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17 Dec By [Curtis Perry](#) » December 17, 2014, 6:00 am [Concerts](#)

ECM+ Presents Generation2014 in Ottawa

The evening of Tuesday, November 18 at the Ottawa National Arts Centre's 4th Stage marked the eighth and penultimate stop for [Ensemble Contemporain de Montréal](#) (ECM+)’s eighth Canadian tour: Generation2014. Celebrating twenty years, a 140-page complementary volume was included as a memento, packed with program notes, biographical details, and score excerpts. The ensemble, whose mission is to help develop the craft of young Canadian composers, has reached a milestone in its history – and they are as lively as ever.

The tour started with a residency at the Banff Centre on November 1, and ended in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. "You're lucky to be here, as the pieces are getting better and better," half-joked Gabriel Dharmoo, the emcee and an alumnus of ECM+'s regular reading sessions.

It was very much a community-oriented event, with an intimacy and warmth underscored by the almost café-style environment that is the 4th Stage; Brian Harman, a 2008 alumnus composer of the project, was in attendance. It was evident that ECM+'s twenty years of stewardship has yielded an impressive artistic legacy, and a loyal following.

In addition to the program notes and the commemorative book, I received a ballot for the Audience Choice award – a nice way of involving the audience, and of addressing the unfortunate but constructive need for competition.

The interviews, conducted bilingually, were incisive and illuminated sections of the piece, punctuated by live examples of the music under discussion.



The first composer, [Marie-Pierre Brasset](#), took the stage first to discuss her piece *cou_coupé*.

"Recently I started to paint on campus, and I discovered that it was really liberating to express myself in another art form than music –I felt free from the demands of producing professional artwork," Brasset noted.

The goal is to break our fears and to get to present ourselves as we are.

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cou_coupé opened with low, ruminative thunder in the piano and lower strings, appropriately cut through by incisive violin, thin lightly gliss'd tones dripping from the stage. Dissonant parallel lines from the flute and violin gave way to an assemblage of dreamy xylophone. Later, a microtonal miasma held the well-attended 4th stage audience in a mesmeric state, giving room for a tasteful series of entrances by the bassoon.



The next composer in the hot seat was [Alec Hall](#), who had a violin concerto on offer, *Object Permanence*.

"How was writing a concerto for this instrument that you grew up with challenging or inspiring?" Dharmoo asked. "I chose Beethoven, Brahms, Berlioz, and Ligeti," Hall said in reference to surveying the literature, laying out a methodical approach to studying his favourites in the repertoire, and decisively using elements that he found particularly compelling. Despite the observation of 'canon', he also quoted Drake and Iggy Azalea as a pop context that the concerto also drew from and could be situated in in some appreciable way. "I choose the richest moments of those references, and [a computer program] analyses it and offers something for this ensemble."

The ensemble did play a particular chord, not particularly evocative of Iggy Azalea – but it was an interesting way to involve digital translation of popular texts. In many ways, Hall's methods invoked the role of technology as an intensive mediator, to great effect. "There are referential objects in the work, whether you recognize them or not," Hall noted.

This bricolage of references made for a particularly fascinating piece. The decatet played frenetically, playfully incorporating glissandi, virtuosic French horn arpeggiated overtones and offering mimetic, stark and perfunctory percussion in the best sense. Some straight-up classical-sounding melodies were offered by the piano and violin, afloat a colourful sea of timbre, before the freneticism re-emerged. A newfound urgency permeated the second half of the work, bows on the verge of flying out of hands, elephantine winds expressing a wish to transcend its element. It ended with a pointed elegance at once surprising and expected.

"There are CDs here, so if you don't think you'll win one, you can buy one, which will save you energy," Dharmoo deadpanned, with an effusiveness that helped drive the evening. "You can vote with your ears, with your heart... the unconditional love of a parent." Laughter.

[Anthony Tan](#) was next, after a brief intermission, with his work *Ksana II* (which, I would later learn, received the Audience Choice award).



"I consider myself an electronic composer who writes instrumental music... because I'm using traditional instruments, I have to use these instruments in certain ways to achieve the sounds that I want," Tan explained. For example, to achieve a white noise sound, the violinist plays with the bow horizontally instead of vertically. In another case, a bicycle tire was used on the strings of the piano. Tan approaches composition from the perspective of sound design, using a certain combination of sounds to create an amalgamated timbre, or a "fused ensemble sound."

"I really try to find a common ground [between studio sound and classical upbringing] using a strict canon form, for example, to organize the sounds. How do you compose a piece of the present moment? I want to lead the listener to experiences a series of present moments." Tan suggested, ceding the stage then to the ensemble.

You could say the percussionist's crinkly aluminum acted as a sonic foil to the airy timbres emanating from the strings' diffuse and subtle bowing. True to the talk, train-like, breathy rhythms followed each other in stretto. Wood against of steel was the order of the day. Airiness, breathiness, and the subtle tapping of strings permeated the work. At one point, I saw a singing bowl, and at another I believe the percussionist was manipulating a foam brick. Certainly, Tan's dedication to timbral specificity and the appreciation of the present moment had garnered lovely results.

Evelin Ramon, the final composer of the evening, focuses on a strong rhythmic energy a strong part of her Cuban identity. Freedom of melody is also a hallmark of Evelin's work. "The human voice is extremely rich," Evelin noted, and she employs the voices of the ensemble as they play to great effect. Evelin's piece started with shocking volume, receding to what sounded like broken glass inside the piano. Whispering voices became chanting voices. Nervous, pent up energy ricocheted through all corners of the stage, pressed drums circulating g to harmonic vibrato in the strings, to punctured rhythms from the piano.



True to the talk, the melodies emerged from *Labyrinth of Light* with a certain Zappaesque playfulness and rhythmic rigor. Plaintive cello emerged beside a pedal tone in the bass clarinet, whispered voices measuring the breve. In many ways, the piece was much about spoken word and rhetoric as it was a study in musical expression, illuminating the thin borders between these modes of artistic expression.

The precision and intent with which the ensemble communicated all the pieces was impressive and convincing – a testament to the live workshop experience worked through over the course of the tour. The method and format was a real privilege to experience.

It lovely evening for all, and a perfect antidote to the snow we've already received here in Ottawa. Here's to another twenty years for ECM.



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