

TRANSPECTRA – NEW TUNINGS, NEW INSTRUMENTS

REVIEW BY KAREN AGES



scale is derived by dividing the interval of a “perfect twelfth” (e.g. from C to the G an octave above) into 13 steps. The result is a kind of “macro tuning”, as the resultant intervals are wider in pitch than those of the “well tempered” scale we are used to. In fact, there are no perfect octaves in this scale.

The concert opened with a non Bohlen-Pierce, but definitely unusual-instrument first half, featuring a lengthy solo improvisation by Jesse Stewart on the Waterphone, a metallic drum-like contraption with spiky resonators and a central tube leading

to a hollow drum head into which water could be poured if desired. Stewart had me mesmerised by the variety of sounds and tone colours he was able to induce, through hand drumming, rubbing, and bowing of the resonators with a bass (or cello?) bow. But the real fun began in the second half, which

Toronto, where I live, is a city overflowing with musical activity; on any given night of the week, there are usually ten or so concerts or musical events to choose from. And in terms of new music, there’s no dearth of this genre either – off the top of my head, I can name at least six contemporary music presenters that boast a regular concert season. So why, given this abundance, did I make the trip to Kitchener on April 28, battling a horrendous traffic jam on the westbound 401? I was intrigued by a particular concert being presented by the Open Ears Festival of Music and Sound, and if I could only attend one event at this year’s festival, it would be this one.

tranSpectra is a collective of musicians and other artists put together about a year ago by clarinetists Tilly Kooyman (also artistic director for this concert) and Stephen Fox, and composers Owen Bloomfield and Todd Harrop. What’s unique about these folks is their interest in exploring unusual tuning systems and unusual instruments, namely the Bohlen-Pierce scale, and instruments built for it. And here’s where it gets even more interesting – clarinetist Stephen Fox not only performed in the concert, but also built the clarinets that he and Kooyman



played, apparently two out of only four Bohlen-Pierce clarinets in existence in the world (the other two, also made by Fox, are in Germany I’ve been told).

So what is the Bohlen-Pierce scale? Without getting into too much detail, the

other-worldly tuning! Along with the next two pieces on the program, *Wanderer* by Owen Bloomfield, and *Calypso* by Todd Harrop, which featured the two BP clarinets alone or with sparse accompaniment (the latter included modern dancer Yvonne Ng, and Rick Sacks swerving around the stage to evoke the sea, wearing a bizarre wooden

frame sporting bells, whistles and shakers), one really had to listen with “open ears”; while the clarinet timbre was reassuringly familiar, the tuning suggested to me that we were definitely not in Kansas any more – but as the evening progressed and my ears adjusted, the unfamiliar became the “new normal”.

The next piece, *Rare Current*, comprised a triptych of newly commissioned works by three Canadian composers, with video art by Reinhard Reitzenstein.



David Lieberman, and played here by Neal Evans. Jascha Narveson’s rhythmically driven piece, *Wire*, introduced yet another

new creation, the tritavophone, a percussion instrument comprising wooden, aluminum and steel bars, as well as long, pitched curved tubes played by striking the ends with rubber coated paddles, in the expert hands of Rick Sacks. *Cross Current*, by Gayle Young, explored the theme of water and introduced yet another instrument, of her own creation, the zither-like amaranth.



(The “Rare” in the title refers to the Rare Charitable Research Reserve, a protected nature reserve in Waterloo region). The first piece, *Body of Wood*, by Emily Doolittle, employed a poem by Rae Crossman expressing the grandeur of a tree, artfully

The final, and probably most complex piece on the program was the premiere of Peter Hannan’s *Deaths of Children Update*. Employing a larger ensemble than the preceding pieces (soprano, mezzo-soprano, 2 BP clarinets, cello, percussion, electronics and dancer), this haunting work with text by the composer explores the devastation of HIV/AIDS in Lesotho Africa, where he spent time while his wife, a doctor, was working there. Neal Evans did a fine job of conducting (he’s actually a double bass player), and this moving work, inspired by Mahler’s *Kindertotenlieder*, closed what I felt to be one of the most exciting and ear-opening concerts I’d been to in a long time. In fact, I felt like I’d witnessed a moment in music history-making! Congratulations to Tilly Kooyman and the tranSpectra team on a unique and well executed program!

Karen Ages is a freelance oboist, and fan of contemporary and world music. She works part-time for WholeNote magazine, for which she writes a monthly column and occasional CD reviews.



opened with a piece by German composer Georg Hajdu, who was the inspiration for both the project and the building of the first BP clarinet. *Beyond the Horizon*, for two

Bohlen-Pierce clarinets, narrator and synthesizer, is built around a text on the subject of cosmology and our ever expanding universe. And what better way to illustrate this theme than with

spoken and sung by mezzo-soprano Anne-Marie Donovan, with instrumental ensemble and visual images detailing the rich texture of a tree trunk. And here, we were introduced to another unusual instrument, the newly created stredici, a 16 foot long arched wooden structure strung from end to end with 27 strings, tuned, you guessed it, to the Bohlen-Pierce scale. This instrument was created for tranSpectra by architecture students under the direction of

photos: top L: Rod Sacks as “Odysseus” in *Calypso*, by Todd Harrop; top R: Todd Harrop, Anne-Marie Donovan, Rick Sacks, Marion Samuel-Stevens, with Neal Evans (conductor) and Yvonne Ng (dancer) in *Deaths of Children Update* by Peter Hannan; below that: Yvonne Ng as “Calypso”, Tilly Kooyman & Stephen Fox (BP clarinets), Rick Sacks as “Odysseus” in *Calypso* by Todd Harrop; Centre: Tilly Kooyman, Stephen Fox, Rick Sacks (tritaphone), Todd Harrop (conductor), video by Reinhard Reitzenstein, in *Wire* by Jascha Narveson; Lower R: Neal Evans (stredici), Gayle Young (amaranth), Stephen Fox (BP chimes), Rick Sacks, Marion Samuel-Stevens, with Neal Evans (conductor) in *Deaths of Children Update* by Peter Hannan.

all photos are stills from the video created by Kenneth Doren - www.digitalopera.org/

