

The 2017 Summer Solstice Music Festival: June 24 & 25

by Morgan Luethe

The 2017 Summer Solstice Music Festival, in addition to its impressive roster of international artists, featured much Canadian talent, as well. In concerts at the Art Gallery of Alberta and, once again, at the University of Alberta's Convocation Hall, audiences were reminded of the high-calibre musicians that live and work in Edmonton and across Canada, all of whom work tirelessly to deepen and enhance the position of live classical music here at home and internationally.

The attention and effort paid to taking chamber music out of the concert hall (out of the *chamber*, as it were) and to present it in and around Edmonton's downtown core, brought a new level of intimacy to the ways in which our audiences experience this art form and, without a doubt, christened more than a few new fans of classical music in our city.

On June 24th, the festival featured a noontday *Strings Only* concert at the Art Gallery of Alberta, given by violinist Timothy Chooi, cellist Brian Yoon, and violist Marcin Swoboda. The program consisted of music written for the all too oft- overlooked ensemble of string trio with works by Beethoven, Dohnányi and contemporary Canadian composers Vincent Ho, Ka Nin Chan, and Serge Arcuri. The impromptu atmosphere of this concert lent itself well to the presentation of this unfamiliar repertoire (even the Beethoven *Eyeglass Duo* and the Dohnányi are relative rarities), and the audience responded enthusiastically to the energy brought to the stage by these three excellent string players.

The festival's final evening saw the trio of Chooi, Yoon and Swoboda joined by ESO concertmaster Robert Uchida (violin), and SSMF Artistic Director Patricia Tao (piano) in an eclectic program that included the music of baroque obscurity Tomaso Vitali, of well-known Canadian composer Alexina Louie, the third Violin Sonata of Edvard Grieg, and the exuberant Op. 44 Piano Quintet of Robert Schumann.

Especially rewarding was the duo of Yoon and Tao in their reading of Louie's *Bringing the Tiger Down from the Mountain II* (1991) that, once again, brought home-grown Canadian music before a captivated audience. This work (of the highly-regarded, internationally-performed Louie) stood to remind the Convocation Hall audience of the unique sound-identity of Canadian art-music and its reflection of this country's kaleidoscopic cultural makeup - an especially pertinent thought given this year's 150th anniversary celebration of Confederation. The performers should be recognized for making this piece an important feature of the festival's closing concert.

The weightiest and probably most famous feature was Schumann's frenetic E-flat Major Piano Quintet, composed during an all-too brief period of mental stability in 1842. Widely regarded as a masterwork of the genre, this quintet has, for a century-and-a-half, electrified audiences with its bipolar oscillations between manic enthusiasm (evident in the first, third and last movements) and halting despair (in the second). The musicians, collected together to for the final performance of the festival, recognized the exquisite beauty and genuine authenticity inherent in this music's emotional instability and played with utmost sensitivity to this element, so characteristic of Schumann's output. Approaching this composer with an understanding of the immense and prolonged mental torment that plagued his adult life (and eventually led to his incarceration in an asylum for the last excruciating years of his life), results in a rewarding listening experience. In recognizing the triumph of Schumann's art over his own inescapable adversity, we, the listener, are edified and start to notice just how profoundly accurate a depiction of the day-to-day turbulence of life this music is.

With a satisfying finish to the 2017 Summer Solstice Music Festival, audience can begin looking forward to the Edmonton Chamber Music Society's exciting 2017/18 season. For all the great music heard throughout this week-long celebration of art, much credit goes to the many dedicated volunteers who pull together and bring off a successful event, every year. It is due to the ongoing efforts of these everyday, local music-lovers that Edmonton can play host, every summer, to a week of world-class music-making. Here's to another 10 years!