

**Vancouver Chamber Music
Festival: Concert 2**
presented by Vancouver
Recital Society
Saturday, July 28, 8:15pm
Crofton House School
by Colin MacDonald

Despite being the brunt of musician jokes about failed violinists for many years, the viola has recently been receiving much attention from composers and audiences alike. The second evening concert of this year's Chamber Music Festival gave a prominent role to this oft-maligned string instrument.

The viola's characteristic dark and throaty tone is pitched in a register very close to human speech, striking the ear with a warmth and intimacy not often felt from the much higher and brighter sounding violin. This effect was obvious in the prelude concert performance of J.S. Bach's *Sonata No. 3 in C major*, originally for violin but transcribed for viola and performed by Hsin-Yun Huang. The auditorium at Crofton House School was a perfect size to hear a solo performer, with the sound carrying easily to the back rows. The transcription fit the instrument quite well, except for some high-register playing which was difficult to reach and became unclear, due to the longer body of the viola.

The main program began with the string trio *Terzetto in C major* by Antonin Dvořák. Here the viola, played by Nokuthula Ngwenyama, had the important role of balancing and grounding the sound of the two violins, played by Ruggero Alliffranchini and Scott St. John. The high tessitura and lack of a real bass instrument gave the composition a very fragile and distant feel, but the sound was appropriate for the light, almost Classical quality of the writing.

The musicians gave a breathtaking performance, moving as one mind in precise phrasing, and delicious tonal and dynamic control.

Two violas played a major role in the world premiere of American composer Steve Mackey's *Gaggle and Flock*, for string octet. Performed by the combined Brentano and Borromeo string quartets (with Canadian Scott St. John filling in the Brentano's 2nd violin chair), this exciting work challenged the ensemble to act as a single instrument of many parts. Precise rhythmic playing was demanded for the abundant use of hocketing, where single notes were passed rapidly among the players to form larger patterns and melodies. The violas provided the link between the two quartets, carrying the weight of melodic material while the violins filled the texture with gestural colours. Mackey's sense of humour was evident with the inclusion of tongue-in-cheek references to fiddle music, short slides and glissandi in the violins that slowed down in the second movement to become a microtonal melody.

The dramatic piano playing of Jonathan Biss took the spotlight in Johannes Brahms' *Quintet in F minor*, performed with the Borromeo string quartet. The strings took a supporting role, as the dense piano part painted a complex picture of desire and emotional repression, no doubt a product of Brahms' secret love for his friend Clara Schumann. The interpretation was very strong, but the forceful passion throughout this immense work left a feeling of exhaustion, despite the beauty of the playing. Even the familiar melody of the Scherzo sounded martial rather than joking, and a little lightness would have been an appreciated contrast.