

Bartók, Matthews steal the show

By: Holly Harris

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Agassiz International Music Festival is throwing itself a party all this week, celebrating not just its 10th year of music making but also the 200th anniversary of German composer Felix Mendelssohn's birth. A series of ten concerts are showcasing the 19th century master's chamber music between June 10-20, performed by a crackerjack ensemble of musicians assembled by the annual festival's Ottawa-based founding artistic director/cellist Paul Marleyn.

Ironically, it wasn't birthday boy Mendelssohn who stole the show, but Hungarian interloper Béla Bartók. The 20th century composer's jazzy *Contrasts* for clarinet, violin and piano (1938) is a thrilling piece not often heard, remarkably co-commissioned by the King of Swing himself, Benny Goodman.

Clarinetist Fan Lei, violinist Scott St. John, and pianist Katherine Chi's flawless delivery exhibited bravura technique and ironclad conviction, with St. John so physically engaged with his instrument he fairly leapt out of his chair. Chi -- notably, the first prizewinner of the prestigious 2000 Honens International Piano Competition -- also added strong backbone to the ensemble while Lei easily handled the virtuosic demands of the compelling, thoroughly modernistic piece.

The program opened with Serge Prokofiev's *Overture on Hebrew Themes* for clarinet, piano and string quartet, Op. 34 (1919) as an apparent nod to Mendelssohn's Jewish roots. It's impossible not to like this captivating work with its buoyant lilt and slinky themes, intently performed by Lei, Chi, St. John, Aaron Au (violin), Sharon Wei (viola) and Marleyn, whose insistent pizzicatos grounded the piece's rhythmic thrust.

Don't let a name fool you. Winnipeg-based composer Michael Matthews' simply titled *Piano Quintet* began its creative life approximately 12 years ago as a ballet-sketch, *Cupid and Psyche*, resurrected as two highly contrasting movements: "Mysteriously" and "Agitato."

The 16-minute world première opened atmospherically, with Matthews' sensitive ear creating a sonic world of brooding introspection filled with glassy harmonics and sinking low registers. As if a flip side, the work's second movement teemed with jagged syncopations and rapidly shifting meters, paying tribute to Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich while pitting its players (including added violinist Laurence Kayaleh) against each other with scarcely a few moments' repose.

After hearing a diverse program of (relatively) modern music, Mendelssohn's *Cello and Piano Sonata No. 2 in D, Op. 58* felt like an old romantic warhorse. Nevertheless, Marleyn and Chi's brought vibrancy to this classic.

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Agassiz International Music Festival

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Eckhardt-Gramatté Hall