

# 2019 Summer Solstice Music Festival

July 10, 2019

By Morgan Luethe

The 2019 edition of the ECMS' Summer Solstice Festival has, once again, left the ears of the audience bathed in terrific music making. Over the course of three mainstage concerts and numerous daytime and evening outreach events in the community, the Festival delivered its annual dose of top-notch chamber music to diverse spaces in downtown Edmonton. A series heavy on repertoire staples, the 2019 Solstice Festival did also fulfill an aim of promoting and presenting lesser known works of the genre; for many, including this reviewer, it was the first time seriously listening to the music of composers like Bridge and Enescu. As for the rest, healthy doses of Mozart (there's *no* such thing as too much Mozart), Weber, Chopin and Schubert made for a robust set of programs and another successful event for the ECMS.

The opening concert of the 2019 Festival featured the warm sound of Ensemble Made In Canada, who presented a program of Mozart, Bridge and Faure. A lush and blended rendition of the E-flat Major Piano Quartet of Mozart opened the concert and immediately lighted on the deep devotion the players of the quartet feel for this music. While a little monolithic at times (perhaps partially due to the acoustics of the First Baptist Church), Ensemble Made In Canada gave an interpretation that leaned into the music, highlighting the rhythmical pulse that lurches the listener into a work that seems to already be underway, with an immediately dense opening texture atop a pumping baseline. The operatic Mozart was rightly present in the following two movements with a lush account of the *Larghetto* centerpiece, and a sprightly *Allegretto* finale. The burnished single-movement *Phantasy Quartet* in F-sharp Minor of Frank Bridge was chosen as the midpoint work of the evening's concert. The composer's unique musical voice, straddling the dual influences of late German Romanticism and French Impressionism offers an interesting glimpse into the broader stylistic metamorphosis taking place at the time. Ensemble Made in Canada showed themselves to be at home in the darkly-toned atmosphere of Bridge's work; the piece's mid-section scherzo passage was a particular highlight and contrasted well with the more ponderous outer sections. Having not been very familiar with Bridge's output before that evening, the group's brooding presentation of this work made a strong case for a serious further consideration of his chamber music. The standout performance of the evening was the group's engaging account of Faure's well-known first piano quartet. The work's undulation between intensity and airy wittiness showcased Ensemble Made in Canada's comfortability amongst the trademark emotional contrasts that define musical romanticism. The weighty first movement was balanced by a sprightly reading of the brightly optimistic second during which the playing of pianist Angela Park successfully kept the piano part's role in the foreground while also maintaining the delicacy and lightness of the writing. The austere slow movement was played with sensitivity and attention to the composer's genuine grief at the time of its composition and set the audience up well for the rapturous final movement that brought the Quartet to its ecstatic conclusion.

The keystone concert of the week was a recital featuring internationally acclaimed Canadian pianist Charles-Richard Hamelin. As with Ensemble Made In Canada's presentation of Bridge's obscure piano

quartet earlier in the festival, so too did this concert highlight to the audience the music of another underplayed composer. The concert's first half presented the early, fragrant *Images oubliées* of Debussy continuing with the Op.3 *Suite* of George Enescu (a work memorable for its engaging combination of Baroque stylistic elements, particularly in its formality and virtuosity.) Hamelin's impressive command over the keyboard was obvious in these and other programmed works that included the familiar *Morceaux de fantaisie* of Rachmaninoff as well as the underperformed Op.28 *Fantasia* of Mendelssohn. Much of Mendelssohn's output for solo piano languishes, respected for its brilliantly craftsmanship but considered ineffectual or slight compared to the work of his contemporaries. While that might arguably be the case in some instances, the *Fantasia* is undeserving of that fate. Hamelin's conviction that this is a piece of deep emotional impact that combines a genuine brooding Romantic idiom with formidable technical demands was clear and appreciated. It's likely the comparative classical sobriety of Mendelssohn's piano music that requires us to consider it more carefully than others, before its impact fully registers. Charles Reichard Hamelin has made his name playing Chopin, and it was his interpretations of this music that formed one of the highlights of the evening. His reading of the profoundly affecting Op. 23 *Ballade* was gripping in its emotional force and it was evident that his understanding and love of this great work runs deep. Bringing off the pyrotechnical *Andante Spianato and Grand Polonaise* with thrilling rhythmical conviction and the flirty pianistic brilliance that Chopin's attractive early virtuosity-vehicles require, Charles-Richard Hamelin's recital concluded with an introspective Bach keyboard transcription. This concert marked his second appearance at the Summer Solstice Festival (having given a similar recital program in 2017), and his popularity with audiences makes it likely that it won't be his last; Hamelin is a player of remarkable technical and artistic ability and his performances are consistently both musically satisfying and memorable.

The penultimate concert of the festival brought together a fine group of musicians from across Canada. The evening's opening performance saw the ECMS' own Patricia Tao join clarinetist James Campbell and violist Ethan Filner in a lean, vibrant account of Mozart's *Kegelstatt* Trio. Written around the same time as the K.493 Quartet presented in the festival's opening concert the work carried on tracing the thread of operatic musical influence that so elegantly marks the composer's chamber music of this period with an irresistible lyrical clarity. The settled contentedness of the Mozart trio laid the way for the rest of the evening's music, all of which remained, by and large, of an untroubled, easier-going tone. Next, clarinetist James Campbell joined violinist Mark Fewer and others in the standout performance of the evening – a frothy reading of Weber's well-loved B-flat Major Quintet. Concertgoers of the ECMS' regular season will remember the London Haydn Quartet having joined with Erich Hoeperich early in the year in the same work, and while this piece appears often in chamber concerts featuring the clarinet, its popularity is totally deserved. While Weber might be criticized at times for perceived plainness or predictability in some of his music, his trademark genius for musical charm and invention (which served him so well as an opera composer), coupled with perhaps the best understanding of the clarinet's capabilities as an instrument of expression and virtuosity among the great composers, gives this work its enduring quality. The festival closed with the epitome of pure, upbeat musical cheerfulness – the *Trout* Quintet of the young Schubert. While by no means the mightiest piece in this composer's justly revered chamber oeuvre, the Quintet does contain some truly lovely passages and is steeped in the unmistakable melodic ease that bleeds from Schubert's *lieder* and into every other area of his work. This work is friendly music and it was brought off in that spirit by the talented instrumentalists that closed the 2019 Festival.

As always, the Summer Solstice Festival is valuable to Edmonton for work it does in bringing art into our community spaces. We should hope that, continuing long into the future, the Festival is able to repeat its past successes with outreach concerts in a range of interesting spaces and venues. The exposure it brings to young artists in pre-concert recitals is extremely important and each of this year's students are heartily congratulated and commended for their hard work in preparing and delivering terrific prelude performances. The inexhaustible year-round efforts of the Festival's Artistic Director, Patty Tao, can't pass unmentioned either and it is to her hard work and dedication to this art that both the ECMS and its audiences owe a sincere thanks. A great 2019/20 concert season lies just on the other side of the Summer months and there's lots to get excited about. See you there.