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Canadian composers learn to put their trust in star performers

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Published On Thu Feb 24 2011

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By **John Terauds**
 Entertainment Reporter

Even experienced artists get sweaty palms.

It's a big week for two of Canada's younger composers. It's not just because they will see premieres of new pieces at the hands of great performers, but because these new pieces are being made to stand alongside some of the very best new music in the world.

On Thursday, at Koerner Hall, venerable French sextet, Les Percussions de Strasbourg, gives us the world premiere of *HeX*, by Andrew Staniland.

On Mar. 2, for the opening concert of the New Creations Festival at Roy Thomson Hall, one of the world's best-



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loved classical percussionists, Dame Evelyn Glennie and the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, present the local premiere of *The Shaman*, by Vincent Ho.

The Toronto premiere of Canadian composer Vincent Ho's *The Shaman* opens the Toronto Symphony Orchestra's New Creations Festival on Mar. 2, 2011.

HAND ARNOLD

In 2009, Staniland completed a three-year stint as composer-affiliate with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, moved to St. John's, Nfld. and now teaches composition at Memorial University.

Ottawa native Ho, who studied at both the Royal Conservatory of Music and University of Toronto, is currently composer-in-residence with the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra.

Both men are used to working with top-level musicians — but both also admit to still being nervous around premieres.

Staniland describes writing for les Percussions de Strasbourg, “a humbling experience.”

As creators, composers are, by their very nature, control freaks. Staniland describes how he expected the French sextet to come back to him with all kinds of questions — in particular over some instrument choices and details on a particular set of instructions he placed in the score.

“At one point, they have to wrap a vibraphone in heavy-gauge tinfoil,” Staniland explains. “I expected a lot of questions from them, but this never even came up.”

Like any proud father, Staniland wanted to make sure his piece would grow up in rehearsal to sound exactly the way he imagined it in his head.

“I was very curious to ensure that the piece works,” the composer explains. “So I asked if we could set up a couple of rehearsals over Skype. All I got back was this soothing email saying, thanks for the nice piece.”

Staniland was not going to hear *HeX* until arriving in Toronto for the dress rehearsal.

He is very conscious of having his world premiere happen alongside pieces by new-music icons John Cage and Iannis Xenakis.

Is it nerve-racking? Of course. But Staniland says he has confidence in the 50-year-old sextet's ability to make *HeX* a success.

“When you're working with experienced players, they deliver back,” says the composer. “They have so much more than we'll ever know in their toolchest.”

Ho, who worked with Evelyn Glennie toward the world premiere of *The Shaman* on Jan. 29 with the Winnipeg Symphony, echoes Staniland's sentiments.

Ho's new creation is on the bill with two well-known pieces by one of the best-known living American composers, John Adams, whose opera *Nixon in China* is just wrapping up a couple of blocks away at the Four Seasons Centre.

Although he describes this bill as “feeling like I'm standing next to Brad Pitt or Angelina Jolie,” Ho admits to being less intimidated now than before the Winnipeg premiere a couple of weeks ago.

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Ho says there was “a lot of back-and-forth” with Glennie as he was composing *The Shaman*. In the end, he gave her total freedom over certain portions of the concerto, including the opening percussion solo.

“I wanted her to find some way to transport us to another realm, to convey the feeling of being taken away from everyday, material existence,” he recalls.

Even Ho was blown away by Glennie’s musical response.

Wanting to preserve an element of surprise, Ho won’t describe the opening section beyond saying, “She does things with the timpani that I would never have been able to imagine.”

JUST THE FACTS

WHAT: Les Percussions de Strasbourg

WHERE: Koerner Hall, 273 Bloor St. W.

WHEN: Feb. 24 @ 8 p.m.

TICKETS: \$20-\$60 @ 416-408-0208 or www.rcmusic.ca

WHAT: Toronto Symphony Orchestra with Dame Evelyn Glennie












WHERE: Roy Thomson Hall, 60 Simcoe St.

WHEN: Mar. 2 @ 8 p.m.

TICKETS: \$32-\$141 @ 416-593-7769 or www.tso.ca

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