

New music, with feeling

ROBERT HARRIS, Globe and Mail, Nov. 10, 2001

Ergo Projects Exchange At Glenn Gould Studio in Toronto on Wednesday

For the past 40 years or so, the intellectual side of music-making has been at the forefront of new composition. The cultural ruins of two world wars and the collapse of the European certainties that had long underpinned Western musical thought forced composers into an intense effort to pick up the pieces and painfully recreate the musical rhetoric from the ground up.

All great music rests on an impeccable intellectual foundation, from the mathematical certainty of a Bach fugue to the formal logic of a Beethoven sonata. But over the past half-century, the intellect alone has propelled a great deal of musical activity and musical novelty.

Audiences, by and large, have shuddered at the results of these efforts. But given the evidence of Wednesday night's concert in of new music by the Ergo Projects Exchange, the traditional balance between thought and feeling in music -- so central to its eventual popularity -- may be in the process of being recalculated. The Toronto concert, featuring six works by composers in their late 20s and 30s, provided telling evidence that new music is capable of charm, delight and emotion, as well as provoking thought.

Not that all six works -- part of a German-Canadian exchange project organized by Canadian composer Barbara Croall -- were completely successful. Corps secrets by Michael Oesterle used many of the repetitive formulas devised by American minimalists such as Steve Reich and Terry Riley to prove once again that as far as "pattern music" goes, more is definitely less. And Chris Paul Harman's *Somewhere*, based on fragments from *West Side Story*, was a bit too allusive and spare to project much musical heat.

However, the four other works on the program filled a wide range of musical experience, starting with the piece Barbara Croall herself contributed to the evening. Calliope is Croall's re-creation of the 19th-century steam-driven musical machines she saw as a child at rural fairs. Indeed, there it was: a bellowing, whistling, belching magical bit of musical confection, charmingly and impeccably redrawn by Croall and beautifully imagined by her performing ensemble.

Carl Christian Bettendorff's *Perpetuum* used a whole range of new musical elements to create a comprehensible, followable arc of musical thought, from triangle opening to triangle conclusion.

Rudi Spring's *Kaleidoskop* used the music of Schubert as the ground on which all manner of novel musical ideas were constructed, weaving quite successfully the Western tradition and the Western avant-garde into a single seamless garment. André Ristic's *Motel Infinity* continued a long tradition within new music to play with sonority and beguile the ear with sounds newly made and freshly combined.

It used to be the conventional wisdom within new-music circles that poor performance often doomed new works and that decades had to pass before a proper interpretation of new pieces could be found. Well, forget that canard.

The ensemble assembled for Wednesday's concert was first-rate. Special mention has to be given to the clarinet playing of Peter Stoll (who literally juggled three different instruments during *Motel Infinity*) and the flute playing of Phillip Jundt. And there was Erica Goodman with her harp, the wonderful player whose father was long-time concertmaster of the Toronto Symphony, providing wonderful support and continuity to the new-music community.

The breakthrough hasn't quite happened for new music yet. It still labours in relative obscurity. But one day, the breakthrough will occur -- led, one suspects, by composers similar to the ones we heard on Wednesday, composers with talent, technique and heart.