

# Benjamin Hochman

## THE VANCOUVER SUN

SATURDAY, JULY 31, 2004

### Rarities well served by quartets

Festival serves wit between  
Jerusalem, Borealis feasts

BY DAVID GORDON DUKE

One of the chief pleasures of the Vancouver Chamber Music and Song Festival is sampling different ensembles over the course of a summer evening. Thursday's program featured an unusual opportunity to compare and contrast the Borealis and Jerusalem quartets.

As is festival practice, the evening began with a prelude concert. This one featured Dvorak's delicious *Terzetto* played by two-thirds of the Jerusalem Quartet — music full of folk flavour and intricately conceived for strings. Because of its odd scoring, for two fiddles and viola, this is no standard heard year-in and year-out on the programs of established ensembles.

The festival regularly champions work by women composers. UBC's Borealis Quartet offered another non-standard work: a rare performance of Fanny Hensel's 1834 *String Quartet*. Hensel, Felix Mendelssohn's older

sister, wrote in a conservative idiom, but her quartet is more than a novelty. Given that Felix and Fanny were particularly close, it's no surprise to hear something of a family aesthetic. Hensel was well served by the Borealis, whose playing was purposeful, sensitive, and committed.

Between the two string quartets, Connie Shih and Benjamin Hochman played Mozart's *D major Sonata, K.448*, a sort of 18th-century high comedy of manners and seduction for two pianos. This reading was full of witty, winsome exchanges between the players, who carefully graded their modern piano sound for Mozartian delicacy and clarity.

Shostakovich has been this summer's unofficial featured composer. Vancouver audiences have heard many of the world's great string quartets in the Shostakovich canon, but a number of things stood out

about the Jerusalem Quartet's approach to the *Ninth Quartet*, composed in 1964. First, there is a certain youthful confidence: these young musicians seem to have been born with an understanding of Shostakovich's music. The quartet's smooth blend helps, as does their well-matched, mellifluous tone.

They've learned to make sounds that are appropriately powerful and harsh yet never ugly; the playing sparks with energy, but never veers indulgently out of control. Though they gloried in Shostakovich's edgy lyricism, their focus was always on line and form — particularly important in the *Ninth* which, structured in five interlocking movements, can risk seeming patchy and discontinuous.

On Thursday it was conceived as a seamless whole, another indisputable highlight of the 2004 Festival.

*David Gordon Duke is a Vancouver arts writer and educator.*



KIRSHBAUM DEMLER & ASSOCIATES, INC.  
711 WEST END AVENUE SUITE 5KN NEW YORK NY 10025  
212 222 4843 TEL 212 222 7321 FAX WWW.KIRSHDEM.COM