

## Quartet cheerleaders

Devoted chamber-music fans live the competition lifestyle for a week in Canada. Katherine Millett gets in the spirit



The best of Banff:  
the TinAlley Quartet

### BANFF

Some of the world's most devoted chamber-music fans flock to the Banff International String Quartet Competition in Canada. Emotional bonds develop, as 39 hours of music and lectures alternate with opportunities for audience and players to mingle in the dining room, at the gym, and on the footpaths of the Banff Centre in Alberta.

After the first day's immersion – Haydn and Bartók played by each of four quartets – audience member Daphne Dunbar of Alberta claimed exhaustion. “Listening to this is not a passive experience,” she said. “I was helping them.”

It was no surprise, then, to hear gasps and barely suppressed cheers from the gripped audience a few days later, after midnight, when competition director Barry Shiffman announced the four finalists in the ninth competition. The all-male Zemlinsky Quartet, heart-throbs from the Czech Republic and back for their third try, had made the cut at last.

“I was mortally depressed when the Zemlinsky didn't make the finals last time,” said Agnes Dyck, a hospice nurse from Manitoba. “They were naughty boys in 2001, but now they're grown-ups.”

Audience members wiped away tears as they privately offered heartfelt congratulations and thanks to quartets which would not advance: the Afiara, Attacca, Koryo, Talisker and Rusquartet.

We of the resident audience, aptly described by Shiffman as “400 crazy quartet fans”, made way for 600 newcomers in the suddenly formal atmosphere of the final round on the Sunday night. Suits and dresses invaded the club we had become. The TinAlley Quarter's light and luminous sound, applied with originality all week from Webern to Mendelssohn and early Beethoven, garnered first prize for the Australian foursome. The Zemlinsky took second, the Ariel Quartet from Israel third and Canada's Tokai Quartet fourth.

“The audience here is amazing,” said TinAlley violinist Kristian Winther, reflecting on the week. “They were right with us.” Or, as Shiffman put it, while reminiscing about his days as a violinist in the St Lawrence Quartet, which won Banff in 1992: “It's Friday night, you've listened to 29 hours of quartets, and you're here for a lecture. You're frightening.”

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