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MUSIC

Winnipeg Free Press - PRINT EDITION

Debuts of fine new pieces propel theme of climate change

By: [Gwenda Nemerofsky](#)
 8/02/2010 1:00 AM | [Comments: 3](#)

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As if on cue, a blanket of fresh snow fell over the city Saturday night as the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra's New Music Festival, Breaking New Ground, with its climate change theme, began.

Opening night, entitled *Arctic Postcards*, featured three world premières, including the long-anticipated *Arctic Symphony* by composer-in-residence Vincent Ho.

The audience was well-primed for Ho's piece. Earlier, University of Manitoba professor and research scientist David Barber, on whose icebreaker Ho travelled the Arctic in 2008, gave an eye-opening presentation on global warming and the Arctic.

The *Arctic Symphony* is a mature and atmospheric work that firmly establishes Ho among North American composers of note. It is a beautifully thought-provoking way to promote the message of climate change.

Barber's brother David supplied accompanying photos that immersed the audience in the landscape's rugged beauty. Sound files of wind whooshed us in and the Nunavut Sivuniksavut Performers sang and drummed from the second balcony. Violins played a magical but urgent tremolo, revelling in the land, but growing assertiveness from cellos ominously warned of changes to come. Contoured string phrases swooped like snowy peaks and drifts.

Conductor Alexander Mickelthwate showed a connection to this substantial work, with a delicate approach to *Meditation* -- piano and glockenspiel sparkling like ice crystals.

Nightfall was supremely lonely; a touching string-quartet episode delivering a sombre message and percussionists swinging corrugated tubing, emitting forlorn whistles.

The bouncy string melody in *O Glorious Arcticus* sang of optimism, tinged with romantic sensibility. The ensuing timpani-driven dance grew stridently determined, with triumphant brass textured and exultant.

Exhilarated, the audience responded with a standing ovation -- and while most of us will never get to the Arctic, Ho's personal interpretation of the region and its plight will continue to resonate.

Another highlight of the evening was the debut of British composer John Tavener's *Popule Meus* for cello and orchestra. Tavener, unable to attend due to illness, provided a taped interview introducing the work, based on liturgical text.

There is no one better to première this work than gifted WSO principal cellist Yuri Hooker. He gave this a tender and poignant reading, his cello plaintive, with heart-rending vibrato.

In sharp contrast, frantic string lines screamed and Jauvon Gilliam on timpani pounded violently. Undeterred, Hooker continued with gentle passion.

The work itself may be drawn-out, but Hooker's commitment to the performance never wavered.

According to Bertolt Brecht, "Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it."

Considering David Barber's predictions, humanity may need artists in a big way.

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Arctic Postcards
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POSTED BY: Mark Duncan
FEBRUARY 8, 2010 AT 6:39 PM

I am not disputing Mr. Barber's prowess as a photographer. I simply assert that there was no synchronization between his photographs and Mr. Ho's music. I wasn't gauche enough to laugh at the disconnect, but there were those sitting near me who had no such qualms. The fact that Mr. Barber and Mr. Ho got a standing ovation proves nothing, since a regrettable feature of WSO concerts over the past two years has been the audience granting a standing ovation if the artist does so much as sneeze. If you are a season ticket holder, as I am, you will be aware that virtually everything gets a standing ovation. Finally, I do not dispute Mr. Ho's contributions as an artist - only that after so much advance hype, his work was a disappointment. If Mr. Collignon wants constructive criticism, here it is: Mr. Mickelthwate, keep the university lecturers where they belong - in their classrooms. Please just give us the music.

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POSTED BY: D. Collignon
FEBRUARY 8, 2010 AT 1:37 PM

I am not sure where the individual above was sitting but quite possibly wasn't in the same venue as the rest of us. Also if this person was paying attention he would of realized that the photographers name was in fact Doug Barber and not David Barber as printed in the Free Press. The photographic work accomplished on this project was nothing short of spectacular considering the conditions faced in the high arctic. To say there was a disconnect can only mean that this individual was not present at the end of Vincent Ho's presentation to join the other 2000 people in a 5 minute standing ovation. I believe Vincent Ho is a treasure not only to the WSO but to the city of Winnipeg and we should be very proud to have him here. While we all have a right to express our opinions, it would be nice to do so in a constructive manner.

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POSTED BY: Mark Duncan
FEBRUARY 8, 2010 AT 10:14 AM

Gwenda Nemerofsky might have found Dr. Barber's presentation "eye-opening", but I, and many of the people sitting near me, found it downright annoying. When I phoned the WSO box office earlier in the day, I was told he would be speaking for ten minutes maximum starting at 7:30, yet the music didn't start until 8:15. If I want to be lectured on the subject of global warning, I'll watch "An Inconvenient Truth". I was there for the music, not for the propaganda.

Contrary to Nemerofsky's starry-eyed assessment, Vincent Ho's "Arctic Symphony" is a wildly inconsistent piece, but things were made even worse by the unintentionally hilarious disconnect between the music and David Barber's photographs. At one point, all hell is breaking loose on stage, with the strings sawing madly and the percussion crashing. And the accompanying photograph? A shot of a large table onboard the ship.

In short, aside from the program's first half - without the boring lecture, of course - this was a disappointing evening.

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