live in this area and enjoys receiving the concert program every month. "She wouldn't give up her membership for anything," she says.

Rogers chuckles, but doesn't seem to find this odd. She says members build strong bonds within the club, whether friendships or musical partnerships.

Driskill-Smith, for one, was delighted to find Fortnightly when he moved here from England about five years ago.

"It's wonderful to perform and to meet like-minded people," he says.

Composer Robert Conrad also feels that connection. His link to the club is through longtime member Laura Barton-Holding, a soprano whom he calls his "vocal muse." He's been writing songs for her for years, and she's performed his compositions at Fortnightly.

This Sunday, Barton-Holding and other singers will perform selections from Conrad's "A Fancy Bred," a collection of songs inspired by Shakespeare plays.

Conrad teaches music theory, voice and piano at Skyline College in San Bruno. When composing, though, he's flying solo, working with just his mind. And that's where he finds Fortnightly a welcome outlet.

"There are so many interesting people to meet," he said. "There's a tendency if you're not professional to get stuck home alone." ■

Norbert von der Groeben

What: A concert marking the Fortnightly Music Club's 99th birthday. The program features works by Charles-Valentin Alkan, Fryderyk Chopin, Robert Conrad, Meyer Kupferman and Aram Khachaturian.
Where: Palo Alto Art Center auditorium, 1313 Newell Road
When: 8 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 14
Cost: Free
Info: Go to www.fortnightlymusicclub.org.

PEACE CORPS



Info Session:

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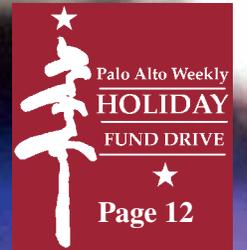
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