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## ROHAN'S CELLO by Stanley Fefferman



*ROHAN de SARAM*

*photo by Stanley Fefferman*

**Sunday, June 3, The Music Gallery, Toronto.**

Famed and gifted cellist Rohan de Saram performed a program that included four solo pieces, three of which were written for him.

“Espera, luz, espera (Hope, light, hope!)” composed in 2006 by Santiago Lanchares (Spain, 1952) Rohan describes as “classically written, with Spanish nationalistic elements.” From the sounding wood of his 1690 Guarneri, one hears progressions of scales as well as stirring sonorities of the martial bugle-calls and hammered-on Spanish rhythms. Primarily towards rhythm, the piece is a single dramatic scene with shifting moods expressed by tentative, probing, short riffs, lyrical passages sad as Hebraic prayer, and a determined questioning tone, all supported by a sense of meter.

Scottish composer James Dillon’s “Eos (1999)”, one of the two solos inspired by Greek mythology, Rohan describes in phrases like “strange and unusual in character”; “jagged and awkward writing, rhythmically challenging and variable”; “like the opening ‘alap’ of an Indian Raga, improvised without meter or definite rhythm, like the dawn –Eos–, rhythm creeps in little by little.”

The opening of “Eos” is almost inaudible — bare squeaks, faint hammerings, featherlike whispers of string on bow that build glissando into the squeal of bagpipes and proceed pizzicato into siren wail and long toned quavering drones, intensely focused and shifting like light, dissolving into a jittery whisper as “rosy-fingered dawn” dissolves into bright day.

The late heavyweight composer Luciano Berio was inspired to write parts of “Sequenza XIV” while

working with Rohan, who is also expert in playing the Kandyan drum of his native Sri Lanka. From notation received from Rohan, Berio composed rhythmic sections of “Sequenza” in which the bow is not used; the right hand plays 12, 11, and 13 beat rhythms on the belly of the cello, while the left hand fingers hit the strings in a percussive way.

The effect is something like a talking drum that actually seems to be vocalizing in code. The whole piece includes bowing near to and away from the bridge and explosive plucking of strings that develop a rhythmic atmosphere like the carefree feeling of childhood. This from a composer who died in his 78th year before he could finalize some technical details with de Saram.

The final solo, “Kottos (1977),” composed by Iannis Xenakis (1922-2001), is a deliberately noisy piece depicting the fury of the hundred-armed pre-Olympian Titan whom Zeus defeated and entombed alive in the earth. The entombment of Kottos is suggested by horrible grinding sounds, as of hard earth being scraped by glacial force of boulders.

The composer’s performance guidelines indicate avoiding “ a beautiful tone in favour of a sound full of noise...bowing away from the bridge, creating volatile, unpitched sounds...and incorporating an array of glissandi, extremes of register, microtones and polyrhythms that challenge the capabilities of the instrument” and the instrumentalist alike.



DAVID HETHERINGTON

photo: Stanley Fefferman

David Hetherington and his 1695 Giovanni Grancino joined Rohan de Saram for a program of four duos, concluding with the world premier of “Duet for Cellos (2007)” by Brian Current (Canada, 1972).

In the preconcert ‘illuminating introduction’, moderated by New Music Concerts director Robert Aitken, the two guest cellists spoke about the growth of the modern cello repertoire since Dvorak’s monumental “Cello Concerto (1895)”.

Rohan stressed the abilities of the cello that is sized to approach both the speed of the short stringed violin and the harmonic range of the long stringed double bass. He also stressed the connection between the incremental leap in the virtuosity of modern cellists with the growing interest composers have for challenging this virtuosity.

Both Hetherington and de Saram showed extreme mastery of the instrument’s ability to create new sonorities, play quarter-tones, their ability to bow at blinding speed, and blend into one texture parts played 1/5th of a beat off each other, as in the “Pas de Deux (1996)” by Alexander Shchetynsky (Ukraine, 1960).



Brian Current

photo: Stanley Fefferman

Hetherington spoke about [Brian Current’s new piece](#) as “classic, in the way it has rhythmic structure and a lot of harmony, though not much melody, and ‘macho’—a venting of aggression,” and not so much exploiting the lyrical abilities of the cello.

Current’s piece, by comparison with the previous duo compositions by Kahrs of Norway and Baggiani of Italy, was serially built on a rhythmic drive that was comprehensible, listenable, and immediately enjoyable.

New Music Concerts closed it’s 06/07 season with this seminal offering that brought five world-renowned works of new music to premier performances in Canada.

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