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The classical company you keep

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Most classical musicians would be more than happy to have any one of the multiple careers cobbled together by cellist David Finckel and his wife, the pianist Wu Han.

First and perhaps most famously, there is Finckel's participation in the eminent Emerson Quartet, and the accoutrements of that success: 100 performances per year and recordings published by Deutsche Gramophone. Then there are Wu Han's solo piano recitals and her chamber music concerts to consider, and the couple's dual role as co-directors of Music@Menlo, the summer classical music series in California. For good measure, throw in their duopolistic roles as artistic directors of the Lincoln Center Chamber Music Society, one of the most prestigious organizations of its kind.

And while you're at it, don't forget job one: the care and feeding of their 10-year-old daughter.

But there's more. Even as Aspen audiences are listening to Finckel and Han Friday at 7:30 p.m. at Harris Concert Hall - playing a program of J.S. Bach, Beethoven, Schumann, Debussy, and Britten - they should consider their venture known as ArtistLed, a classical music label founded in 1997 and dedicated to the sale and distribution of their own works (artistled.com).

"As time goes by," says Finckel, 53, "the why of how it got started becomes more and more obvious. You look around and classical recording contracts are falling like trees in the forest. When I started, all the chamber groups had labels, and now I'm one of the lucky ones to be with Deutsche Gramophone

(with the Emerson Quartet)."

Finckel, in fact, is in a unique position to survey the world of classical music recordings, with both a major recording contract and the existence of ArtistLed, his very own label.

"With the Quartet," he says, "Deutsche Gramophone is very cooperative, and I've had enormous luck. But it's a standard commercial arrangement. On the other side, as an independent, we can turn on a dime."

"When you're offered a recording contract," Han, 45, explains, "the contract is in the company's interests. Are they signing this artist, to make big bucks, to do popular crossover albums that are sellable and hit the charts? Or sometimes they have a Beethoven sonata already and they say: 'We need something else to fill the catalog.' As an artist, unless you're a superstar who can call your shots, they are rarely asking you: 'What's the most exciting music you want to make?'"

Also, when an artist records for a major label, the artist does not own the recording. The label does, and if the performance doesn't sell, that particular recording can end up off the market and in the dustbin of history, never to be heard from again.

"If you're in luck," Wu Han continues, "the recording company keeps you in the catalogue, but there are countless stories of someone recording, say, a Bach suite and it "sells 200 copies instead of the 30,000 they expected and the recording company says we have to take it out of the catalogue. Then it's not available for anybody. The recording company is not interested. It doesn't really give you that freedom. With Artist-Led, we have a different selling cycle. The longer a recording stays,

longer it sells, if you tour it sells handsomely."

Different selling cycle indeed. Even if the couple "gets hit by a bus down on Amsterdam Avenue," to quote Finckel, their recordings will remain available.

"We actually have it in our wills," he says. "There is money set aside, if we're run over by a bus the company will continue to exist and make the records. We own the rights to all our recordings."

The recordings themselves have met with some acclaim. Time magazine's Terry Teachout called their Tchaikovsky recording "a performance that ranks among the great chamber music recordings of the postwar era." But a small company like Artistled also means there is no money for advertising or the normal promotional hoo-ha. The label relies on sales online and after live performances.

"The major difference as a musician is that all the pressure that we feel is self-inflicted," Finckel laughs. "It doesn't come from anywhere - marketing or sales or the ideas of reviews. It's all about taking full responsibility for the product, about not being able to blame anything on anyone else."

"It's a personal choice," Wu Han says.

"The way our stars lined up," David Finckel says, "it's a very personal choice. When we see those recordings sitting there after a performance, I can't tell you what a source of satisfaction that is. When people are lined up buying the other four Beethoven sonatas they didn't hear that night, it's so gratifying. It's unbelievable as serious artists to feel that kind of satisfaction."