

CONCERT REVIEW

And You Call This Music?

Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra

Monday, February 4

Centennial Concert Hall

Attendance: 633

(three stars out of five)

By Holly Harris

The Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra's New Music Festival continued to grapple with burning questions about the nature of contemporary music Monday night, with its third concert of the week, *And You Call This Music?*

Lively WSO maestro Alexander Mickelthwate hosted the interactive evening that was equal parts lecture/demonstration, with a special guest panel of composers and music critics (including Toronto-based writer Tamara Bernstein and the Winnipeg Free Press' very own Bartley Kives) invited to shed light, comment, and even – in a quintessentially Canadian way – politely argue the nitty-gritties of new music.

One selection that easily passed muster was WSO composer-in-residence Vincent Ho's *Dragon Realms (Version 2)*, with its first incarnation premiered by the WSO four years ago. Ho's further refinement of the score showed the growth and impressive talent of this young composer, with its one movement filled with raw beauty and a poetic sensibility that was genuine.

The program also included a chance for the audience to vote – Canadian Idol style – for the winner of the 5th annual Canadian Music Centre's (CMC) Prairie Region Emerging Composer Award. This year's two finalists, Andrew Staniland and Shelley Marwood were tied in a dead heat, each vying for the \$1,000 cash prize. Having the composers introduce their works may have helped break the lock, with the top prize honours eventually shared between the two.

Staniland's *Protestmusik* (composed during the 2003 invasion of Iraq), with its cryptically titled movements only listed as numbers, began with a shot and only grew in intensity from there. But it wasn't all blood and thunder, with sparse pizzicatos and a ghostly celeste creating an unusual, negative musical space in "2." The third movement featured an increasingly dominant, chilling snare drum - that drives men (and women) to war – making its own caustic statement in this powerful work.

The second contender, Marwood's *Illumination*, presented a kinder, gentler composition,

that juxtaposed sinuous phrases with aggressive, jagged rhythms. The Calgary-based composer showed her keen ear for close quartal harmonies, as the two elements eventually morphed into a uniform mélange of sound.

Trevor Grahl's Mechanical Miniatures, inspired by Saturday morning cartoons and his own father's machinist livelihood had the musicians scaling the heights before plummeting into muted depths, as a delightful, dizzying ode to Looney Tunes.

Paul Steenhuisen's Pensacola, featuring an electronically manipulated tape of Michelangelo's poetry, offered a multi-layered, spatial work that remained a stumper. Having the maestro deconstruct the various musical quotes helped, but the pure density of the work still obliterated its meaning, leaving this reviewer cold.

The NFM festival continues tonight with Synthesize My Soup, 7:30 p.m. at the Centennial Concert Hall.

Holly.harris@shaw.ca