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Well-presented Revelations

Toronto

Roy Thomson Hall

03/02/2011 -

John Adams: *Short Ride on a Fast Machine* - *Harmonielehre*

Vincent Ho: *The Shaman: Concerto for Percussion and Orchestra*

Dame Evelyn Glennie (Percussion)

The Toronto Symphony Orchestra, Peter Oundjian (Conductor)

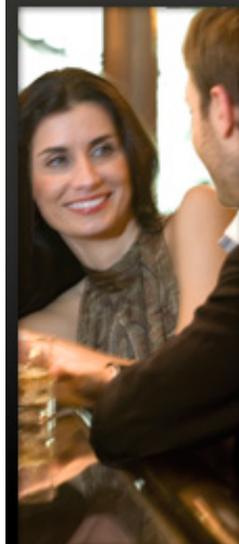


Dame E. Glennie (Courtesy of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra)

The 2011 edition of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra's New Creations Festival certainly got off to a strong start with two works by this year's special guest composer, John Adams, and a new work by Canadian composer Vincent Ho.

Toronto has just experienced a significant dose of John Adams, what with an eight-performance run of *Nixon in China* in James Robinson's rivetting production. For this concert, *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* proved a giddy

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opener. It is raucous and blaring (on purpose) and features a percussionist repeatedly striking the wood block almost to the point of overdoing out the joke. But since it only lasts four minutes, it doesn't wear out its welcome.

The second piece turned out to be a major work by Ottawa-born Vincent Ho. Born in 1975, he studied music in Calgary, Toronto, Paris, and Los Angeles, and is currently conductor-in-residence with the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, where *The Shaman: Concerto for Percussion and Orchestra* was premiered in January.

Who better to deliver a challenging new work than the unique Dame Evelyn Glennie, an established audience favourite in these parts. I tried to count the number of instruments she gets to play during the 25-minute piece but gave up; there were instruments I had never seen before, plus she vocalizes in a strange way in the opening movement, "Ritual". She follows a number of scores as she moves between instruments, and there are sections where she bursts out into her own cadenzas. Her sharp focus on the music never fails to spark a similar rapt response in the audience. (During the intermission interview in the lobby, Mr. Ho recounted how Dame Evelyn contributed to the creation of the work. No two performances will be exactly alike, partly due to availability of instruments.)

"Ritual" conjures up distant voices and dreams or spells, some of them ominous. The second movement, "Fantasia - Nostalgia" and "Conjuring the Spirits", has a solemn start then becomes gossamer and meditative. I can imagine people wanting to listen to this while they do yoga.

The final movement is "Fire Dance" - the name is a deliberate reference to the "Infernal Dance" from Stravinsky's *Firebird* as well as Manuel de Falla's work. It has a driven trajectory with jazzy rhythms and cross-rhythms, and contains an energetic cadenza. It rushes to an exciting and abrupt ending - and a totally wild audience response. (A note on the audience, by the way: an extremely diverse demographic.)

The title for John Adams' *Harmonielehre* is taken from the title of an analysis of harmony, published in 1911, by Arnold Schoenberg. Schoenberg was breaking away from established harmonic theory and working toward his famous/notorious 12-tone system and atonalism. Adams' 40-minute piece, however, explores a way of working back toward tonal harmony. The first of its three parts (untitled) conjures up dreams (shades of Vincent Ho's work) and was actually inspired by a strange dream in

which Adams imagined a supertanker achieve rocket lift-off from San Francisco Bay. It builds over 17 minutes to a very grand climax.

Another similarity with *The Shaman* is the composer's heavy use of percussion: five percussionists are required and they are busy at times.

The second part is entitled "The Amfortas Wound", the reference being the wound that will not heal (the character in Wagner's *Parsifal* is named Amfortas). The music has a doleful, yearning quality and builds twice to an anguished Mahlerian climax.

The third section has the whimsical (or, as in the program note, Zappaesque) title: "Meister Eckhardt and Quackie". Quackie is Adams' own baby daughter. Adams had a vision of her riding on the shoulder of the Medieval mystic Meister Eckhardt. The celesta is used to conjure up a sparkly soaring through the stars. There seems to be a slow descent but then the music speeds up and builds to an intense, pulsating grandeur.

I can recall decades ago my personal discovery of Bartok's *Concerto for Orchestra*, a piece that instantly became a part of life. I have a similar reaction to *Harmonielehre*. Judging from the committed performance by Peter Oundjian and the TSO, it deserves to be an equally established work in the central repertoire. Don't be put off by the word "minimalist"; its harmonic richness deserves to be called "maximalist". (And please don't be put off by "maximalist".)

The New Creations Festival will present more John Adams on March 5 (when Adams conducts) and 10.

Michael Johnson

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