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Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra wins a new fan in Carnegie Hall concert

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Post-Gazette classical music critic **[Elizabeth Bloom](#)** engages readers in a conversation about classical music.

Written by Elizabeth Bloom on Friday, 09 May 2014 7:50 am.



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The Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra shows its colors at Carnegie Hall.

NEW YORK—Call me a fan of the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra. I've drunk the Kool-Aid.

To be fair, after reading an article about the WSO (mentioned in my most recent blog post), I was hooked by the orchestra's artistic approach. But its concert Thursday night as part of the Spring for Music festival at Carnegie Hall only confirmed those good feelings; it was the most innovative concert program I've ever heard.

The pieces were R. Murray Schafer's Symphony No. 1, Derek Charke's "13 Inuit Throat Song Games" with Inuit throat singer Tanya Tagaq and Vincent Ho's Concerto for Percussion and Orchestra ("The Shaman"), which featured Scottish percussionist Dame Evelyn Glennie. Music director Alexander Mickelthwaite conducted.

OK, a lot to process there. First of all, all three pieces are written living composers who were able to come out on stage following the performance. Second, they are all Canadian composers. The WSO is on the forefront of supporting fresh Canadian culture with music that is unapologetically Canadian (hence, the Inuit throat singing) and new.

That plays out in the orchestra's annual New Music Festival; in the fact that Winnipeg accounts for 12 percent of Canada's musicians but only 2.25 percent of its population, according to program notes; in the WSO's education programs; and in its role as the official orchestra of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet and Manitoba Opera Association.

The fruits of those labors made their way into Carnegie Hall. The venue was packed, and there was plenty of pride on display; I could see that in chatting with a few Winnipeegers who had come for the show. They were kind enough, literally, to confirm the stereotype that Canadians are nice people. Fans were waving the red Spring for Music flags in support (the musical equivalent of Terrible Towels). The women wore red shoes, the men red ties; all seemed to have the red cloths on their chairs. The orchestra is 74-members-strong, with 50 percent each of female and male members, noted Canadian ambassador Gary Doer, who spoke at the beginning.

A few thoughts on the music:

Mr. Schafer's three-movement First Symphony was a dissonant and occasionally microtonal force of nature that featured some fascinating devices. The composer deployed glissandos for interesting effects, at one point creating haunting sonorities through hairpins; strings sounded like faraway motorcycles, cut off by forceful bass drum. Musicians whistled in the middle movement, which must demonstrate the level of trust between them and Mr. Mickelthwaite.

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Alex Christie-Miller

7h

@AChristieMiller

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Mr. Charke's work comes out of the Inuit throat singing tradition, in which women compete in passing off vocal lines to each other. According to the composer's program notes, "The game is over when one singer laughs, often when the vibration of sound causes a tickle in the throat." The piece is concerto grosso style, with first chairs featured in addition to the singer. Playing off the singer's guttural, breathy sonorities – all of which Ms. Tagac improvised – the strings created their own whispery tones through vertical and circular bowing. Watching Ms. Tagac perform was a show unto itself. The singer was barefoot and dancing the whole time and showed off remarkable physical and vocal endurance.

Dame Evelyn's tour-de-force performance rounded out the concert. She had a massive percussion set-up that included cymbals, vibraphone, marimba, bass drum, several side drums, bongos, bowls and other instruments. The piece, inspired by shamanism, again harkens back to indigenous traditions of Canada, and it has moments that are both rocking/mesmerizing and downright gorgeous. A few moments stick out in my memory: beautiful vibraphone and Bach-like marimba writing in the middle; the connection between orchestra and soloist (like multiple balls falling, somehow, in perfect coordination) during the urgent ending. The phrasing Dame Evelyn achieved with sticks on drums was as thoughtfully shaped as the most lyrical violin playing.

I got the sense that the WSO was the only orchestra capable of presenting this particular program. That's not from a technical perspective, but from a meaning-driven perspective, from a willingness perspective, from a philosophical perspective. And in a world where music and art are increasingly accessible, these distinctive experiences stick out. Spring for Music is meant to celebrate the individual character of orchestras – something that many observers believe has declined. This one showed its sense of purpose and its profound relevance to its community.

Below: Dame Evelyn Glennie and music director Alexander Mickelthwaite bow with the WSO.

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Bill Gapen 9 days ago

THE WSO Carnegie Hall performance was 'interesting'. . Yes - they are unique - yet I am not sure I will be playing their performance as I drive down the road. Music - it takes a unique ear to enjoy unique sound. I would not go as far as to call it music.. more sound and creativity. Orchestra - the strings were in very good shape. The horns section though were sometimes out of pitch and there were a few wrong notes here and there from some. Throat singing is very unique - although perhaps for a select audience Percussion with Dame Evelyn Glennie OUTSTANDING. Audience - a very large contingent from Winnipeg who flew in for the concert. Base on the number of people waving their red kerchiefs and my discussion with

attendees. I would hazard to guess the hall was about 70% composed of Winnipeggers. past or current. While the spirit is live and thriving - one needs to question whether it was a New York performance or a Winnipeg pep rally using a NY venue. For an orchestra to excel with global recognition - wouldn't one want to say that people from all over the world came to witness and enjoy an orchestra? Perhaps it goes back to that unique sound.. yes certainly unique but does it draw an international appreciation ?

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