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Review: A bride, a groom and wolves fuel a chilling West Coast premiere

By Steven Winn, Contributor
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The Viano Quartet and pianist Stephen Hough perform the West Coast premiere of Hough's Piano Quintet at Music@Menlo. Courtesy of Harrison Truong

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Imagine a drunken sleigh ride across the Russian steppes that reaches its grisly climax when a bride and groom are pitched out into the snow and killed by wolves.

British Australian composer Stephen Hough came across the wrenching tale in Nebraska writer Willa Cather's 1918 novel, "My Antonia." He was so struck by it that he transmuted the story into a passionate and cunningly constructed piano quintet, "Les Noces Rouges" ("The Red Wedding").

More Information

Musica@Menlo 2026 Festival: Redux: Through Aug. 8. Free-\$110. Menlo School, 50 Valparaiso Ave., Atherton. 650-330-2030. <https://musicatmenlo.org>

That piece had its West Coast premiere Sunday, July 26, capping Music@Menlo's "The Unfolding of Music" program at the Menlo School's Spieker Center for the Arts.

With the composer at the keyboard and the Viano Quartet as his inspired partners, this blighted journey began with the somber strains of an Orthodox wedding hymn. No sooner had the strings spun out the long lines than the pianist picked up the theme and tilted the harmonies, as if to teasingly foreshadow the dire events to come. It was a technique that informed the music throughout and heightened the narrative stakes.

As if dollyng a camera into the bridal chamber, Hough served up some rapturously lyrical love music in the first section that brought Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff to mind. The swells grew increasingly tumescent, rising, then gently drifting away.

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As the wedding party began, a quotation from a Russian drinking song took hold. Soon enough, as if the musicians themselves had grown tipsy, pitches began to wobble and harmonies started to teeter. The boisterous dances grew frantic and unruly — the strings keened, and the pianist even slammed the keyboard a few times.



Violinists Arnaud Sussmann, from left, Stella Chen, Aaron Boyd and Jessica Lee perform a piece by Georg Philipp Telemann during Musica@Menlo's 2026 summer programming. Courtesy of Harrison Truong

When the scene shifted to the sleigh, Hough set a repeated musical figure in motion to suggest the dogged, doomed procession of the horse-drawn sleigh. As in Ravel's "Boléro" or Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony ("Leningrad"), the perseverating passage drove on even as the strings wailed through weaving glissandi and dissonant attacks. The depiction of the horses stumbling in the drift and the wolves approaching was keenly drawn and played with desperate urgency.

Even as the deaths loomed, the music glanced backward at the hymn and the drinking song, capturing the tunes as distorted memories lost in time.

Hough sounded fateful church bell chords near the end. But there was no redemption or release, only the musical embodiment of travelers out on a fateful cold night.

The cohesion and connective tissues that made "Les Noces" gleam played out in other ways through the afternoon program, which "unfolded" music from the Baroque era to the present.

Some of that had to do with the performers. After opening the concert with a disciplined but charmless Georg Philipp Telemann concerto, it was a pleasure to hear violinists Aaron Boyd and Stella Chen return after intermission and turn nine Béla Bartók miniatures into a mini-essay on expressive tone and temperament, including a witty evocation of bagpipes.



Violinist Stella Chen, left, and pianist Stephen Hough perform a piece by Beethoven during Musica@Menlo's 2026 summer programming. Courtesy of Harrison Truong

Robert Schumann's Andante and Variations for Two Pianos, Two Cellos and Horn was a highlight of the program, and the ensemble was by turns majestic, martial, playful and poignant. Two superb pianists, Wu Han and Hyeyeon Park, led the way in prominent roles.

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Han and her cellist husband, David Finckel, founded this invaluable organization in 2003 and will conclude 24 years as co-artistic directors this summer. There will be speeches and tributes to come as the festival continues through Aug. 8.

Against that backdrop, two touching moments on Sunday between the dynamic duo may have stood out to many Music@Menlo regulars. Twice during the Schumann, Han and Finckel had a few glowing measures mostly to themselves. In the midst of this eloquent and energetic performance, those bars of music spoke gorgeously.

Steven Winn is a freelance writer. This article has been provided in partnership with San Francisco Classical Voice.

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