

The Music of Gilles Tremblay

Feb 23, 2005 - Phillip T. Young Recital Hall

Aventa Ensemble, Susan Young, soprano, Stephen Price bass baritone, Ronald Kilian, piano, Bill Linwood, conductor

By Deryk Barker, Times Colonist staff

"By 1913 music had already reached the absolute limit of complication allowed by the capacity of composers, players, listeners and instrument makers."

In the mid-1930s, Constant Lambert's opinion may have seemed a reasonable one. From our post modern vantage point it is rather clearer than what Lambert viewed as the "absolute limit" was, in the 1950s, to become merely a launching pad taking music into realms as yet unimagined.

Wednesday night's Aventa concert was comprised of three determinedly "cutting edge" works by three generations of Canadian composers.

The main event was undoubtedly Tremblay's monodrama *A quelle heure commence le temps?* (wonderful title). A full description of the piece would take more space than I have at my disposal; suffice it to say that despite its length, it never once seemed to be outstaying its welcome, a fact which I attribute to both the quality of the music and to Aventa's performance.

Bass baritone soloist Stephen Price bore the brunt of some ferociously difficult music and bore it superbly, particularly in the several long unaccompanied stretches. The dazzling solo piano part, in which Tremblay shows the influence of his teacher Messiaen, was scintillatingly played by Ronald Kilian.

Tremblay's orchestration is marvellous, both when using his instruments conventionally and when calling for more unusual effects, for example trumpet and trombone forcing air through their mouthpieces with the palm of the hand, bassoon fingering the keys without blowing and an almost indescribable scratching effect from the strings. I don't, however, think that cellist Larry Skaggs' sneeze was in the score, exquisitely timed though it was.

It has become a commonplace for me to write that Bill Linwood directed a commendably coherent and compelling performance. What I don't believe I have mentioned before in these pages is how well he always conveys the pulse of the

music, no small achievement in many contemporary scores. Tremblay himself was in attendance and seemed suitably pleased with the performance.

Wolf Edwards' *Altus* is an Aventa commission and was receiving its first performance. The work opens with a bang and continues in similar vein; in fact there were several occasions when I felt that I was being granted an insight into how it must have sounded to be bombed in Kosovo.

Again space prohibits a full description of the piece, so I shall content myself with two observations: firstly, these must have been some of the loudest sounds ever heard in the Phillip T Young Recital Hall; secondly, it is a real treat to discover a composer who uses percussion not just to add colour, but to add muscle as well.

Claude Vivier, whose *Lettura di Dante* opened the evening, is, for me, one of those composers whose work I can admire without feeling any real affection for. And there was much to admire in the music, including some delicate, almost pointilliste instrumental textures and dazzling colours.

Needless to say, the considerable difficulties of the vocal line posed no challenge for soprano Susan Young. Is there nothing this woman cannot sing?

Another outstanding evening from Aventa. The remaining concert in the Tremblay series is tonight at 8 p.m