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Final farewell performances planned for Gold Coast Chamber Players

By Lou Fancher



Sakura Cello Quintet: Cellists Stella Cho, Michael Kaufman, Yoshika Matsuda, Peter Myers, and Nathan Chan (guest) Photo provided

For 35 magical seasons, Gold Coast Chamber Players founder, Artistic Director and violist Pamela Freund-Striplen has brought vibrant, high caliber chamber music concerts and top tier musicians to the East Bay. After launching Gold Coast in grand homes in Alameda and appearing in small- and large-scale venues throughout the Bay Area, Freund-Striplen's effervescent energy and immersive programs-immensely instructive but never pedantic-enriched the Lafayette community with an ongoing series at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center.

Freund-Striplen will conclude the thematic-specific concerts at the end of the 2022-23 season.

The March 11 concert, "Cello Extravaganza," is presented in partnership with the

Bay Area Music Consortium and features the SAKURA Cello Quintet, whose members are Stella Cho, Michael Kaufman, Yoshika Matsuda, Peter Myers and guest cellist Nathan Chan. The all-cello program is robust, with works by Faure, Dvořák, Falla, Peter Myers,

Debussy, Joe Hisaishi, Britten, Schubert, Rachmaninoff, and Chick Corea.

The final concert on April 15, "Souvenir," showcases Freund-Striplen joined by Brendan Speltz, violin; Connie Kupka, violin; Luke Fleming, viola; Andrew Janss, cello; and David Speltz, cello. The program includes Beethoven's Duo "Eyeglasses" for viola and cello; F.A. Kummer's "Cello Duo #1 in C Major, Op.22;" Mozart's "Quintet in G minor, k. 516;" and Tchaikovsky's "Souvenir de Florence, Op. 70."

The performances are preceded by an always-intriguing pre-concert talk presented 30 minutes prior to the 7:30 p.m. "curtain time," led by Freund-Striplen or other musicians involved in the performance, who offer expert insights into the historic and cultural environment within which the program's works were composed and first performed.

About the origins of the cello quintet program, Freund-Striplen said, "A founding member of Sakura, Peter Myers, has performed with GCCP several times and that led me to find out about his cello quintet. I've always been a fan of groups of cello: the range and singing quality is so rich. Once we had eight cellos in a concert and it was simply amazing!"

Most of the works on the wide-ranging program are arranged for cello quintet by Sakura and demonstrate a variety of music styles. Brilliant contrasts in texture and tone - not to mention rhythm, timbre, and balance in the cello voices - are evident to anyone comparing Dvořák's "Silent Woods" to Corea's "Spain" to Schubert's "Erlkönig," and so on. "Dvorak is my favorite composer and 'Silent Woods' is a great example of why (that is true)," Freund-Striplen said. "From the very first notes, I feel my heart is breaking. Gold Coasters know Dvorak is included in almost every season."

Freund-Striplen first heard Schubert's "Erlkonig" while a student at Oberlin Conservatory. "My friends and I became obsessed with the original version for baritone and piano. You don't have to read the poem it's based on to feel the excitement of the chase by the supernatural. We'd listen to it over and over, even at parties. We were true music nerds."

The selections for the final concert hold significance for the ensemble but also, importantly, for audiences who have long treasured the unique access they have had to Gold Coast's first class musicians in the library's intimate, small space.

Former Lafayette City Manager Steve Falk, after learning Freund-Striplen will wrap up annual seasons and move on from Gold Coast, wrote on social media: "This is the day I dreaded - but I knew it would eventually come. What you've done in and for Lafayette, Pamela, is nothing short of remarkable, and I've long been proud to tell people about the sophisticated and elegant music and programming you've delivered to our community. Your basic message: the good stuff isn't owned by the big city; we can do that here, too! And you did. With joy. With young people. With national and international stars. With challenging and interesting repertoire. With intention and integrity. You are one of a kind, Pam, and I bow down now to honor you and the work you've done."

The "Souvenir" program includes what she calls "favorite gems in the chamber music repertoire." Designed as a blockbuster end to the season, she had no idea when she curated the program that it would be the collective's last concert. "The title is a poignant coincidence," she said. "Tchaikovsky's epic 'Souvenir de Florence' will blow the walls down and will be a joyous way to finish."

Reflecting on the group's history and legacy, she said, "I hope our legacy is about building community through music. By creating an adventurous concert series with an international reputation, GCCP became part of the fabric of my community. We provided not just employment, but a place for musicians to really create meaningful work. Also, our educational programs have reached hundreds of students throughout the Bay Area. A former student of mine, now a Campolindo High School sophomore, just formed Young

Chamber Players, a student led chamber music organization and a real passing of the torch."

As for Freund-Striplen's specific plans and her next chapter as a professional musician, she said, "I'll be concentrating on special projects with social impact, like 'Cultural Crossroads' from Gold Coast's last season. I'm excited about taking it to a national and maybe even an international audience. I still love performing and curating and will see where my imagination takes me. I'm also going to do some consulting to help others design concerts in their communities."

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