

CLASSICAL

Mix and match music from around the world

Intercultural Orchestra's autumn festival showcases work of Elliot Weisgarber

Chrysanthemums and Maple Leaves

Vancouver Intercultural Orchestra
Oct. 22 to Nov. 3 | various locations
Tickets and info: \$10 to \$28, vi-co.org

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SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Fall in Vancouver is increasingly filled with new music. Vancouver New Music's Sonic Topographies festival runs Oct. 16 to 19, heavy this year with music by John Luther Adams, this year's winner of the Pulitzer Prize in music. Music on Main's Modulus Festival gears up for yet another run Oct. 23 to 29. And the Vancouver Intercultural Orchestra (VICO) offers its own autumn festival, Chrysanthemums and Maple Leaves, Oct. 22 to Nov. 3 in various Victoria, Burnaby, and Vancouver locations.

The latter organization has undergone a few important changes in the last little while. Founding artistic director Moshe Denburg has stepped down, and composer Mark Armanini, who has a long interest in blending music cultures, has taken the reins.

It has been a smooth transition: Armanini has worked with Denburg since 2008 and is committed to taking the organization to the next level.

"We are using the basic materials as before," says Armanini.

"Concerts are balanced with a lot of educational programs, ranging from elementary to university target groups. We try to connect composers with players, and to foster learning about how it is possible to cross cultures and to develop language and skills that will communicate and connect with audiences."

The idea of intercultural



Miyama McQueen-Tokita, left, and Issui Minegishi will be featured performers as the Vancouver Intercultural Orchestra presents Chrysanthemums and Maple Leaves from Oct. 22 to Nov. 3 in various locations in Victoria, Burnaby and Vancouver. Composer Mark Armanini, who has a long interest in blending music cultures, has taken the reins from founding artistic director Moshe Denburg.

ensembles that mix and match musical traditions is by no means exclusive to Vancouver, and VICO has been proactive in searching out like-minded organizations worldwide.

"We are building an international relationship with the Atlas Ensemble out of Amsterdam. These players are very good, and models of how to work with players from different traditions who want to expand those traditions outside their national boundaries."

I wondered what route Armanini took for his personal compositional journey, and just when he began to think outside the specifics of a Eurocentric classical tradition. "Sitar playing on Beatles records by George Harrison," he replied instantly, adding "I think this is a very common start on non-European music." Next came studies with composer Elliot Weisgarber at the University of British Columbia.

"In 1990, when I first started



meeting with Chinese musicians," Armanini explains, "my music was adaptable. Contact with the players was key, but it was really the instruments that I fell in love with — such intimate sounds combined with extensive techniques. I developed a musical language over the next two decades, and also a knowledge of how the families of instruments worked."

As a Pacific Rim hub, Vancouver was destined to embrace music from Asia and the Pacific

as a matter of course. Yet, the vital presence of Elliot Weisgarber (1919–2001) accelerated things very significantly. A one-time student of Nadia Boulanger in Paris, Weisgarber became enchanted with Japanese music, specifically the shakuhachi or bamboo flute, and his enthusiasm spread to many younger composers, performers, and would-be ethnomusicologists.

While Weisgarber's legacy is significant, performances of

his music remain rare. Chrysanthemums and Maple Leaves will endeavour to change that. Weisgarber's daughter gave Armanini a selection of works either for shakuhachi or with various Japanese themes.

"So we are using that music in this project. One of them is a song cycle called Songs of Winter taken from Japanese poetry."

As Armanini recalls: "That was premiered long, long ago at UBC ... with Judith Forst, and Elliot playing the shakuhachi."

"Also I have taken a trio, Spring in Yamato, that I don't think was ever played in Vancouver, and transcribed it for ensemble, as a sort of a working model almost of how to write for traditional instruments and how to use their best qualities."

Back in the Weisgarber era, it would have been a stretch to find good instrumentalists for music of this kind, but now the scene is different.

"We are demonstrating how much Vancouver has changed, in that we can now find players where Weisgarber couldn't in his pioneer days."

While Weisgarber's pieces anchor the entire festival, culture-bridging works from other composers will be heard, as VICO hosts a quartet of guest musicians from Japan and the Netherlands: Naomi Sato (sho), Issui Minegishi (ichigenkin), Bruce Huebner (shakuhachi), and Miyama McQueen-Tokita (koto).

The festival swings into high gear Oct. 22 with In An Autumn Garden at the Orpheum Annex, a program exploring the legacy of Japanese court music (Gagaku), with sho virtuoso Naomi Sato, the Tiresias Duo (flute and piano) and the Tempest Flute Ensemble. For details and tickets, go to www.vi-co.org.

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