

## Island's Beauty Enthralls This Busy Bowen Fiddler

Thirty seconds into Moritz Behm's CD debut, *My Anthem*, my six-year-old daughter looked up from her sketch-book. "Daddy," she intoned with unshakable confidence, "this one's a keeper!" Of course, it's not unusual for Franny to offer strong opinions; whatever it may say on my business card, she's the real music critic in the house, with an unerring ear for sounds that are vital and spirited. But in singling Behm out for praise she's only echoing what the Bowen Island fiddler's friends and neighbours have been saying for years. To them, it's long been obvious that his talents are unique; now, with the release of his first CD, it's time for the wider world to take notice.

Like most first-album calling cards, *My Anthem* is intended to showcase the diversity of its maker's musical interests. Sprightly jigs and reels nestle up to darker, rock-tinged psychedelic outings; the Central European Inflections of "Sweet Dreams" pay homage to Behm's German heritage, while Squamish First Nations performer Bob Baker's drumming and chanting on "Dark Grace" make it clear that Behm is comfortable honouring the equally ancient traditions of his family's adopted shore. And although he prefers to sing through his fiddle, vocalists Heidi Anderson, Julie Vik, Samantha Coulter, and Rob Bracken colour his songs with tones that range from fresh-faced folk clarity to gritty bar-band exuberance. Even in his choice of guest artists it's clear that Behm has eclectic tastes, and over a pot of tea he confides that his ultimate ambition is to be equally comfortable playing with a punk band, a pack of African drummers, and on some sort of new-age soundscape. But careful sequencing and the guiding hand of producer Colin Nairne ensure that Behm's debut is no grab bag; *My Anthem* flows seamlessly from start to finish, with gripping melodies and emotive fiddling a constant.

Behm—who'll showcase material from his CD at Presentation House on Saturday (November 28)—wasn't always so willing to experiment. He's been playing the violin since he was eight (and added the mandolin to his arsenal during his teens), but his early years were focused entirely on becoming a classical-music virtuoso.

"I was really keen to play, and going through the classical program I showed a lot of talent," he explains. "But I feel like I got pushed a little bit too fast, and my love of music sort of waned as my capacity to play more and more challenging pieces grew. After a while, I didn't know if I was doing it because I enjoyed it, or because somebody was telling me to. I got as far as playing the Bruch violin concerto [the quintessential Romantic showpiece] and went up against Corey Cerovsek at the Canadian Music Competition—where I got 79 percent and he got 94, so that sort of took the wind out of my sails about being competitive in that way. I just sort of broke down at that point, and couldn't find the energy to practise anymore, so I just let it sit for a while."

Burnt-out at 11, Behm might easily have joined the millions of former music-school trainees whose instruments sit, idle and unplayed, in basements and closets everywhere. But Bowen Island banjo picker Jim McConnan showed him a few Celtic tunes, and a new love was kindled. (The two still play together in the Fiddleheads, a Bowen institution, at a variety of community gatherings.) "I could relate more to jigs and reels than I could to classical," Behm says. "They're just more fun to play." Of course, the trick in learning jigs and reels is to master a traditional idiom. But to develop a personal voice on one's instrument, it's necessary to go beyond the historical vocabulary—and in this venture, the by-then teenaged Behm found inspiration in an unusual source. "I really started to like rock as a teenager, and one band in particular: Van Halen," he says. "Eddie Van Halen, the guitarist, had this style where he just reached out into the stratosphere and made some really, really powerful solos, where every note was just right. He was a really big influence on me to go my own way and just play exactly what I feel".

The other big influence on Behm's musical development was not necessarily musical in

itself—unless you take a rather poetic approach to nature, as the fiddler certainly does. The landscape and weather of the island where he grew up are embedded deeply in *My Anthem*, which pulses with the beat of waves on the shore and soars with the abandon of an autumn storm. In fact, I can't think of any other record that so perfectly distills the essence of this coast; you could write thousands of words explaining what it's like to live here, when one cycle through Behm's songs would suffice just as well. "I've spent a lot of time around here just in complete quiet: out in the forest, just watching nature, watching the trees and the landscape," he explains. "It's taught me a lot. It's taught me to really see something for what it is, without your mind making something out of it. Nature has a way of doing that. It really puts you in tune, gets you out of your mind and into experience, I guess.

"One place in particular that does that is Cape Roger Curtis [Bowen Island's westernmost point], and the song 'Dark Grace' is about that. I had a really amazing experience one night, just sitting there on the beach when the sun went down: it was like your whole body was tingling, and you weren't thinking anything; as soon as a thought entered your mind you just kinda went 'Okay, not now!' It was just amazing. You felt like you were a part of everything. "That's what that song was about, and I tried my hardest to write it on my own and describe what was happening—but I could only do the fiddle and mandolin part. I knew that it was something I would have to give to other people to finish." Behm's collaborator on this piece was Heidi Anderson, and her lyrics do a fine job of conveying his ever-increasing awe of, and love for, the natural world. "Lately I've been going out into the forest and just playing," he says. "I've been playing jigs and reels so much in the bars that I've sort of lost contact with, like, 'Why was this song originally written? What original seed caused this song?' And going out to the beach or into the forest really connected me with that again. It keeps that inspiration going, that energy, so you're not just doing it for the show, but you're actually feeling the music while you play it."

Back at home, my daughter is certainly feeling the music. Not long after passing judgment on *My Anthem's* opening track, she started doing her version of the Highland fling to stompers such as "Anthem" and "The Beast", and now, sweaty and dishevelled, she's curled up beside me for a rest. Her final verdict? "I like this CD a lot—but it makes my feet hurt."