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Brilliant ideas are what Vancouver's Modulus Festival is all about

By Alexander Varty



The Los Angeles-based Calder Quartet.

A Music on Main production. At Heritage Hall and the Roundhouse Community Arts and Recreation Centre from Friday to Sunday (September 28 to 30). No remaining performances

I can't imagine what the Modulus Festival would have to do to get a bad review—and whatever it might be, it didn't happen this weekend.

In any case, Vancouver's rising new-music (and sometimes old-music) showcase espouses the values of range, diversity, and excellence—words that should be a mantra for all arts producers in our post-millennial, multicultural society. And speaking to Music on Main artistic director David Pay on Saturday night, he reiterated his intent. What does he want to see on his program? "We want *everything*," he stressed.

That's a tall order. But this year's Modulus included a Felix Mendelssohn string quartet; an improvising choir made up of False Creek seniors; a piece scored by a bona fide rock star for 12 bicycles, their riders, and boom boxes; a groundbreaking collaboration between a *zheng* virtuoso and a dub-inspired electronics wizard; and a whole night's worth of music from an eminent Finn. Oh, and was that Jane's Addiction playing during the intermission on Night 3? I think it was.

Not everything, then, but a lot.

Too much for this listener, who had to give opening night a miss. The second evening's show started strongly, though, with the Canadian premier of New York composer Michael Gordon's *Clouded Yellow* on Friday, as performed by the Los Angeles-based Calder Quartet, and it only got better from there.

Truth be told, this new work is not among the Bang on a Can mainstay's greatest scores. Inspired by the migration of butterflies, it seems at times a little too programmatic, as if it had been ordered to underpin a National Geographic Society documentary. And it makes brutal demands on the cellist, who has to hammer on one note for what seems an eternity—not a good use for a player as gifted as the Calder's Eric Byers. Still, the quartet responded with a focused, intense attack, which only got stronger through two more Canadian premieres: Andy Akiho's rousing *Mobile on a Stream Into the Sound* and Andrew Norman's surreally vivid *...towards sunrise and the prime of light*.

The Calder's realization of the latter immediately made the 32-year-old Norman, a recent Pulitzer Prize nominee, an audience favourite—and then the group shifted gears to play Mendelssohn's *String Quartet No.6 in F minor*.

If that wasn't a revelatory performance, it was, at the very least, faultless. And have we said that range is a worthy characteristic?

Vancouver resident Mei Han has already shown her varied capabilities on the zitherlike *zheng* this year, playing everything from ancient Taoist melodies to state-of-the-art improvisation. Teaming up with electronic-dance-music producer Michael Red is another bold move and, in what I think was only their second performance, the two showed uncanny teamwork. The music was rhythmically static, at times—an as-yet-unavoidable consequence of sampling and looping technology—but it was also very, very beautiful.

Saturday was given over entirely to the scores of 60-year-old Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho, whose work is not programmed nearly enough in North America. Just why escapes me, except that only exceptional musicians can do it justice, like the nine who convened, in various configurations, as the Music on Main All-Star Band. Standouts included pianist Rachel Iwaasa's solos *Ballade* and *Prelude* (pieces that pivoted on the lines between tonality and atonality, and between simplicity and deep structure), and the duo of Mark McGregor on bass flute and Rebecca Wenham on cello on the shape-shifting *Oi Kuu*.

Although increasingly recognized as a composer of operas, Saariaho is best known for her insights into the physics of sound—although the way the two instruments melded in *Oi Kuu* was as much magic as science.

Robyn Driedger-Klassen also excelled on the duet for soprano and electronics *Lohn*. We knew she was a powerhouse singer, but her nakedly emotional and unadorned reading of 12th-century poet Jaufré Rudel's Occitan text revealed another and arguably lovelier dimension to her voice.

The singing of the Express Your Voice Choir at its home base, the Roundhouse Community Arts and Recreation Centre, on Saturday afternoon was far less virtuosic but just as inspired. It's an amateur group for seniors, but however frail some of its members looked, their voices rang out with glorious conviction under the direction of Western Front music curator DB Boyko. And the simple humanity of their singing was soon replaced by the equally basic activity of cycling, in Richard Reed Parry's festival-ending *Drones/Revelations*.

Here's the deal: 12 cyclists, each toting a boom box, circling the audience in near darkness, as a pre-recorded voice reads a text relating to unmanned reconnaissance aircraft—the drones—interspersed with words from the Bible's Book of Revelations. The effect could have been more doom-laden than it was, and the droning music, though appropriate, lacked variety. But the idea—which we hope the Arcade Fire multi-instrumentalist expands on in future pieces—was brilliant, and brilliant ideas are what Modulus is all about.



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