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Review: Borealis String Quartet (June 9, 2008)

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Canadian arts have rarely gotten their proper due, particularly in this country. Indeed, far from a provincial backwater, Canada provides bounteous and conscientious official support for the arts, in sharp contrast to the paltry allocations afforded U.S. cultural institutions. Generously supported by the Canada Council for the Arts, the Borealis String Quartet this weekend commenced the June Music Festival of Chamber Music Albuquerque. The Borealis can hold its own, at least, with any quartet currently on stage. Characterized by youthful vigor matched with exquisite technique, the group's sound is smooth and pristine. No doubt they record beautifully.

From the very opening phrase of the Mozart Quartet in F Major, K. 590, the ensemble began to kick up its heels, almost literally in the case of first violinist, Patricia Shih, the most animated of the group. She proved as much fun to watch as to listen to. There has developed, no doubt organically over time, what might almost be called a choreography to the interaction of the group to match its musical solidarity. While individual voices can be heard, there is a homogenous quality of sound overall. Mozart, in this late work, was experimenting with polyphony, and all four movements allowed for intricate interplay of voices. The Andante glowed with rich sonority, achieved in part from the 17th and 18th century instruments on which the group performs.

Refreshingly, the 2004 work by Latvian-Canadian composer Imant Raminsh "A Falcon, a Storm, or a Great Song" is a contemporary piece of chamber music actually worth hearing. Its title from a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke, the work begins with a minor-mode theme which

winds its way throughout the opening movement. Full of melody yet never mawkish or sentimental, this is genuine chamber music. The middle Elegy rises to a moving high-register climax, followed by the rigorous Finale with its surprising turns of harmony.

Puccini is a name virtually unknown to chamber music recitals. His *I Crisantemi* (Chrysanthemums) is an early work composed as an elegy, its themes later used in the opera *Manon Lescaut*. The piece served as a sweetmeat before the main fare of the second half, Beethoven's final quartet, Op. 135 in F.

In his late work Beethoven, like Mozart, became fascinated with counterpoint, especially in the Allegretto which the group produced seamlessly. The Vivace is the shortest of all Beethoven's quartet movements, yet contains a wealth of musical material.

The group took the Lento assai a bit faster and a bit louder than it is usually played, certainly losing nothing of the profundity, perhaps even enhancing it in terms of pure, raw pathos. Borealis has the ability to make surprising twists actually surprising, and its seeming spontaneity enhanced the deeper sense of the final movement.

Chamber Music Albuquerque has in its June festival consistently brought to town some of the most talented quartets to be had. The series continues over the next two weekends with the Antares and St. Lawrence Quartets performing at the Simms Center for the Performing Arts in the Albuquerque Academy.