

Sonic Boom

A Vancouver Pro Musica presentation

Featuring the Turning Point Ensemble

At the Western Front on Friday, March 11, 2005

By Alexander Varty

In contrast to past editions of the Sonic Boom festival, which began life as an anything-goes exploration of sound, this year's event was a relatively sedate affair – at least as judged by the second of its three nights. No instruments were mutilated, no new geniuses were unveiled, and despite festival director Timothy Pickett's promise of "inclusivity", most of the featured composers hailed from the halls of UBC, SFU, or Capilano College. Most pieces were written in standard notation, and all but one eschewed the use of electronics or amplified sound.

So what was new in this evening of new music?

Well, very little, actually. Academic composition is not where one looks, these days, for sonic innovation, most of which is taking place at the outer fringes of rock, jazz or electronic music. But musicians schooled in traditional European methods of composition do have an edge in craft. Most of the music heard on Friday night was carefully shaped, and all of it was elegantly played by the Turning Point Ensemble under the direction of conductor Owen Underhill.

The ensemble had to be sharp right off the bat, for the complex rhythms and dynamic contrasts of Colin MacDonald's *Skillful Means* could easily have derailed a less skilled band. Difficult to play but easy to listen to, MacDonald's piece was a pattern-music hornpipe with a distinctly nautical air; in fact, its final movement displayed an almost piratical dash and flair that was very much in keeping with the composer's flowing locks and waxed moustache.

Unfortunately, this opener was also the night's energetic apogee; nothing else was quite as engaging, although Stefan Smulovitz's *the still unanswered question* came close. By spreading the musicians around the room and thickening their acoustic textures with electronic drums and laptop-controlled computer processing, Smulovitz created a sumptuously enveloping soundscape that effectively combined both intricacy and energy.

The other successes – among them James Maxwell's dark but sublimely well made *leven* and François Houle's quicksilver *Petite pièce un peu étourdie* – were more purely cerebral. There's a tendency in academic music to valorize the clever idea over the heartfelt statement, but these pieces contained enough beauty to offset their theoretical underpinnings, as did Lisa Miller's *Balance*, which, like all her music, was smart and sensual. Alfredo Santa Ana, Martin Reisle, and Farshid Samandari contributed works that were so dry they

made no more impact than a whispery desert wind; on the other hand, Elizabeth Knudson's *They Took Flight* seemed out of place in its sweet simplicity and uncomplicated counterpoint.

To sum up; the established composers wrote fine, nuanced work; the emerging artists showed that finding one's voice is an ongoing process; and the all-star band that is the Turning Point Ensemble did its best to make everyone sound good. No surprises there – but a more than 50-percent success ratio in any concert of new music is nothing to sneer at.