



Norbert von der Groeben

The mirror multiplies them, but only three musicians from *The Octopi* are pictured. From left, they are Richard Sogg, Maho Nabeshima and Raymond Walton. (Mark Reiss was out of town when the photo was taken.)

## Club centennial

Thriving Fortnightly Music Club celebrates its 100th birthday

by Alexander Papoulias

Two pianos, four pianists, eight hands. They call themselves The Octopi.

The group of pianists with the unique name are gearing up to perform an unusual arrangement of Claude Debussy's "Petite Suite" this weekend. The performance celebrates the 100th birthday of Palo Alto's own Fortnightly Music Club.

"The Octopi are four really strong personalities. When we're playing together the question is: 'Who's following who?', 'Who's leading the tempo?'" said Raymond Walton, who plays with fellow pianists Maho Nabeshima, Richard Sogg, and Mark Reiss.

"Physical acrobatics aside, it takes us a lot of concentration and timing for us to pull off the performance."

Debussy's original "Petite Suite" was composed as a piano duet — one piano with two pianists. Composer Henri Busser, Debussy's assistant and protege, later arranged the piece to be played on two pianos by four pianists.

Eight hands playing two pianos at once creates a great deal of sound and resonance: It requires a deliberate and delicate touch to keep from becoming noisy.

"When we're performing the piece together we each have to pull back a little so it doesn't get loud, and the music can come through," Walton said.

On Jan. 13, that music — as well as compositions played by a host of other musicians — honors the Fortnightly Music Club, which began 100 years ago as an informal music study group by the wives of Stanford professors. It has since blossomed into a Peninsula institution.

In fact, the club has grown so much — to nearly 200 members — that Jan. 13's free concert is already "sold out" to the public. Because so many members responded to the event invitation, club president

Deborah Rogers anticipates that the 180-seat Palo Alto Art Center auditorium will be packed.

The club's next public concert is scheduled for Feb. 10. It will also be free and held at the art center.

According to a Fortnightly Music Club history on the group's Web site — [www.fortnightlymusicclub.org](http://www.fortnightlymusicclub.org) — the club started in January of 1908, when several Stanford faculty wives began meeting for casual music-study sessions on alternating Monday evenings (fortnightly).

Each week a new piece of music was chosen as the subject for study and performed for the group by several of its members. In 1912, the group went door to door in Palo Alto to ask their neighbors if they would enjoy having concert musicians visit their homes to give performances. The response the club got was overwhelmingly positive, and eventually led to a concert series that ran from 1912 to 1928 in Stanford University's Assembly Hall.

Within a few years, the club evolved into a performance group welcoming both women and men, and grew to include musicians and music enthusiasts from neighboring cities. The student-organized ASSU concert series at Stanford ran from 1928 through the middle 1960s, when it eventually became the Live! Arts at Stanford.

Today the club presents eight formal performances each season at the Palo Alto Art Center, free and open to the public. The club also meets at the homes of members, giving informal performances. Membership dues are \$30 a year, and cover the cost of printing programs, advertising, maintenance of the art center's pianos and the use of the auditorium. New members are welcome, but those hoping to be "active" members who may perform for the public must pass an audition.

"Our informal meetings in members' homes are great fun for us.

The live performances we give for an audience, though, are really the essence of what the club is about. They give us the most pleasure," Rogers said.

Fortnightly members say it is the thrill and satisfaction of live performance that make all of the club work worthwhile. A round of applause from an appreciative audience means the world to members who pay club dues, volunteer their time, and audition to play at formal concerts.

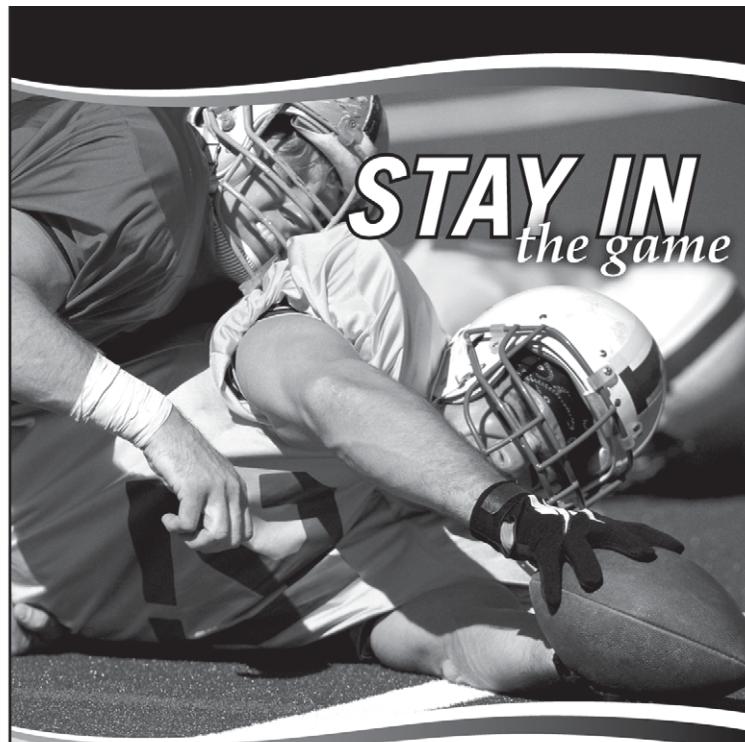
"Formal concerts are the most fun because of the audience's response. You can tell that they're there because they really want to be. They're there for the same reason we are — because they love the music," Fortnightly and Octopi pianist Maho Nabeshima said.

A pianist since the age of three, Nabeshima left her native Tokyo in 1995 to study at the New England Musical Conservatory. Now a music teacher at the San Francisco Conservatory Prep School, she is preparing for a performance at Carnegie Hall this April. That performance will feature a duet with flautist Margaret Cornils, as well as the world premiere of "Flautus Maximus," a piece composed by Nabeshima's husband, Cody Wright.

Not all Fortnightly members are as highly schooled as Nabeshima. The club includes musicians whose abilities range from beginner on up, as well as composers and non-musicians.

Lifelong pianist Raymond Walton has been a club member since 1991, holds a master's degree in music and a doctorate in musical arts and performance, and is a Realtor by profession. "The club has doctors, lawyers, real estate agents, students and professional musicians. This is a music appreciation club above all else," he said.

In addition to the piece by Debussy, Sunday's centennial concert will feature Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 in G, BWV 1048, by Johann Sebastian Bach; Liebeslieder Walzer, Op. 52, by Johannes Brahms; and "Libiamo ne lieti calici (Drinking Song)" by Giuseppe Verdi. Fortnightly members and guest musicians will perform. ■



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