

COVER STORY

Modulus Festival: Just the place to explore new worlds

Music on Main offers a mix-and-match approach to selecting artists and pieces for the four-day music event

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SPECIAL TO THE SUN

What's new in music is, by definition, one of the overriding concerns of David Pay's Music on Main enterprise — a cocky, quasi-alternative presentation company with an eclectic approach to artists and repertoire.

Usually ensconced at Heritage Hall, a Belle Époque former post office and one of the architectural treasures of East Vancouver, MoM gets the fall music season underway with a week-end-long sonic party, the Modulus Festival. For yet another year, the event slides neatly into the post-Fringe time slot, before the fall parade of music gets truly underway.

Part of the MoM fun, and certainly part of its programming agenda, is a serious mix-and-match ethos. This year's festival runs a stylistic gamut from a mainstream Mendelssohn string quartet to an almost new, somewhat conceptual, piece in surround-sound at The Roundhouse.

Kicking off Modulus on Sept. 27 is multi-instrumentalist Richard Reed Parry, whose musical resume boasts his bona fide talent for melding orchestral and indie rock sensibilities. As part of both Grammy-winning Arcade Fire and symphonic outfit Bell Orchestre, both hailing from Montreal, Parry has done more than flirt with mainstream pop influences. But he could easily be considered the very model of the modern post-classical composer with his two works bookending the festival.

Parry's work For Heart and Breath weaves throughout the opening night concert in three parts, featuring performances from Los Angeles-based Calder Quartet — itself a genre-bending ensemble that has performed everything from classical recitals at Carnegie Hall to indie rock with The National.

Also on the bill is Michael Finnissy. In new music terms, Finnissy is old school, a product of the Royal College of Music lecturing at the University of Southampton. His website candidly describes him as: "A virtual failure in commercial terms, but who the hell cares either way?" Exactly; he's unquestionably one of the most respected British composers of his generation. Two Finnissy works (Mercy and Mankind and Sesto Libro di Gesualdo) are on tap.

There's also a premiere by this year's Music on Main composer-in-residence Jocelyn Morlock, with her two Tom Cone Songs.

The program concludes with a rarely heard classic: Olivier Messiaen's 1943



Calder Quartet will perform an untitled work by Andy Akiho, a piece by Henryk Górecki and Mendelssohn's F minor String Quartet.

two-piano extravaganza Vision de l'Amen. (One of its few Vancouver performances was a definitive reading by the late French composer and his pianist wife, who played Visions at SFU for, I regret to note, a painfully tiny audience).

Friday is all about the string quartet with the return of Calder Quartet, offering an as-yet-untitled work by Andy Akiho, the Quasi una fantasia of Henryk Górecki, and Mendelssohn's F minor

String Quartet.

Saturday evening features Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho (see sidebar), one of the stars of her generation, who turns 60 this year. Long important in the international avant-garde, she became better known to Canadian audiences in part through the Canadian Opera Company's 2000 performance of her provocative L'amour de loin.

Sunday sees a festival encore, a free performance at the Roundhouse of

another work by Richard Reed Parry. Drones/Revelations draws on ideas and techniques from the worlds of electro-acoustic music and performance art. This will be the first performance done with the spatial setup Parry envisioned. The work features 15 cyclists — riding in the dark on glowing tires — each carrying a boom box playing the composer's score. The post-industrial environment of the Roundhouse should be perfect for a piece that physically envelops its

audience in sound.

How does Parry feel about the multi-focus of the festival and his place as a featured composer whose work erases many of the traditional boundaries that separate musical idioms? Very good indeed. For him festivals like Modulus are just the place for new audiences to explore new worlds — "a way of keeping an ear to the ground for the fresh, the new, the alive and exciting."

But while the mashup strategy is



KEVIN WINTER/GETTY IMAGES

Musician Richard Reed Parry will offer a free encore performance of Drones/Revelations.

gaining popularity with presenters as they are faced with greying classical audiences, changes in broadcasting, recording, and advertising, and the perennial quest for new and sometimes different audiences, they must take care not to alienate their existing patrons.

MoM composer-in-residence Morlock says the eclectic approach at Modulus is effective because it has been borne out of a genuine desire to present the work in a new way rather than employed as a mere marketing tool.

"I like the way Music on Main is comfortably inclusive," she said. Adding to MoM's formula for success are the logistics: audience members often get to the venue early for drinks, and hang out after the music stops to discuss the performances.

While the company's mix-and-match approach should find favour with a number of different musical constituencies, traditionalists are also coming around.

Patron and UBC professor emeritus Richard Sprately is a supporter of programs like the Vancouver Recital Society's Beethoven Violin Sonatas project and MoM's chamber music at The Cellar Jazz Club, all the while defining himself as a "slightly reformed musical ultraconservative."

The self-confessed chamber music fanatic is quick to point out the "hipster factor" of Modulus's indie-infused mashups doesn't much appeal to him ("As I head into my mid-70s, 'hip' and

'cool' are not exactly big in my vocabulary," he said) but he admits the lure of high calibre performance is enough to draw him out of his comfort zone.

"If you can inveigle me into going somewhere new for something I know and like, I'm willing to stay for something I don't know," he said.

With its brave new Modulus lineup, Music on Main is optimistic more will follow suit.

At a Glance

MODULUS FESTIVAL

Sept. 27: Music by Richard Reed Parry, Michael Finnissy, Jocelyn Morlock, and Olivier Messiaen

Sept. 28: The Calder Quartet; Music by Andy Akiho, Henryk Górecki, and Felix Mendelssohn

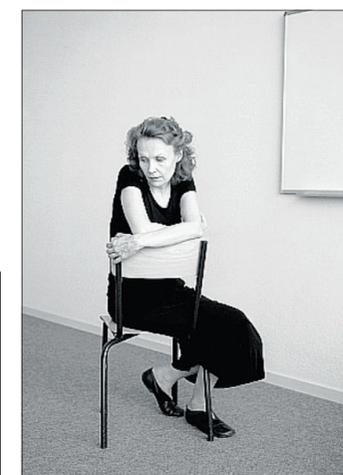
Sept. 29: One Night Stand: The Music of Kaija Saariaho

All concerts at Heritage Hall, Main at 15th, 8 p.m. Tickets \$35/\$15

Festival Extras

Sept. 28: Music for Zheng and Electronics. Heritage Hall, 10:30 p.m.

Sept. 30: Richard Reed Parry's Drones/Revelations, The Roundhouse, 3 p.m.



Finland's Kaija Saariaho is known here for the Canadian Opera Company's performance of her L'amour de loin.

A treat for Saariaho fans

This year has been a banner year for local fans of Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho, who turns 60 on Oct. 14.

Vancouver audiences get to hear a good bit of her work this month. Three works — Leino Songs, Adjo, and Changing Light — are to be performed on a program featuring work by female composers offered by the Nu: BC Collective at the Roy Barnett Recital Hall on Friday evening at 8 p.m.

And Sept. 29, Music on Main's Modulus Festival includes an all-Saariaho evening at Heritage Hall.

UBC-trained composer Gregory Lee Newsome studied privately with Saariaho, who trained at Helsinki's Sibelius Academy and has been based in Paris since the 1980s.

"I had composition lessons with Kaija in 2001. We met in her Paris studio overlooking the Centre Georges Pompidou and IRCAM. She's quiet and serious, but warm, gentle, and encouraging, too," Newsome said. "She offered specific insight into my music, but she also refined my approach to composition — a lasting gift."

Newsome, who's now based in Toronto, was involved with several Saariaho events earlier this year, and has a keen appreciation for her work.

"Timbre is a critical aspect of Kaija's music. Listen for instrumental colour, such as an airy flute or a noisy cello, solo or in combination. She has a characteristic sense of gesture, with use of glissando, tremolo and trill, and an idiosyncratic use of dynamics, more to change instrumental timbre than to create drama. But there is a dramatic arc to her music, especially her vocal music, and almost all of her work has a sense of relentless, muted intensity."



Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho.



Composer-in-residence Jocelyn Morlock.

David Gordon Duke, Special to The Vancouver Sun