

Orchestral Music Fresh Out of the Oven: *IT'S HEAR & NOW*

By Sheryl Ratcliff

There are a handful of composers who will likely always be considered the grand poobahs of orchestral music. Among them are the classical giants like Ludwig van Beethoven, the inimitable Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and the king of raw emotion, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. But rising up amongst the shadows of these Herculean talents is a movement of new music by composers of the 20th and 21st centuries, music so vigorous and captivating that it could well bloom into the concert hall staple of the coming centuries.



Conductor Pierre Simard

On May 27 and 28, the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra gives voice to these composers in *Hear & Now, A New Music Festival*. The CPO's former Associate Conductor Pierre Simard returns to Calgary to conduct this two-day celebration of modern music that includes the world premiere of his own piece, *Passacaglia*. "We cannot downplay the importance of new music because any music at any given time has

been new," says Simard. "Orchestras play old music now but at one time Mozart's, Beethoven's and Schumann's music was just fresh out of the oven."

Contemporary orchestral music gives composers a much freer reign in creating their own musical language without the compositional restraints of yesteryear. Simard explains that "music from older times was functioning in a very strong frame of reference. They had a set of musical parameters to work with. For instance, the first movement *had* to be a sonata form. Those parameters are completely gone now. Each composer writes what he wants and it's really a reflection of the world in which we live. It's a sign of the times."

Joining the CPO for *Hear & Now* is Lara St. John, the phenomenal Canadian-born violinist who began playing the violin at age two. By four, she had made her first solo appearance with an orchestra and at ten made her European debut. Now with world-wide appearances and several top-selling CDs under her belt, she is described as a "high powered soloist" by the *New York Times*. (And to give you an idea of just how colourful and eclectic she is, her latest CD release is with her polka band, Polkastra, whose members hail from Canada, Israel and America. It's called *Apokalypse Now* and its tag line is: Would you like Sauerkraut, Poutine, Goulash or Hummus with that?)

She'll perform with the CPO on May 27 for a piece she considers one her favourites, *Violin Concerto No. 1 (Australian Postcards)*, by Sydney composer Matthew Hindson.

"His publishing company sent me this concerto back in 2002," she says. "People send me stuff all the time but I was struck by this one immediately. Of course I wrote to the publisher and got the score." In 2007, she recorded the piece with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra of London, England for her 6th CD, *Hindson, Corigliano, Liszt*.

"Calgary will be the Canadian premiere, and I'm totally chuffed that they're doing it because I think it's a fabulous piece and I think it needs to be heard," she says.

"Hindson *really* has his own voice. Somehow he manages to make music sound like the sun and the surf and sand and sea and sky. It's kind of incredibly enjoyable as well as being ridiculously powerful. In some bits it's *really, really* loud. Like you know, all hell breaks loose. But then, everything smiles in the last movement. It's just great fun. It's one little inside Australian joke after another," she says, referring to the fact that at one point, the piece even includes the theme song of a rugby team from Down Under.

Both Simard and St. John refer to a familiar public perception of new music being unapproachable, too intellectual, or in St. John's words, "angsty and random." "Do not fear!" laughs Simard. "Do not fear new music."

"There was this whole period of time during the mid 20th century when contemporary music got so far away from its listeners," he says. "It was becoming inhuman, if I may say so. They were taking the human aspect out, and we're

beginning to realize that now. That's the message that I want to get across, that the repertoire we're playing is extremely current. It's about stuff that happens to our audience members and around us. There is a strong emotional content."

St. John agrees, saying "I think that people have started to realize that there's a reason for me to express not angsty randomness, but beauty, and emotion and *passion*. I think (new music) is starting to find its own voice in quite a lot of youngish folks."

Festival highlights include St. John's rendition of *Australian Postcards* and also the world premiere of Simard's *Passacaglia*, a very expressive piece that stirs up images of dragons and magicians in fantastical musical theme. Also much anticipated is Joseph Schwanter's *New Morning for the World (Daybreak of Freedom)*, in which a narrator from the United States Consulate General delivers the famous Dr. Martin Luther King address.

Tickets and information for the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra's *Hear & Now: A New Music Festival* are available through the CPO Box Office at 403.571.0849 or online at cpo-live.com.

Violinist: Lara St. John
Photo credit: Sharon Gunderson

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