

## High-quality, cutting-edge music

### Montréal Nouvelles Musiques

February 28-March 10, 2005

www.festivalmnm.ca

by Emily Hall

This eleven-day event comprised of nineteen evening concerts, six afternoon concerts, nine master classes, and eleven lectures, all of which drew a total of over nine thousand audience members. While the début *Montréal Nouvelles Musiques* in 2003 showcased the Netherlands, this second *MNM* featured French composers and performers. Among the long list of performers were the Parisian new music ensemble Court-circuit, and Britain's vocal quartet, the Hilliard Ensemble. The festival also provided an opportunity to hear several Toronto-based groups rarely seen in Montreal such as New Music Concerts and the Esprit Orchestra. Of course many Montreal "regulars" appeared, such as the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, Société de musique contemporaine du Québec, Nouvel Ensemble Moderne, Ensemble Contemporain de Montréal, Quatuor Bozzini, several electro collectives, and a range of younger student performers.

The award for the most all-encompassing experience must be given to *Quasar*, a saxophone quartet from Montreal, and to Jean-François Laporte for his composition *La plénitude du vide*, the result of his collaboration with these performers. Laporte's composition of over sixty uninterrupted minutes filled the entire concert at Saint-Jean-Baptiste church, in a cave-like atmosphere. There is nothing like a darkened church to set the mood. Layers of richly coloured unisons were amassed from both live performers (playing invented instruments in addition to their saxophones), as well as sound installations built by Laporte. At first, the tone was ceremonial and meditative; then somehow, imperceptibly, it built up to an

apocalyptic presence with sirens placed in various parts of the church space. The performers contributed to the spatialization by walking among the audience and in the balconies.

The addition of Toronto's Evergreen Club Contemporary Gamelan was highly enjoyable in two concerts. They premiered, along with the ECM, three new Canadian pieces by Linda Bouchard, Chan Ka Nin, and André Ristic. In *Le Matin des magiciens* by Walter Boudreau, the gamelan performed breathtakingly fast and virtuosic gestures while western instruments (played by members of the SMCQ) adopted the 5-pitch scheme of the gamelan.

The Bozzini Quartet presented a fabulous concert; my favourites were by Justin Mariner, whose ending indeed captured the gothic chorale, and Benedict Mason, who chose to fully address tradition in his monumental *String Quartet no. 1*. In the latter work, we get all the reminders of the past centuries, fragmented and re-worked into today's sensibility. Actually, it is not merely a sight-seeing tour of the string quartet, but a tour of the history of string playing - such as orchestral music, viol consorts, and folk-dance fiddle tunes. Because Mason uses good transitional writing instead of a disjunctive, cut-and-paste approach, the piece differed from some other post-modern music in that it smoothly flowed even through vastly different worlds.

A refreshing change was the concert of Jean Piché's *videomusic* presented by ACREQ/Elektra, and consisting of electro-acoustic pieces with video. Abstract images connoting the organic, the global, and the cellular combined with more identifiable visuals such as ghostly apparitions, city life, and panoramic scenes of the Indian countryside. The music was a mélange of acousmatic sophistication with techno grit and luscious soundtrack majesty.

The Esprit Orchestra concert under the direction of Alex Pauk and Denys Bouliane was an asset to this festival. Most impressive

was David Pomeroy's commanding performance as Seigen in selections from Alexina Louie's opera *The Scarlet Princess*, a testimony to her gifts as a rich and colourful orchestrator. *La neige est blanche mais l'eau est noire* could perhaps be one of Denys Bouliane's most diatonic and accessible compositions – high-spirited with compelling contrasts.

The opening concert, featuring France's Philippe Leroux, provoked the question, "Does every French composer always feel the need to be exciting?" which I considered throughout the festival's duration. Demanding an involved electronic setup, the series of songs by Leroux, entitled *Voi (Rex)*, employed the best electroacoustic sound ever heard in Pollack Hall, showcasing the new acquisitions of McGill's Digital Composition Studio under the direction of Sean Ferguson. Leroux collaborated with soprano Donatienne Michel-Dansac while composing, and we got to hear her astounding abilities in this Canadian première with the Nouvel Ensemble Modern. Notable was the elaborate duet section between singer and clarinet in virtuosic unison. The showstopper, however, was Leroux's (*d'*) *Aller*, with violinist Alain Giguère achieving the extremes of virtuosity.

The McGill Symphony Orchestra conducted by Alexis Hauser premièred Brian Cherney's violin concerto, a piece written over forty years ago, with Jonathan Crow as soloist. Also featured was Dutilleux's enchanting *Symphonie no. 1*, whose lush harmony and sparkling flourishes were deftly rendered by this student orchestra.

Another student group, the McGill Contemporary Music Ensemble, presented the famous short film by Luis Bunuel, *Un Chien andalou* (1929) accompanied by live music by Martin Matalon, *Las Siete vidas de un gato*. Matalon captured, in music, the precocity of the characters and established the sound world of the film's time period, the 1920s dance-hall, notched up to match the film's titillating surrealism. The consistency of the music's

driving rhythm heightened, by contrast, the seemingly incoherent stream of images in the film. Gérard Grisey's final composition, *Quatre chants pour franchir le Seuil* is a stimulating piece of static, textural music for soprano and ensemble. Ingrid Schmithüsen was the soloist, deftly shaping even the most demanding screams, cries, and high-pitched babblings. At times the fragility of the orchestration was noticeable, but the McGill students gave a moving performance of this unearthly and mortifying piece.

The two concerts by French chamber music ensemble Court-circuit were unequivocal favourites. The first concert exclusively presented Canadian premières, and was conducted by Pierre-André-Valade, one of the ensemble's founding members. The programming contained a heavy dose of high-energy music that eventually became a numbing experience. Nonetheless, it allowed listeners to witness the ensemble's impressive talents for this type of music, as well as to develop a better understanding of France's musical sensibility by showcasing three of her composers: Yan Maresz, Martin Matalon, and Phillip Hurel. The two highlights of this concert were Hurel's *...à mesure* and John Rea's *Accident*. Hurel was adept at handling a frenetic musical style. Instead of an "everything everywhere" attitude, he shaped an internal life for the instrumental parts by giving each its own melodic loop which was continuously elaborated and permuted. In *Accident*, Rea showed a Canadian's perspective towards the French idiom, making excellent use of this ensemble's specific abilities. The ending, however, adopted a different stance, with static, throbbing harmonies.

In their second concert, Court-circuit presented what proved to be a festival highlight, the Canadian première of Mauro Lanza's *Aschenblume*. In this piece for nine musicians, including a massive percussion set-up, Lanza risked exploring the utmost extremes of brashness, and succeeded. The

music was over-the-top edgy, fantastical, rhythmically hyper-complex, and violent in almost a farcical manner – drawing the listener into its spell of youthful energy. The whole program contained music with imaginative colours, with works by Benjamin de la Fuente, Marc-André Dalbavie, and Alexina Louie. Pierre Klanac's *La joie éclatante des jeunes époux* for sixteen musicians was a celebratory tarantella: exciting, vibrant, colourful, and riveting, with an emphasis on unusual harmonies in the higher frequencies. This demanding music was executed effortlessly under the direction of Denys Bouliane.

Lectures and masterclasses provided a meaningful counterpoint to the concerts. In her talk entitled *What it Takes*, Alexina Louie was generous in sharing her realities of life as a composer. Her engaging talk invited the audience to create solutions to the compositional conundrums she herself faced during various projects.

*Voi (Rex)* was the conduit by which Leroux discussed the mainstay of his compositional strategy: models. Some of the models he uses are: the actual shape of letters (translated into melody and rhythm using computer software), linguistic morphology, natural acoustic models and spectral analysis, figuration (an emblematic or allegorical representation of the meaning of the poem's text in musical terms), and finally, a model of the model (a kind of regurgitation-transcription process of the musical results of previously-used models). These disclosures, however, paled in comparison to the inspired aural result of his actual music.

Mauro Lanza gave a survey of his works and aesthetic interests, which tend toward a nostalgic playfulness with the culture of his youth. Toy instruments, *The Muppet Show* theme song, and sound effects from '80s videogames such as *Burger Time* and *Dig Dug*, have all made their way into Lanza's music.

Benedict Mason managed to cover a fairly wide topography, including a generous

amount of listening examples and an emphasis on his visual and extra-musical concepts. His recent work is difficult to truly grasp through recordings because they are large-scale, building-specific works involving choreographed musicians.

In his talk, Yan Maresz openly shared his musical opinions and preferences. Time, as expressed in duration and polyrhythm, is his obsession. His inclination towards music with a perceivable pulse stems from his early experience as a professional jazz musician. He emphasized his method of rigorously structuring some musical parameters while giving freedom to others. Most importantly, he articulated his belief that each piece of music should have some unique characteristic that will impress itself on the listener's memory.

Compared to MNM 2003, the logistical organization of this year's festival was noticeably improved in two ways. First, the free shuttle-bus transportation to and from concerts and other events was invaluable, since there were often two concerts at different venues in one evening. Second, the post-concert soirées, sometimes hosted by minor celebrities, were a successful addition, providing a place for an open-minded exchange between public and artists. One such evening featured a reading about outer space by poet Raôul Duguay, accompanied by the audience's throat singing.

All in all, this year's MNM was a worthy successor to the last one, with even more events and higher attendance. Montreal's new music fans got a concentrated dose of high quality cutting edge music from Canada and France, and they are most likely looking forward to the next MNM with eager anticipation.

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