

Playing for passion

Saint Michael Trio marks 10 years of concerts and camaraderie

By Janet Silver Ghent | *Palo Alto Weekly* | [View the full article](#)

Rehearsing in the alcove of Russell Hancock's Palo Alto living room, Michel Flexer's cello and Daniel Cher's violin engage in playful dialogue as Hancock maintains a percussive beat on piano. The romantic piece is "Two Kites," by Brazilian composer Antonio Carlos Jobim, better known for "The Girl From Ipanema."

Ten years ago, the Saint Michael Trio was founded in Hancock's living room on St. Michael Drive, performing house concerts for up to 40 guests. But the house was too small for the trio's growing fan base. A decade and several albums later, earning stellar reviews along the way, the trio has performed everything from Beethoven to the blues at venues from the Bay Area to Salt Lake City and Seattle. On Saturday, March 4, the trio will host a 10th anniversary concert at Redwood City's historic Fox Theatre.



Violinist Daniel Cher, pianist Russell Hancock and cellist Michel Flexer have performed together as the Saint Michael Trio for the past decade. Photo courtesy of Russell Hancock.

Jazz pianist David Benoit, in the liner notes for the trio's "French Fusion" album, called the group "a boy band that is the musical embodiment of Silicon Valley."

The three musicians personify Silicon Valley in another way: All are classically trained musicians who contemplated concert careers but chose to make a living as

entrepreneurs in completely unrelated fields. Hancock, who teaches in the public policy department at Stanford University, is president and CEO of Joint Venture Silicon Valley as well as a concerto soloist with symphony orchestras. Cher, a physician, designs and tests medical devices and also plays violin and accordion with a klezmer band. Flexer, who was principal cellist and a soloist with the Palo Alto Chamber Orchestra while growing up, is a software engineer and serial entrepreneur.

"We all decided independently that music might be more rewarding if it wasn't the only thing we were doing," said Hancock. "We wanted it to be a passion." That said, "We're not playing as amateurs or hobbyists but as concert musicians. We're not looking to be a novelty act."

What is novel is the trio's approach to programming. Hancock calls it a "smorgasbord." The anniversary event will open with classics and segue into jazz and rock, followed by a post-concert chocolate reception with the artists at Club Fox. Advance ticket holders also had the opportunity to vote on some concert selections on the website, choosing from such offerings as the Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby," Claude Bolling's crossover jazz "Amoureuse" and Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven."

In keeping with that eclecticism, the group will play selections from 250 years of trio music, from baroque to Broadway, at a sold-out March 12 concert at Saratoga's Montalvo Arts Center. "This is not your grandmother's chamber music," wrote Angela McConnell, Montalvo's executive director on the liner notes for "Warning: May Cause Mood Swings." "This is music that grabs you by the throat or tickles your funny bone or surfaces an erstwhile sadness, sometimes all at once but always in rapid-fire succession."

The trio, which anchors the Villa Chamber Series at Montalvo, is also affiliated with Notre Dame de Namur University in Belmont and performed two concerts with the Peninsula Symphony earlier this year.

"These three remarkable musicians bring a special brand of musicality, panache and infectious energy to their music, and it was a complete joy to perform with them," conductor-music director Mitchell Sardou Klein wrote in an email.

The Saint Michael Trio prefers to play close to home, not only because the three have day jobs but because "we're all committed family men," Hancock said. They rehearse in the evening, after dinner, enabling them to spend time with their

families. The three have a combined total of seven children, six of them girls who also play instruments.

For Flexer, music is a family affair. "I play at home in the basement with the Flexer Quartet," he said, noting that his wife and one daughter play violin, another daughter plays cello and he himself plays the viola part on cello.

Like the Flexer Quartet, the Saint Michael Trio plays for fun, albeit on a professional level. However, because the group doesn't rely on concert fees to make a living, the audience benefits. While many concerts are free, the proceeds from such events as the anniversary gala, where tickets are a modest \$15, finance pieces they commission from up-and-coming composers. The Fox Theatre concert will hold the world premiere of a piece by Canadian composer Cameron Wilson. Commissions can cost anywhere from \$5,000 to six figures for a John Williams piece. "We haven't yet commissioned a John Williams," Flexer joked. However, Williams' haunting "Schindler's List" theme is on the trio's debut album, and another Williams piece, the theme from "Sabrina," is a candidate for the March 4 event.

Freedom from economic constraints gives the trio the wherewithal to pioneer a new "edutainment" format that Hancock patented as an "Informance," delivering music to wider audiences at minimal ticket prices. Focusing on a single composer, these Informances incorporate slides and explanations along with musical interludes. During an April 7 Informance titled "Delineating Dvorak," which costs a mere \$5, noted violinist and Stanford lecturer Robin Sharp will join the trio at Stanford's Dinkelspiel Auditorium.

"The combination of entertainment, knowledge and emotional connection is what music is all about, and they share it with such aplomb," according to Sharp. "When I am able to perform with them, it is always a joyous collaboration."

Prospective audiences can pick up the flavor of an Informance from a 2013 event at Dinkelspiel captured on YouTube (tinyurl.com/h4cl7qx).

Discussing French impressionist composer Claude Debussy, Hancock described him as "cantankerous, a maverick, a renegade... a womanizer, constantly in debt. His wife threatened to shoot him if he didn't kick his mistress out of the house, and she had the gun in her hand. And yet he wrote melodies of unspeakable sweetness, of incredible delicacy."

He stepped over to the piano to play a few bars from "Clair de Lune." "You know this?"

The audience laughed.

"Of course you do. It's the music that rolls during the credits of 'Oceans Eleven.' "

When three passionate people come together to select music and create a program, "we disagree all the time," said Cher.

Hancock calls it "creative tension. ... We sometimes have animated discussions about the proportion of classical and the proportion of contemporary. Danny always lands on the side of doing more classical music. I always take the point of view that some of the deep classical stuff can leave the audience behind. I care about that a lot. Danny cares about it less. Michel always ends up casting the deciding vote."

Said Flexer, "I'm in the middle. I try to keep the peace in the group."

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What: Saint Michael Trio's 10th Anniversary Gala

Where: Fox Theatre, 2215 Broadway St., Redwood City

When: Saturday, March 4 at 7:30 p.m.

Cost: \$15

Info: Go to [Saint Michael Trio](#) or phone 650-FOX-7770