

State of the Art

February 6, 2016

Art and goodness in the company of others

At a recent Odd Sundays event, The Uprisers, a spoken word collective under the leadership of Andrew Titus, performed to great applause. The room was filled not only with the regulars but also with the poets' parents and friends. The performers are young, it goes without saying, and their individual identity didn't seem to matter. I only know their names because of a previous notice: Blair Webber, Tyler Lifford, Brianna Parker, Victoria Vee, and Anthony Bryan, as well as Titus.

The performance began with a woman playing the guitar and singing her original songs. Several others spoke their poems. Then as a group, speaking from different parts of the room and yet loud enough for my old ears to hear, they dramatized a long poem with verve and enthusiasm. I don't know if the poem was a group effort or if the individual parts were written by those who spoke them.

They acknowledged the influence of Shane Koyzscan. He came to prominence when he delivered his poem at the Vancouver Olympics. He read in Fredericton for this year's FROSTival.

A friend of mine (I will let him be anonymous) told me that he would rather have a root canal than go to a poetry reading. In the olden days women poets invariably whispered their poems timidly, apologized for them. But the young women of today belt them out, one of the many ways the world is improving.

I go to poetry readings for the same reason I go to concerts and to church--to experience art or goodness in the company of others. Listening to a poet accustoms my ears to certain words, certain rhythms.

Hearing the poet read his own work also gives me a clue to their individual cadences. Dylan Thomas and Robert Frost each had such distinctive voices that people like to imitate them. Leonard Cohen has adopted a persona-- the felt hat--while singing his poetry. It makes him seem more contemporary. Robert Hawkes demonstrates to a listener how to read his work, with a slow emphasis on every word and a simplicity that enchants.

Coincidences and synchronicities seem to hold meaning, but what? I want to seek out the significance. Former professor here, Mike Taylor, phoned from Ottawa to tell me about a concert of the Juilliard String Quartet playing an Elliott Carter piece. Three minutes into the work the elderly violinist collapsed. Was it because of the difficulty of playing the work? Fortunately the man revived and indicated he wanted to soldier on, giving added drama to the concert.

The next day I attended a "Music on the Hill" concert where they were playing—you guessed it—Elliott Carter. The piece, "90+", was written in 1994 when Carter was 86 to celebrate the 90th birthday of a friend. Carter himself lived to be 104 and was composing right up until a few months before his death in 2012. The pianist, Simon Docking, explained that the composition

used only 90 notes, giving us something to listen for. Docking is a young man, so I didn't worry about his collapsing.

On the other end of the age spectrum was "Lock Groove", written in 2015 by Daniel Koontz, a 47 year old who was in the audience and came on stage to explain the piece. Lock groove is the close-out groove on a phonograph record. Koontz "was inspired by a sonic fantasy of a malfunctioning turntable...that depicts the needle stuck in the lock groove." The piece was commissioned by Docking for violin and piano.

Another ear-stretching piece was John Cage's "Eight Whiskus", originally composed for a singer. It was later transcribed for violin: "By means of the use of software programs expressly designed for Cage... 'mesostics' were generated on the first three words of a poem by...Chris Mann." Violinist Nadia Francavilla gave us a mini-lecture on the piece—yet another reason to go to a live concert.

My poor old brain never has to work as hard as it does when it's listening to new music, good for it I'm sure. I know I can't go with a "the emperor has no clothes" attitude or a "my three year old kid could make art like that" insolence. I have to try my darndest to understand and to appreciate. Part of the delight of a live concert is being with others who are also trying their hardest.

Mike Taylor said he liked the spectacle of a live concert. I did loose attention for a few minutes when I speculated on how hard the page-turner (a young man with a handsome profile) had to concentrate.

The concert concluded with a soothing, although still "new" piece, a medley from George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* transcribed by Jascha Heifetz. I could sink back into the familiar melodies, understand it, even though the notes were arranged in a contemporary mode.