

New Music review: Evelyn Glennie and Land's End Ensemble provide spectacular evening of six premieres at the Bella



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Evelyn Glennie, the extraordinary profoundly deaf percussionist, played with the Land's End Ensemble on Friday. *JIM CALLAGHAN*

This past Friday night was a truly special one for Calgary's new music community and a milestone for the city's arts community as a whole. Land's End Ensemble hosted internationally-renowned percussionist Dame Evelyn Glennie its 20th Anniversary Celebration at the Bella Concert Hall, Mount Royal University, in a wrap-up recital of epic proportions capping off the new hall's exciting début series.

The sold-out concert was the month's hottest ticket in town, featuring percussion-themed premieres of no less than six new compositions specially written for Glennie by Allan Gordon Bell, Luna Pearl Woolf, Omar Daniel, Derek Charke and Vincent Ho, the ensemble's artistic director and concert curator.

Ho had pulled off a coup getting Glennie to come to such a special event and to take part in what was announced as her first-ever percussion and chamber music recital. Ho had collaborated with her twice before, notably on *The Shaman*, a percussion concerto that was performed at Carnegie Hall's Spring for Music Festival in May 2014. But for this remarkable night at the Bella, Ho created a new work of thunderous and often virtuoso proportions for drum kit and piano trio (see below).

Of course, Glennie is familiar to Calgary audiences in addition to orchestras the world over. She has performed with the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra numerous times and will return to do so again in the fall. But most important, it was clearly the pedigree of Glennie's performance acumen that provided an enormous inspiration to each composer. Everyone, artist and audience member alike, thrived on her virtuoso breadth. Every new work pushed the boundaries of her expressive energies, harnessing each composer's imaginative capabilities.

But truly it was her musicianship that spoke loudest. Glennie's unstinting preparation gave testimony to an interpretive maturity and professionalism we can only hope to see more and more often by other distinguished future invitees to the Bella. What's more, Land's End played unceasingly well all night, and often with cellist Beth Root Sandvoss stealing the show.

It was for these reasons that the concert was not to be missed and Glennie helped to cast our new music community in a perfect light, demonstrating that original, newly-commissioned composition is the quintessential ambassador of our contemporary culture, exploring topical issues, current ideas and our innermost feelings. New music, at its most vibrant and at its most relevant, is precisely what we need in our troubled times.

Percussion recitals in particular, with their tendency to produce a varied and potentially intense riot of colours, can offer a universe of sound and rhythm that tends to accrue emotionally to greater, additive, aesthetic possibilities. Percussion instruments' organic representations of the many pulses of life within each of us can also lend an effect of relatable immediacy.

The Land's End concert was not only a celebration of the ensemble's dedication to new music, but also an embodiment of laudable creative purpose, considering their commissioning of so many new works to be premiered in one night — a profound cultural need in our city. A gala night, a sold-out Bella, a star performer at her best in Evelyn Glennie and an enthusiastic audience, many of whom could be overheard talking about the music at intermission and after the show, all brought to life a memorable event that featured high-quality performances from everyone.



Percussionist Evelyn Glennie. *JAMES WILSON / -*

There were many outstanding moments. Allan Gordon Bell's piano trio *Markings*, inspired by "three phases of water" with picturesque parallel titles such as *Cirrus*, *Slip-offs & Cutbacks*, *Erratic*, *Chatter & Groove*, document the flights of water vapour, slow meandering currents across landscapes, and even the activity of glacial melt, but hardly glacial in pace. With the work's finale set as a *moto perpetuo*, Bell's series of programmatic epigrams seemed to be cast in a time-lapse photography aesthetic and attained a different level of intimacy and contrapuntal beauty that can only be called splendidly evocative.

Bell consistently finds new compositional ideas to work with when he creates musical naturescapes. In the future, there could be another Juno award in all this: no one can rival Allan Bell's acute geographic description of our nation's diverse landscapes. He stands as musical counterpoise to our country's greatest visual artists, except that Allan Gordon Bell is uniquely a Group of One.

But it was his second piece titled *littoral/liminal* (*littoral* means "by the sea shore" and *liminal* refers to "by the margins"), written for one crash cymbal and no mallet changes that was the most immediately curiosity-raising. How does one create a composition using only one sound source — a cymbal, no less? The work appeared to be a solo study cast in the Berio mould, exploring the expressive ranges and possibilities of one instrument, resulting in an entrancement of the cymbal's hidden, bewitching, spectral qualities summarized by subtlest shifts in pitch change and even some astoundingly fresh timbral novelties that were worked into the narrative astutely well by both composer and Glennie, who allowed the cymbal to ring at all times.

Often the piece seemed to evoke tones that weren't struck at all, namely the pitches A and E (and occasionally F). When I consulted the score, sure enough, they were there, but formed a sub-narrative underneath the immediacy of the mallet striking the crash cymbal. In effect, there were constantly two pieces in dialogue with one another: the first narrative was the immediate sound of the cymbal and the second narrative was a separately pitched, differentially rhythmized piece arising from the cymbal strokes. Here was a work embodying music more by subtle implication and less by the sonically obvious. It was a superb display, inviting the audience into an intriguingly different, meditative zone.

Such a splendid quasi-spectral piece, where the harmonics and their rhythmic oscillations comprise the actually work, and not the immediate cymbal-attack surface sonorities themselves, was a huge highlight for me. It was certainly the very opposite of the work that immediately followed, James Keane's abrasively ebullient Piece for Dance.

Keane's music is well known in the dance world (check out his recent work for choreographer Theo Clinkard with TW Pina Bausch, a beautiful piece), particularly his collaborations with Joss Arnott Dance for whom his Piece for Dance was commissioned. Here it was performed in its specially revised version for Glennie. Heavy on tom-tom and bass drum and performed to powerful shifting accents at a breakneck 150 to the quarter, the audience was pinned down by Glennie's impressive solo virtuoso display whose musical narrative stood quite often at cross purposes to all the commissioned pieces we had heard.

Originally titled Wide Awakeing (appropriate considering its overpowering triple forte passages), Piece for Dance would have read just as well had it been titled: Concerto for solo percussionist in the Xenakis style, pre-recorded electronica rhythm section and tape loop. Cast in three distinct parts, the middle section marimba solo featured Glennie playing complex cross-rhythmic passages that were recorded and looped back against her continuously played solo material. The work as a whole read as a virtuoso treatment of standard percussion instruments albeit cast in an impressive array of shifting textures, the A sections set at rattling loudness levels to wake the dead.

After the work ceased its final reverberations, I excused myself from the building to do some heavy math, trying to calculate the next time my internal organs might recover to once again vibrate at their normal frequencies. Yet, through it all, I felt as though the piece's overwhelming nature was an autobiographical sketch of sorts about how Glennie's sensory systems are brought to life by vibration. What stands for us as an extremely loud and bone-rattling experience must equate to a very different kind of sensoria-stimulated universe for Glennie, one I'm convinced she was trying to demonstrate in a manner that might translate best for us. However, what I took away most resonantly from Keane's piece is that we must accept that such a world, one in which Glennie lives every moment of her life, is something we can never truly comprehend.

There were many pieces on the concert programme that were ordered in a manner so as to broadly contrast one another, such as those of minimalist character. Arvo Pärt's *Spiegel im Spiegel*, written in tintinnabular style, made repetitive use of a melodic voice over an F major ostinato, or a repeated axial point on A, while a hand-crossing voice in piano (Susanne Ruberg-Gordon) provided the acoustic ringing. The idea of the work is to create a soothing hymn (in this version, for cello) while the piano part frames the melody with repeated notes that tintinnabulate the natural resonance of Pärt's carefully chosen chords, creating a sonic reflection of sorts that mirrors back and forth between voices (hence the work's title, translated as "mirror within mirror"). The effect was a success for the most part.

Likewise, a splendid performance of Derek Charke's *Tree Rings* for violin and marimba made a decided impact on its audience chiefly for its thoughtful and musically engaging story. A fine staged moment at the beginning set the improvisational feel of the work, featuring John Lowrey's *senza misura* off-stage entrance from the back of the Bella.

Tree Rings is a condensed tone poem in quasi-cyclic form emulating the life cycle of a majestic tree. Each minute of music could mysteriously encapsulate decades or even centuries of the tree's life as told within its internally mapped-out ring structure. The conceit is doubly effective: the cycling through of ideas from section to section added to the imagery of temporal compression depicting tree rings metaphorically traversing time, evinced brilliantly through the work's arpeggiated violin line and final section of impressive ostinato mallet playing. Here is a splendid work, one that needs to be heard several more times to be understood better still.

Luna Pearl Wolff's *Entanglement* was inspired by *Mélange à Trois*, an instrumental theatre work that featured percussionist Krystina Marcoux who used the body of a cello for her instrument. Here the premise is smartly transformed into a piece listed as a cello and percussion duo. However, the work is really a cello solo work overlaid, quite literally, by Glennie's arms appearing to percuss the instrument while she hunches behind Sandvoss who bows the same instrument. While the cello is bowed by one player and struck and caressed by the other, it appears that Sandvoss suddenly is using four arms to play, giving the instrument a sensual quality, perhaps best summarized as an opera aria for cello, entangling a dramatic theatricality and an erotic intimacy between instrument and performer(s).

Woolf seems to have carefully considered the relationship of physicality to the performers' bodies, for example their height, physical performance characteristics and their physical relationship with the instrument. Set in shards of imitative Bach cello suite fragments, and buttressed with non-tonal impressionistic properties, both percussive or spectral, the discontinuous narrative was something to be experienced, and far less so to be analyzed. Entanglement summarized well our own semi-conscious relationships with bodies as sonic conveyors, whether it be our own body relating to another person, or how we relate resonantly to the unique acoustic nature of each instrument we encounter, as though each instrument were equivalent in vibrancy to a person's body. A telling moment came when Glennie picked up a spare cello lying on stage, percussed it as duo partner while Sandvoss bowed her own cello, relating one acoustical body to another albeit in a fresh yet unconventional manner.

In the end, however, it was when Sandvoss, at the conclusion of a very good performance, was caressed too by Glennie, as though cello and performer had become one and the same body. Here, the work best conferred the idea that Glennie was Geist to both cello and performer — a striking image about music and our acoustical relationship to it through the innateness of deeply felt rhythmic vibration, elucidating our permanent entanglements with such deeply intimate musical experiences, an important recurring theme throughout the percussion recital. Very enjoyable, and the perfect piece to introduce Glennie onstage after Bell's sublime Markings for piano trio.

It might be stated that Entanglement, with its interesting Bach-like memes serving as musical groundwork, might certainly be re-worked into multiple directions. My guess is that there is more artistic room to grow this idea into a series of acoustical/bodily creations that would yield tremendous promise for a whole collection of pieces — perhaps a series of six “entanglement suites” — making use of many different kinds of instrument relationships.

STELCO by Omar Daniel, was another well-conceived piece, this time featuring metal clangs imitating the sounds of industry, equilibrated well to the sonic facsimiles of the piano. Scored for vibraphone, two bells, marimba, and piano, the work tells a compelling and ghostly narrative of a world not so much gone by but closed down forever, consigned to our historical and acoustic past, but here brought to life with worthy fascination.

Endlessly inventive complexities abound in struck sounds eliciting rich steel harmonics and their timbral worlds, here made to live again in piano and percussion. Ghostly apparitions of coal-fired ovens and workers long passed who toiled there, including one of my own family who was very close to me. The piece was often more tintinnabular than the Pärt and wholly suited to a fascinating study of what comprises the specialized timbral world of metallic factory sounds, seemingly unleashed from their human rhythms, and how they might echo and resonate if they were left to para-sympathetically vibrate their histories through time. It was a successful and at times eerie piece, but possibly in need of a slightly extended title. Perhaps STELCO Echoes?

To end the evening came Vince Ho's Kickin' it 2.0 in four sections for piano trio and drum kit. Twister, the first movement, was a truly technical finger twister of bracing velocity, ruthless in its incisive rhythms and well conducted by Karl Hirzer. The middle movements, Filigree, with its floating sounds, and Cadenza, a wholly improvised piece at the discretion of the ensemble which featured muted shards of Brahms, Tchaikovsky and Elgar, allowed for some beguilingly interesting passage work to freely emerge from the ensemble's creative brain trust.

But the finale, Burn, a relentless moto perpetuo homage to an older two piano-two percussion work written by Omar Daniel of the same title, made the most impact. Here, even the string players were seemingly playing a percussion instrument and with stunning velocity and coarse bow-work.

The evening ended with a powerful and energetic reminder of what percussion music can be about when its intensely idiomatic conventions are translated with deft skill into all instruments. Ho's Kickin' it was a tribute to percussion as rhythm, haunting timbre, and pure power, an aphoristic anthem to all percussion pieces everywhere. What a positive success and a formidable way to end the evening, with Glennie kickin' it to the end.

While we are eagerly awaiting Land's End Ensemble's twentieth anniversary recording to come out this fall, and my hope is to review it when it makes its appearance, it is also very appropriate to hope for a new-issue recording of this concert, one that marked a turning point not only for new music in Calgary, but for all the performing arts in firmly establishing our city's place as a preferred new music/contemporary arts destination.

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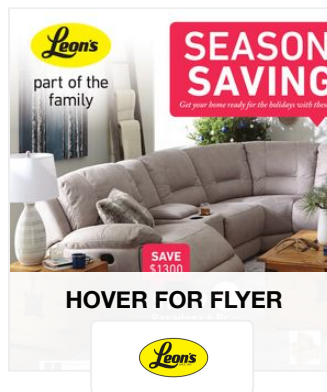


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