

Fresh off Fischhoff win, Milton String Quartet to perform at ENCORE

by Mike Telin



Life has quickly changed for the Milton String Quartet. After winning the grand prize and string division gold medal at the 44th Annual Fischhoff Chamber Music Competition in May of this year, violinists Roman Fraser and Maithéna Girault, violist Evan Robinson, and cellist Joshua Morris are already receiving invitations to perform recitals and at festivals.

Formed in 2015 at the Schulich School of Music of McGill University, the ensemble is also ENCORE Chamber Music's Fellowship Quartet, and on Friday, June 30 at 7:00 pm, they will present a free recital at the Tudor House on the campus of Gilmour Academy. The program will include Joseph Haydn's *Quartet in F, Op. 77, No. 2*, Béla Bartók's *Quartet No. 3 in C#*, and Felix Mendelssohn's *Quartet No. 4 in e*.

The Milton are the Festival's first Fellowship Quartet. "I heard about the program from Clara Engen, who is ENCORE's Head of Operations," Joshua Morris said during a conference call with his quartet colleagues earlier this month. "Clara and I both did our undergraduate studies at Oberlin and we've kept in touch. She encouraged us to apply. We did, and we won, and we're very happy about that." In addition to Friday's concert, the Quartet are also performing outreach concerts, playing in master classes, and receiving daily coaching with the Cavani Quartet as part of the Fellowship.

Regarding their program, Roman Fraser said that they have performed the Haydn and the Mendelssohn in the past. "Our coach, André J. Roy, wanted us to learn some of

the more standard repertoire. The Mendelssohn appeals to us because it is full of dramatic flair that we feel we capture well. The Haydn is interesting in that it's the last complete string quartet that he wrote. Of course, he was the original architect of the string quartet, and in this piece, you can hear that he had been honing his craft for many years."

When asked about the Bartók, Fraser paused. "We haven't played it before," he said. "It came as a request from ENCORE because it is part of their theme. After the Fischhoff we spent two weeks performing in Europe so we haven't had a lot of time for rehearsal, but we'll be on it as soon as we get there."

All four members agreed that their recent success is due in large part to their coach, who passes along his energy and passion for the string quartet. They also said that Roy has made them believe that having a career as a professional quartet can be a reality.

Following their Fischhoff win, *CBC Music* named the Milton String Quartet one of the top ten music groups in Montreal to look for, calling them classical music's version of a rock band. How does this kind of publicity make them feel? "In some aspects it has been overwhelming, although it is most welcome," Maithéna Girault said. "Winning seems to be opening so many doors very fast, and that has been exciting. We didn't enter the competition with big expectations, but with this unfolding of events, we now see concrete ways for the group to start taking off, and that's very positive and encouraging."

The four agreed that they are just now realizing how much publicity winning the Fischhoff has given them. They are also aware of the extra pressure that comes with being held to a higher musical standard, something they find exciting.

When asked why they want to pursue a career in chamber music, they all mentioned the social aspect of the genre. "In an orchestra I always felt like my voice was just in the middle of a crowd," Evan Richardson said. "With chamber music you're making music with a group of friends. As a violist, the quartet repertoire is what I want to be playing. There is so much great music, and that makes all the difference to me."

Winding down our conversation I asked each musician to tell me where they are from and when they first began studying music.

First violinist Roman Fraser: "I'm originally from Amsterdam, but moved to Montreal at the age of five, the same year I started playing violin. I didn't take it seriously until I was nine."

Cellist Joshua Morris: “I’m from St. Albans, Vermont, a small town just south of the Canadian border. I started playing cello at the age of nine and enjoyed it from the beginning. Early on I decided that I wanted to pursue music, even though I wasn’t sure exactly what that meant.”

Second violinist Maithéna Girault: “I was born in Paris but moved to Montreal when I was two. I started playing violin at six-and-a-half years old — I was inspired by a cousin who played the violin, and fell in love with it. I never questioned anything after that, being a musician was always what I wanted to do.”

Violist Evan Robinson: “I grew up on the coast of Maine, and moved to Indiana at twelve. I started playing violin around eight, but I never thought about being a musician until I was fourteen or fifteen. I started playing viola when I was sixteen. My teacher told me that because I was so tall it would be easier for me.”

Photo by Josef Samuel

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