

MUSIC

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MCO takes trip to Asia in charming program of contemporary works

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CONCERT REVIEW

Manitoba Chamber Orchestra

Jan. 8, 2014

Westminster United Church

Attendance: 486

The Manitoba Chamber Orchestra presented an eclectic Asian-inspired program Wednesday featuring three world-premières plus an old English warhorse.

The concert, led by guest conductor Judith Yan, also showcased Chinese flutist Xiao-Nan Wang and baritone Michael Nyby. Yan is the artistic director of the Guelph Symphony Orchestra and music director/principal conductor of Opera on the Avalon.

Proving that true artistry knows no borders, the Winnipeg-based Wang stole the show with his soulful interpretation of Jim Hiscott's *Far Heavens*. Inspired by the masterful musician's own spiritual world, the 20-minute episodic work is a showpiece. After striding onstage, beaming, with his chromatic dizi flute in hand, Wang immediately entered Hiscott's exotic world with focused intensity.

The local composer wisely allows adequate solo breaks for the flutist, with idiomatic writing able to display Wang's brilliant trills, throaty vibrato and virtuosic runs. His final cadenza ranged from the delicacy of a Chinese tea ceremony to passionate declamation. The two artists -- clearly in tune with each other -- worked together previously in 2006. Hopefully their simpatico relationship will yield more creative fruit, with this latest work awarded the only standing ovation of the night.

Julian Grant's *Wu Dai Tong Tang* (Five Generations -- One House) proved another success. The London-born composer repurposed an earlier string quartet to create a 20-minute string orchestra work, in turn derived from music written for his yang-qin (butterfly harp) he received while living in Beijing.

Each of the five short, well-crafted movements teems with textural colour and life, including rugged bow strokes to swooping glissandi and pizzicati, resulting in a charming work you'd like to hear again.

200 Dreams of Captivity, composed by Scott Wheeler, is an orchestral song cycle for baritone and obbligato cello based on evocative poetry by Wang Dan, (mostly) written while imprisoned for his role in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. The seven poems reflect on memory and friendship, with the Hamilton-born Nyby's expressive delivery lending operatic gravitas.

However, despite his deeply resonant vocals, all too often the orchestra, particularly the higher-pitched violins, subsumed his words. Still, the most effective sections in the ambitious, 40-minute work were Eastern Wind, with its mysterious gongs, and Winter Night, where snap-pizzicato captured the bite of frigid cold and relentless memories.

And then it became time, as they say, for something completely different. After nearly two hours of 21st-century Asian-inspired music, the MCO turned back the hands of time to 1892 England. Yan crisply led the players through a windswept interpretation of Sir Edward Elgar's Serenade for Strings in E Minor, Op. 20 that still satisfies as an enduring classic -- despite the jarring effect of the program's stylistic ricochet.

With three living composers present in the audience, it's a mystery why they were not asked to speak briefly about their works. While this practice is often debated, it would only have added to the enjoyment of the music. Still, the MCO is to be commended for offering almost an entire program of new music -- as well as the players themselves for admirably performing three complex contemporary scores on the cusp of the city's annual New Music Festival.

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