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Timbres and tones of percussion abound

By STEPHEN PEDERSEN | Concert Review
Sat, Jun 4 - 4:54 AM

The Montreal Percussion Ensemble created something of a sensation in the Dunn Theatre Thursday night at the Second Highlight Concert of the 2011 Scotia Festival of Music.

After stunning audiences with the concentrated rhythmic macramé of Steve Reich's Sextet during Tuesday's opening concert, they produced a lighthearted set of polyrhythmic knots and splices with tin juice cans, a potpourri of shakers and woodblocks, a conch shell, several drums including a bass drum and a lion's roar, a suspended tenor drum with a cord dangling below it that is pulled slowly downward with a resin glove to live up to its name.

The ensemble's delightful play of timbres and tones, anchored by three sets of bongos and congas, made us all feel like five-year-olds discovering the thrill of furiously beating on a can or running about whacking anything that pops or tingles.

But it was serious fun, to quote Dartmouth composer Paul Cram, which was contrived by John Cage, America's most famous enfant terrible, as his Third Construction for Percussion Quartet.

We appreciated its whimsy while listening with awe to the ensemble's marvelous energy and concentration. The musical texture was produced by notated polyrhythmic phrases performed in different orders chosen by each player.

It and other such works influenced minimalists like Reich and Philip Glass to develop their own musical vocabularies of repeated phrases offset from one another to phase in and out, overlapping and lining up with the pulse, now on it, now off it.

Pianist Peter Allen played a Haydn Sonata (E-flat Major, Hob. XVI:49) following it with a lyrical and impulsively fiery Hungarian Rhapsody (No. 4) by Liszt.

Allen has specialized in the too-little heard and somewhat neglected repertoire of Haydn's varied and poetical sonatas. He released a superb CD in 1994 of 12 Haydn sonatas and one set of variations, which is still available.

His meticulously nuanced finger work alludes with remarkable effectiveness to the fortepiano for which they were written, the lighter, two-string-per-note ancestor of the contemporary three-string pianoforte.

Allen's Liszt, typically flamboyant and full-sounding, began with a startlingly original effectiveness owing to the echo of Haydn lingering in our ears.

The program began with the Blue Engine String Quartet playing Smetana's oddly disjointed String Quartet No. 2 in D Minor, written while the composer was locked in a life-and-death struggle to maintain his memory under debilitating attack by encroaching deafness.

Its fragmented phrases are lyrical allusions to folk music and dances, which never get to develop very far beyond repetition. Yet such was Smetana's skill and determination, they continued to make musical sense in the long run. The Blue Engine players played it with warmth and elegance. A sweet performance.

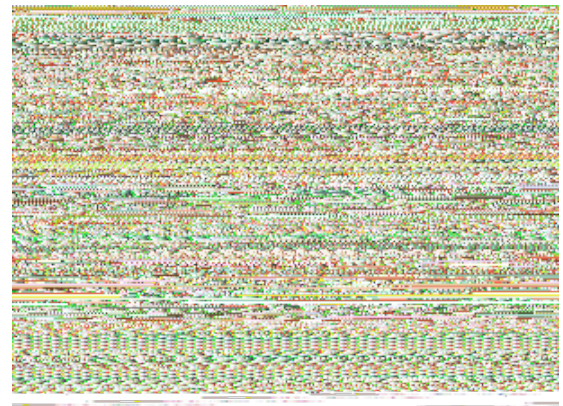


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Tuesday night's piano quartet of John Novacek, Jonathan Crow, Douglas MacNabney and Denise Djokic ended the program with Dvorak's Piano Quartet in E-flat Major. The work has its bravura moments. Each movement develops its themes with admirable thoroughness and a sense of having stopped just short of exhausting their interest.

This quartet of players is extraordinarily attuned to each other, generous in yielding the lead, exchanging prominences in particular passages, always supporting, always focusing on the music.

Stephen Pedersen is a freelance arts writer who lives in Halifax.

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