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Nova Scotia Youth Orchestra

Dinuk Wijeratne, Conductor

Nadina Mackie Jackson, Bassoon

St. Matthew's United Church, Halifax

August 29, 2016

You might have missed it, Halifax, but last night was a big night for the bassoon. Dare I say the biggest? When a sublime Canadian soloist of **Nadina Mackie Jackson's** caliber comes to town, well, it's not an everyday thing, let me tell you, let alone when they play a bassoon concerto, a bassoon sonata, a new work by a young Canadian composer featuring the bassoon, and a couple of Carl Maria von Weber ditties as well. Big bassoon night, really big. Sucks to be you if you missed it.

There were actually two other bassoonists onstage, Halifax's treasure, musician/composer **Chris Palmer**, and the more-recently-moved-to-town (via Brazil/Montreal), **Ariana Pedrosa**, both enjoying Mackie Jackson immensely, as evidenced by their ear-to-ear grins whenever they weren't playing their own bassoons. Yeah, really big night for the bassoon. The occasion,

though, was even bigger: the start of the 40th anniversary season of another treasure – the Nova Scotia Youth Orchestra, under the superb leadership of **Dinuk Wijeratne**.

Clearly, the NSYO loves Dinuk and he loves them – it is a match made in heaven, and let's hope the draw of brighter lights doesn't tempt our Dinuk away from his beloved "kids."

The evening opened with a Vivaldi *Bassoon Concerto*, one of the 39 that he composed for the instrument (clearly he too was a fan), and afforded Mackie Jackson the chance to show the bassoon in many of its wonderful colours. She had a few colours of her own, including her trademark blue hair and an amazing Wonder Womanish concert outfit, featuring an iridescent fringed vest atop leggings and spurred boots. With her sparkly wristbands and funky persona, I'm imagining that she was a big hit with the Youth Orchestra members (she did mention wanting to take the band on the road at one point in the evening). The smaller ensemble featured the violins and violas standing in Baroque style, and this showstopper work demonstrated why Mackie Jackson has become a bassoon phenomenon in Canada and abroad.

Next was a newly-commissioned piece by a young talent, composer **Lucas Oickle**, a Nova Scotian now living in Vancouver, whose *Squeezed Through Wood* began as an interpretation of his wife's dream. Described in admiration by Mackie Jackson as a fully-orchestrated tone poem, it featured vibraphone and vocalizations from the musicians, and had an overall dreamlike quality which fully utilized the orchestral ensemble. Bet this will be added to Mackie Jackson's extensive repertoire, and bet we should be eagerly looking forward to more music by Lucas.

The players then took a break, sitting in the hall, with the exception of Principal Clarinet, **Kailan Fournier-Poteet**. It's an unusual name, and you won't be forgetting it any time soon. This polished young musician (a student of Dominic Desautels) has recently graduated from Dalhousie and is leaving town to head to Toronto's Glenn Gould School. Her playing of the Poulenc *Sonata* with Nadina Mackie Jackson was really wonderful, her beautifully expressive sound reaching all corners of St. Matt's. In an introduction to the piece Mackie Jackson said that Poulenc had a lot of admiration for the bassoon, but also liked to make fun of it, noting, "even as he makes fun of us, he honours us – I'm up for that." The two musicians were perfectly synchronized, their breathing as one, and the playful nature of something that sounded like a bit like a hornpipe in the last movement was a lot of fun.

Mackie Jackson noted that 40 years ago she had played in her own youth orchestra, and she talked about the importance of it all, and how she was so impressed with the caliber and passionate commitment of our young Nova Scotia players. With her "take no prisoners" presence and passion for her chosen instrument (she admonished the violinists to put down the violin and take up the bassoon!), she's a great advocate for the power of youth orchestras in general.

My only cranky comment of the night: this is the second concert in a church this summer where I've strained to hear the conductor speaking without the benefit of a microphone. Dear conductors (and soloists): I can hear you (barely), but many others cannot. Let's remedy this, please. We love you and we want to hear what you are saying. Even when you think you are projecting, there is going to be someone in the hall who cannot hear you. Thanks – end of rant.

As with the two previous NSYO concerts in Pictou and Lunenburg, the concert was dedicated to the memory of the late, great **Bee Huxtable**, a long-term supporter of the Youth Orchestra, Symphony Nova Scotia, Scotia Festival, Women for Music and who knows how many other musicians and music organizations. Bee had just recently passed away, and so this was our first concert "AB" (After Bee). Not sure that it has sunk in yet that this graceful, quiet yet determined woman will not be in her usual seat at the symphony, backstage congratulating the players, and generally not wanting a fuss made about all she has given to the arts in our city over a lifetime. I couldn't help thinking "do not go quiet into that good night" in relation to both Bee and Mackie Jackson throughout the evening.

For her final work, Mackie Jackson performed two movements of von Weber's *Andante e Rondo Ungarese* (although the Hungarian bit sounded again like more of a hornpipe to me). Virtuosic playing to the end drew the crowd to its feet and a chance to meet their Bassoon Heroine at intermission and sample her CDs, including one selling for five bucks which supports young bassoonists in Canada.

After a warm and getting warmer intermission, the guys wisely shed their tux jackets and we settled in for what Dinuk said is

possibly his favorite Beethoven Symphony, No. 8. Then we were reminded that it's (not only) about the bassoon, but about all the instruments that make up the wonder that is a symphony orchestra, including the lovely French horns, oboe, flute and clarinet – bravi, tutti!

Conducting from memory, Dinuk led the musicians in a strong performance of the well-loved masterwork, and if there was the very odd misstep, it only added to the excitement and passionate playing by the NSYO. With a few professional players like SNS Principal Bass **Max Kasper** subbing in as well as some community members, the orchestra was almost the same size as **Symphony Nova Scotia**, the "grown up" orchestra that provides many of the NSYO its coaches.

How great that a young percussionist like **Cameron Yetman** can be playing drum kit with **Los Primos** one day and then donning a tux and performing tympani with the NSYO the next. That's what this concert was really all about – a celebration of 40 years of work by those who know what it takes to make an orchestral musician, and the musicians who have been fortunate to immerse themselves in this supporting and nurturing organization over the years.

Bee would have loved it.

PS:

In case you missed the bassoonathon, there's lots more to come in the NSYO 40th, including an Alumni Bash, Concertmaster Andrew Son (on piano!), Denise Djokic, a Pops fundraiser and the combined NSYO/SNS concert. www.novascotiayouthorchestra.com (http://www.novascotiayouthorchestra.com) for all the deets.

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All about that bass(oon).

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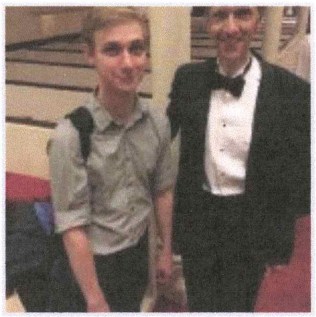
Young Cuban violinist Alison Enriquez (centre) has joined NSYO; joined here by father Augusto and supporters Shimon Walt (L) and Jeff Goodspeed (R)



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Two composers: Lucas Oickle (L) and Chris Palmer (R)

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Thank you, Dinuk!

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