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Today is FRIDAY MAY 28, 2010

CPO Hear & Now New Music Festival

By RED50 FRI, MAY 28 2010 COMMENTS(0) ON THE SCENE

Review

The Calgary Philharmonic presented the first of two programs in the CPO Hear & Now New Music Festival on Thursday at the Rozsa Centre.

Bob Clark

Calgary Herald

Attending a concert of contemporary classical music premieres is akin to what Forrest Gump said about life being like a box of chocolates: You never know what you're going to get.

From what was heard on Thursday at the Rozsa Centre in the first of two programs offered by the Calgary Philharmonic (under the baton of conductor Pierre Simard) in its Hear & Now new music festival, you'd have to conclude it was a pretty good box indeed — outstanding, in fact, when it came to star Canadian violinist Lara St. John's performance of the Violin Concerto No. 1 (Australian Postcards) by Australian composer, Matthew Hindson.

Even if you were familiar with St. John's interpretation of the work on her acclaimed recent CD, you couldn't help being bowled over by hearing it performed live. The concerto is a lively work — brimming with humour, brashness and excitement in its outer movements, and filled with pastoral beauty in its slow movement. A virtual crazy quilt of musical references — Hindson comes across in this piece as a kind of latterday Francis Poulenc, drawing on everyone from Philip Glass, Gershwin and Leonard Bernstein, say, to Darius Milhaud and Bizet (the crazy "drunken" quotes from Carmen near the end of the piece) — the concerto avoids being merely pastiche, thanks to the committed and very expressive playing of St.

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John, who brings out the underlying sincerity of purpose and remarkable craftsmanship in the work.

Her strong, authoritative yet subtle performance was astonishing in its breadth and variety — eliciting gossamer lines of sound from her instrument at some moments and feelings of almost rhapsodic sway at others.

Preceding the Hindson concerto was the attractive concert opener — Perennials, by Vancouver composer Michael Oesterle. As the title suggests, the six short movements comprising this altogether clear and easy to follow work represent flowers, or more correctly, the spirit of those blooms that return again and again. According to composer Rodney Sharman (Sharman provided informed and succinct commentary on each piece on the Hear & Now program before it was played), Oesterle's evocation was effectively structured on the use of similar musical material over and over but in different contexts — which comes across, in listening, as almost a kind of theme and variations.

Other works on the CPO program included Calgary composer David Eagle's Precipice, a compressed score whose momentum of overlapping layers of sound builds nicely to an imagined vista that you sense is almost spiritual in nature; Sacred Journey by American composer Andrew Norman, a thickly textured, intense but not unlyrical work that resembles a relentless sonic climb towards some sort of religious ecstasy (the piece, we were told, was inspired by the connection between church layout and the crucified body of Christ); and Atlas Eclipticalis, by one of the great American theorists of late 20th century composition, John Cage.

Conductor Simard prefaced the performance of the Cage piece by holding up a blank sheet of paper for the audience, and then using his arms — as a kind of clock going between 6 and 12, over and over — so that members of the pared-down orchestra would know where they were in making musical sense of chance in their necessarily unique re-creation of the piece. Fun up to a point, but in an historically interesting way.

Next came A Missing Generation by young Calgary composer Joel Balzun. Inspired by the effect of genocide — above all, in 1970s Cambodia — on the generational continuity of families, the Balzun work displays an impressive mastery of orchestral writing that reminds you of Hollywood epic (a la Exodus)-meets-Mahler, especially in the big play on the major-minor treatment that Balzun accords his own variant on Frere Jacques for the bulk of the piece. Ending on a jubilant note, A Missing Generation struck an obvious positive chord with many of the younger members of the audience — as well it should, given the buildup of excitement that came through in the writing and the CPO realization of it. Clearly, a composer to watch.

The contemporary classical showcase concluded with Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Jennifer Higdon's Machine — a wild and very brief churning work that puts you in mind of the "traffic" sections of Gershwin's An American in Paris, only gone quite mad. Suffice it to say, it provided an apt coda to an evening of virtuoso music-making on the part of the orchestra.

You can hear more tonight at the conclusion of the Hear & Now festival.

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