

The abstract staying power of 'new music'

This iteration of a series of contemporary concerts is not as off-putting as it seems

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REVIEW

The term "new music" is a confusing one: It doesn't mean all recent music, but rather something quite narrow and specific. When critics talk about "new music," they are referring to that subset of the art music tradition that is contemporary. We can't call it classical any more, because there's nothing either classic or classical about it. It may use the conventional instruments of the orchestra or it may not (it may use electronics or scissors and fishing line). It tends to be, as with all art after the early 20th century, cerebral and abstract, concerned with breaking formal boundaries and definitions. Its composers are more often than not associated with university music departments. It tends to

be resistant to plebeian diversions such as melody or regular rhythm, and for this reason it is a rarefied pleasure that attracts a tiny audience.

This audience is also aged. A sea of white heads filled a concert hall in Toronto on Sunday evening, for a performance of four important works of the 21st century.

This concert was one of a long-running series called New Music Concerts, whose musical director is the venerable Robert Aitken, a composer and flutist. Four pieces were performed, all on conventional instruments: a string trio by the American avant-gardist composer Elliott Carter, who died in 2012; a world premiere clarinet concerto, with a large chamber orchestra, by Canadian Paul Frehner; a similarly multi-instrument piece featuring a piano, from 2009, by Canadian Linda Caitlin Smith; and a large and noisy percussion concerto by Dutch composer Robin de Raaff.

A preconcert talk with the composers and Mr. Aitken exemplified the problem of audience. Preconcert talks are usually meant to give a primer to those who are not familiar with the

kind of art about to be performed. If you go to a preconcert talk at a large opera, you are going to hear some basic introductory information about the period and the preoccupations of the work. At new-music events, however, the talk will be for those already in the know. It will use the words chromaticism, counterpoint and harmonics — all terms that need to be explained to non-musicians. In the audience I recognized one famous filmmaker, one avant-gardist composer, one famous sound-poet. They all know one another.

Of course, there must be a place where aficionados of rarefied tastes may gather, but one wonders if this approach alone will be forever productive. After all, this audience (me included) will be dead quite soon.

And the work itself is not nearly so off-putting as its ambience threatens. The first piece of the evening, Mr. Carter's *Accordes* — a piece first performed in 2011, just before that composer died at the age of 103 — is a bright, nervous, trembling piece, a piece of agitation and busyness and multilayered complexity,

essentially modernist. It is played by a violin, a viola and a cello, but, unusually, the viola is the dominant voice. This was deftly and subtly accomplished by violist Doug Perry.

Mr. Frehner's thrilling and mysterious clarinet concerto, titled *Cloak* (in a reference to cloak-and-dagger spy novels), came next. Mr. Frehner had instructed the clarinet soloist, Max Christie, to play in a distinctive way so as to obtain two tones at once, which is more unsettling than beautiful, but the piece achieved a shimmering brassiness that was at once fun, lively and mildly threatening. Mr. Frehner conducted this himself.

The highlight of the evening was the piano-chamber orchestra piece *Path of Uneven Stones* (2000) by American/Canadian composer Ms. Smith.

The Canadian pianist Eve Egoyan, with whom Ms. Smith has collaborated many times, played this melancholic, reflective, tranquil piece with her usual sensitivity. This piece, unlike the others, relies on a pretty melody. Ms. Smith has said that she was trying to write a "non-heroic" role for the piano;

which would make it a kind of "anti-concerto." Her goal, she said, was to write a music that turns inward rather than outward.

Indeed, the quietude of this piece was in contrast to the bold clanginess of the last one, Mr. de Raaff's thundering *Percussion Concerto* (2013), which involved the agile percussionist Ryan Scott leaping about a vast arsenal of bongos, marimba, temple blocks, vibraslaps and other eerie sound-makers. This piece was so aggressive and fuming it was hard to care too much about the subtle colours and hums that Mr. Scott is so adept at evoking from his tubes and skins. The piece was conducted by Mr. Aitken, who did not appear to have a perfect accord with his performers.

The age of the audience for this often radical work has always puzzled me. Why would old people be more open to the radical and challenging than young people are? Perhaps because they are less conservative. At any rate, something must change.

Special to The Globe and Mail