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MUSIC

Winnipeg Free Press - ONLINE EDITION

Cancer's touch touches audience in musical journey

Concerto makes world première

By: Gwenda Nemerofsky
Posted: 1:00 AM | Comments: 0

Behind every piece of music there is a story. For Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra (WSO) composer-in-residence Vincent Ho, it was the illness and subsequent death of his friend, artist Luc Leestemaker, that inspired him to write *From Darkness to Light: A Spiritual Journey*.

This percussion concerto is Ho's second collaborative composition created for acclaimed Scottish percussionist Dame Evelyn Glennie. The work received its world première on Saturday, the final evening of the New Music Festival, conducted by Alexander Mickelthwate.

ConcertReview

WSO New Music Festival
Centennial Concert Hall
Saturday, Feb. 2
Attendance: 1,711
★★★★ 1/2 out of five

Ho took up a cause, one that touches millions of people worldwide — the experience and devastation that is cancer. To do this with authenticity and understanding, he interviewed a number of people living with the illness.

The work begins gently, as the barefoot Glennie produced resonant bell-like notes from the xylophone, while strings used a tremolo effect. As the piano sang, we sensed a blithe unawareness, perhaps pre-diagnosis. When Glennie drew her bow across the atmospheric waterphone, otherworldly squeals emanated, beginning an ominous downward spiral. Brass whined and the cellos' menacing passage marked the first

inklings something was wrong. Orchestra members rustled the pages of their scores. Denial became futile.

Nobody plays like Glennie. Moving to the bass drum surrounded by snares and bongos, she began to beat them violently with incredible physical power, marking the realization of an absolute diagnosis and the initial terror it strikes. The music hit us in the pits of our stomachs and we couldn't take our eyes off Glennie and her total commitment.

The WSO, during Glennie's solo, did a terrific job portraying chaos, often the state into which an individual and their family are thrown upon receiving the dreaded news.

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- It was amazing. Beyonce can do no wrong.
- It was OK. I liked Madonna more last year, though.
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Moments of controlled intensity were punctuated by swooping brass notes, insinuating themselves brashly on listeners, much like the disease on its innocent infirm.

Just when we thought it would never stop, everything quieted down. Much-needed respite, a sign of hope, came from a tender reprise of the xylophone entry. Satisfying harmonies in the low strings encouraged, but gradually darkened, mirroring the unpredictability of cancer. A poignant interlude played by flute, oboe and piano offered serenity, however fleeting.

As images of Leestemaker's artwork projected on a screen onstage, Glennie ended the concerto with her own solo marimba composition, A Little Prayer. You could have heard a pin drop as the audience sat, enchanted by the beauty and grace of this chorale, rich with the dignity every cancer patient wishes to maintain throughout the biggest challenge of their life.

Ho has created a lasting masterpiece of sensitivity and perception. And for those of us who shared our personal stories — our voices were heard.

The second half of the program featured Distinguished Guest Composer Steve Reich's 1983 Desert Music for amplified voices and orchestra. A scaled-down WSO, joined by the Winnipeg Singers, worked their way admirably through a marathon of Reich's signature repetitive phrases, with thought-provoking text from poems by American William Carlos Williams.


At times jazzy and syncopated, at times hypnotic in its form, the overall effect was of a work whose ideas reached us before the end, and while the composer had more to say, the audience, and perhaps the musicians, had had enough.

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