

PSQ revels in ragtime and its all-America

By CHRISTOPHER HYDE

It's rare to attend a classical music concert and be unable to get a tune out of your head afterward.

That was the effect of "Ragtime: American Originals," Wednesday's opening concert of the Portland String Quartet's American Music Festival this week at the Sabbathday Lake Shaker Meeting House.

After playing what is arguably the first rag ever written, "Mississippi Rag" (1897) by a white bandmaster, William Krell, the quartet, with pianist Virginia Eskin, explored the roots of ragtime, stretching as far back as the American Revolution.

The fairly rigid structure of the form was illustrated by the most famous rag of all, Scott Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag," which sold a million copies after 1899. Violist Julia Adams' transcrip-

CONCERT REVIEW

PORTLAND STRING QUARTET - "RAGTIME: AMERICAN ORIGINALS!"

WHERE: Shaker Meeting House, Sabbathday Lake
WHEN: June 24

tion for string quartet - most rags were written for piano and promoted through sheet music - illustrated the 16-bar format of four groups of four measures, very well.

Ragtime's origin, in hymns, marches and popular songs, was shown with "Simple Gifts" (1948), "Free America" (1774), and "Aura Lee" (1861), the Union counterpart of the Confederate "Lorena."

The Portland String Quartet's version of the famous Shaker hymn gets better and better every year. The additional effect of Af-



Courtesy photo

Pianist Virginia Eskin explored the roots of ragtime in a concert on Wednesday with the Portland String Quartet at the Sabbathday Lake Shaker Meeting House.

rican rhythm was made clear syncope. The transformation was miraculous. Further rhythmic effects, straight, and then with gentle and the influence of classical

music, were explored in works by Louis Moreau Gottschalk, Nathaniel Dett and William Albright, brilliantly interpreted by Eskin.

The last, a rag entitled "Behemoth," written in 1974, is the only one of its kind that can be described as terrifying.

After intermission came the results of the fusion, beginning with a transcription of Joplin's "The Strenuous Life," a phrase made popular by Teddy Roosevelt.

Eskin then introduced her specialty, rags by female composers, which were just as good, if not better, than those of their more popular male counterparts.

"Fluffy Ruffles," by Marian Davis (1888-1970) was elegant, and "Judy's Rag," (1975) by Judith Zaimost, gracefully added modern harmonies.