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## Afiara Quartet shows its stuff at Le Petit Trianon

By Richard Scheinin

Word has been spreading about the Afiara String Quartet: It's a group that plays with keen unity, the reports have said. With passion. All true. This group of twentysomethings from Canada, now in residence at San Francisco State University, is on the verge of joining the list of excellent string quartets that call the Bay Area home.

Still, you had to wait awhile to get the full measure of the Afiara when it performed Sunday at Le Petit Trianon in downtown San Jose. The concert had a great arc to it, and it wound up teaching a lesson, too, about what, or who, is needed to push a musical performance up several notches. But more on that later.

In the first half of its South Bay debut, courtesy of the San Jose Chamber Music Society, the Afiara played Haydn's String Quartet in D major, Op. 76, the fifth of the "Erdödy" Quartets, which have a special charm and sadness about them. The group handled the charm nicely, even slyly, but didn't really catch the sadness, although the famous "Largo" boasted moments of beautiful and quietly united playing.

Beethoven's String Quartet in F minor, Op. 95, known as the "Serioso" and composed toward the end of his middle period, showed off razor-sharp rhythmic acuity and fire in the group's chordal attacks. But for all its hotblooded precision, the quartet wasn't unlocking Beethoven's mystic expressiveness, and there was the sense that the group's blended sound hasn't nearly reached full flower. That flowering can take years in a quartet, and the Afiara is only 2 years old.

Better was the short piece that had opened the concert, "Pannonia Boundless," by the New York-based Serbian composer Aleksandra Vrebalov. It's filled with Gypsy influences, and the Afiara — violinists Valerie Li and Yuri Cho; violist David Samuel and cellist Adrian Fung — gave it a throbbing, scorched-earth reading. One problem: The group didn't adjust to the hall's hot acoustics, so portions of the performance became a din.

All this changed in the concert's second half.

Sometimes all it takes to move a musical performance to a higher level is the arrival of a single experienced player, in this case the pianist Stephen Prutsman, who exudes confidence, fun and deep understanding whenever he performs.

He joined the Afiara for Dvorak's Piano Quintet No. 2 in A major, Op. 81, a bighearted piece that oozes with melody, and suddenly the music felt lived-in, fortified by musical mega-vitamins. They were running through the veins of all five players; here was true unity and interactivity: Prutsman's deeply shimmering runs melted through the equally shimmering haze of the Afiara.

Quicksilver and delicate, muscular, electric and filled with sentiment without going over the top, as can happen with Dvorak, this performance went by in a flash. The finale tingled, it was so blazingly beautiful.

As an encore, the five players performed Prutsman's arrangement of the old Weather Report hit "Birdland," composed by Joe Zawinul. It was a rocking, full-gospel surprise; Prutsman doesn't worry about genres and what is or isn't "correct" in a classical setting. The young members of the Afiara were game.