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SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2013

Live Review: New Music Festival (February 2nd 2013)

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New Music Festival

Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra

Centennial Concert Hall

February 2nd 2013

Four and a half stars

The 2013 New Music Festival, honouring minimalist composer Steve Reich, ended on a triumphant note with a concert of passionate, transformative music reaffirming the importance and vitality of life.

The evening began with the world premiere of Vincent Ho's *From*

Darkness to Light: A Spiritual Journey, a piece written for legendary Scottish percussionist Dame Evelyn Glennie. The unveiling of *From Darkness to Light* marked the second time the Composer-in-Residence for the WSO and Glennie have collaborated on a world premiere of his work, and expectations were accordingly high. Ho, Glennie and the WSO, conducted masterfully by Alexander Micklethwaite, did not disappoint.

Ho was inspired to write the highly emotional piece after the death of his friend, artist Luc Leestemaker. During his introduction Saturday night, Ho noted that several months after Leestemaker's death from cancer, the composer and his wife welcomed a baby daughter into the world, and this movement from death to birth, from sadness to hope, mirrored the work's emotional arc.

From Darkness to Light began quietly and calmly with gentle lead-in by Glennie, who, surrounded by a variety of drums and other percussion instruments, created a focal point on the stage. Her drums and xylophones softly and steadily grew in intensity and tempo until a moment where, amid the orchestra's persistent rustling of sheet music and high string notes, Glennie let out a single anguished cry of "No!"

Ho's technique brilliantly evoked the moment when a cancer patient first learns of their diagnosis and finds themselves unable to accept their condition. Glennie and the orchestra then leapt into a visceral, dramatic section, mesmerizing the audience with their impassioned and dynamic playing.

As the piece came towards its conclusion, paintings by Leestemaker began to appear on a screen at the back of the stage, accompanied by the hopeful and stirring voices of cellos and violins. Glennie stepped forward to a marimba and, bathed in a silvery glow, began to play her own meditative composition, "A Little Prayer."

As she paused to let the last few vibrations of the instrument dissolve, it seemed as if the entire packed concert hall was engaged in one single, potent moment of silence shared with her.

The New Music Festival audience rewarded the artists with a sustained and heartfelt standing ovation as many listeners fought back tears, overwhelmed by the powerful emotions of the piece.

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▼ [2013](#) (15)

▼ [February](#) (2)

[Live Review: New Music Festival \(February 2nd 2013...](#)

[Live Review: Magellan Ensemble \(January 5th 2013\)](#)

▶ [January](#) (13)

▶ [2012](#) (20)

▶ [2011](#) (17)

▶ [2010](#) (25)

▶ [2009](#) (52)

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Coming after the unqualified success of Ho's work, it seemed almost impossible that Reich's *The Desert Music*, performed in collaboration with The Winnipeg Singers, could have half the same impact - and yet the piece, inspired by the American poet William Carlos Williams, was equally as riveting and emotionally intense.

A group of string players, forming a half-circle around Micklethwaite's podium, began the composition with a comforting, folk-influenced motif. The Winnipeg Singers soon joined in, delivering excerpts from Williams' poetry in beautiful and crystal-clear tones; the recurring statement "man must change or perish" gave the choir's melodies a dark, even chilling undercurrent.

Despite having been written in the 1980s, Reich's work felt deeply moving and remarkably prescient. The WSO's choice to perform this particular piece proved a fitting and timely reflection on humanity's most acute dilemmas in the 21st century. Their masterful rendition of the piece met with the approval of its composer, who came up on stage to receive enthusiastic accolades from the audience.

As the closing piece of the concert series, *The Desert Music* was a brilliant reminder of the relevant, challenging and inspirational role the festival plays in the artistic life of our city.

POSTED BY PAUL AT 12:54 PM
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