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Cold Play

By Frank J. Oteri on February 4, 2013

I've finally returned to my desk at New Music USA after travelling to Paris, Nice, Cannes, and finally Winnipeg, Manitoba to attend the second half of the [2013 Winnipeg New Music Festival](#) whose featured composer this year was Steve Reich. I'd long wanted to attend this festival and had never been able to sort out the logistics. But this time the lure of live performances of *Tehillim* (one of my all-time favorite pieces of music) and *The Desert Music* (which I had not heard live since attending the American premiere at the Brooklyn Academy of Music back in 1984) was enough to convince me to board yet another airplane (less than 12 hours after I returned home from France) and brave the weather in Winnipeg. (During the time I was there, the temperature dropped to -34°C , which equals -29°F .)

Decked out in a corduroy suit, a vest, a lined coat, tall boots (purchased specifically for this trip), gloves, earmuffs, and a hat (the first I've worn in more than 30 years), I exited the Winnipeg Airport together with my wife Trudy, who was dressed similarly, and faced the elements for less than a minute to hail a cab, returning outside for an additional minute to get our luggage from the trunk and into the hotel. Despite all the layers and less than two minutes of exposure in total, my eyes (which weren't covered) felt somewhat pulverized, my nose and my throat felt swollen, and my already doubly covered ears felt numb. Trudy fared no better. It was COOOOLD! Much as I was eager to roam the town in the hours not spent attending rehearsals, concerts, pre-concert talks, and post-concert receptions, I was prepared to give in to the completely out-of-character impulse to remain indoors in our heated hotel room during any free time. And indeed, on our first day in Winnipeg (Friday, January 31), we cabbied it from the hotel to Centennial Hall (a distance of approximately six blocks) to attend rehearsals for the all-Reich chamber music concert that evening—*Different Trains*, *Clapping Music*, *New York Counterpoint* (featuring a soprano saxophone soloist rather than the usual clarinet), and *Double Sextet* (performed along with choreography by Peter Quanz). Following the rehearsal, Winnipeg Symphony composer-in-residence Vincent Ho drove us to a Latin American restaurant (perhaps to provide the allusion of a warmer climate) located between Centennial Hall and our hotel. Trudy and I stayed there pretty much until it was time for the concert. After a full meal we ventured back to the concert hall by foot, but asked to be driven back to the hotel following the post-concert reception since it was even colder at that point.

The performances were exemplary and the large audience was extremely enthusiastic—it was a new music dream come true. Not only did so many people of all ages come out for this concert, they actually came out in, ahem, $-34^{\circ}\text{C}/-29^{\circ}\text{F}$! As for the repertoire, though for many it might have been a brand new experience, I felt like a standard repertoire aficionado attending a typical classical music program because I know all of those pieces quite well. Since I usually find myself at premieres, it's a pleasure I don't get to have all that often. The only new thing for me was Peter Quanz's choreography for six dancers (entitled *In Tandem*) which turned Reich's double sextet into a triple sextet—every phrase in the music was accompanied by a corresponding visual gesture. Sometimes, I must confess (not being the most movement-savvy person), dance can be lost on me. I was particularly worried since the day before I had woken up in a time zone seven hours earlier than Winnipeg and few things are worse for jet lag than sitting in a dimly lit concert hall. But I was completely riveted. Quanz made *Double Sextet* come alive for me in an extremely direct and visceral way. During a Q&A with CBC radio host Bill Richardson, Quanz claimed that “most dancers can memorize music more easily than musicians.” After hearing and



North Watch, a public sculpture on Main Street by Manitoban artist Ivan Eyre, just about sums up my initial thoughts about Winnipeg

seeing that exciting performance, it was clear to me that dancers can not only memorize music, but can also really perform music—interpret it and make it completely their own.

While I spent all of Friday morning unwilling to leave the hotel room, my internet peregrinations led me to [Into The Music](#), a used record store than was roughly the same distance from the hotel as Centennial Concert Hall. If there's anything that can cure me of a reasonable act of self-preservation, it's vinyl. So I decided to walk there and I did. Somehow it didn't feel quite as cold. But before I could really explore all that was on their shelves, it was time to head to the concert hall for a rehearsal of *Tehillim*. Though it clearly sounds heavily syncopated, *Tehillim* seems metrically regular until you carefully study [the score](#); it's chock full of meter changes, many of which are highly irregular. (The final eight measures are 9/8, 12/8, 8/8, 10/8, 17/8, and three measures of 10/8.) During the rehearsal, it seemed slightly beyond the grasp of the ensemble, though they were clearly giving it their all. I was somewhat worried.

After dinner in the hotel, we walked back to the concert hall for the performance. (It was just as cold as the day before, but I suppose we were acclimated at that point.) The first half of the concert opened with the North American premiere of Jonny Greenwood's Suite from *There Will Be Blood*. I'm a huge Radiohead fan, so I was excited to hear a live performance of the orchestral music that Greenwood has been composing as of late. But after getting particularly excited when I read in the program notes that Greenwood's score was originally written for ondes martenot and strings, I admit that I was disappointed that the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra performance was just strings. Then Evelyn Glennie joined the orchestra for another North American premiere, *Hikoï*, an extremely flamboyant percussion concerto by Gareth Farr, who is one of New Zealand's most widely performed composers. I had been familiar with Farr's music from recordings but this was my first exposure to it in a concert hall. Hearing it live definitely adds to the experience since it is very theatrical, although Farr asserted during the pre-concert Q&A that for him "the music has to be the priority" and if something that's great theatrically doesn't ultimately serve the music, he'll opt for a less theatrical solution that does. Hearing Farr talk about his music was as entertaining as the music itself. "People think because I'm a composer I must be a very serious person," Farr exclaimed at one point and then proceeded to describe his other career as Lilith LaCroix, New Zealand's [most famous drag queen](#).

Then came the real shock of the evening, and perhaps of my entire Winnipeg experience. After a euphoric standing ovation for Glennie and Farr, Vincent Ho came to the stage to announce that due to unforeseen circumstances, the performance of *Tehillim* would have to be cancelled and a work that had been performed earlier in the week would be performed again instead. Everyone seemed crestfallen. I certainly was. Conversation during intermission bordered on the surreal. What possibly could have happened? We tried to find out but no one was talking. Then we heard a series of announcements, calling various people to report back stage. When we re-entered the concert hall, it seemed like the audience was only about 5/8ths the size prior to intermission. But then there was another announcement that the performance of *Tehillim* would go on after all! It did, and it was practically flawless. It was miraculous and was also one of the most exciting performances I have ever witnessed; it was as if life itself depended on every note. We learned after the concert that one of the four singers came down with the flu right after the rehearsal and had completely lost her voice. After a hot bath and a shot of cortisone, her voice returned at around 9 p.m. and she contacted intrepid WSO conductor Alexander Mickelthwate. She rushed back to the concert hall and they called Steve Reich, who at this point was in his hotel room, and she sang for him. Reich came back to the concert hall in time to experience what for him, as he later acknowledged, was also one of the most exciting performances of his music.



WSO conductor Alexander Mickelthwate, Steve Reich, and WSO resident composer Vincent Ho

Everything the following day seemed somehow anticlimactic, although it got off to a great start thanks to a fabulous dim sum brunch we had with Vincent Ho. I did make it back to that record store and bought three LPs (including a collection of historic recording by the iconic Canadian folk fiddler Don Messer). I also wandered through the underground walkways and skyways in downtown Winnipeg and found a store that sold Canadian wine. We had dinner at a restaurant across from our hotel named Bailey's which is in a historic Winnipeg building that dates back to the year 1900. The concert that evening opened with another percussion concerto featuring Evelyn Glennie, *From Darkness to Light: A Spiritual Journey* by Vincent Ho, which is more introspective than most works in that medium. An extremely moving tribute to a visual artist friend of Ho's who died of cancer last year, *From Darkness to Light* emphasizes timbre over pulsation. Ho's music and Glennie's stellar performance of it offered clear aural proof that percussion instruments can be as expressive as strings or winds. The festival concluded with Reich's *The Desert Music*, a 40-minute choral/orchestral tour de force based on fragments of poems by William Carlos Williams. Again, it was a delight to hear live again after nearly 30 years, but there was something magical about the previous evening's performance of *Tehillim* that trumped every other event that I attended.

As Ellen McSweeney opined earlier today in her [musings about what the new music community could learn from the Super Bowl](#) (I had actually done my best to stay completely away from it this year, and succeeded up until reading her essay—go Canada!), we should not “be afraid to show vulnerability.” Everyone's experience of that performance of *Tehillim* was amplified by the fact that it almost didn't happen; my own experience was further enhanced by attending a rehearsal that seemed far from perfect. Perhaps we need to open all new music rehearsals to the public. Indeed, the performers did seem vulnerable, and everyone was cheering for them to win and ultimately they did. And what was even better about that than the Super Bowl is that nobody lost.

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