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The Lateral Extension of the Orchestra

Brian Current

Review of *Touch*: A multi-disciplinary, multimedia gala concert celebrating Esprit Orchestra's 20th season. Friday, April 25th, 2003 the Jane Mallet Theatre, Toronto.

Solo Performers: Fujikio Imajishi, violin; Peter Chin, dance/choreography

Programme

Screening: *Inspired by McPhee* — Larry Weinstein director/producer; featuring Esprit's CD recording of McPhee's *Nocturne*.

Nocturne (1958), Colin **McPhee**, with dance and choreography by Peter Chin

O Java (1993), **José Evangelista**, with video direction by Bongo Kolycius

Concerto for Violin & Orchestra (1990 — 1992), **György Ligeti**

Fujikio Imajishi, violin

Touch Piece (2003)* **Alex Pauk**, for orchestra with multi-screen video projection, digital sound effects & electroacoustic tracks in 14-channel surround sound

Video composition: Colm Caffrey

Sound effects design: David McCallum, David Rose

Electroacoustic sound & audio creation: Darren Copeland

Media environment design & production management: Chris Clifford

Set design assistant & consulting: Jerrard Smith

*World Premiere — commission supported by the Laidlaw Foundation and Roger D. Moore

It has been difficult to say goodbye to the symphony orchestra. A museum, really: large groups of wooden stringed instruments with a spine of brass and percussion on a distant concert-hall stage. How curious that we could love it still. And yet it seems that this is not a sentiment particular to our own time. Despite our demands that it evolve with us over the centuries — its consolidation, its move out of the private home, its incorporation of the role of conductor, its weathering of the Romantic impulses for larger and larger still — the nucleus has remained remarkably intact. Even throughout the riotous twentieth century and the dazzling developments in technology where there would soon be “a union of electronics and instrumental forces where distinctions and even juxtapositions of them will scarcely be useful or interesting¹”, the symphony orchestra remains with us somehow, caught in the space between the need for preservation and the need for evolution.

The Esprit Orchestra, the Toronto ensemble devoted entirely to the performance of new music, embodies this tension. The group turned twenty this year and congratulations are due in force to its artistic director, composer Alex Pauk. Throughout its history, Pauk and the orchestra have not only provided Toronto audiences with pieces by well-known international composers — Berio, Takemitsu, Ligeti, Penderecki, Lindberg — but have also offered a nurturing space for a number of leading Canadian composers. “A whole generation grew up with Esprit”, said Alex Pauk at his home in Toronto, “namely Rea, Cherney, Koprowski, Louie, [Pauk himself], Evangelista, Burke. Our audiences could watch those composers evolve.” The orchestra has commissioned over sixty Canadian works, toured Europe and has released several important recordings of Canadian music, largely due to efforts of the indefatigable Pauk, who is persistently re-examining the role of the ensemble:

I think that the sustainability of the symphony orchestra will increasingly become a question. The relevance of that sound as an entertainment medium and an artistic expression for the generations that are now becoming drawn by so many other things — it's a question mark for me.

Experimental programming plays a large part in the orchestra's vitality and the concert of April 25th, Touch, is an example that is worth considering. Entering the hall, the sold-out audience was confronted not only with equipment usually associated with the extension of the orchestra — amplification, electroacoustics, signal processing — but also with several large movie screens directly above the stage, a move that laterally extends the orchestra into the realms of visual media. In fact, Esprit plans to explore multimedia combinations like this on an occasional to regular basis and, alongside traditional programming, to develop a cross-disciplinary milieu that will be made available to composers and collaborating artists in the future. It is thrilling to witness experiments like this — and above all, Alex Pauk and Esprit should be applauded for their pioneering impulse. — However, on the evening of the concert it was easy to be torn between wondering if the visual apparatus represented yet another step in the evolution of the orchestra or yet another stepping its disappearance. Or both. What follows are some reflections on the four pieces presented

1. MACHOVER, Tod (1986), “The extended orchestra”. *The Orchestra: Origins and Transformations*, Joan Peyer, ed. Billboard Books. New York.

over the course of the evening and observations on how they may have been affected by the cross-disciplinary environment in which they were presented. Quotes and excerpts are included throughout from an interview with Alex Pauk at his home in Toronto.

The concert opened with the 1958 *Nocturne* by the itinerant Montreal-born composer, Colin McPhee. One immediately senses Esprit's comfort with the music of McPhee and Pauk has referred to him not only as a positive force for the ensemble, but also one that has helped "to identify the orchestra outside of the new music realm". Certainly, despite McPhee's associations with composers like Varèse and Cowell and its relatively late composition date, the gamelan-flavoured *Nocturne* is largely conservative and rooted in melody and accompaniment along the lines of the American symphonists. There are, however, attractive features that oddly supersede its conservatism. McPhee's command of orchestration suggests Copland in its level of transparency and there is an appealing exoticism to the work's descending melodic lines, inflected by the now-familiar *Pelog barang* scale². Overall, there is a sense of effortlessness to the writing and an endearing sense of longing for the Island of Bali to which McPhee would never return. If there is a piece to draw broader audiences to Esprit, it should be this one.

The *Nocturne* was presented twice: first alongside a film cut to a recording of the work, and then live with the dancer and choreographer Peter Chin. During the first outing, it was telling that the orchestra sat silently on the pitch-black stage while their disembodied selves, the Esprit recording from their compact disc, broadcast the music through the amplification system surrounding the room. Intentionally or not, the audience was offered a vivid comparison between the sound of the live and recorded versions of the same piece, as well as the power of amplification to alter our perception of it. Generally, it seems that a composer's impulse to amplify concert music has been checked by the fact that speaker systems will inevitably modify the sound's timbre, creating a fairly easy choice: should the sound emit from a box designed by, say, Steinway, or a box designed by Samsung. However, it became clear during the performance that the line between these two is steadily shrinking and that after the nearly crystal-clear, omni-directional onslaught of the recorded version, ironically it was the *live* version that felt lacking in presence.

The easy-going charm of the *Nocturne* helped it to blend rather well with both film and dance. Larry Weinstein's short film, *Inspired by McPhee*, was a lively mosaic of colourful processions, traditional dance and gamelan orchestras juxtaposed with black-and-white archival footage taken by McPhee himself in the 1930s. As it was a silent film edited with a sensitivity to the music, the two works often found connecting points and the overall effect was of a blanketing, *Baraka*-like experience with very little trace of traditional concert music. When the piece was played a second time, live, there was an abrupt change from film-experience to dance-experience. Balinese specialist and choreographer Peter Chin, who performed in front of the orchestra on stage, created a constantly moving and seamless blend of

2. Slightly altered to our Western ears as the stepwise: Major 2nd, Major 3rd, min 2nd, Major 2nd. Lindsey, Jennifer (1992) *Javanese Gamelan: Traditional Orchestra of Indonesia*, Oxford University Press.

Indonesian dance (a single upturned toe, horizontal eye motion, open-mouthed facial expression, complex hand movement) and basic Western technique (*pliés*, forward curves, lunges). Again, due to the accepting nature of the music and the particular magic that occurs only with dance, the combination enhanced rather than detracted and was more than the sum of its parts.

If McPhee's *Nocturne* was at heart a nostalgic ode to Balinese and Javanese culture, José Evangelista's *O Java*, the next piece on the program, was a celebration of its inventiveness. Written in 1993 while the composer was in residence with the Montreal Symphony³, the piece is a fine example of Evangelista's inspiration from what he calls "le merveilleux paradoxe du gamelan javanais", a stratified and complex texture not based in counterpoint, but entirely in melody⁴. The night of the concert, the orchestra performed it live, accompanied by Paul Kolycius' video of lush Javanese vegetation. Here there were curious issues with the blending of the two media that are worth pointing out. First, the lingering slow-motion style of the video, although attractive, seemed to clash with *O Java's* formal scheme of four sections of contrasting texture and tempo (ABCA'), connected by very deliberate tempo changes. The second section was a clear departure, containing an outburst where the entire orchestra became suddenly locked into a driving eighth note pattern. The third section was also contrasting and featured brightly stacked and metallically resonating chords interspersed with individual winds and strings in multi-tap rhythmic figures and melodic fragments. Meanwhile, the video moved forward uniformly and unaware, awash with brilliant greens for long periods before violent reds and bright purples dramatically drifted into frame. Each work had its own formal reference points and while no one is suggesting that the music and video should have been matched exactly, it seemed here that any correlation between the two were either accidental or arbitrary. Of more concern was the danger that the subtleties of Evangelista's music would be lost to the numbing effects of the multi-sensory experience. Much of *O Java* contains upwards of twenty to thirty simultaneously running lines, all near-reflections of themselves in various forms of augmentation and diminution. It is surprisingly cohesive, and one has to listen carefully to hear what is happening. Again, while it is important that the orchestra test-run new ideas and combinations, in this particular case it is not inconceivable that the Evangelista could have stood on its own.

The most extraordinary experiment on the concert was Alex Pauk's *Touch Piece* (2003), an all-encompassing sensorama that combined the orchestra with multi-screen video projection, film-quality digital sound effects and dense electroacoustic tracks in intricate spatialization. This was the culmination of the program, as it brought together into one prototype the kind of cross-disciplinary work Esprit could produce in the future. Pauk has described it as a "giant workshop for the way things could go" and while there was a quality of work-in-progress to the piece, it is remarkable in that it successfully distanced itself from the concept of orchestra-as-museum and genuinely aimed to tap into the aesthetics of the total-artwork.

3. BOURGOUIN, Francois (1993), "José Evangelista: Meeting the MSO Challenge", *Canadian Composer*, p. 20. The OSM, not coincidentally, also performed McPhee's *Nocturne* during his tenure.

4. For some insight into Evangelista's work, specifically with regard to *Clos de Vie* and *Piano Concertante*, see his article in *Circuit: "Pourquoi composer de la musique monodique"*, vol. 1, n° 2, Montreal, p. 55-70. He also discusses how he first explored harmonic languages ranging from Messiaen to Lutoslawski to Ligeti.

Very little about how the audience experienced *Touch Piece* suggested a traditional symphony concert. We did see a conductor and some players, dimly lit by music-stand lights. However our attention was drawn to a great many other places. The orchestra was divided into choirs, with the strings and percussion on stage, the winds in two clusters midway through the hall and the brass unseen in the upper balconies behind the audience. All musicians were called upon at various times to play small percussion instruments, so if one looked over his shoulder, he might glimpse through the darkness, for example, a clarinet player with small wind chimes seated next to several technicians at a row of computers. The 14-channel speaker system surrounding the room was as much a part of the sound world as the orchestra, transmitting a combination of unaltered sound effects of natural phenomena, real-time signal processing and spatialization of live instruments (including a likeable ring-modulation of the solo oboe that travelled the periphery of the room) and various kinds of distant, resonating white noises. On the ceiling, a slow-moving video was projected simultaneously onto three screens, and loosely followed the episodic shape of the music. Fire, surf, sunsets and clouds moved in a graceful ballet of time-lapse and slow motion, a *video concrète* made up of scenes from a post-production library originally intended for commercial use. Finally, sophisticated lighting design was cast upon the enormous gauze curtains hung on the sides of the screens, filling in the periphery of the scene. The entire room burst with technology and the effect was ultimately maximalist: this was a performance space where the eye and ear could wander from feature to feature, occasionally catching a glimpse of the whole.

There are a number of features that made *Touch Piece* atypical, mostly because it brought into the concert music arena characteristics usually associated with other art forms. First, there was the genuine aim to tap into a kind of total-artwork where, even more than simply juxtaposing the various sensations, the composer was trying to evoke a kind of sixth sense brought about by their cross-pollination:

The question of what is being created is an interesting one for me, because I imagine — I think it was partially achieved in Touch Piece — that there is a third art form that is created, that is sitting out there in space, not in your ear, not in your eye. It partly relates to the dream world and other sensory abilities that we have in differing degrees. Some people have it blocked off altogether, I think [laughs]. So the piece was created with that idea: that I was opening my perception to natural sights, sounds and feelings. In the process, I felt that I was doing more than just music. It was something other than just sound impressions.

Closely related was the principle of immersion. This is an idea we know well from composers from Wagner to Cage and Schafer⁵, but also (and probably more) from technology-driven media such electroacoustics and virtual reality. Since the piece was inspired by a multi-sensory event — an experience the composer had in the 1970s on the Island of Kauai after extensive hiking and camping — Pauk wai-

5. Comparisons to Schafer (influence of wilderness, immersion, aspects of Gesamtkunstwerk) seem logical. However, the two composers have very different goals: while Schafer has the uncanny ability to tap the mysteries of the natural world at their source, *Touch Piece* is a dazzling recreation of them, built from the ground up with immense technological resources. While Pauk knows and admires Schafer's work (he has conducted a number of his pieces and commissioned two of them) he wasn't thinking of Schafer during the composition of *Touch Piece*, and that his (Pauk's) interests in the wilderness and its sounds were for the most part exclusive to this work.

ted until the resources and technology were available to create its reflection in the concert world:

I think that the dimension that the piece was created in was more than auditory, so I wanted to extend it. And you can never do that fully, because you just cannot create a real environment, unless you take somebody and put them in it: a real natural environment. I was trying to give them that place that I was in.

Perhaps the most exceptional aspect of the work is that much of it was delegated to other artists⁶, all unified under the umbrella of the Pauk's vision. When asked about this, Pauk explained:

I don't feel that this is not my piece, because those people helped me achieve what I wanted to happen. There is nothing [Colm Caffrey, the video artist] did that I didn't like. I think I built enough breadth into the piece to work that way without it damaging itself. There was a clear direction of where I wanted it to go.

The comfort with artistic teamwork is easily understood in light of Esprit's experience in film music, where many different artists are often called upon to work in collaboration. It also helps to explain the orchestra's uncanny sense of ease when following time-code cues, as well the presence of a digital sound effects specialist in the ensemble. *Touch Piece* is a work particular to Esprit ("It's all the things they've been doing for twenty years — all in one piece") and because it looks forward, rather than backward, was a very fitting programming decision for the group's 20th anniversary.

Finally, and oddly enough, it was the piece of straight concert music that was the foil of the evening. Multimedia apparatus was cast aside for the moment and the orchestra launched into Ligeti's *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra* (1990-1992) with the Esprit concertmaster Fujiko Imajishi in the solo role.

Although Esprit never considered putting any visuals alongside this piece — it is important to reiterate that Pauk is still very much committed to concert music in its pure form — their conspicuous absence acted as a revelation of the psychological shift that occurs when music is suddenly freed from other disciplines. Without visual distractions, the subtleties of Ligeti's music made themselves known: the play of clashing intonations, for example, provided by spectrally-informed scordatura, or the restraint shown in the brief third movement where descending chromatic lines are suddenly cut off at the precise moment they would have become overbearing. Without the anaesthetic-like effects of direct light, the capacity audience was tangibly alert, and stayed with the orchestra all through the five movements to the very end, where an irreverent anti-finale of pointillistic gasps and buzzes followed a riveting cadenza. True to Ligeti's later style, the overall feeling was of a rapprochement with the listener without any sacrifice of intelligence. Even during high levels of activity, the writing was economical, controlled and confident, and the performance was traditional Esprit at its best.

6. A small crowd came to bow on stage after the piece. The program lists credits for: "Video composition, sound effects design, electroacoustic sound & audio direction, media environment design & production management as well as set design and consulting."

Alex Pauk is a tremendous asset to new music in Canada and should be applauded for bringing Esprit, an entire symphony orchestra devoted to newly composed music, into the 21st century. Not only intact, but also thriving. The multi-sensory prototype he unveiled at the concert of April 25th has much potential and it genuinely managed to brush the dust off the experience of concert music. Gone was any sense that the orchestra was fragile or a museum piece. However, especially following Esprit's performance of the Ligeti, it was easy to reflect on what we might be losing by bringing visual media to the concert stage, either on a regular or an occasional basis. When the videos began and the lights darkened over the musicians, one felt suddenly caught on the exciting but uncertain cusp of change. And torn between marvelling at the beauty of the evolution itself, and saying goodbye, yet again, to a much-loved icon of a much-loved tradition.

References

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