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Theatre

New Music Notebook: Ilkim Tongur, Zosha Di Castri give premières at Land's End concert

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Curtis Anderson and Shane Fage: Land's End Ensemble: Violinist John Lowrey and pianist Susanne Ruberg-Gordon.

In this inaugural instalment of New Music Notebook, a semi-regular column that examines new compositions by Calgary composers and reviews new music concerts featuring composers whose works are presented in the Calgary performing arts scene, I look at two pieces heard in January during Forum 2014. Both works were part of the first half of a wonderful Land's End Ensemble concert whose highlight was the remarkable song cycle by Peter Maxwell Davies "Eight Songs for a Mad King." (See review here).

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Of the four pieces programmed for the first half of that event, perhaps the most interesting was "Yakamoz" by University of Calgary doctoral candidate in composition Ilkim Tongur. The work's title means, as best can be translated, "Sea Sparkle" and evokes the movements of a bioluminescent marine life form (*noctiluca scintillans*) living in the nearby Istanbul waters. When disturbed, these sea creatures fluoresce on touch and can be observed *en masse* to produce lovely night-time hues in the visible blue light spectrum with an added sparkling effect.

Ms. Tongur is a composer already in possession of tremendous confidence and shows astute use of her instrumentaiton. For example, to represent the Sea Sparkles' habitat within two directionally opposing water confluences, she has represented the rivers with two contrasting themes. Before her piece was debuted, Ms. Tongur stepped forward to the microphone and announced that the themes "don't always fit well together, although sometimes they do." The phosphorous sea creatures were made to sparkle beautifully in Susanne Ruberg-Gordon's piano playing. This was a first-rate performance and a very busy evening for the diverse pianist. Here was only one work of many in which Ms. Ruberg-Gordon achieved the finest balance, acting as both the core sound [illegible] Moreover, she kept the brightness of her unwieldy instrument to a minimum, ensuring that the acoustical combination of hall and piano was continually striking the perfect balance.

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There were equally beautiful moments from violinist John Lowrey and cellist Beth Sandvoss. Ms. Sandvoss' eerie sul ponticello passages created the perfect atmospheric dive into the two opposing currents, ably painting the mysterioso effect. With a nuanced lyricism, Ms. Ruberg-Gordon's playing was at its subtlest throughout these chordal passages, navigating a perfect flow through the opposing rivers, entirely played in a contrapuntal manner in both string lines, culminating in the apex of the work – a perfectly fluorescent after-thought. Whether the motives crash together in the B section, or the sparkles are ethologically portrayed in a winsome high solo from Mr. Lowrey's violin, this work presents an endless variety of beautiful images. Lovely piano tremolos fluoresce before our senses, the work dissolves, and a completely successful work comes to a close. Ms. Tongur has made a remarkable splash with this lovely work.

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After the humorous Satyricon-inspired performance-art piece "Impotentia Coeundi" by Arne Gieshoff, divertingly performed by Laura Jayne Bowler, we heard "La forma della Spazio" by New York composer Zosha Di Castri. Inspired by the famous mobiles of Alexander Calder, Ms. Di Castri has created a complementary sonic effect that places individual instrumentalists throughout the hall in a surround-sound formation, with flute at the hall's back-left and clarinet back-right. The title of the work implies contemplation of space as though it were the epicentre or inherent driver of the narrative time domain.

And what better place than the Rosza Centre to perform this interesting piece. With piano to our left on stage, cello to our right, and violinist John Lowrey on a riser stage centre, Ms. Bowler conducted. Mr. Lowrey played beautifully, virtuosically, on repeated notes and broken angular chords, acoustically tweaking the space with pulses and spectral experiments, particularly in the lovely pointillistic opening. The pinging of the space lends a peculiar effect of instrumental transposition and timbral novelty, particularly when instruments combine their sounds. Even though the eye/brain sees the instruments, a curious sensory transposition takes place between auditory and visual modalities – timbres combine, and can even momentarily appear to be originating from switched sound source locations.

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Accomplished to excellent effect, Ms. Di Castri's work is a high-wire act of exquisite timbral balance that is brilliantly conceived around original resonance qualities. The work manages to be lyrical despite its conflation of separate fragmentary narratives in space and time conjoined to make their own kind of narrative wholistic logic.

One also can imagine that the work must sound very different depending upon where in the audience one was located. In this way the piece acts potentially as multiple pieces at once, depending upon where one happens to experience the spatiotemporal narrative.

High praise must go out to Ms. Bowler, for it was a considerable accomplishment to conceive of and conduct this work, in effect finding the best way to make it come together as well as it did using a blend of musicality, intuition, experience, and expertise.

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"La forma della spazio" is a solid and uncompromising success. I hope that Ms. Di Castri continues to compose in this creative vein for differing acoustical types and soundscape venues, experimenting with different instrumental and timbral combinations. I look forward to hearing more.

We also heard a fine performance of "Sturzstrom" by Christopher Mayo, a work driven by the the gestural conceit of downward falling streams in rhythmic and motivic cascades. The work's neo-minimalist cast and astute blending of wind instruments achieved a pleasant spectral balance. This is a subtle and difficult work that I should like to hear again, in a different setting. Mr. Mayo's work carry a great deal of sophistication to them that require multiple performances so as to achieve balance, and to that purpose, Land's End certainly did justice to the work, particularly at the furious climactic points of the piece. I would like to hear more of this composer's work.

Photo credit: Curtis Anderson and Shane Fage: Land's End Ensemble: Violinist John Lowrey and pianist Susanne Ruberg-Gordon.

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