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## String (quartet) theory

**Afiara String Quartet puts fresh spin on some classics in MusicFest concert**

**Guelph, Ontario**  
**By Dawn Stevenson**

Like Albert Einstein and daylight-saving time, the Afiara String Quartet is a reminder that time is flexible. Thursday night, from inside the recital hall of the Guelph Youth Music Centre, time seemed to stand still during the San Francisco-based quartet's MusicFest debut.

In retrospect, it passed all too quickly.

The four Canadian musicians moved instinctively and breathed in unison, melding into a single sound. Taking surprising freedoms with time during their performance of Beethoven's "String Quartet, op. 18, no. 1," the group often caused simmering tension to emerge from pregnant silences.

The quartet -- including Guelph native, violist David Samuel -- assumed classical ideals of restraint, balance and harmony with natural ease, and patterned its attack of accents with strict observance. As if cued by telepathic forces, they wove separate roles into a cohesive and elegant musical fabric.

The scherzo movement embodied the joking feel and rhythmic neatness of a limerick. Deviously manipulating clichés and assumptions, the quartet's agility and zeal for this short movement was a winning demonstration of Beethoven at his most charming.

For bold contrast, the group followed the Beethoven piece with Béla Bartók's "String Quartet no. 3." By applying a wide variety of distinctive string techniques like Sul Ponticello (bowing near the bridge to generate a brittle, nasal buzzing), 'Bartók' Pizzicato (producing a snapping sound), and abundant glissandi, the performers shaped an eerie soundtrack worthy of any horror flick.

It was exciting, getting knocked around my seat in a suspenseful flurry of sawing motions and irregular meters. I admired the Afiara Quartet's resourcefulness, and intrepid pursuit of the next phrase.

The second half of the evening contained just one work, Felix Mendelssohn's "String Quartet no. 2, op. 13." The serene sweetness of its opening gestures spread a warm glow through the hall.

After touching down briefly for this peaceful episode, the quartet took off with passionate vitality and didn't look back.

The opening of the intermezzo movement is unforgettable for its passages of imitation, plucked accompaniment, and contagious, matter-of-fact melody. Its last repetition catches you off guard, coyly refusing to cadence.

In the final movement, the short violin cadenza was sweet and sad, performed with distilled sensitivity. As the last notes tapered, abiding stillness resounded in the space.