

From the Georgia Straight
September 11, 2003

Tuning Into the Music Makers

Colin MacDonald - by Alexander Varty

Promoting contemporary art music can at times seem like a thankless task: the vast majority of listeners have bought into the sleek banalities of machine-made pop, while a sizable minority prefer to drown out today's din by immersing themselves in the classics. The remaining few are a fragmented lot, but those who seek cutting-edge sonics are likely united by one thing: they're on Colin MacDonald's e-mail list.

As the compiler of *Oscillations*, a monthly calendar of avant-garde musical events that can be accessed by sending an e-mail to majordomo@oscillations.ca, MacDonald is responsible for keeping tabs on everything from freeform jams at the Sugar Refinery to symhonic commissions at the Orpheum. As cohost of CiTR's *Are You Serious? Music* (Sundays from 9 a.m. to noon) he gets to broaden his scope to include international artists, and as the brains behind the Vancouver version of composer Phil Kline's *Unsilent Night*, he leads a surreal and celebratory soundwalk

though the West End that, this year, will take place on December 21.

He also sings with the One Voice Harmonic Choir and performs Balinese compositions with the UBC music department's Gamelan Gita Asmara. More and more, though, he's presenting his own work. Since graduating from UBC in 1993, the 32-year-old MacDonald has helped form the Saxophilia saxophone quartet, and as de facto leader of Ensemble Symposium he helms the most exciting new chamber-music group to appear on the West Coast in years. (The quartet was recently named ensemble in residence at SFU and presents a program of student compositions on November 27.) This fall also marks the debut of another project, the Colin MacDonald Pocket Orchestra, at the Vancouver Art Gallery on November 6; there the saxophonist will be joined by a string quartet in renditions of two pieces by British composer Michael Nyman, and two more by MacDonald himself.

"I think I'm one of the few people, if not the only person, in Vancouver who performs Nyman's music," says MacDonald, interviewed while housesitting a friend's Bowen Island cottage, "and I think it's such a crime that he's under-appreciated in that way."

Nyman and his American counterpart Steve Reich are among MacDonald's musical gurus, and his own work fits loosely into the minimalist camp. "The music I'm listening to a lot more these days is stuff like the [New York City-based] Bang on a Can composers: a lot of Michael Gordon, in particular. So I'm getting into more uneven cycles and overlapping polyrhythmic stuff. But definitely there's a strong focus on rhythm and more static tonalities."

MacDonald's minimalism is animated by a populist sensibility and also by his Buddhist beliefs: somehow it manages to be energetic and contemplative at the same time. "When I went to UBC I learned to play a lot of this really abstract music that wasn't really accessible to many people," he explains. "But when I finished my degree, I started looking for music that spoke to me a lot more, and that would speak to an audience a lot more. And that's sort of when I turned towards the minimalist repertoire and decided to start writing my own music, because I couldn't find anything that I wanted to play. I had to take the reins into my own hands."

So far, MacDonald has met with a great deal of aesthetic success, even if he's still looking for that elusive audience. But that, too, will come in time.

His kind of talent, energy, and determination won't be denied.