

GREEN EGGS AND CAM

Sunday, March 11

Vancouver East Cultural Centre

It may seem unlikely that a young musician in his 30's should have a 10-year career retrospective, but if you are at all familiar with the work of Cam Wilson, it's suddenly not that surprising. Cam has been active as a performer and composer in Vancouver since the late 80's, as a member of the *VSO* and the piano trio *Joe Trio*, and with the assistance of The Little Chamber Music Series That Could brought together a program of new pieces and old favourites.

With a quick glance at some of the titles, it was clear that this wasn't going to be your average evening of chamber music. Sure, we had the standard lineup of orchestral strings and winds, but what were we to expect from names like *House of the Rising Sun Variations*, *Addams Family Opus 111½*, and *While My Spanish Guitar Gently Weeps on the Set of a Spaghetti Western*? Wilson is a humourist as well as a pluralist, a post-modern composer who freely admits to collecting melodies heard on TV, on the radio, and from pop music, using the recognizable tunes as source material for stylistic explorations into the combined history of Western classical music.

House of the Rising Sun Variations, for piano trio, was a set of ten variations on the well-known traditional melody. The first variation, subtitled *Fauré*, started innocently enough in the style of its namesake, a bit of French Romanticism, but this was just to draw us in. Subsequent variations moved through *Jack Daniels*, *Piano Strum*, *Charleston*, *Clint Eastwood*, and *Old Sea Captain* to name a few, crossing the musical gamut of honky-tonk, boogie-woogie, spaghetti western, neo-classicism, and sea chanty.

The *Addams Family Opus 111½* showed a further dimension of Wilson's skill as an arranger and composer. Wilson took the opening motive of Beethoven's last piano sonata, the theme of **The Addams Family** TV show, through them together in the blender, added a quote from Grieg's *Peer Gynt*, and crossed the line from whimsical to truly surreal. A single movement set of variations, the music briskly changed style and reference with precision and agility, making me think of the mercurial writing that Carl Stalling did for Warner Brothers in the 40's and 50's.

The ensemble expanded to chamber orchestra dimensions for *Carnival of the Animals that Saint-Saëns Never Got Around to Writing*. With poems by Kelly Cook and narration by Rosalind Beale-Dala and Evelyn Thatcher, this piece picked up where Camille Saint-Saëns left off, and created a musical homage to some other members of the animal kingdom, namely the Skunk, the Amoeba, the Canada Geese, the Ugly Duckling, the Lawyer, and the all-too-recognizable Energizer Bunny. Part musical in-joke, part social satire, neither the text nor the music threatened to take itself seriously, and despite the obvious craft in Wilson's orchestrations, the piece would have benefited from some trimming—some jokes wear a bit thin on multiple tellings.

The second half opened with another set of variations (Wilson's favourite form), this time on the tune of the **Turtles** song *Happy Together*. More fast metric and stylistic transitions through sambas, celtic jigs, Ellington swing, Brahmsian counterpoint, and Mahlerian passion, the real hero of this piece was conductor Wallace Leung, who did a remarkable job of holding the musicians together through all of the madness. This was followed by *While My Spanish Guitar Gently Weeps on the Set of a Spaghetti Western*, an arrangement of George Harrison's tune from the **Beatle's** *White Album* in the style of Ennio Morricone. A beautifully nostalgic english horn solo played by Tony Nickels brought to mind the image of Harrison facing off in a gun duel with The Man With No Name, and was pure magic.

The centrepiece of the concert was the premiere of a song-cycle called *Playground Rhymes for Grownups*, setting the poetry of Bill Richardson. This piece was commissioned to replace a work that was originally to set the poetry of Dr. Seuss (hence the title of the concert), for which Wilson couldn't negotiate the rights, so another childlike theme was chosen. The text is a charming depiction of adult life in Lotus Land, peppered with shopping, leaky condos, stock markets, body modification, and prescription drugs. Wilson's eclectic setting of each poem proved a particular challenge for soprano Rosalind Beale-Dala, who had to negotiate a gamut of singing styles and characters that ranged from childish sing-song, to sultry jazz singer, to contemporary operatic, often within the same song. Beale-Dala was very strong in the role, and brought a charming exuberance to this world of adult toys seen through a younger mind's eye.

Wilson's talent lies in giving us music that is popular and recognizable, but treating it with the craft and care of a traditional composer of classical music. Much as Bartok did with his own Hungarian folk-melodies, Cam Wilson uses the music of our time as a springboard for his own lighthearted musical expressions. He does much to break down the barrier between "high" and "low" art, taking the elitist sheen off of the Classical music experience, and he showed his true colours during the encore performance of **Queen's** *Bohemian Rhapsody*, as he rocked out on Brian May's guitar solo with an electric violin. I can't wait for his twenty-year retrospective.

Colin MacDonald