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Music

Dame Evelyn Glennie, the deaf percussionist who listens with her whole body

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“The first performance is almost like passing your driving test,” Dame Evelyn Glennie says in a soft Scottish brogue. “It doesn’t make you into an expert Formula 1 driver.”

Glennie’s astonishing abilities as a percussionist may be equivalent to those of a racer at Le Mans, but you probably get her point. No actor would say that he had got the whole measure of Hamlet after performing the part just once.

Glennie has given the premieres of many new pieces, including Vincent Ho’s percussion concerto *The Shaman*, which the Winnipeg-based composer wrote for her late last year. It opened the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra’s 20th annual New Music Festival in January, and was voted audience favourite.

Don’t expect to hear quite the same piece when Glennie opens the Toronto Symphony Orchestra’s New Creations Festival Wednesday, even though the music on her stand will again be Ho’s concerto. Unlike *Hamlet*, *The Shaman* includes sections in which it’s up to the soloist to decide what to play and on which instruments.

“This is the orchestra, and this is me,” Glennie says, pointing to the notes for orchestra on the score’s first page, and then to an adjacent space marked “cadenza.” She gets three of those in the opening minutes, though she insists that everyone in Roy Thomson Hall will have an influence over what she plays.

“The audience plays a huge part in how a piece will actually form,” she says. “They really allow the performers to walk a tightrope in a way that never seems to happen in the privacy of your own four walls. I’m listening to the audience, and they’re listening to me.

“The listening skills in Winnipeg were fantastic, and that really allowed the stretching of phrasing, allowed a kind of danger, when you’re pushing and pushing things, that only happens in a live situation. It’s not the nerves that are doing that, it’s the audience”

Glennie may be one of the best listeners in the world, because she has had to develop the listening abilities of her entire body. Since the age of 12, she has been profoundly deaf, which means her ears deliver only a fraction of the sound vibrations that she picks up most vividly through her feet, hands, chest and whatever else in her frame responds to the vibrations from her various instruments.

“The body’s like a huge ear,” she says. “It’s as simple as that.”

Her sensitivity to sound seems magical when you hear her play. Magic was on Ho’s mind after he met Glennie, began corresponding with her by e-mail, and gradually developed with her a plan for a concerto related to special talents, old and new.

“For years I’ve been fascinated with indigenous cultures, and the music of indigenous cultures, which often play a huge role in shamanism,” he says. “Music was always an important element in their rituals. I wanted to create a piece that showcased Evelyn as a modern-day shaman. Every time I hear her perform, I feel I’m transported beyond material existence.”

The Shaman is a big, colourful work in four movements, with lots of range for virtuoso fireworks, as well as for more lyrical music on mallet instruments. As you might expect from any piece written for percussion, it’s strongly rhythmic, and (to judge from a tape of the Winnipeg performance) highly varied in the types of sounds selected by the soloist.

Glennie made her choices with an eye to practicality, however. She used to travel with her own gear, but with the straitened economies of concert life, she now more often depends on whatever is available at or near the venue. She stayed away from outré things, and looked for ways of using familiar instruments in new ways, such as allowing the body of a tympanum to act as a resonator for smaller instruments. She’s been trying out other sound sources during rehearsals this week, including the most portable of all: her own voice. The goal is to make it easy for Ho’s concerto to travel and have more performances.

“This piece has a very long shelf-life,” Glennie says. Coming from someone who plays a lot of contemporary music, much of it written for her by leading composers, that remark is at least as good a compliment as an audience seal of approval.

Dame Evelyn Glennie and the TSO perform The Shaman Wednesday night at Roy Thomson Hall. The TSO’s New Creations Festival continues with two more concerts on March 5, featuring a co-commissioned piece by John Adams; and March 10, featuring eighth blackbird and the premiere of R. Murray Schafer’s Symphony No. 1.

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