

# Afiara String Quartet

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**Hitting the  
Jackpot**  
Montreal Chamber Music  
Festival  
Gil French



Selecting concerts to attend is like gambling: sometimes what you want to hear most turns out disappointing, and what you'd ordinarily pass on moves you deeply. At the 14th Montreal Chamber Music Festival, held Wednesdays through Saturdays for four weeks in May, we hit the jackpot by choosing to attend the final week.

The Afiara Quartet, four Canadians in residence at San Francisco State University, were the stars of the festival's final night, a six-hour three-concert marathon honoring Mendelssohn's 200th birthday. When Quartet No. 2 had finished, because the Afiara had completely changed my pulse, breathing, and inner rhythms, when I went to speak, I choked up -- the equivalent of hyperventilation.

The stillness of the quartet's torsos belied their quivering toes, arched heels, bouncing knees, and earnest faces. Even in quiet passages they sustained the same engrossing mood, but without leaving me feeling hectored. Their ability to subtly move across the spectrum from vibrato to no vibrato, while sustaining long, warm lyrical lines against Mendelssohn's nervous passages, was part of their secret. Another was their pleasure in partnership with one another. Their intensity went far beyond tight rhythmic harmony and sweeping tempos. The Afiara will be back next year.

In the Octet, written when Mendelssohn was 16, the players were arranged in a semi-circle -- four violins, two violas, then two cellos -- separating the Afiara among violinists Rachel Barton Pine and Jonathan Crow, violist Marcus Thompson, and festival founder, cellist Denis Brott. Yet the Afiara shared their warm collegiality with everyone in a performance of orchestral force. True, Pine had the star role, playing the principal melody line from start to finish with rich, warm lyricism. But the brilliant tempos and tight ensemble turned the Octet into a triumphant festival finale.

The Afiara began Mendelssohn's Quartet No. 6 with a heart-stopping tempo, pulse, and attack. Violinist Valerie Li and Yuri Cho played like one soul four-hands, while violist David Samuel and cellist Adrian Fung leaned into one another. At the end of the first movement, not even the four of them seemed to believe the intensity they had just accomplished.