



Listening to the Present

by Gregory Oh

I have a confession to make: I perform and listen to a lot of new music, and I don't like all of it.

I am going to continue by advocating for one of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra's most adventurous programming weeks—the New Creations Festival. I'll try to resolve the contradiction a little later.

Let's start, though, with a quick orientation. When the TSO was founded nine decades ago, Puccini was busy working on *Turandot*, Ravel was forty-seven, and nine years earlier Igor Stravinsky had premiered *Le sacre du printemps* which had resulted in a riot. *Le sacre* proved to be nothing short of transformative—for all the listeners who were there to hear those new sounds, nothing would ever be the same.

New Creations Festival featured artist Barbara Hannigan can recall a similar feeling of being permanently changed:

When I think about the music about Claude Vivier and what it's meant for

me in my life—from the very first piece of his that I heard . . . those pieces had . . . a very heavy effect on me . . . over and over. I felt that I was a completely different creative person than I had been before the music began.

It can be hard work listening to something that eludes established frames of reference, but the beauty of new things is in their ability to transform us in new ways.

Conversely, rather than being transformative, some people have told me that they find contemporary music cold or unmoving. I think it becomes dangerous, equating emotion with artistic expression. Based on personal experience, I would argue that the volume of tears shed listening to classical music in the past decade will never come close to rivaling that of one season of bad network television and formulaic Hollywood movies. I don't ever want *So You Think You Can Dance* to be mentioned in the same breath as *Daphnis and Chloe*.

I asked Brian Current, whose work *This Isn't Silence* will be performed at the March 1st concert, about the perceived truculence of new music. "Composers are trying to tell you what it's like to be alive at this time in history. Sometimes that can include things like the Cold War, the atomic bomb, the holocaust—these events and their consequences were felt across our entire society. How can you expect, or even want, our music to ignore this?"



Barbara Hannigan



Brian Current

A case in point, Peter Eötvös' *Seven* (March 1st concert) is a response to the 2003 immolation of the Space Shuttle Columbia. In an email exchange, I asked him about engaging with music that sounds so dramatically different.

Music is just like real life: it is a process. One of the main conditions of our mental well-being is that we live our lives in the present both physically and mentally . . . We have to listen to music the same way we would listen to a poem that we are about to memorize. First, stop comparing it to other things—there is nothing worse in a child's life than listening to that same sentence over and over again: "you look like your grandfather".

We have to pay attention to the unusual qualities . . . the sonority of the vowels



Claude Vivier



Peter Eötvös

and the noises of the consonants as well as the ringing of the rhymes. We have to read a piece of poetry countless times before we really understand it . . . This is and always has been the case with pieces of music. (Translated from Hungarian by Csaba Kozsó.)

Expecting a new work to reveal itself in exactly the same way as a familiar work will often only lead to disappointment. Just like making new friends, it helps to keep an open mind, avoid the burden of expectation, listen well and give it time—give it time. In the words of Eötvös, "resist the temptation to escape into the past and rather let the Present build the Future."

Before we finish, let us briefly return to where we started—the founding of the TSO in the 1920s. During the same period in Toronto, a collective of painters was unveiling their first exhibition. They sold only three paintings, and could not even cover the cost of program printing. The critics, unlike the public, did not ignore the Group of Seven, accusing the "Hot Mush School" of being "garish . . . loud, affected, freakish." *Saturday Night* commented, "Those who believe that pictures should be seen and not heard are likely to have their sensibilities shocked."

I mentioned at the outset that I don't like every piece of new music. I think that when you truly engage with new music you gain the freedom of honestly informed opinion. When you open yourself to new sounds, and even question those very sounds, you may find yourself transformed. Classical music has always relied upon the fundamental "audience participation" of listening; when you take the time to listen, you become as essential to our cultural legacy as the creators themselves. As the Group of Seven pre-emptively wrote in their 1920 catalogue:

The artists invite adverse criticism. Indifference is the greatest evil they have to contend with. But they would ask you—do you read books that contain only what you already know? If not, they argue that you should hardly want to see pictures that show you what you can already see for yourselves. ■

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