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Reviews of Classical, New, Live, and Living Music

New Music Concerts “MALAYSIAN VOICES” reviewed by Stanley Fefferman

Posted on May 9, 2011 by Stanley Fefferman

Sunday, May 8, 2011. The Music Gallery, Toronto.

Composer Chong Kee Yong, seen here rehearsing with David Hetherington, was invited by New Music Concert’s artistic director Bob Aitken, to curate a concert of ‘new music’ from Malaysia. What do we mean by ‘new’?

The music was ‘new’ in the chronological sense. Mr. Chong included his own compositions and work by T.I. Tajuddin, a contemporary of his, also born in the early 1970′s. There was work by three really ‘new’ composers born in the mid 1980′s. All the pieces were composed during the last 10 years.

Some of the music was also ‘new’ topically. Three compositions make direct reference to current events: the earthquake and tsunami in japan; the 2002 bombing of a resort in Bali; and the ‘murder’ of ancient Banyan trees in Malaysia—Chong Kee Yong’s own reflection on the “They take paradise and put up a parking lot” theme. These topical pieces all exploit the ‘anything goes’ ability of new music to create sonic images of chaos that dramatize disaster and express protest. But this music is not itself destructive or purely angry, and all the pieces exhaust their anger and arrive at endings full of “charms to soothe a savage breast.” The beastliness of things is there, but also the beauty.

Those of us in the audience who regularly enjoy the challenge of meeting the 'new' in music were delightfully re-'newed' by the blending of Chinese, Gamelan, and native Malaysian timbres and modes into the European-based new classical music mix. Many of the pieces, particularly two by Chong Kee Yong were elaborately orchestrated for from 7-12 players, distributed through the hall in surround-sound mode, but not all were good to hear. *Mourning the murder of an old Banyan tree (2002)* opened with really ugly sounds: piano pounding, clarinet and flute shrieking migranely, cello and violin groaning like overweighted floorboards and creaking like rusty hinges, while Rick Sacks on percussion cacophonated rush-hour traffic. It was Yeats' "blood-dimmed tide…loosed upon the world." Towards the end the mood changed and you could imagine the melody of birds and breezes in the Old Banyan arising and fading like the soft bong of a gong.

The three pieces that followed were hot and hotter. Adam Sherkin, emerging in Toronto as a pianist who relishes really difficult scores, astonished with his playing of Tazul Izan Tajuddin's *Torrent of Images—A Memorial (2002)*. This dramatic work contrasts rapid, repeated, dissonant, high register arpeggiated scales permutated with abrupt, jagged, erratic, random note-clusters in the low register. The work trills like an overexcited nerve and pounds like the pulse of a doomed victim. The drama is worth it, as is Sherkin's display of hand and ear virtuosity.

Chow Yun Yi's *A Night without Voices (2009)* for piano, percussion, winds and strings was based on an ostinato melody threading a gentle cacophony of instrumental voices that speak the language of chimes, soft winds and round, muffled drumskins. His theme is the persistence of nostalgia as a hedge against the march of time. Robert Aitken's conducting held the floating atmospheric feeling of the music within the bounds of palpable rhythm and precise ensemble work.

The outstanding piece of the evening was Aiyun Huang's solo percussion performance of Chong Kee Yong's *Bell Stone (2010)*. The composition was inspired by Mr. Yong's visit to a thousand year old 'bell stone' in Denmark which he says "makes amazing sounds when you hit it, like hearing voices from the past…." Aiyun Huang danced in her sonic apparatus jungle, chanting, wailing, humming, as she tapped, stroked, shook, rattled, scraped and beat on metal and wood with her bare hands, with sticks and mallets and bowstrings. The sheer variety and combination of timbres, rhythms, meters, tempi and cultural signals enchanted and mesmerized.

It is also interesting that this 'new' music integrates 'Nanyin', one of the oldest music genres of China. Like many of the works in this concert, *Bell Ston*e combines old and new genres to express the common drama of our life—how the past follows us as we journey forward in time.

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Posted in Reviews Tagged Adam Sherkin, Chinese music, Chong Kee Yong, David Hetherington, Gamelan, Malaysia, New Music Concerts, Rich Sacks, Robert Aitken, Tazul Izan Tajuddin

Talisker Players FAÇADE reviewed by Stanley Fefferman

Posted on May 2, 2011 by Stanley Fefferman

Tuesday, May 3, 2011. Trinity St. Paul's Centre, Toronto.

"Take care of the sense and the sound will take care of itself." Lewis Carroll.

What if the sense is Non-sense? What will the sound be like? Well, it should sound like fun. This night The Talisker Players bravely presented a fun evening of nonsense-put-to-music, recited and sung by some fine, flexible voices: soprano Xin Wang, tenor James McLennan, and reader Graham Abbey.

The program was a blend of contemporary Canadian and established British works. Three of Dennis Lee's poems from *Garbage Delight*, *Jelly Belly*, and *Alligator Pie* were set by Alex Eddington for soprano and string quartet (2002). Harry Freedman composed his comic chamber-music theatre piece *Pan* (1972) for piano, soprano, and flute around words drawn from North American Aboriginal languages: (nonsense to me if not to native speakers). Alexander Rapoport put music to his adaptation of the words of Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky*. The evening's title piece, *Façade* (1922) is an entertainment with music by William Walton and poetry by Edith Sitwell for reciters, flute/piccolo, clarinet/bass, clarinet, saxophone, trumpet and cello. On the whole, The Talisker Players deserve great credit for mounting an ambitious project to entertain us that for the most part succeeded.

Every part of the program was framed by an hilarious in-character reading by actor Graham Abbey featuring Alice in conversation with various insane, inane, Wonderland/Looking Glass characters. Xin Wang, a striking, elegantly dressed warm-voiced soprano, mugged her way without inhibition through the comic sonics of Dennis Lee's nonsense-for-kids verses. Alex Eddington's music was both very 'new' and comic at the same

time.

Xin Wang was joined by Ann Thompson on flute and Jeanie Chung on piano for Harry Freedman's extended work, Pan, that required the three performers to extend the techniques of their instrument besides performing their functions as soprano, flute, and piano. Beer bottle over strings, stamping feet, whisper, cluck, and shout into the piano strings, pulling faces, acting out a comic episode. The music appeared to have the performers doing their different things at the same time instead of appearing to be their parts of the same thing at the same time. Kind of a deviation into the aleatory. It was fun to let go into the apparent random impulsiveness of the work. I especially enjoyed the movement into jazz mode when Xin Wang sang scat while the musicians comped behind her.

James McLennan, a clear and melodious tenor, sang and comfortably recited the parts of Rapoport's *Gnat*, an entertainment in the spoofy, zany style of Johnny Carson's the Magnificent Carnac skits. McLennan shared the vocal duties in *Façade* with Xin Wang . The direction of their work here left me a bit adrift. I have always loved the collaboration Sitwell herself [featured in the photo] recorded with Peter Pears in 1955. It has the same essential style of *Façade's* first (1929) recording by Constant Lambert and David Lloyd-Jones. That style consists of keeping individual personality out of it, of eliminating self-expression and allowing the soundings of the words to come through their meanings in time with the music. In this way, the character of each singer remains iconic, as in *Commedia dell'arte* and therefore consistent throughout the varied moods of the 20 poems that make up the work.

Wang and McLennan each tried to be cute in various ways, failing to create their characters, and so lost the fun of the piece. The large ensemble that performed Walton's exquisite potpourri of musical forms played expertly, but too loud, often drowning out the reciters, who sometimes resorted to shouting, which also did not please. It was a case of too much of a good thing. Nonetheless, The Talisker Players are a good thing, very much so, for sharing the risk of new material with audiences in Toronto where the serious classical and new music scene could use a deviation into nonsense. The performance will be repeated on May 4, 8 PM.

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Posted in Reviews Tagged Canadian composers, Façade, Graham Abbey, Harry Freedman, Lewis Carroll, New Music, Pears, Sitwell, Talisker players, Trinity St. Paul's Centre, Xin Wang

Mooredale Concerts Finale: Brahms & Kuerti reviewed by Stanley Fefferman

Posted on May 1, 2011 by Stanley Fefferman

Saturday, April 30, 2011. Koerner Hall, Toronto.

Anton Kuerti's 2006 recording of the Brahms *Concerto for Piano no 1 in D minor, Op. 15* for Analekta with Joseph Rescigno conducting the Grand Montreal Metropolitan Orchestra is ranked highly among world-class recordings. Kuerti's playing is exceptional. He is imaginative but never showy; he takes chances but is never wayward. His range of tone and dynamic is wide and there is a sureness to the emotional thrust of his playing.

The piano enters after a very long, tumultuous opening orchestral tutti which is supposed to be a vigorous onslaught. And it was, though the tempo seemed to drag at first. Maestro Marco Parisotto leading the Ontario Philharmonic may have misjudged the acoustics of Koerner Hall, because the sound, particularly of the timpani and brass, seemed mindlessly shattering. Nonetheless, the warmth and intelligence of Kuerti's playing prevailed, and the first movement ended on a feeling of celebration.

The Adagio worked better with the orchestra keeping behind Kuerti's sweet, spacey, otherworldly reflectiveness. The winds occasionally overwhelmed the piano, but on the whole contributed some very nice colours to the introspective mood. The Finale was crisp and cohesive. Kuerti's light-fingered virtuosity was balanced forward in the rollicking soundscape of Brahms' rondo with its nods to Beethoven and Schumann. The ever-strident brass introduced Kuerti's masterful cadenza that twisted and turned like a wily fox and led the ensemble in its dash to the victorious finish.

Brahms was 20 something when he wrote the *Concerto in D minor*. He was in the midst of deep emotion concerning the madness and death of his mentor Schumann and caring for Schumann's wife Clara and her family. Brahms started his first Symphony in his early 30's and was well into his 40's when he completed it, partly because of the burden of expectation from his friends and public that he would be Beethoven's successor. *The Symphony No.1 in C minor, Op. 68* is the product of a great deal of pressure and much deliberation. It was a success. It is also huge, lasting up to 50 minutes.

Maestro Parisotto, to his credit, conducted without a score, radiating musicality in the flow and precision of

his gestures. The performance of the orchestra was a mixture of blessings: good timing, some passages of great textural beauty, and some roughness in dynamics. In general the climate of the first movement was limpid and clear. I enjoyed the lyric winds in the third movement, especially the clarinet, as well as the songfulness of the first violin. The opening of the last movement was dramatically executed and progressed in a fully voluminous way and measured pace towards the coda, and the tumultuous applause of a satisfied audience.

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Posted in Reviews Tagged Brahms, Clara, Concerto, Koerner Hall, Kuerti, Marco Parisotto, Piano, Schumann, symphony

Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson and ARC Ensemble @ Koerner Hall reviewed by Stanley Fefferman

Posted on April 27, 2011 by Stanley Fefferman

Tuesday, April 26, 2011. Koerner Hall, Toronto.

There is a life-affirming energy in Brahm's *Trio in A minor for Piano, Clarinet and Cello, Op. 114*. Brahms, in his 57th year, had decided never to compose again. By chance, he attended a recital by clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld. Brahms' decision to stop creating music was blown away by this performance and, over the next few years, he composed for Mülhfeld this trio, a clarinet quintet, and two clarinet sonatas.

The cello introduces the sombre, arching theme of the Allegro. ARC's clarinetist Joaquin Valedpeñas paired delightfully this evening with guest cellist Sharon Robinson. As if James Taylor were paired with Janis Joplin, the clarinet answers the cello's opening gritty, gutty emotion with delicacy—deep, warm and sweet. The clarinet makes elegant work of the recapitulation and the cello joins for a whispered rush to the movement's end. Dianne Werner took some time toning down the volume of her keyboard and by the middle of the Adagio movement she began fitting in. In this movement, clarinet matched rather than mollified the cello's emotion, a feeling that developed into a kind of love-story line by the third movement, and finished as a dark dance in the

forceful Allegro finale.

The most exciting composition of the evening was the *Suite for Two Violins, Cello and Piano Left Hand, Op. 23* by Erich Korngold. The Prelude and Fugue opens with a discordant cadenza for solo piano dramatically played by ARC's David Louie. The anxious, chromatic melodies of the fugue voiced by the three strings create an eerie impression that rises to rapture in piano trills, lapses into silence, rolls out in the lower registers of Bryan Epperson's cello, and resolves in deep piano chords punctuated by cello pizzicatos. Erica Raum and Marie Bérard have a lovely high-toned violin conversation before the cello brings the movement to a fully committed emotional close.

The Waltz is spooky, mixing the atmospheres of Vienna with a sinister, tango-laden Argentinian brothel. The Grotesque (3rd movement) is percussive, abrupt, jerky and obviously fun for the musicians. The piano ushers in a creepy mood, the strings follow, the mood turns sentimental in a piano solo that opens into a wide screen movie score by the whole ensemble that concludes in a rousing climax. The fourth movement is a song that has a Mozartian loveliness touched by the rich tones of a of a Mahler soundscape. The Rondo-Finale gallops away like a horse opera, reminding us that Korngold made his living writing some of the best scores Hollywood ever heard.

The featured Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio came onstage after intermission for Schumann's *Piano Quartet in E-flat major, Op. 47*, joined by ARC violist Steven Dann. The members of the K-L-R Trio have been together for 35 years, and it did not take long to hear their smooth drive taking every turn of the Schumann perfectly. The Introduction—a delicate tutti—ignited quietly like a Rolls Royce. The pianist Kalickstein rolled out a rhythmically incisive second repetition of the opening theme, but was meticulous in keeping his keyboard in sonic balance a bit below the string tone. Steven Dann's viola fit in seamlessly until after the midpoint of the Andante Cantabile third movement, where it sings the original melody nicely solo and in concert with the cello. The viola also features strongly in the fugue of the exuberant Finale. The cello and piano introduce an intricate staccato line that moves Schumann's final chamber work and a life-affirming musical evening, in a contrapuntal flow towards a climactic finish.

ARC is the acronym for Artists of the Royal Conservatory

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Posted in Reviews Tagged ARC, Erica Raum, Joaquin Valedpeñas, Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio, Korngold, Marie Bérard, Mühlfeld, Schumann, Sharon Robinson

Opera Atelier: La Clemenza Di Tito reviewed by Stanley Fefferman

Posted on April 23, 2011 by Stanley Fefferman

Friday, April 22, 2011. The Elgin Theatre, Toronto.

“Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done; her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden.” Sir Philip Sidney

If you found out that your best friend and the woman who expected to be your bride had became lovers and brazenly plotted to assassinate you, naturally you would want them caught and punished. But in Mozart’s golden (and final) opera, the plotters confess, are pardoned, and you thank them for helping you to rise above your instincts. Imagine!

Opera Atelier’s co-artistic directors, Marshall Pynkoski and Jeannette Lajeunesse Zingg did imagine a production that delivers a world of pure golden delight. Their players have amazing voices, are good looking, gorgeously costumed, enchantingly set, lit, and ornamented by a ravishing corps de ballet. It goes without saying there’s nothing wrong with Mozart’s music, and for a baroque ensemble and chorus, Tafelmusik, conducted by David Fallis can’t be beat. Given all this gloriousness, one can also see at a glance that it is the directorial vision that galvanizes all these excellent-in-themselves elements into the exciting experience of a work that has rarely been staged in the past 150 years.

Jean-Pierre Ponnelle’s 1969 production for the Cologne Opera, began the restoration of La Clemenza’s reputation, and Christopher Alden’s 2009 production for the Chicago Opera Theater conducted by Jane Glover kick-started a reassessment of this supposedly fizzed out, two-dimensional “opera-seria.” The Opera Atelier directors took the risk of producing this long-shot, and found their saving grace in Racine’s Berenice, where the characters come to life because they face and accept the flow that follows a difficult decision rather than escaping disappointment by dying. Instead of taking the brittle positions passions corner them in when events turn, the characters turn with events, accepting the demands of changing circumstances, forgiving each other’s weaknesses.

Of course, it still seems a bit absurd that Tito would propose marriage to three women in one day, and that none of the fatal miscalculations of the disappointed parties are punished. But somehow, the tremendous style

that unifies every detail of what happens on stage, and how it flows with the music, releases any pent-up absurdity the audience might feel in a catharsis of enjoyment.

Measha Brueggergosman as Vitellia, the twice-spurned empress-candidate is a feral presence on the stage as she unleashes the force of her jealous ambition on Sesto, her all-too-willing instrument. Her part in the trio "Vengo, aspettate" is magnificently three-dimensional as her voice and demeanour radiate confusion and horror that Publius and Annius are able to misinterpret as excited happiness over the news that Tito has finally chosen her as Empress. On a simpler level, the duet "Ah perdona al primo affetto" in which Servillio and Annio affirm their tie of love in defiance of Tito's matrimonial interest in Servillio is the first of several lyric joys as the trousered Mireille Lebel blends her stalwart mezzo with Mireille Asselin's sweet soprano.

Michael Maniaci as Sesto is electrifying. His "Parto, ma tu ben mio" and "Deh per questo istante solo" are deeply moving. His male soprano seems to rise to the top of any scene he is in, and his movements as an actor are sharply compelling, if a bit tightly wound. Kresimir Spicer and Curtis Sullivan respectively, as Tito and the courtier Publius, are both in fine voice, blending much needed male tones into the predominantly soprano texture of the soundstage. Spicer's "Se all'impero, amici Dei" is richly drawn.

Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra and Choir keep the magic of Mozart's music flowing like a river on which the voices float. Peter Shackleton's clarinet obbligato transports us to the exquisite pleasures of the Concerto and the Quintet for Clarinet. John Aberger's oboe obligato is another bonus passage. At any and all points, the elegant patterned movements of the dancers are a bonus. Speaking of movements, the one fault I find in the direction is that it all-too-often sends the lead characters crashing full-tilt into the side pillars.

If, as they say, opera seria is an acquired taste, Opera Atelier's production of Mozart's *Clemenza* would be the place to acquire it. It runs to May 1. Click here for times and tickets.

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Posted in Reviews Tagged Curtis Sullivan, David Fallis, Jeannette Lajeunesse Zingg, Kresimir Spicer, La Clemenza Di Tito, Marshall Pynkoski, Measha Brueggergosman, Mireille Asselin, Mozart, Opera Atelier, Tafelmusik, The Elgin Theatre, Vitellia

Tokyo String Quartet finish their Beethoven Cycle reviewed by Stanley Fefferman

Posted on April 15, 2011 by Stanley Fefferman

Tokyo String Quartet

Thursday, March 14, 2011. Jane Mallett Theatre, Toronto.

"Whoever has built a new Heaven has found the strength for it only in his own Hell." Friedrick Neitzsche".

Beethoven composed his last three string quartets within a few years of his death from prolonged, painful, multiple organ dysfunctions due to poisoning by the lead additives in the wine he habitually drank. These quartets are the music Beethoven wrestled from the grip of his Final Angel. Where other ensembles bring out the drama of Beethoven's defiance as he meets the inexorable gaze of fate, the Tokyo String Quartet create an effect like Leonardo's Mona Lisa, where rich feeling radiates from the depths of an enigma so at peace with itself that it can show a smile.

The *A minor, Op. 132* (July, 1825) sings at its core in an archaic hymnal mode giving thanks for new strength after the recent bout of illness Beethoven had endured; but the song of thanks also intones a profound, somewhat mournful resignation. Part of the enigma of this work is the constant start-and-stop alternation of happy and sad, quick and slow, flowing and staccato, solemn and dance-like, soft and loud. It's as if whatever feeling absorbs Beethoven in one moment calls up out of the depths its opposite, be it harmonious or dissonant. A low register drone like bagpipes evokes in the first violin a high pitched passage that sounds like "Chopsticks."

Another part of the enigma is a sense that the music "teases us out of thought." We are reminded of the music of the future. One hears passages whose figurations bring to mind music of later Romantic composers, be it Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Borodin, Rachmaninoff, Copeland or Gershwin:as if Beethoven had found the musical archetypes, a musical table of elements, for states of mind that have persisted to this day. Since I don't recall noticing this effect until this performance by the Tokyo String Quartet, I have to allow that it is a reflection of the distinctive polish of their playing.

The *C Sharp Minor, Op. 131* (July, 1826) in seven movements, may be 'the greatest quartet ever written'. It was composed during the time that the composer's nephew Karl, whom he regarded as a son, attempted suicide, and whom Beethoven saved by getting Karl accepted in a patron's regiment. It opens with a fugue

that looks back to Bach. The four parts of the fugue are based on a melody in which one can hear “The still, sad music of humanity”. A fast movement follows powered by the flying fingers of Martin Beaver on the first violin and Clive Greensmith’s cello plucked pizzicato like heartstrings. The flow is often agitated but the spirit of this movement is warm with Beethoven’s sense of freedom to do as he likes.

Richard Wagner referred the central andante—’theme and variations’—as the “incarnation of innocence.” The theme is simple, the scoring is uncannily skillful. Kikuei Ikeda’s second violin’s support of Beaver’s melodic phrases are subtle, while the first violin remains silent during Ikeda’s melodic turns . Kazuhide Isomura’s viola creates a fine contrast of long notes against the cello’s air-spaced pizzicati, and their double-stopped duets that follow are especially fine. The Tokyo give this movement an organ-toned, smooth, melting, texture shot through with the skylarkings of sonic highlights.

A playful presto followed by a mournful adagio brings on the martial finale that, again in the words of Wagner, “is the fury of the world’s dance…and above the tumult, the indomitable fiddler whirls us to the abyss.” The Tokyo abandon themselves to a craziness that dances with lamentation and prayer.

Beethoven’s last complete work for string quartet, the *F major, Op. 135* returns to an earlier style of composing. It is in the conventional four movements and is quite short—in Beethoven’s own words, “a circumcised quartet.” Though his health was precarious, and he was very short of cash, the work is cheerful in a Haydnesque way. In the score of the finale, Beethoven inscribes the idea around which his work last work revolves: “Must it be? It must be.” The movement begins with a question posed with slow, sad music: the music of the final answer is ‘glittering and gay.’

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Posted in Reviews Tagged Beethoven, Clive Greensmith, Jane Mallett Theatre, Kazuhide Isomura, Martin Beaver, Music Toronto, Tokyo String Quartet

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