

# Montreal/New Music International Festival: 3<sup>rd</sup> edition

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by Emily Hall

Montréal Nouvelles Musiques' 2007 festival proved to be exceptional this year, teeming with experiences and ideas whose impact lasted long after the festival ended.

Getting off to a strong start, a whopping four-hour concert in three parts was presented by different electroacoustic entities from Montreal in collaboration with the Society for Arts and Technology (SAT). A forty-five minute work encompassed the first part: *Cristaux de temps hiver* (2007), composed and performed live by the electroacoustic quartet Theresa Transistor. The performers turned knobs, talked into microphones, and used their computers to create an ambient work that, at times, evoked the isolated feeling that the winter cold burdens us with. In contrast, lively sound sources speckled the piece - the spinning of car tires in the snow, the city's snowplough, and even sound bytes from *Sleigh Ride*.

Part two of the evening was presented by Réseaux and the Conservatoire de musique de Montréal. *Impasto 290406* (2006) by Christian Bouchard was a well-crafted and penetrating work inspired by abstract expressionism, and was indeed an "instrumentarium for spontaneity" as Bouchard described in the programme notes. A few examples: hi-pitched shrieking, sci-fi lasers, and rising gestures expounded by a chorus of voice-like sounds. *Matériau III* (2007) by Louis Dufort was visceral and physically shocking. Beginning with a watery version of *Impasto...*, we discover, among other things, white noise waves ending in firecracker textures, natural sounds like geese and rain, music box

melodies, and a sudden ending. *Nuit* (1997-2001) by Yves Daoust was a soothing escape into meditative washes, without succumbing to new age soundscapes. His sounds give a sense of openness: air through tubes, rushing rockets, crickets chirping and a starry night sky. During this second section of the evening, a series of three music and video works—*Treelogy* by the duo Milliseconde Topographie—punctuated and contrasted the other compositions by emphasizing pitch (major-seventh harmonies) and steady beats influenced by pop music. The liberating landscapes in *Treelogy 1: She Under A Sherrington Tree* and the music box sound sources added nostalgia. In *Treelogy 2: A Portrait*, fragmented, artificially re-constructed movements of growing plant images glowed in unnatural neon green light. Though there were caressing sonorities, the beeping sounds evoked a heart monitor: if *Treelogy 1* was healthy, *Treelogy 2* showed signs of illness. Most in contrast with the first two parts was *Treelogy 3: Orchid*, all macabre greys and blues. It seemed to be a post-mortem of a dead orchid whose jittery movements, evoking scientific CSI scans, effectively followed the accompanying glitch-based music.

The third and final part of the evening, the world premiere of *Spatio Lumino*, was in true musique actuelle flair. A committee of composers created this work (Dauphinais, Hamel, Lalonde, and Smith) for six seasoned improvisers and a light code designed by Éric Belley. Light – its colour and intensity – became the interface through which written and improvised music came

together. Imagistic sounds were central here, particularly of the animal variety. First there was a rainforest - fluttering, cawing, laughing monkeys, thunderstorms, with intermittent bluesy harmonies. Then a savannah complete with trumpeting elephants, tribal drumming, mouth harp, and didgeridoo. Not forgotten was a foray into farm life where the bluesy harmonies become raunchy, cabaret-like, with the sounds of cows, roosters, cats and even a vacuum cleaner.

Brady's *Sound Off* (1983) was performed in the foyer at the Palais des congrès on a Sunday afternoon. Tim Brady and Walter Boudreau directed two antiphonal groups totalling over 100 young musicians from Cégeps and other schools. *Sound Off* presents simple, playful ideas despite the original intention as an angry expletive. Don't get me wrong, there were plenty of cluster swells. Think Scelsi, but louder. Perhaps it was the unusual setting and younger-than-usual musicians that created a refreshing purity (or an illusion thereof?). In any case, there was something special beyond just making a lot of sound. More, please.

The Ensemble Contemporain de Montréal (dir. Veronique Lacroix) paired with Victoria-based Aventa (dir. William Linwood) for a concert beginning with festival guest composer Moritz Eggert's *Pong*, named after the first computer game. Like life itself, Eggert explains, the basis of this game is "objects in motion that hit or miss each other." We witness the seven "players" as they either miss the notes or successfully pass them on to others. The start is pointillistically slow, progressing to faster, erratic rhythms, and climaxing to an extreme rapid succession of repeated notes. We hear a breathy sigh of relief from the pianist, and then a faint pizzicato concludes this percussive and corporeal music. Two of the vocal movements of *Moon-Pain* (2003)

by Danish composer Klaus Ib Jorgensen featured the soprano Janice Jackson. *Moonlit* was an intense movement that hypnotically showcased Jackson's ability to transform extended techniques into powerful means of communication. Constricted vocal sounds – fricatives "b", "t", "pt", vocal multiphonics, chromatic melodies, scratch tones, glissandi, tantalizingly high pitches – all combined to create a hyper-dramatic frustration bordering on masochism. *Lunar Land* imaginatively evoked a moonscape with suspended space, isolated actions and stimulating silence. Somewhere, high up in the vast blackness, we hear a howling at the moon, upon which the music takes us back down to the smoky, dusty earth. Jacynthe Riverin was a mesmerizing soloist in *Adonwe* (1994), a piano concerto by Michel Gonneville that provided a highlight ending to the concert. *Adonwe* is the name of the identifying personal chant that Iroquois adolescents receive during their rite of passage. In eight parts, Gonneville depicts the musical instruments as characters in this ancient story - the piano as the boy that struggles to find his identity, and the orchestra as the outside world that the boy strives to consciously understand. Rhythm, texture and melody communicate the story's confrontations, evolutions and partial transcendence. Like the story, the music is sweet and simple, fierce and complex, naïve and mature: a testament to Gonneville's inspiring honesty as a composer.

In the concert titled *Que la voix demeure*, Peter Schubert directed both Cappella McGill and Les Chanteurs d'Orphée. A premiere of Chris Paul Harman's *Es Ist Genug* (2007) was a personal favourite with sustained notes, a complex pitch field, and a slow tempo. The addition of a double bass – a brilliant idea – bolstered low notes to the otherwise narrow register of the choir. Another McGill professor, Jonathan Wild, contributed *Ic*

*mun wax wode*, a simple approach to text setting often with repeated phrases but with an array of sound worlds. *Le Prince* by Isabelle Panneton was an enticing combination of whispering, recitative and singing. It had a reactive property whereby a secondary event would set a phrase in motion. There were three works by Ligeti including the significant *Lux Aeterna* (1966). This evening, I was affected the most by *Éjszaka* (1955). It accomplishes some of the same major ideas of *Lux Aeterna* but within a deceptively innocent platform of C Major against a persistent rhythm. *Reggel* is stunningly brief and simple. Its rooster calls, that might risk cheapening the music, are instead striking and euphoric.

Denys Bouliane directed the students of McGill's Contemporary Music Ensemble in the presentation of the famous Fritz Lang silent film *Metropolis* (1927), accompanied by live music composed in 1995 by Martin Matalon. The popularity of Matalon's movie music for *Un Chien Andalou* from the festival's 2005 edition, presumably prompted the festival organizers to bring him back, and the decision proved positive: the hall was filled to the brim.

In some ways, Matalon's soundtrack reflects how the modern day audience would likely receive this film of the 1920s. We are distanced from the film to an extent that it casts a dream-like aura by nature of its now old-fashioned and thus unfamiliar idiosyncrasies. (One of the hurdles, for example, is that it has no sound, which is a big adjustment for today's audience to make.) In step, the music is often dreamy and mysterious. But for all the cutting-edge advances in today's film industry, we do clearly see the extravagance of this production, and equally, the music navigates a wide palette of colours. At times, the music is mayhem, tapping into the confusion of the storyline or an aggressive

accompaniment during the turbulent scenes. Matalon is exceptional at using a particular sound or instrument to represent a character or scene. The transformation of sound follows the transformation of characters, such as the well-engineered choreography of the robot birth. The movie is filled with sexual overtones, and the electric guitar, as the ultimate sex symbol, fits seamlessly.

One reason the music and film combine ingeniously is because they share similar time dilations or paradoxes. Here's a very old (1927) movie about a far-distant future. It depicts a society, carefree and happy - usually signs of progress - achieved through archaic means of slavery and through dangerous and huge technologies (the steam engine). The soundtrack ingeniously hints at popular music conventions that are no longer cutting-edge, much like the archaic social structure in *Metropolis*. We see robots created with a 1927 imagination, we hear a 1980's jazz-rock fusion influence in a soundtrack written in 1995, and the two manage to combine spot on within the niche of retro coolness - in a tasteful way. Indeed, the modern audience too easily views old ambitious far-out movies, even those with sound, as if they were jokes, à la Mystery Science Theatre 3000. Instead, Matalon's score has an unwaveringly high artistic integrity and sophistication. In many ways, hearing his music helps us view *Metropolis* on a more direct level so we may fully appreciate its true originality and value.

Later in the festival, the reverse happened: a film was set to music. Jérôme Bosc's *Buster*, a clever montage of Buster Keaton clips from 1917-1928, accompanied *Fearful Symmetries* by John Adams, performed by the MSO. There were allusions to old school video games and plenty of tongue and cheek. At one point a text stated, "now you can watch the musicians...but just a little."

The Nouvel Ensemble Moderne (dir.

Lorraine Vaillancourt) performed a concert of three compositions by European composers. *Frankfurt Musicbox* by Manfred Stahnke, a festival guest composer, was lively in its frequent changes of texture, register, and expressions, confirming Stahnke's "music for the sake of music" approach. A microtonal scordatura lends an antique patina to this kind of portrait of a music box with peculiarities: "its pitch is not really stable, its pulse stutters. It is a living being, and quite a melancholy one in some passages," Stahnke writes. Complex, with fast rhythms and falling-running lines, it also felt something like a Renaissance chanson melody with its abundance of hocket. *Euclidian Abyss* by French composer Hughes Dufort was inspired by Barnett Newman's painting of the same name. Dufort takes full advantage of our sense of expectation for a music that "explores an immemorial archetype: the fall." We wait, and wait, surrounded by a misty atmosphere of drawn-out chords, trills, pizzicato and arpeggios. Finally, the pace quickens and the music gets lost in countless rolling scales, climaxes, and wave-like formations, which musically portray "the fall." Dufort creates a warm and symphonic sound using only an octet. The NEM also presented Philippe Leroux's *d'Aller*, during MNM 2005, and we hear it again closing this concert with the return of violin soloist Alain Giguère. For some, this would seem like poor planning to repeat from 2005, but this one deserves an exception. Listening to it a second time validated my initial impression that this is an extraordinary composition, and I wouldn't hesitate making it an MNM tradition for future festivals. "d'Aller" is successful because it equally and powerfully satisfies the cerebral and the intuitive while remaining clear despite a rather kinetic sound world. The music follows the laws of natural evolution, or as Druhen describes, "a

sound metaphor on the Laws of the Living". Entities of pitch, harmony, and melody are born, with the violin as the catalyst that sets them off and later interferes in how they grow. Heterophony is an appropriate texture, and Leroux uses it to trace the shape of a sine wave with tantalizing results.

Stockhausen's *Stimmung* (1968) performed by Paul Hillier's vocal ensemble from Denmark, Theater of Voices, was an unforgettable experience. In a half-darkened hall, positioned in a circle with a glowing white orb as their centre, the six singers begin. Pure persistent simplicity, the seventy-five minutes follow only a single major chord. Through repetition, vocal sounds are abstracted and deconstructed so that we perceive them with the fresh insight we once had as children: at face value, with all our senses awakened. Overtone singing, humming and vowels vibrate purely, weaving patterns among the six voices. Like a meditation, Stockhausen asks the singers to breathe "long, calm, and balanced." At once playful and serious, as a Buddha is both heavy and light with wisdom, *Stimmung* forms a prayer through a smile, offering a world we rarely get to hear.

Alexis Hauser led the McGill Symphony Orchestra in performances equal in quality to those of professional orchestras. The program's offerings included Chris Paul Harman's *Otogi no kuni e*. Harman was probably deliberate in omitting "concerto" in this piece for cello and orchestra, featuring Matt Haimovitz, which redefines the relationship between soloist and ensemble. Avoiding the bravura-role, Harman found inspiration in what he considers to be the most profound music of the cello repertoire: "in the slowest sections, with the simplest and purest of materials played without vibrato and filtered through the use of a heavy practice mute." Quite a few times I forgot the cello was even there, but this is part of its charm: an imbalance of

forces, supported also in the way the individual movements unexpectedly unfold. For example, endings sounded like beginnings. Conversely, rhythm was predictable, almost primitive, with driving pulses in the fast movements. Harmon provided secret glimpses of unique worlds, but quickly took them away, making me crave for more. This distances the listener; the music becomes a rare artefact, like a magical but dangerous potion in a fairytale story that must be placed far from reach for our protection. After all, the title means “towards a fairytale land” in Japanese. Non-traditional instruments embedded the orchestra; their novelty indeed provided an enchanted backdrop, especially the cimbalon. The accordion came out finally in the last movement, like a train going into a dark tunnel, with low moans from the double bass.

Toronto’s Continuum ensemble made the short journey to Montreal for performances of, among others, two Jules Léger Prize winners. Austria’s Klangforum Wien previously performed Yannick Plamondon’s *Autoportrait sur Times Square* at MNM 2003. Continuum was the commissioning ensemble so it was great to hear them perform the work this time. With squeaky-high extremes, the music contains daring grotesqueries. Plamondon bravely touches on an integral aspect of his generation, one that grew up with the tendency to hold up to itself a sarcastic mirror. While the music’s propulsive behaviour keeps our attention, the music can also be sweetly melodic, delicate, and slow. The last three minutes of *Autoportrait...* adapts Nine Inch Nails’ *Hurt*, itself a song that mixes the fragile and the brutal. Plamondon removes the melody and gradually shapes what’s left into an ebbing, beautifully floating, and moving conclusion. And while he can acknowledge and portray his pop-cultural influences in a positive

light, at other times, paradoxically, he employs them in a self-mocking way. A distorted version of *Star Wars*’ widely recognizable *Imperial March* appears in the third section. It does itself sound grotesque (in the movie it blends with the environment), but here it’s like a gaudy billboard intrusion. Plamondon twists it to match in sound what he has it representing here: pop culture’s failure to present a whole reality of complexity and subtlety. People see only a cheap, one-sided view (in this case, an evil army of faceless clones) for the sake of an easily recognized, instantaneous drama. Artists should take risks despite anxieties over finances, professional reputation and artistic integrity. Plamondon’s risky self-examination produces a powerful work that openly embraces and repels the pop culture that shaped him; and we, by example, discover the contradictions in our own selves and influences.

The most recent Jules Léger prizewinner (2006) is James Rolfe, with his work *raW* (2003), written during the build-up to the American invasion of Iraq. The title is, of course, the word *War* read backwards. Rolfe examines J.S. Bach’s *Brandenburg Concerto no. 2* as filtered through Bob Marley’s *War*, Burning Spear’s *The Invasion*, and John Philip Sousa’s military march, *Stars and Stripes Forever*. Burning Spear’s roots reggae contains Rastafarian messages that call attention to social injustices. Bob Marley sings parts of Haile Selassie’s famous speech to the 1963 U.N. conference asking for disarmament of nuclear weapons. Sousa’s lyrics celebrate freedom, but as a glorification of military power that provides American citizens with liberty.

Do *raW* listeners benefit from knowing the socio-political underpinnings of the originals? Rolfe himself admits: “it was only afterwards that I noticed the [titles’]

relevance.” What outwardly attracted him to these selections, it would seem, were their abstract sound qualities: perhaps the drive of the Sousa with its strong cut-time “oom-pah” or its cutesy piccolo obbligato; the hypnosis of the reggae with its thick and heavy bass, its symmetrical rhythmic patterns and its simple repetitious chord structures. Interestingly, the march and the reggae have different messages yet they share sound similarities for the same purpose: to attract the masses.

For the most part, I didn’t – at least on first listening – recognize many details of the pieces referenced in *raW*. The work struck me as minimalist, contagiously witty and surprisingly playful and severe all at once. As Rolfe stated, “the constant running sixteenths of the Bach are by turns syncopated or silenced.” The result is a catchy, irregular rhythm with a steady underlying pulse that, along with its severe attacks and percussive approach to the piano, reminds me a bit of Stravinsky’s *Ebony Concerto* (1945) for jazz band. Continuum performed the work with excellent coordination and agility.

Martin Arnold’s *Moonlight on the Bluff* was absorbing. On the surface, the music is endearingly helpless. Like a fledgling bird wobbling along the grass, the music’s off-kilter, indirect flow is a curiosity. And, we hear it as if from a faraway perspective, as if peering through the opposite end of binoculars: somewhere here there is a truth, but we cannot define it because the picture appears too small. Its seeming impotence induces sympathy, but we also have an urge to see more clearly. The endless mystery behind the music’s purpose keeps us fascinated, and hearing it under the purposeful context of a live concert emphasizes this even more. In fact, it undertakes what Moritz Eggert tackled in the composition *Interior at Petworth*, performed at the earlier concert of this

evening, only much differently: Arnold defies a mode of operation. Like many wild baby animals, the music is not as helpless as we perceive it to be. Despite the loss of functionality of each constituent part, there is true craft at work. *Moonlight on the Bluff* presents new possibilities. Even the title of the composition is open to interpretation. The word *bluff*, as Arnold observes, has surprisingly diverse meanings and he doesn’t restrict it to one definition. Both modest and enthralling, the percussionist plays a long, quiet melody in parallel compound octaves, simultaneously on the marimba and glockenspiel. Arnold’s soft and inviting sensibility awakens ones enjoyment of the subtle timbres and silent parts of music. After the percussion solo, the music begins to flow and the musicians’ movements are like gentle caresses. A great treat to hear this live, and to hear this performed by the Continuum ensemble.

The sheer size of the festival made for the difficult task of limiting this review to but a few of the amazing experiences it had to offer. I had much to say that couldn’t stay—every turn stimulated the passionately curious during the thirteen days of experiences.

-Emily Hall

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