

Banff Centre World Music Residency program off to a strong start with uplifting final concert



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The Banff Centre's inaugural World Music

Residency came to a close Friday with its Persian and Eastern traditions participants giving a well-received concert of some fine traditional gems, spiced with plenty of new compositions. The concert's musical inspirations took the form of both notated and semi-improvised compositions featuring faculty and participants representing Persian, Turkish, Arabic and North Indian Classical traditions.

In this final instalment of the Banff Centre's Friday night Musical Encounters series of the winter season, we were treated to pieces of varying ensemble size and makeup, ranging from duos to quartets and many more comprising large ensemble or orchestra. It was often enchanting to hear the many colours drawn from the orchestra including oud, violin, cello, setar, sarangi, voice, tombak, tabla, and kanun. Very often pieces mixed Eastern and Western instruments and influences with the old and the new, particularly when members of the Toronto-based Medieval trio Pneuma Ensemble took part in most of the works, adding a special timbre to the evening's sound. Inviting Pneuma was a nice touch and I appreciated the added sounds of vielle and gittern.

The World Music residency final concert was hosted and led by program director Kiya Tabassian, the well-known Iranian-Canadian setar virtuoso, and co-founder of the well-travelled early music/Middle Eastern trio Constantinople, based in Montreal. Also on faculty were equally esteemed master musicians Dhruva Ghosh (sarangi), Yogesh Samsi (tabla), Ziya Tabassian (percussion) and Charbel Rouhana (oud).

Mr. Ghosh was certainly my favourite, and his sarangi playing was a clinic on how to bring out the many musical possibilities contained in this long-neglected North Indian traditional instrument, which now has a new-found and deserved popularity. It was refreshing to hear this instrument given pride of place, an internal cultural voice brought back to life and out into the open again.

Even though the faculty participated together in only one piece, they

amply demonstrated how well mixing musical traditions from different cultures can lead to a rewarding artistic experience.

Most of all however, their example helped to underscore that the point of the residency was, and always will be, to teach musicians about the risks of performance, and just how important it is to leave the comfort zone of one's usual performing experience and to daringly plunge into a musically and culturally unfamiliar situation. Therein lies the attraction for the residency artists and participants to come to Banff to make a very different kind of music.

I talked to Kiya Tabassian, World Music Residency program director, asking him about some of the more important features that make the program so remarkable at the Banff Centre, and what participants must bring to the program.

"Chemistry," Mr. Tabassian said. "There was a really nice chemistry between everyone."

Mr. Tabassian discussed the central importance of another attribute participants must bring to these cultural exchanges, namely an openness to working on very different kinds of music combined with an ability to adapt quickly to new ideas and new musical systems. This kind of versatility, when practised and perfected in an intensive, three-week international musical/cultural environment, can lead to great rewards for the musicians.

"The residency was life-changing and gave them (the participants) new direction to their musical activities and what they wanted to do," he said.

It also helped that the faculty were all master performers, ready to engage the younger musicians.

"The faculty interacted with participants at the highest level possible," he said.

"For three weeks they saw each other in workshops, meetings, creative sessions, individual meetings, group meetings, delved deeper into these traditions, and not only with an academic approach. We gave didactic

workshops, and creative sessions too in how one can be creative within all of the traditions.”

The program initially provided space for 22 participants, but the acceptance committee was so impressed with the strength of the applicants, they increased the number of spots to 27.

“We had classical performers in strings and sax, and jazz, and more people from university ethnomusicology programs, [including]... composers, some experienced in Western classical contemporary composition, and some in Middle Eastern composition. This was a nice orientation of backgrounds and provided for some nice exchanges,” Mr. Tabassian said.

It also gave a chance for experienced faculty members to help not only the younger composers but also the instrumentalists too, who came to develop their skills in improvisation. This way, they developed and became deeper musicians, reflecting more on changing their orientation toward what it means to make music.

“It was a chance to show that there are other traditions that can be helpful to Western Classical musicians. It was interesting for the musicians to learn about how to improvise, or develop a personal way of thinking about music and making music,” Mr. Tabassian continued.

Much of the technical knowledge the residents picked up was derived from learning about the musical systems behind the notes they play. In short, musical compositions throughout the world are subjected to units of formal pitch organization, called ‘modes’, the precursor to Western traditional scales, but far more sophisticated and complex than the scale system employed in the West.

“It opens doors for them,” Mr. Tabassian said. “In modal music you can create a huge amount with a few notes. It’s certainly the case with Persian music where five, two, ten or even a succession of twenty notes can show how amazing and how far you can go with one mode.”

Such sophisticated organizational possibilities transcend our very basic conceptions of major and minor keys here in the West, because Eastern

musical systems like those of Persian and North Indian traditions open greater possibilities for ingenious music making. It's no wonder jazz turned to modes instead of scales, as had traditional Classical composers too, such as Beethoven, Chopin, Rachmaninoff and many others, albeit in only a few pieces they composed.

Modes also afford the possibility of building compositions solely on four-note groupings, called tetrachords. Composers in the Persian, Arabic and Turkish traditions often build new tetrachords on top of a basic tetrachord, constructing multiple four-note groupings into a series that can extend over more than one octave, and even as far as two-and-a-half octaves, a remarkable and uniquely specialized form of music.

One example we heard at the concert included the large six-part 'Pish-daraamad-e Shour' by the great master Ali-Akbar Shahnazi. It was comprised of a dastgah — something very similar to a pitch class set that Stravinsky or Bartók would have used — making use of a unique set of four-note cells that collectively, when repeated in similarly organized compositions, came to be called the "Shour" mode a long time ago. (Shour, more accurately, is often likened to a collection of modes, and can exist in several forms).

An entirely composed piece for full orchestra, the 19 members of the ensemble residency program played it sublimely well, blending beautiful, different instrumental colours — a splendid feat of collective musicianship.

The Persian way of creating music can run in different beat cycles too, such as 10, 11, 13 beats etc. Mode and beat cycle, once established, can give the musicians a working model they can develop further into a whole composition containing some improvisation.

Many pieces in Friday's concert contained improvisational portions, typically found in a given work's middle section, which is traditional for many works in this repertoire. A strong example was 'Spring' by the up-and-coming santur player Fährad Khosravi. A fine instrumentalist who is musical in every way, it was a pleasure to hear his work, combining fine improvisational qualities with his command of the instrumentally

attractive, melodically alluring sounds of his santur.

'Gharib' was another lyrical work with improvised material by the setar player Morteza Abedinifard. Both Mr. Khosravi and Mr. Abedinifard are Iranian, and are clearly steeped in revealing the more compellingly inner aspects of Persian musical language. They received a warm welcome from the audience who clearly enjoyed the more rhapsodic aspects of their playing.

The faculty were outstanding in their recital component as well, all seated onstage to start the second half of the concert program, playing a semi-improvised piece that the ensemble had been exploring together just two days before the concert. While improvising individual lines and exploring different modes together, the piece more or less coalesced into its final form. There was initially no actual title to the composition, but later Mr. Tabassian settled on the more mystical descriptor 'A Song Within Mountains'. Set in the modes Dast-gâh Homayoun / Raag Basant Mukhari, the piece carried a distinctly lyrical, smooth, nearly gossamer feel to it as is customary (at least, from what I remember of Basant Mukhari), while supported with some engaging tabla playing by Yogesh Samsi.

Virtuosic treatment of this particular mode was an important added bonus to creating the piece, given that the mode's innate lyrical character can be occasionally difficult to pull off, especially when aiming for a smooth melodic overall finish. But above all, what I took away from their performance was a sense of individual and personal exploration reaching communal fulfilment and that somehow the ensemble had explored a means for reaching a consensus musical space that amounted to more than the sum of its parts. I believe we were left with a transcending experience, richly demonstrative of how such a powerful musical language communicates through the subtlest of means.

There were many other highlights too that attempted, and successfully achieved, these musical goals, often to stirring effect. What comes to mind right away is the 'Pakastani Sufi Kalam', sung by Shumala Hemani, who accompanied herself on a portable harmonium.

Here was one of the most emotionally involving laments I have heard in a long time. I enjoy melancholy songs from many different cultures, each expressing radically different inner existential visions of what it means to be sad. In this case, Ms. Hemani's piece struck a nerve in me for its paradoxical robustness, its vocal virtuosity, the harmonic texture contained in her solo line, and the sense of working out an inner grief by building emotional power and inexorable drive right up to the final note. It ended the first half with a bang and hardly a whimper.

There were also some fine new compositions performed, particular 'Diamonds in the Sand' by guitarist Joel Bell and the interestingly inward-looking piece set for solo voice and ensemble by Brechtje van Dijk called 'The Boat of Myself'. Here were good examples of creating engaging crossover works of both Eastern and Western influence in contemporary compositional style, but relying on older forms and musical archetypes to create something original. Mr. Bell's piece excelled in combining jazz elements, beat cycles and colours, with improvisational elements, while Ms. van Dijk led the ensemble through a more speculative poem set in distilled, soporific sound textures, all to good effect.

Finally, the orchestra itself deserves considerable praise. Reconciling tuning systems from very different instruments and varied cultures, and making them sound wonderful together, was certainly one feat worth mentioning here. But, I think the greatest accomplishment for which the orchestra deserves the most praise was how well they all worked together to convey a melodic and colourful vision of any composition they played.

For example, when the concert opened with a piece calling for a section consisting of viola, setar, santur, and clarinet, that was an impressive way to start, setting the tone for our ears to acclimate not only to a range of unusual colours, but in different combinations we don't conventionally hear. It immediately grabbed my attention.

As if to bring this message home again at evening's end, the last piece, 'Moher' by oud player Hadi Eldebeck, made the right sort of polyphonic impression with its varying illuminative textures. I wish the piece could have gone on longer, exploring the magical possibilities of tonal colours contained in its rich counterpoint and hypnotic melodies. It was beautiful,

and the audience loved it.

And there are many of us out there who want more of this kind of glowing, large musical texture that can only be found in a diverse, Eastern/Western-combined orchestra, capable of dazzling listeners with its uniquely entrancing sound world.

Even though turnout was moderate at the Margaret Greenham Theatre, the music was well received, and based on the many individual responses I heard afterward, it looks very much like audience appetite and growth for this kind of music will be guaranteed for many years to come.

The World Music residency program has been a long time in coming for many years. Now that it is finally here, we can look forward enthusiastically to a broad variety of much-needed musical/cultural infusion coming again soon to Banff from all over the world, and that can only be exciting news.