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Distinguished Family Turns Out in Force Robert Sirota's Chamber Works at Manhattan School of Music

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By Steve Smith



Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

The Sirotas Play Sirota The violinists Jonah and Nadia Sirota play chamber works by their father, Robert Sirota, at Manhattan School of Music.

The name Sirota has been one to reckon with in New York musical circles for some years now. Nadia Sirota, a stellar young violist who has served as muse to prominent composers like Nico Muhly and Judd Greenstein, also cuts a high profile as a presenter on the Web-radio station Q2. Jonah Sirota, another violist and Nadia's older brother, is a member of the respected Chiara String Quartet. The Rev. Dr. Victoria R. Sirota, Nadia and Jonah's mother, is an accomplished organist and the canon pastor of the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine.

That Robert Sirota — Victoria's husband and Jonah and Nadia's father — might be overshadowed by his family's doings stands to reason: as the president of the Manhattan School of Music since 2005, he has operated largely within the musical world's infrastructure, helping to burnish the status of a conservatory long accustomed to second-tier status behind the Juilliard School, where he began his training as a

composer. His brief, eventful tenure has not been without fireworks; a move by precollege faculty members to unionize remains unresolved.

Now, after seven years of service to the Manhattan school, Mr. Sirota is to depart in November to concentrate on his composing. On Thursday evening, his colleagues celebrated their departing president with a concert of his chamber works in the school's John C. Borden Auditorium.

Remarkably, this was the first time the Sirotas had performed together publicly in New York, and only the second time, period. They made for an unorthodox ensemble rich with tonal and timbral possibilities in "Constellations," a new piece for two violas, celesta (Victoria) and piano (Robert).

Ruminative, dreamy and only fitfully bound by functional harmony or meter, "Constellations" vividly conveyed celestial shimmer as well as frissons of trepidation and awe suited to another inspiration, less obvious: an inquiring passage from the Book of Job.

As it happened, a sense of melancholy and of grappling with spiritual notions were this concert's through line. The cellist Norman Fischer, Robert Sirota's classmate at the Oberlin Conservatory, and the pianist Jeanne Kierman Fischer were poised and expressive in the rich, poignant Adagio espressivo from Mr. Sirota's Sonata for Cello and Piano. (The Fischers amount to extended family; their daughter Rebecca, a violinist, plays with Jonah Sirota in the Chiara String Quartet.)

"A Sinner's Diary," a sequence of musical mementos by turns meditative, agitated and darkly comic, showed Robert Sirota at his most resourceful, fully exploiting the possibilities provided by combining two violas, cello, flute, piano and percussion. "Remembrance," a tribute to a late colleague, offered four sonnets by Shakespeare set in tart, gangly lines, well sung by Charlotte Mundy, a soprano.

The concert ended with "Twelve Days," a puckish, engagingly kaleidoscopic reworking for six violas of "The Twelve Days of Christmas" fashioned by Mr. Sirota for Nadia to play with recorded backing but performed here by a sextet. In an evening spent giving thanks pre-emptively to a man who will be on the scene until November, it's small wonder that Christmas should come early as well.

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