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The Vertical Orchestra
Featuring Ensemble Symposium
A Cryptic Music, Red Shift, Canadian Music Centre,
and Vancouver Public Library Coproduction

At the VPL Central Branch on Thursday, December
9, 2004

-By Alexander Varty

The crescent-shaped atrium of the Vancouver Public Library's downtown headquarters in an impressive space, nearly the length of a city block and seven storeys high, bounded on one side by the glass facade of the library itself and on the other by a clifflike bank of balconies. It's also one of the ugliest sounding venues in this city. I've heard live music there before, and it's always been a mess: sounds echo weirdly from its hard surfaces or disappear entirely into its heights. So to set a site-specific concert in architect Moshe Safdie's hall might seem like an act of enormous hubris, but last Thursday night the musicians of Ensemble Symposium tamed the room and made it theirs, in the process delivering

an immensely enjoyable and equally unusual concert experience.

Granted, most of the risks were assumed by the Vertical Orchestra's performers, who either set up amid the strolling pedestrians on the atrium's floor or assumed a lofty perch in its balconies. The featured composers played it safe, which, under the circumstances, was probably a good call.

Event organizer Jordan Nobles led the way with *Vertigo*, a slow, dreamy assemblage of long tones that floated in space like fish in an aquarium, and that course was followed by Jennifer Butler, whose *as she moves through shadows* flowed out of the opening piece with barely a pause. It was interesting to hear how the acoustics of the room affected AK Coope's clarinet, Douglas Hagerman's oboe, and bandleader Colin MacDonald's saxophone: the reeds seemed to morph into brass instruments, losing some of their identifiable timbre but gaining presence and punch.

Pleasant enough, I thought, but for me the experiment didn't really come into focus until Ben Wilson's *Play Don't Play*, midway through the program. Opening with a richly dissonant fanfare, the piece moved in fits and starts, each musical statement followed by a

long -- sometimes a *very* long -- pause. Wilson's approach probably wouldn't work in a concert hall, but in this public space, animated by purposeful students and busy shoppers and street people in search of a respite from the rain, it asked us to really listen to our surroundings. And so, even though I very much enjoyed the way the Kristy Farkas's *un(titled)* exploited the disembodied voice of singer Marci Rabe, and the warm goodbye that was MacDonald's *Ex Libris*, for the rest of the night I found myself concentrating on extramusical sounds: the rhythmic clatter of wheeled suitcases crossing the floor; the hiss and sputter of a coffee shop's espresso machines; the dull murmur of distant conversation; and the relentless chatter of the guy behind me, expounding to his companion on the sociology of the undead, the occult symbolism of snakes, and the way rituals should most effectively be staged.

"It all comes down to music, lights, and sound," he said near the end of the hour-plus concert, apparently oblivious of the slow spectacle unfolding around him. How true, I thought. How true.