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Montreal Chamber Music Festival Celebrates 20 Years



Clarinetist Krakauer, Dover and Emerson Quartets Excel

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To coincide with its 20th anniversary in June, the Montreal Chamber Music Festival moved from St George's Church to regular concert halls. These included Pollack Hall at McGill University's School of Music, Bourgie Hall at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, the Theatre Maisonneuve at Place des Arts, and the Oscar Peterson Hall at Concordia University—the first three found in the downtown core, the last quite a trek west from the center of the city.

The program organization this year was very confusing, shifting sporadically among dates in March, April, May, and June. 14 concerts were distributed among four bewildering, interlocking series; and many concerts had their own individual titles. Of the eight classical concerts offered during the principal portion of the festival (June 6-21), I attended six. Performances comprised classical music as well as jazz (which I didn't attend).

Artistic Director Boris Brott took the opportunity at the June 10 concert to celebrate the festival's 20th Anniversary. He noted that 2015 also marked the 70th anniversary of two events of liberation, the end of World War II

and the Holocaust. He expressed his "appreciation for the remarkable and extraordinary resilience that is our collective human spirit, which through music aims to project a message of hope that is uplifting and inspiring."

The Dover Quartet, one of the stars at last year's festival [Sept/Oct 2014] and winner of the Banff String Quartet Competition in 2013 [Jan/Feb 2014], opened the June 10 concert with Viktor Ullmann's Quartet No. 3. It was written in 1943 at the Theresienstadt concentration camp (now in the Czech Republic) a year before Ullmann died. If there is one young quartet that has found its voice it is the Dover. Joel Link (first violin), Bryan Lee (second violin), Milena Pajaro-van de Stadt (viola), and Camden Shaw (cello) performed the single-movement, 15-minute work with mesmerizing attentiveness and expressivity, evoking in the first part the melancholy yearning and grief of the camp, midway through the playfulness of a whimsical dance, and finally the uplifting conclusion of liberation.

The musicians turned from the subtle to the rambunctious for Franck's Piano Quintet, which is almost a caricature of romanticism gone berserk. The Dover, joined by hometown pianist Marc-André Hamelin, threw themselves into a raucous yet tightly controlled performance. The opening reveled in unabashed sensuality. The many alternations between pianissimos and fortissimos dazzled with agility, though sometimes in the third move-

ment the musicians, in their eagerness, seemed to be pushing the limits of musical taste. Hamelin and the quartet were in perfect harmony, playing with confidence, unity, and depth. Between these works, Hamelin performed Schubert's Impromptus, D 935:3 & 4, with polished tone and a serious touch.

Hamelin treated festival listeners the next evening to a solo recital, again at Pollack Hall. Except for one short work, John Field's *Andante Inedit* in E-flat, what we heard was not in the printed program booklet. The other scheduled works were replaced by Villa-Lobos's *Rudepoema*, Liszt's *Venezia & Napoli*, Haydn's Piano Sonata No. 41 in B-flat, and Debussy's *Images*, Book 1. All displayed Hamelin's meticulousness, irreproachable technique, and musicianship; but I was left feeling that his sound is characterized by too cool a temperament. Despite his prodigious talent, he rarely seemed "to get under the skin" of the notes; there just didn't seem to be much inner spirit in his playing.

The next evening the Dover Quartet returned to Pollack Hall with Israeli clarinetist Alexander Fiterstein. He and two local guests, violinist Victor Fournelle-Blain and pianist Charles Richard-Hamelin (second prize winner at the 2014 Montreal International Music Competition), opened with Bartok's *Contrasts*, written in 1938 for Benny Goodman. The trio conscientiously contrasted the atmospheric middle movement with the agitated folk-inspired dances of the outer two.

The Dover Quartet then followed with routine performances of two major works. In Dvorak's Quartet No. 11 the ensemble played the first movement in an exhilarating classical style, the second with a dreamlike quality established by the opening dialog for the violins, the third with verve and spirit, and the lyrical as well as vigorous fourth with subtle shape and balance. It lacked intensity and depth, however. Fiterstein then joined the Dover for Brahms's Clarinet Quintet. With his clear high range, mysterious mid-range, and darkly romantic low range, he wove a thread of unifying beauty, radiance, and charm into the multi-faceted work, ranging from autumnal melancholy to joyous rapture.

The following week, the Ariel Quartet, formed in Israel 16 years ago, took over from the Dover Quartet. Because the program indicated that they were to be joined by the 14-member "Festival Strings" for all three works on June 17, and by clarinetist David Krakauer and "other greats" for each of the two works on

June 18, I feared that they wouldn't be heard alone during their entire visit. They did, however, play Shostakovich's Quartet No. 8 instead of his scheduled Chamber Symphony in C minor (a string ensemble arrangement of that quartet) that was originally scheduled. Moscow-born first violinist Alexandra Kazovsky, second violinist Gershon Gerchikov, violist Jan Gruening, and cellist Amit Even-Tov gave a riveting performance. The seductive, intensely mournful opening Largo gave way to a blistering Allegro Molto. The central waltz movement exuded bitterness and irony. Even-Tov played with exquisite charm and simplicity. The expressive concluding movement, with the slow fugato on DSCH (the four-note theme built on the abbreviation of Shostakovich's name) was marred, however, by howls from the appreciative audience before the concluding sounds had faded into nothingness. A moment or two of reflection on this sublime epitaph would have been more appropriate.

This concert opened with a composition by Denis Brott's father, Alexander—composer, conductor, violinist, pedagogue, and patriarch of Montreal's musical Brott family—to honor the 100th anniversary of his birth. Members of the Ariel Quartet and the Festival Strings performed his 10-minute *Ritual* (1942). Written in a post-romantic idiom expressly for strings and a string quartet, it here evoked a nostalgic, poignant atmosphere replete with shifting moods and textures. The group struck a felicitous balance that also allowed the players to show off their own voices.

The evening's concluding work, Schubert's *Death and the Maiden* (arr. Mahler-Matthews-Mitchell), did not fare as well. The upper strings overwhelmed the cellos and the single double bass, and their massed sound was too great for the delicacy and refinement of Schubert. There were some lovely moments when the solo quartet was playing alone, especially the duets between first violin Jonathan Crow (concertmaster of the Toronto Symphony) and the second violinist. But the tone generally alternated between brash and lugubrious.

The festival celebrated the "human spirit" on June 18 with one "spiritual" and one "spirited" 20th-Century work. The eminent clarinetist David Krakauer joined Jonathan Crow, cellist Rachel Desoer, and pianist David Jalbert for an intensely moving performance of Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*. In this meditation on adoration and peace (when time will no longer exist), the musicians, especially in their solos, produced heavenly colors

that couldn't have been more removed from the horrors of the concentration camp where it was composed and premiered before 5,000 prisoners. "Never," Messiaen said, "was I listened to with such rapt attention and comprehension." Desoer's cello solo in 'Praise to the Eternity of Jesus' was ethereal and captivating in its beauty, the tone pure and polished without a hint of vibrato. Crow's solo in the concluding 'Praise to the Immortality of Jesus' was the embodiment of sensitivity and finesse. Krakauer played with seamless fluidity and stunning control, especially that long crescendo on the low E in the third movement that seemed to arise from nowhere.

To conclude the program, Krakauer joined the Ariel Quartet for a rollicking rendition of Golijov's *Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind*. The blind medieval kabbalist rabbi of Provence, Isaac, believed that everything in the universe was composed of combinations of the Hebrew alphabet's letters. According to Golijov, "Their root is in a name, for the letters are like branches that appear in the manner of flickering flames, mobile, and nevertheless linked to the core." This can be seen as an allegory for a quartet. Golijov attempted to reflect Aramaic in the first movement, Yiddish in the second, and Hebrew in the third.

Not being proficient in these languages, it was impossible for me to distinguish one from another; but no matter—the pathos, joy, and ecstasy expressed by the seemingly possessed musicians, who moved seamlessly from style to style, made up for any lack of understanding. The clarinet is the star of this quartet, and Krakauer blew the audience away. His racing pulse, piercing cat calls, and throbbing low notes characterized the Aramaic movement, bleating cacophonous whining the Klezmer dance of the Yiddish movement, and exuberant joy and ecstasy gone wild the Hebrew. One is unlikely to see a quartet enjoy itself more in performance.

The last concert I attended (June 19) was a showcase for Montreal soprano Marie-Josée Lord. It was appropriately titled "Femmes!" She was accompanied by an all-woman trio. Drawing mostly from the operatic repertory, the show illustrated the progressive stages of love in a woman's life, from joyful to crazy to painful to jealous and finally to self-love, the last illustrated by 'Dis Mois Que Je Suis Belle' (Tell Me I'm Beautiful) from Massenet's *Thais*. Lord included excerpts from Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, Gounod's *Romeo and Juliet*, Strauss's *Salome*, and three Puccini operas.

Although her fans evidently appreciated the show, there were major problems. She consistently sang too loudly, her voice was miked in a hall holding only about 450 seats, and her descriptions of each opera went on far too long. One may consider jazz ensembles part of a chamber music festival, but Lord's kind of show would have been better suited to a club or cabaret.

The most satisfying concert was the one I attended earlier in the season. On May 2 at Bourgie Hall the venerable Emerson Quartet performed selections from Bach's *Art of Fugue* and Beethoven's Quartet No. 15. In the past I've found the Emersons playing on the bland side, with a fear of taking risks. But their performances that evening with their new cellist Paul Watkins were not only elegant and immaculately shaped, but heartfelt and profound. They proved that they are truly masters of their art.