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Orchestra Outshines Unartful Gallery Venue

Colin MacDonald's Pocket Orchestra  
A Western Front New Music and Vancouver Art  
Gallery Coproduction

At the Vancouver Art Gallery on Thursday,  
November 6, 2003

By Alexander Varty

Credit where credit's due: if creative music is to thrive in this town it is vitally important that more people be exposed to it, which means that it is also necessary for composers and musicians to seek new venues in which their art can be heard. So congratulations have to go to vocalist and Western Front music curator DB Boyko for organizing the Under Exposure series of concerts, which has been running at the Vancouver Art Gallery for a little more than a year. The combination of the Front's smart programming and the VAG's Thursday-night admission-by-donation policy seems a natural.

But concertizing at the VAG is attended by some

serious problems. The idea of having the musicians set up in the gallery's rotunda is essentially sound: the area is central, visible, and acoustically alive. But it's also the main point of access to the gallery's visual exhibitions, which forces hordes of viewers to crowd the listening space. This in turn, attracted the attention of a briskly assertive security guard, loudly determined to move everyone along. The situation could be easily rectified by setting out a few chairs for the audience members.

An even bigger problem is the incessant hum of the gallery's air-circulation system, which is as loud as an idling Airbus.

Nonetheless, saxophonist Colin MacDonald is on to something with his Pocket Orchestra, in which he's joined by violinist Sarah Westwick, violist Manti Poon, and cellist Finn Manniche. They delivered assertive readings of some rhythmically intricate but generally tonal material, most of it by MacDonald himself.

The bandleader opened the night alone, playing though Philip Glass's *Gradus* as he gradually traversed the grand staircases flanking the performance area. Apparently unruffled by the sudden appearance of a janitor behind him,

MacDonald toyed effectively with the rotunda's acoustics, giving the domed space's natural echo time to inflect the music's contours.

With its hints of Balinese music and sea chanteys, *Gradus* was also a great way to set listeners up for what followed, especially the late Martin Bartlett's *Nautical Almanac* and MacDonald's set-closing *Thaumaturgy*. Sounding like a Middle Eastern-inflected soundtrack for a Sinbad story, the former was a fine vehicle for the bandleader's almost flutelike tone on the alto sax. *Thaumaturgy* was more of a band showcase with the quartet hitting a near-orchestral density of sound.

I'm looking forward to hearing this group under better circumstances, but I left impressed by its musicality, its strong sense of ensemble playing, and, most of all, its grace under pressure.