

The Splendid Allure of Europium at the Inaugural Montréal/Nouvelles Musiques L'attrait magnifique de l'« europium » lors du premier Montréal/Nouvelles Musiques

Paul Steenhuisen

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Article abstract

Composer Paul Steenhuisen shares his own views on the Montréal/Nouvelles Musiques Festival by situating it within the context of other Canadian festivals and by discussing its main characteristics. The author also discusses the festival's artistic principles and its thematic orientation. On considering the compartmentalization of the public, he suggests that an artistic approach based on a unifying musical or philosophical idea would be an advantageous replacement to the "star composer" system.

The Splendid Allure of Europium at the Inaugural Montréal/ Nouvelles Musiques

Paul Steenhuisen

With the decline of orchestra-led new music festivals in Canada, the organization and artistic direction of large, new music-centred events has now almost completely moved, fallen, or been taken back into the hands of composers and the smaller chamber music groups with which they are often associated. The hierarchy of control has changed significantly, from one in which artists assisted professional administrators in presenting a festival, to a more music-first position, in which artistic direction is assisted by arts administration. It hasn't always been this way. In the early to mid-90's, with Bramwell Tovey on the podium and Glenn Buhr as composer in residence, the Winnipeg Symphony led all Canadian festivals, in their heyday playing for young, enthusiastic audiences in Manitoba's January deep-freeze. In Toronto, with Gary Kulesha as composer-in-residence, the Toronto Symphony was at the helm of what ultimately became known as the Massey Hall New Music Festival, while the Edmonton Symphony and their former composer-in-residence John Estacio presented the Resound Festival of Contemporary Music. Unfortunately, both the TSO and ESO-led festivals have faded into oblivion, while concurrently, the majority of Canadian orchestras became mired in fiscal and other struggles. To play a leadership role in planning and realizing relevant contemporary music festivals became seemingly unmanageable, and rather than consider contemporary music and the superb new music that is available as part of a solution, orchestras have for the most part receded, and become further entrenched in embalming 18th and 19th century musical practices.

Elsewhere in Canada, however, numerous other committed presenters have successfully generated new music gatherings/conferences, usually with unconventional music-making and artistry at the forefront of their intentions. The Sound Symposium (begun in St. John's by the late Don Wherry in 1983), Kitchener's Open Ears (commencing in 1999 with Peter Hatch as Artistic Director and with the assistance of the KWO), and the various Vancouver New Music Festivals (initiated by Owen Underhill in 1996 and continued in various metamorphoses by Giorgio Magnanensi)

are examples of a few. The most recent (and certainly the largest) addition to the collection of artist-run festivals is Montréal/Nouvelles Musiques, co-directed by the dynamic duo of Walter Boudreau and Denys Bouliane. As was made evident by the gargantuan *Symphonie du millénaire* in 2001, for Boudreau and Bouliane, brashness and scale are an important part of an event's identity. Similarly, the shadow of MNM impacts well beyond the festival's duration. In the bitter cold of early March, with the assistance of the SMCQ administration, and in collaboration with McGill University, SRC, and many ensembles, helpers and funders, Boudreau and Bouliane were able to present the first successful installment of this festival. To their credit, the public surface of MNM was crisply articulated, and without the desperate perception of penny-pinching that has diminished many an orchestra-led festival. As an invited guest composer of the festival, but not a resident of Montreal, I had the layered perspective of witnessing the 9-day event with intimacy and familiarity, while having the fresh vantage point of a partial outsider, a temporary presence amidst the local creative and political currents.

Having travelled to and participated in festivals on four continents, I have been fortunate to garner a broad base of experience with the various wonderful energies a successful festival can gather and spawn. Perhaps as expected, MNM clearly resembles the European festival paradigms on which it is based. With a hint of Huddersfield, a dash of Darmstadt and Donaueschingen, a glimmer of Gaudeamus, and the imprint of other European festivals, MNM consisted of 9 days and nights of fairly constant concert activity. Like most current North American contemporary music festivals, it lacked any vestigial reminder of the 1960's "happenings" in the United States, or the random acts of music-making and ad-hoc concerts that can happen at Darmstadt when so many talented individuals get together. But as expected from a university-linked venture, its guest composers did give masterclasses and pre/post-concert lectures and presentations of their work to both the students and the public. Often led or dispersed by John Rea's allusive introductions and commentaries, the festival panel discussions (aka controlled disturbances) provided further insight in support of the musical activity.

The Saturday afternoon panel discussion with many of the guest composers featured Rea's poetically biological subject of succession in nature and its relative corollary in music. Although the topic offered multiple avenues for pursuit, given the short timeframe available and the calculated vagaries of the introductory material, none on hand truly broached it with any degree of depth. Jean Lesage and Sean Ferguson offered preliminary thoughts as embellishments to Rea's initiative, whereas R. Murray Schafer sidestepped the questions altogether, and escaped to an early rehearsal. Cornelius de Bondt and Klaas Torstensson rejected the topical subtleties Rea offered them, and impatiently asked "Do you want to talk about music or what?" Following this, they proceeded to recount decades-old political actions of Louis Andriessen's *Orkest de Volharding*, as though they had happened yesterday, and were transferrable and repeatable in North America (if not for the "apathy").

Oddly, at this European-modelled festival, the Europeans all but refused the topic and style of discussion, while the North Americans tentatively previewed it.

This particular Saturday afternoon panel discussion perhaps left an appropriate impression of the festival, confirming both the slow maturation away from European musical culture and the wealth of artistic resources in Montreal, while at the same time revealing a certain discomfort with the old model. No longer fully “embedded” in the vessels of Europeanism, the current Canadian solutions are still in the process of developing an identity to match the context — a task which MNM *almost* fulfills. At this point, the most notable difference between MNM and its European festival counterparts was the input of the musicologists (i.e. in Europe they show up). Composers are rarely short on words regarding their own work and can sustain discourse independently, yet the vantage point a critic or musicologist can offer has significant potential in this context. The initiative of IRCAM in this case is important. Ferociously keen to document and discuss creative and scientific work at the Centre Georges Pompidou, IRCAM always has a musicologist on hand to lead interviews, offer critical lectures and writings, and contribute to the public and pedagogical identity of its events. In addition to the composer-centric discussions at the most recent MNM, the inclusion of a carefully chosen critic may provide a profitable clarifying function. Bouliane himself has asked the question “Where are the musicologists?” — and the question remains. In the arborescences of Canadian musicological and compositional development, they have yet to intersect in a meaningful way.

With MNM’s lectures, master-classes, panel discussions, open rehearsals by day and concerts at night, the agenda was already full, yet one of the significant byproducts of the festival was the degree to which it triggered satellite events. The result was a cluster-effect of satellite activity that signifies the creative prosperity of the Montreal scene. Several other events were planned simultaneous with the festival, in part to facilitate an excuse for other composers and organizations to be present for it, and in part to feed off of and also benefit from the impetus and stimulation of MNM. The SRC/CBC Young Composers Competition was presented as part of the proceedings, and the Jules Léger Prize was presented; these two were done in the context of the festival. Additionally, the Canadian League of Composers held its annual general meeting, and a newly forming national new music networking coalition had its initial conference meetings. Directly or indirectly, everyone seemed to want a piece of it.

To that end, Ensemble Kore presented the off-festival *Free Radicals*, a lo-fi, semi-multimedia series in collaboration with a thought-provoking and skilled generation of youngish composers, in sharp contrast with the more cultivated work heard at MNM. But was it radical? *Free Radicals* took place in a bar setting, with rock group instrumental configurations, retro-video stylings, and 80’s-era Jenny Holzer L.E.D.’s. Their concerts, attitudes, and aesthetics highlighted the elements that weren’t represented at the main event, but nonetheless became part of the critical mass of new music focus, of which MNM was the primary attractor. Those who are privy to the

Montreal new music scene's social milieu's could cynically view the circumstance of *Free Radicals* as an incendiary part of the wranglings, generational quarrels, and competition for attention between ambiguously intermingled groups of artists. To the outsider, the visitor, or untainted and allegiance-less music connoisseur, the result was one of mildly refreshing diversification. Any underlying problem with KORE's gesture is dulled by the fact that the events weren't scheduled **simultaneous** with MNM concerts, but rather **after**, ultimately fulfilling the complementary role of late-night concerts. That *Free Radicals* had more to do with the recent past than the current and future, and that they didn't meet their own challenge, misses the point that in its strict Euro-molding, MNM didn't aim to reach particularly far outside common contemporary music practice. Arguably, they didn't need to. As the source of the majority of musical activity, and the inspiration for the surrounding and peripheral activity, MNM admirably fulfilled its role as the driving force.

One should consider whether or not Montreal is a new music festival all year round. Given the abundance of ensembles, and the number and weight of concerts, there is almost constant concertizing in this city. What is the difference between a festival and a collection of concerts placed in close proximity? What opportunity does this create for links between concerts, ideas, and curation? Having a focal guest composer is an obvious solution to focussing a festival, but with the sophistication of the Montreal contemporary music audience, significant potentials to bind artistic directions — ones specific to Montreal — exist for the taking. While attending the near-extreme bulk of concerts at MNM has a certain magnetism, I support the relatively unexplored idea of having the festival artistic direction conciliate and challenge the ensembles and their artistic direction to present a percentage of the festival concerts as an elaboration of an "idea". Not a guest "star" composer, not a concert theme, not for the Disneyfication or commercialization of the music, but a question — perhaps a musical question, a philosophical question. Perhaps a scientifically or poetically loaded question such as Rea might propose — to be answered in any number of different ways by the many contributors, through existing and newly commissioned repertoire, much like what sometimes happens at curated group shows in the visual arts. Cohesive, yet unstifling, a portal to a non-exclusive topic, through which each of the many capable directors can assert their points of view. The artistic rigor of the groups and depth of their musical solutions would ideally be the positively competitive impetus for their individuation. A binding festival idea/strange attractor might also help to intersperse the obviously divergent, non-overlapping audiences attending the festival. With few common denominators between the audiences and cliques attending the acousmatic and ensemble/orchestra performances, the communal exploration of a topic (no matter how abstract) could address this circumstance. Is it inevitable that these audiences are separate, and must they remain so? I can't help but wonder if there is a mutually respectful, creative question between them, currently untapped. Ultimately, the total audience mass at the festival was striking and noteworthy, as much as the clear divisions of aesthetics and demographics between them. From my perspective as partial outsider and (un)innocent bystander, able to move

from clique to clique, more or less precariously based on music and not social dynamic, it does seem to be the case – similar conversations between separate crowds. This proves, once again, that it's easy to be the imaginary artistic director and provide ideas... but to make them happen is another story (!!)

Clever programming on the part of the MNM artistic committee contributed to some strategic coordination of composers and performers, from which long-term working relationships may develop. To avoid the colonialist approach of drawing international ensembles in for a “greatest hits” repertoire package, concerts were negotiated to include pairs of Canadian commissioned works. Through this, performers such as Klangforum Wien and the Hilliard Ensemble had the opportunity to work with Plamondon, Ristic, Evangelista and me. With this in mind, MNM was an excellent venue for exchange, and I am confident the Hilliard Ensemble will add José Evangelista's crystalline *Songs of Innocence* to their touring repertoire. Smart pairings such as this, facilitated by Bouliane and Boudreau, may have fruitful musical ramifications for all involved. The Hilliard Ensemble, whose voices we know so well from recordings, gave a performance full of gorgeous, resonant tone, and impeccable intonation. While the bulk of their “contemporary” repertoire is rather bland and anachronistic, their delivery was understated, graceful, and accurate. Klangforum Wien's performance of Plamondon's *Autoportrait sur Times Square* was striking in its expressive range – while still accessing the darker colours of the work, it was both physical and controlled. Similarly, Klangforum pianist Marino Formenti's version of Georg Friedrich Haas' semi-masochistic *Hommage à György Ligeti* was also something to behold. Arms wide open to play the two differently-tuned pianos, Formenti extracted a timbre that recalled both gamelan and dark, early twentieth century Viennese eroticism. On the same concert, they were equally able to address the jovial eccentricities of André Ristic's automatic writing in *Sonate de carnaval*.

Without exception, the performances were excellent, and reveal the extremely high level of musicianship in Montreal. Prominent examples include the OSM's committed but probably under-rehearsed rendition of Michel Longtin's ambitious post-modern work *Quaternions*. With its vast and complex referential palette, it was precisely a work that the OSM wouldn't place on a regular season concert. As the composer should be applauded for his persistence in writing this work, on a smaller level, so too should the festival for identifying it as one that must be heard. Kicking off the festival, the SMCQ gave a piano-mangling version of Georges Antheil's *Ballet mécanique*. Appropriately, what it completely lacked in subtlety (as per Antheil's compositional prowess) it compensated with unfaltering physicality, and what it lacked in airplane engines (as per directions from the composer), it made up for in the impassioned conducting of Walter Boudreau. From an altogether different perspective, the Quatuor Bozzini offered a breathtaking performance of Luigi Nono's *Fragmente — Stille, An Diotima*. Despite my preference for the longer, more strained bowings of the Arditti Quartet's recorded performance, they reached for and grasped the depth of the work, as they also did with Jean Lesage's *Quatuor No 2*. Earlier that night, Trio Fibonacci plunged headlong into Wolfgang Rihm's *Fremde*

Szenen (1982-1984), tackling the work with substantial rigor. The stylized Quatour Molinari was also impressive playing Sofia Gubaidulina's *Fourth Quartet* and R.Murray Schafer's *Seventh Quartet* (with soprano), despite the unintentional children's theatre quality of the staging in Schafer's work. Also worth noting were the performances of the McGill University contemporary music ensemble; although it is comprised mainly of undergraduate students, they showed promise playing Varèse, Ligeti and De Bondt — musical styles and composers they will revisit throughout their careers as professionals.

While it's impossible to be all things, MNM admirably represented the long-term work of its artistic directors. It also precisely met its stated goal of being an international forum focusing on the production, interpretation, and dissemination of the modern and contemporary repertoire. It brought together Canadian and international composers and performers, and placed Montreal at the centre of contemporary musical activity for nine good days. While currently not the vanguard of contemporary music festivals, MNM was a bright, encouraging beginning, and a fairly accurate, ambitious reflection of current contemporary music-making in Canada. Given the instigators, the contributors, and the resources available, MNM clearly is already one of the most important new music festivals in Canada.