

Globe Review

CLASSICAL MUSIC » REVIEW

An exuberant adventure into turmoil

GENERATION 2008

Ensemble Contemporain de Montréal + Music Gallery
In Toronto on Saturday

BY ROBERT EVERETT-GREEN

There was good cheese on the tables and wine in the glasses, provided by the Bureau du Québec. People were talking about music and art. Could this be one of those notorious galas our Prime Minister was talking about during the election campaign?

No, it was just a modest reception in a church meeting-hall, after the first concert in a brave and frugal national tour by the Ensemble Contemporain de Montréal +.

Each year, ECM artistic director Véronique Lacroix and a small jury hunt for the best young Canadian composers, then commission them to write something for the eight-member ensemble, which is based in Montreal. This is the fifth time Lacroix has taken her new pieces on the road.

The four composers seemed (in their verbal and written comments) to be concerned with the same issues as the rest of us "ordinary Canadians," including global financial disasters, the mediation of social life by computers, and change in general. But their well-made pieces mostly showed them to be card-carrying modernists, more inclined to let the materials of the art guide their composition than to try to illustrate extra-musical ideas.

Scott Good said his *Shock Therapy Variations* was inspired by Naomi Klein's political treatise *The Shock Doctrine*, about how the capitalist system victimizes societies in turmoil.

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His shaggy, rambunctious piece featured lots of tumult, including episodes of controlled improvisation and flamboyant outbursts from Good's trombone and Tim Brady's electric guitar. But Klein's complaint seemed forgotten by the time we reached an exuberant patch of Latin jazz late in the piece. It was just too much fun to have any bearing on a malignant global system.

Brian Harman said his *Gregarious Machines* was meant to reflect on the effects of computer-based gadgets on human interactions. But microchips in themselves make no sound, which may be why Harman's score mimicked an earlier age's anxiety about technology. His use of rugged "mechanical" rhythms was not so different from what Varèse and Honegger were doing in the twenties and thirties. But he made good use of textural contrasts, and especially of long pneumatic rhythms that gusted through skillful combinations of instruments. Michael Berger's *Skele-*



Ensemble Contemporain de Montréal +. MICHEL DUBREUIL

ton grew from a tiny glissando in the strings, which he tweaked and repeated and magnified in a work that sometimes seemed like an episode of lucid drunkenness. The music swelled suddenly into a late, rugged climax whose necessity I couldn't really judge - I'd need to hear the piece again. Berger said his theme was the

role of memory in music, though I'm not sure his work brought that to the fore more than any other piece that relies on progressive repetition.

The free-flowing kinetic character of Fuhong Shi's *Kaleidoscope* seemed to take its cues from Shi's subtle exploitation of the colours and heft of the instruments in the group.

The music ran on its own sense of psychological gravity, and sometimes found a lot of energy in situations of little forward motion. But in the end it felt like high-quality student work, and didn't really reveal to me what kind of musical personality Shi might have.

I also found it distracting to be told, in the stilted interview

Lacroix conducted with Shi (a ritual performed with each composer in turn), that the opening piccolo figure represented a cicada. But then I tend to find it confining to be told in advance what a piece is about, or what some bit of it represents. I'm not sure that kind of information makes new music more "accessible." It might actually distract people from perceiving what the music is really up to.

While they were performing, Lacroix and her players needed no explanations at all. They are a wonderful ensemble, who played everything cleanly and attentively, with a transparent, well-balanced sound and a palpable sense of adventure. Their tour is well worth celebrating.

» The ECM's *Generation 2008* plays Vancouver's *Cellar Jazz Club* on Nov. 4, the *University of Victoria's Young Recital Hall* on Nov. 5, the *University of Montréal's Salle Pierre-Mercure* on Nov. 8, *Dominion-Chalmers Church* in Ottawa on Nov. 10, and *Memorial University's Cook Recital Hall* in St. John's on Nov. 12.

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