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MOVIES

Winnipeg Free Press - PRINT EDITION

Christmas over, but January Ho, Ho, Ho time for composer

By: Gwenda Nemerofsky

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Ho says he's honoured but 'terrified' to have Glennie performing his work. 'She is one of those champions who has the capacity to change lives,' he says.



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Vincent Ho

orchestras as well as international ensembles. He has been the WSO's resident composer since 2007

While the rest of us were counting the last few days left before Christmas, Winnipeg composer Vincent Ho was counting down something more personally exciting. On Jan. 29, world-famous percussionist Dame Evelyn Glennie will debut his new work: *The Shaman: Concerto for Percussion and Orchestra* on opening night of the 20th annual Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra New Music Festival (NMF).

The 35-year-old composer-in-residence can hardly contain his anticipation. He has a lot riding on this weeklong event. As co-curator with WSO artistic director-conductor Alexander Mickelthwate, Ho has had a hand in selecting every piece of music planned for the NMF and every musician selected. It's pretty much his baby.

Ho met Glennie at her 2009 performance with the Manitoba Chamber Orchestra. She was debuting *Mirage?*, a work by Ho's former teacher, Christos Hatzis. "He had told her about me -- that I was one of his best students," Ho said earlier this month. "She looked at my website and liked my works, then entrusted me with a work for her."

While on the lookout for soloists to perform at the NMF, Ho checked with Glennie's agent and she happened to be available for the festival dates (Jan. 29-Feb. 4). "I asked her what repertoire she would like to play and she said, 'How about yours?' I was honoured and surprised, but also terrified. I've been preparing for this for almost 20 years!"

Ho is very much the serious musician. He's been honing his craft for his entire adult life. Born in Ottawa, he received his Associate Diploma in Piano Performance from the Royal Conservatory of Music (Toronto), his Bachelor of Music from the University of Calgary, his Master of Music degree from the University of Toronto, and ultimately his Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of Southern California. He attended the Schola Cantorum Summer Composition Program in Paris for further training in analysis, composition, counterpoint and harmony.

Since then he has gone on to win numerous awards and have his music performed by many major Canadian

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and is contracted until 2013.

"I'm always learning new things, perfecting my technique," he explained. "I can get growth from this," he said of the commissioned work for Glennie. "To write for such a great performer allows me to work to my optimum... my philosophy of my role as a composer is not just to entertain. I want to connect with the audience."

Ho and Glennie, who is profoundly deaf, kept in regular touch throughout the process. "We had back-and-forth discussion," he said. "I wanted to write a piece that is suited to her, created just for her. She is one of those champions who has the capacity to change lives. She finds the soul behind the music."

The WSO, the National Arts Centre Orchestra (NACO) and the Manitoba Arts Council commissioned the concerto -- and it's already in demand. It will open the Toronto Symphony's New Creations Festival on March 2 and be played by the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony and NACO in 2012.

What is the attraction? Maybe, in this *Harry Potter* world, it's the supernatural elements of the work. In the program notes, Ho divulges a fascination with the music of indigenous cultures and the concept of shamanism. He designed *The Shaman* to connect the audience to another plane of being. "I use music to create a world that's convincing, ritualistic. It is meant to be an organic experience."

He will be speaking more about his work at the Meet the Composer Series held at McNally Robinson Booksellers on Jan. 18 at 7:30 p.m.

As a listener, I have always been struck by the sensitive and candid openness of Ho's music, especially his most recent works. While some composers resort to gimmickry and innovation for innovation's sake, forsaking accessibility for flash or dissonance, Ho resists this trend, opting instead for genuine expressions of his personal interpretation of the world around him. It may not always be a perfect world, as so eloquently portrayed in his *Arctic Symphony* at the 2010 NMF, but he tells it like it is.

Ho says it best: "A good piece has layers, levels, at which it can reach people. Each piece has to be an honest representation of who I am, a reflection -- or portrait of my soul. It comes from deep inside... that's the kind of composer I want to be. I have pushed to the edge, as far and as deep as I can. Sure, I'd love to have a record deal or win a Juno -- that would be icing on the cake. But as long as I am writing something that fulfils me and gives people something, I'll be satisfied."

And so for Vincent Ho, Christmas may come a little late this year. But when Evelyn Glennie walks onto the Centennial Concert Hall stage and gives that first shake of the ritualistic shakers on Jan. 29, the wait will all be worth it.

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