

collectif9

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Montreal-based *collectif9* left its mark on Edmonton this past month, presenting listeners with a program of interesting and augmented takes on some classic repertoire staples. A string orchestra of nine young and seriously talented players, the group brought a diverse selection of works to the ears of the ECMS audience that included pieces by Mahler, Purcell and Osvaldo Golijov. From the Baroque to the electronic dance music of today, *collectif9* offered compelling takes on music that would otherwise have been outside of the scope of what could be expected a chamber concert. The group's signature combination of interpretive innovation and impressive performance skill kept listeners bound and engaged as they followed the group on an unpredictable musical tour across style and genre.

The program notes for *collectif9*'s concert made clear the fact that the musical structure of the evening would be fluid; malleable and bouncing between composers and musical periods. Up first was *Spheres* - a haunting, ethereal single-movement piece for string orchestra by British composer Gabriel Prokofiev (grandson of Sergei Prokofiev). The piece inhabits an austere atmosphere that unfurls gradually, and with increasing complexity atop persistent, plodding punctuation from the bass strings that seem to suggest the subversive artistic humour that famously pervades so much of his famous grandfather's music. *Spheres* is a short piece - around four minutes in length - and manages to cover significant textural and emotional ground in that span, from the plaintive and simple to the jagged and dissonant. Under the capable bows of *collectif9*'s nine superb instrumentalists, the substance of Prokofiev's work was communicated engagingly, and with the seriousness it deserves.

Gypsy folk music had a traceable influence throughout the evening's program, with each piece having been given a dash of Roma perfume and arrangement by the group's bassist and leader, Thibault Bertin-Maghit. Works like *Night of the Flying Horses* and *Tancas Serradas a Muru*, from composer Osvaldo Golijov (an Argentinian composer of Romanian-Jewish heritage) gave *collectif9* ample opportunity to demonstrate their robust skill as players in a genre of folk music renowned for its virtuosity and depth. Golijov's music proved an intriguing blend of both the lovable, melancholic lyricism and ferocious athleticism of Romanian folk-dance music. *collectif9* found similar sentiments ripe for teasing out in the music of Mahler too; the well known slow movement of the composer's first symphony was given a charming reassessment, replete with descriptive ornamentation (with players mimicking the calls of woodland animals to great affect), and a refreshing dash of paprika-spurred enthusiasm in movements well-known klezmer-influenced sections. Of course, no survey of Roma-inspired music could forget Bartok's charming *Romanian Folk Dances*, of which *collectif9* played a rousing, foot-tapping medley.

collectif9 also made forays into older music, presenting innovative instrumental re-imaginings of both the opening chorus of Bach's *St. John Passion*, and Purcell's *The Fairy Queen*. In the case of both works, the point of these interpretations wasn't to give convincing readings of well-known

Baroque music in string-arrangements. Rather, the way in which these works unraveled and expanded into contemporary, dance-influenced rhythms and modern harmonic language gave insight into how their original musical building blocks, despite a centuries'-long distance between their aesthetic world and our own, were just as useable and fresh under vastly different stylistic treatments.

In a way, *collectif9*'s message was one of unity, and they communicated in the way they highlighted common themes of dance rhythm and style across disparate pieces that wouldn't otherwise be understood as having anything in common. The group's program made the temporal distance between Purcell and Stravinsky and Golijov appear much smaller, and their respective works far more interconnected one would think. *collectif9* understands that, if what we know (inaccurately) as 'classical' music is to persist and continue to engage listeners and draw their interest, then it is imperative that the very real artistic connections across centuries and styles be acknowledged and communicated. Through programs like those they present, Purcell and Mahler and modern house music aren't partitioned, isolated bodies of work, but consecutive and interrelated signposts along a single path. Props to this vibrant young group for recognizing this and for bringing it to the ECMS audience with such passion and enjoyment. Let's have them back soon!