

Steve Mackey Interview

by Colin MacDonald

The term “chamber music” is generally reserved for sound produced by small groups of traditional orchestral instruments: winds, strings, and piano. A number of contemporary musicians would like to expand that definition to include modern-era innovations such as the electric guitar. American guitarist and composer Steve Mackey will have precisely that goal in mind when he appears this weekend in the Vancouver Recital Society’s Chamber Music Festival.

Mackey is part of a generation of composers who have grown up listening to rock music, while at the same time having access to a huge resource of recordings spanning classical, jazz, and world music. This openness to a multitude of musical expressions is reflected in Mackey’s own career. Initially a rock guitarist, and after a brief career as a freestyle skier, he trained in the classical guitar and lute, became the director of an early music ensemble, and is now a professor of composition at Princeton University. When asked how he would describe his personal style he replied, “I think my music is weird but with a sense of humor, bright, colorful but slightly twisted. The word ‘Psychedelic’ comes to mind, which makes sense given that my musical roots are as a guitar player in rock bands in Northern California in the late sixties and early seventies.”

Mackey has written a number of works for orchestra and for traditional chamber groups, but when possible he keeps involved in his music as a performer. The role of the electric guitar in these pieces can be an important compositional element, and he tries to strike a balance between works that exploit the instrument’s popular rock ’n’

roll image, and more abstract writing that integrates the amplified sound as simply another tone colour. On Thursday, July 26th, he will be presenting *Troubadour Songs*, a piece for electric guitar and string quartet. “In *Troubadour Songs* I try to create a musical universe that is equally fresh and exotic to both the guitar and the quartet. A fantasy landscape where neither can rely on familiar devices.”

Writing for the string family has been a consistent part of Mackey’s output, and his catalogue contains no fewer than nine works for string quartet, either alone or in combination with other instruments. In 1989 he achieved major recognition for *among the vanishing*, commissioned for soprano Dawn Upshaw and the Kronos String Quartet. He finds himself returning to the string quartet for its flexibility of sound and character, and also for the commitment that the players bring to the creative process. “Part of this is due to the fact that it is possible to be a full time string quartet, without a day job. The same could not be said of many other groups that play contemporary music.” Mackey is also following in the footsteps of many traditional composers who used the quartet as a medium for experimentation. “Beethoven quartets, for example, are far more complex and probing than his more public symphonies. I like to think that I am expanding the expressive and sonic palette of the quartet,” he reflects.

This spirit of experimentation will be heard in *Gaggle and Flock*, for string octet, which will receive its world premiere on Saturday, July 28th. Commissioned for the combined forces of the Borromeo and Brentano string quartets, who found themselves playing at a lot of the same festivals, Mackey will feature a bond between the two violists. “Violas have such a distinctive, soulful sound and

represent the inner voice of the quartet literally, psychologically, and metaphorically.” He will also use a distinctive seating arrangement to both separate and join the two groups, and as the title suggests, they will be in the familiar “flying-V” formation of migrating geese.

Programming such novel works, particularly a world premiere, is a challenge for the Chamber Music Festival’s artistic director Leila Getz, but she is no stranger to new music. “I have always included contemporary music in the summer festival. I find that in general audiences are more open to this sort of thing in the summer.” Perhaps it’s the relaxed atmosphere of the annual event, whose organizers invite people to come in shorts and sandals, that helps open the public’s ears. In the case of Mackey’s music, she herself was unfamiliar with it, but she trusted the judgement of her colleagues in the Borromeo quartet. “When Nick Kitchen (1st violin of the Borromeo) asked if I would be interested in the very first performance [of the octet] I jumped at the opportunity.”

One of the challenges of programming new music is in overcoming the public associations of contemporary works with rigid, academic music composed in the ivory tower of modernism, a style of writing that was responsible for driving audiences away from the concert hall. Mackey makes a real effort to connect with his audience through the personal contact he achieves in performing his own works, but he does not put down the support networks available in an academic setting. “It was my colleagues at Princeton that helped me realize that the only prayer I had to make a contribution to music was to be myself and do what only I could do. There is no need for warmed over versions of other people’s visions of how music should go. My colleagues inspired

me to reconnect with my electric guitar/rock music past which I had repressed in graduate school.”

What does this all say about a musician who is an improviser, and a composer of orchestral music, chamber music, and electric guitar music? Steve Mackey is someone who enjoys experiencing sound with a musical appetite that is omnivorous, and wants to share those experiences with similar, open minded music lovers. “I expect my pieces to be received with enthusiasm and I’m surprised and disappointed when they are not.” In the natural diversity of the Chamber Music Festival, his music will undoubtedly feel right at home.