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MUSICANADA 77

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This Festival of Canadian Contemporary Music, which took place at St. John's, Smith Square, between November 4 and 15, left me with mixed feelings. In fact, it gave rise to a strong sense of cultural schizophrenia. Having lived in Canada for some time, I was pleased to see so much effort being put into the promotion of Canadian music in this country, and was anxious to see these efforts come to *successful fruition*. On the other hand, I was concerned that few countries have such a wealth of excellence in the field of contemporary music as to be able to sustain a six-concert, 37-work festival in one of the world's largest musical centres. In the event, my English-born cynicism proved more appropriate to the occasion than my Canadian-inspired optimism. So from a position moderately west of the Azores, and on the basis of attending three concerts (my real geographical location north of the Trent prevented me going to the three week day concerts), I will attempt to resolve my schizophrenia and provide a balanced account of the proceedings.

The most successful works in the opening concert (given on Friday November 4 by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, conductor Mario Bernardi) were R. Murray Schafer's *Son of Heldenleben* and Jacques Hétu's Piano Concerto. *Son of Heldenleben* is a satirical tribute to Strauss's tone poem. Its basic motivic material is two series derived from the opening theme of the original, while direct quotations become increasingly obvious and amusing as the piece progresses. With the enormous forces it requires (a full symphony orchestra with a 35-instrument percussion section — not to mention a piano and prepared tape), the work at times gave rise to a texture reminiscent of Polish colourism, and against the background of Schafer's soundscape work it was not difficult to imagine Strauss's flowing melodies and conventional harmonies struggling to be heard through the cacophony of the modern-day world. Hétu's Piano Concerto owes a clear debt to mainstream neo-classicism and a Bergian dodecaphonism, and lacks the originality of *Son of Heldenleben*. Yet with the possible exception of an undeveloped fugal entry in the slow movement, it is a finely conceived work which was more than suited to showing off pianist Robert Silvermann's Lisztian abilities.

Two concerts were given during the following week, one by La Société de Musique Contemporaine du Québec (Tuesday November 8), and the other by the Quebec Wind Quintet (Wednesday November 9). The next concert I was able to attend was given by the Canadian Brass on Friday November 11. For an hour and a half these five superb performers (the playing of trumpeter Ronald Fromm in particular leaves one lost for superlatives) joked, clowned (and played) their way through an evening of amusingly inconsequential works. Indeed, it was possible to detect a sense of relief when it was encore time and the Brass could throw themselves into Bach's Little Fugue in G minor. Tuba player Charles Daellenbach's verbal preface to

this encore verged on a surrealism worthy of Woody Allen. Is there a composer of strong enough disposition to write a piece for the combined talents of the King's Singers and the Canadian Brass, one wonders?

The following concert (The Festival Singers of Canada — Sunday November 13) had the strongest programme of the three I attended. It began with Clifford Ford's Mass, a sensitively conceived neo-Renaissance work of impressive dimensions which gave the world-famous choir ample opportunity to stamp their authority on the concert. At the close there was Harry Somers' *Five Songs of the Newfoundland Outports*. The work incorporates many original vocal effects (such as the 'chin' or 'mouth' music used by singers to imitate unavailable instruments) and, with its sparse harmonies, unadorned lyricism and clean-cut rhythms, provides a good example of Somers' striking musical language. It is a magnificent setting which provided a suitable climax to the evening.

Bruce Mather's *La lune mince* and Istvan Anhalt's *Cento* made the most lasting impression among the remaining pieces. *La lune mince*, with its emphasis on vertical sonorities, betrays an extremely delicate ear for fluid musical timbres (particularly in the handling of soprano voices). By contrast *Cento* (scored for twelve voices and magnetic tape) explores the inherent sonic qualities of words by shuffling and scrambling its text — sometimes beyond recognition. The total success of *Cento* was unfortunately compromised by a preoccupation with the rhythmic possibilities of the harder consonants.

There was some good music to be heard during *Musicanada*, but there was also much that was mediocre or just plain uninteresting. From this point of view the festival was badly conceived. Although Canadian music has come a vast distance in the last twenty years (there was little but Edwardian pastiche in the early 1950s), it has not yet reached the stage where a major incursion onto the international scene is warranted. Only one Canadian composer is internationally known, and that reputation rests as much on work in education and environmental philosophy as it does on composition.

It would be realistic to say that Canada now has a solid base from which younger composers can reasonably expect to make an impact on the world of contemporary music. It would also be true to say that over the last 20 years Canada has produced a number of interesting figures. Against this background, it would perhaps have been better to put on two or three concerts which combined the country's obvious talents in performance, and presented carefully chosen works representative of the best that Canada has to offer.

The excuse could be made that the festival's intention was to present an overview of Canadian composition since the mid-1950s, but this is not an adequate defence. 'Workings in the margin' (and two pieces in the opening concert came into this category) are of interest only to musicologists. It seems more likely that the festival's shape derived from a current fit of cultural chauvinism. In the sense that Canadian composition is more than capable of standing on its own two feet, the chauvinism is about ten years overdue. But in the sense that the music has yet to 'go places', it has given rise to a degree of unreality.

The result of the festival might well be to hinder the future promotion of Canadian music in this country. That would be a genuine pity. However, in their attempts to throw off the remnants of a cultural inferiority complex, the powers that be (and it is unlikely that these are the composers and musicians themselves) seem unable to distinguish between that which is Canadian and good, and that which is simply Canadian.