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Concert review - Many pleasures in a batch of Beckwith

Ken Winters Globe and Mail Update

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Let's Hear It From Beckwith

- *New Music Concerts*
- *At Walter Hall*
- *In Toronto on Sunday*

John Beckwith, musical polymath but most intensively and intrepidly a composer still fully engaged at 82, had the pleasure Sunday evening of a public concert devoted entirely to eight of his numerous chamber pieces, personally chosen, four of them premieres. All were performed to a fare-thee-well by 10 wind and brass players in various configurations, and, in the main work, by a marvelous soprano, an outstanding clarinet and by Beckwith himself, at the piano.

Produced by Robert Aitken's New Music Concerts and the University of Toronto Faculty of Music, the concert was, perhaps of practical necessity, limited to wind music. For all Beckwith's variety of design and resourcefulness in combining his instruments, this was a limited sound world. I couldn't help thinking how much more sonically and expressively spacious the concert would have felt with the simple (though doubtless in the circumstances too expensive) addition of his *String Quartet* (1977), which I think of as one of the two or three Canadian masterpieces in the genre. But of course we'd have needed the St. Lawrence String Quartet to do it justice, and I'm not sure that group has it in its repertoire, even if its fee could have been afforded.

Within the sonic limits of the wind-sound world, however, the program had many poignant pleasures for its audience.

Every instrument, from the father and daughter flutes of Robert and Dianne Aitken at the top of the scale to the bassoon of Nadina Mackie Jackson and the tuba of Mark Tetreault at the bottom, was superbly managed.

Of the four premieres, the three brief ones – *Duo* (1982) for two clarinets, *Animals with Horns* (2007) for trumpet and euphonium, and *Tropical Flutes* (1999, with coda added 2010) – each had its distinction within a kind of late-Stravinskyan inventive austerity – clear, sparse, moulded. The longest of the four, *Back to Bolivia* (2006) for four clarinets with two of the players alternating on treble and bass instruments, was both richer and stranger, and in its final section brought us the relief of the kind of rhythmic propulsion, vivacity and Beckwithian wit the program could have used more of.

Three of the four revivals – the handsome *Solo* (2008), arrestingly played by bassoonist Jackson; *Duo on H.E.S.A.E.S.* (1984) for two trumpets, resonantly managed by Gillian MacKay and James Gardiner; and *Eureka* (1996) for nine woodwinds and brass, beautifully dovetailed in all its complexity – had each its

particular tensions and drama. *Eureka*, indeed, was very busy, both sonically and visually, with its nine players moving gradually onto the platform, assembling into three groups, calmly changing positions within the groups, then gradually drifting off leaving only two players on the darkening platform, and ending with an ominous low note from Tetreault's tuba, repeated three times.

But the most effective of the revivals was *Synthetic Trios* (1987) for soprano, clarinet and piano. The work itself is more subtly imagined than any of the others, less relentlessly cerebral, more human in its aspect. And in its three performers it was singularly blessed.

Soprano Teri Dunn is the most vital singer of new music I have heard since the great days of soprano Mary Morrison and mezzo-soprano Patricia Rideout. Like those two unforgettable artists, Dunn is exquisitely centred musically, full of the life and joy of what she is singing, and a real live person to behold. Her voice is clear and gleaming, and she managed with fearless élan the high tessiture Beckwith with Beethovenian mercilessness had imposed upon it. Clarinetist Peter Stoll complemented Dunn's high temperament with splendid unassuming composure, and Beckwith himself brought a magisterial confidence to the tricky and eccentric piano part. After all, he wrote it and he should know just what to do with it. I hope this performance will be recorded. It was a lulu.

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