

Inside the Sound

By Alexander Varty

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A Turning Point Ensemble presentation. At the Scotiabank Dance Centre on Sunday, May 7 It's generally believed that the mystic and millionaire Giacinto Scelsi had an induplicable talent, but that's not quite true. It's possible, for instance, that one could come up with a reasonable facsimile of the Italian composer's Kya by introducing a Zen shakuhachi virtuoso to the massed horns of Bhutan's Thimpuh monastery, or by setting klezmer-clarinet king Dave Tarras adrift, in a small boat and dense fog, somewhere in the vicinity of Marblehead, Massachusetts.

Of course, that's not going to happen; for one thing, Tarras is dead. But his fellow clarinetist François Houle is very much alive, and easily negotiated Kya's cursive melodies as part of yet another outstanding concert from the Turning Point Ensemble.

One of two pieces that featured Houle, Kya is at once dreamlike and uncannily prescient.

Written in 1959, it anticipates both the multicultural flavours and the ambient textures that began to creep into new music during the psychedelic '60s; it's also decidedly sensual in comparison to the serialist norm of its time. Behind the soloist's near-vocal lamentations, the other players passed the foghorn accompaniment around, creating a shifting backdrop of droning strings and resonant brass. This gentle relay beautifully complemented Houle's luscious tones.

Luscious is not the word for Liquid, however. John Korsrud's new commission for Houle and Turning Point is music for channel-surfers; fast-paced and restless, it's also an apt, even friendly portrait of its designated star. Ironically, however, it's Houle who's the constant here, keeping a burbling, semi-improvised solo line going while the ensemble flickers between mock minimalism; acrid, Frank Zappa-style percussion; and frenzied, pointillistic flurries. Houle gets the last word too, in a vanishingly soft, split-toned solo coda that sounds like a benediction.

The other pieces on the program were equally remarkable. Erwin Stein and Arnold Schoenberg's 1920 chamber setting of Ferruccio Busoni's rarely heard Berceuse élégiaque suggests that the great pianist was also a visionary composer and another progenitor of the ambiguous tonalities and gauzy textures that mark much contemporary music today.

Gyorgi Ligeti's Chamber Concerto for 13 Instrumentalists, on the other hand, is the polar opposite of a dream. Yet, thorny and knotted as it looks on the page, this legendarily difficult piece seemed almost rollicking under Turning Point conductor Owen Underhill's direction. The ensemble played it as if engaged in some arduous but joyous sport, in a visceral conclusion to a near-flawless night of music.

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