

CHAMBER CHATTER

13 November 2019



Our *Chamber Chatter* columnist is MCO Director of Marketing & Communications Conrad Sweatman

I'M PLEASSED TO TELL you that the Bach concertos you'll hear tonight will be out-of-tune. Not, mind you, due to the clumsy hand of our piano tuner or musicians. Rather, they'll be out-of-tune because that's how JS himself wanted it. Why would that be?

For complex reasons that would likely fascinate a good minority of readers and bore everyone else, it's mathematically impossible for a piano to be perfectly in tune. Like a fitted sheet too small for a mattress, mapping one corner of the piano in alignment with just intonation forces the others to spring out of tune. In Western music, the solution to this problem historically has been to adopt equal- or well-temperament systems of tuning, which distribute this natural out-of-tuneness fairly evenly among the keys. The result is that while no key is perfectly in tune, none are too noticeably discordant. Bach was a champion of well-temperament (today we tend to use the slightly different equal temperament system) in a century marked by greater controversy around tuning, and in fact wrote his keyboard masterpiece *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, which jumps showily from key to key, to demonstrate the possibilities of well-temperament. It must have driven traditionalists at the time to distraction.

I'm not sure whether Simone's piano is tuned according to equal- or well-temperament, but either way, she'll fill the air with intervals that reverberate with subtle dissonances that aren't marked on her page, because that's just how pianos work.

Traditionalist enemies of these egalitarian approaches to tuning—whose arguments oddly resemble those of conservative opponents to democratic and socialist 'levelling'—are few today. But search YouTube and you'll still find examples of pianists performing pieces in 'just intonation' that usually stick to one gloriously resonant key, obscuring the sad, degraded state of the others. Or simply pick up a synthesizer with a tuning table, and voila, you can switch from key to key without any loss in intonation: a utopia of keys acting in perfect cooperation! Ironically, traditionalists have perhaps been slowest to embrace or experiment with the brave new world of synthesizers. They complain, sometimes with good reason, about the artificial textures of their sounds and their overall soullessness. What they don't always appreciate is that the flat and mechanical qualities they perceive are often a product of synthesizers' capacity for a particular kind of sonic purity. While there is no single reason why Culture Club, Milli Vanilli, and other 1980s synth-pop bands sound so corny to many of us today, surely it has something to do with old synthesizers' presets favouring the most basic sound waves: sine, saw tooth, triangle, and square. These are the most basic building blocks of sound, but do not appear in nature, or in all the orchestral and acoustic instruments with which

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we're familiar, so isolated and divested of idiosyncrasy. In other words, when King Crimson or Yes strikes a key on a Moog synthesizer, we are hearing nature unnaturally reduced to its most fundamental.

Synthesizers have evolved considerably since the 1970s and '80s, and now emit sounds more akin to acoustic instruments in their textural richness. They've grown more sophisticated as they've strayed from timbral purity. And, in another irony, they are frequently and deliberately somewhat out-of-tune, despite their historic capacities for perfect intonation. This dissonance is commonly achieved by replicating an individual sound several times over, and detuning each replication ever so slightly. The warm, immersive effect it achieves is called 'chorus' for reasons you can probably guess: we hear choirs singing in unison as a group of voices, rather than one single powerful voice, partially because individual choristers inevitably perform a little out-of-tune from one another. This is true no matter their skill level or how much their

conductors berate them. In short: the cause that Bach supported for well-temperament may have been pragmatic in spirit, but it turns out most of us prefer the all-too-human imperfections of music subtly detuned and distorted anyway!

Speaking of choirs and Bach, I won't miss the chance to remind you about our December Christmas concert. It features The Winnipeg Singers and the incomparable Karina Gauvin performing sublime Bach cantatas alongside the MCO. The Winnipeg Singers are, of course, among the top choirs on the prairies, while Gauvin is considered one of the greatest singers of the Baroque in the world. How lucky we are then to hear them present such rarely performed works, treating MCO audiences to their second month of Bach in a row (Bach-to-Bach, as it were). As impeccably delivered as the performances promise to be, we know they'll be slightly and pleasantly out-of-tune for reasons already mentioned—filling Westminster with added seasonal warmth on a December night.

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Manitoba Chamber Orchestra

Anne Manson, Music Director
7.30pm, 13 November 2019
Westminster United Church

Douglas Boyd, conductor
Simone Dinnerstein, piano

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PRE-CONCERT EVENT

Suzuki Music Winnipeg Inc.
violin students, led by **John Taves**; 6:45 pm.

TICKET WINNER

Congratulations to **James Chapryk**
winner of season tickets on October 30th!

Concert etiquette—please turn off cell phones,
pagers and beeping watches before the concert begins.
The use of recording and photographic equipment is not
permitted. Please keep children quiet and seated, and use
appropriate intervals for washroom breaks. The Manitoba
Chamber Orchestra strives for a scent-free environment
at its concerts, as hair spray, perfume, and deodorant
can trigger reactions. Please be mindful of this.

Intermission note

Refreshments are available upstairs,
served in support of the **Winnipeg Girls' Choir**
by their volunteers.

First violin

Alexander Read¹
Katie Stevens
Elizabeth Skinner
Narumi Higuchi
Momoko Matsumura
Adora Wong
Jessica Ramsay
Christine Yoo

Second violin

Rachel Kristenson¹
Maya De Forest
Boyd MacKenzie
Laura Chenail Hough
Sarah Harrington
Charna Matsushige

Viola

Pamela Fay
Woosol Cho
Michaela Kleer
Margaret Carey

Cello

Desiree Abbey¹
Laura Jones
Carolyn Nagelberg
Minna Rose Chung
Bery Barthol Fiisaime

Bass

David Fay
Paul Nagelberg

Harpisichord

William Bonness

¹soloists in Tippett & Corelli

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