

CHAMBER CHATTER

30 October 2019



Our *Chamber Chatter* column is MCO Marketing & Communications Manager Conrad Sweatman

CUTTING SHORT my usual preamble, I'd like to prompt you to read Dinuk Wijeratne's absorbing programme note for the premiere of his piece *Gajaga Vannama – Fantasy Variations on a Traditional Theme*:

"The two most prominent ethnic groups of Sri Lanka—the island country of my birth—are the Sinhalese and the Tamils. I happen to be a product of both. This piece is a highly personal musical interpretation and realization of a traditional melody and classical 'Vannam' dance-form that dates back to the early 1700s. In the royal courts of the city of Kandy, the last capital of the era of the ancient kings, the *vannamas* evolved from short sung melodies into longer, substantial dance pieces. In *Dance and the Nation*, cultural anthropologist Susan A. Reed captures the cultural context of the *vannamas*:

"The staple of most Kandyan dance performances, whether in processions or on stage, are the *vannam* dances. Originally the *vannamas* were a group of songs of both Sinhala and Tamil influence composed during the Kandyan period and sung in the courts of the Kandyan kings. The expressive arts of the court that developed during this time can be viewed as a blend of South Indian and Lankan elements. There are 18 traditional *vannam* dances, of which the most popular is the *Ga-*

jaga Vannama. It depicts the majestic gait of the celestial elephant of the great god Sakra. The song of the Gajaga Vannama describes the sacred elephant with 8 trunks and 16 tusks bathing and frolicking in one of the 700 lotus ponds of the abode of the gods. The *vannamas* are often danced in processions, from small wedding processions with a few dancers to large ritual processions with dozens.'

"We tend to perceive many artforms as being unchanging, 'vertical' creations that are fixed in time. Yet when we look closer, or dig into their histories, they reveal aspects of tradition and innovation in proportions that are delicate, subjective, and often hotly contested. My 'imagining' of the *Gajaga Vannama* is scored for strings and piano (my instrument), and set in a single-movement of 15 minutes. After a short, slow introduction of 7 beats to the bar, the main section of the piece begins. It gradually increases in tempo and urgency over time. Towards the end is a 2-part vocal recitation. The first part is a direct quotation of the *kastirama* (drum composition) from a classic recording of the *vannamas* by Piyasara and Chandrakanthi Shilpadhipathi. The second part is a variation on the *kastirama* of my own composing. The further increase of tempo in the *coda* (concluding section) imagines the dancers entering a state of trance.

"This piece was composed on a co-commission from the Manitoba Chamber Orchestra and I Musici de Montréal. My thanks to Pabalu Wijegoonawardane for his translation of original source material; to Dr. Sumuditha Suraweera for his knowledge on traditional drumming; and most especially to my dear

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colleague Eshantha Peiris, without whom I would have been lost if not for his invaluable ethnomusicological expertise, assistance, and advice.”

Further to Dinuk’s comment about the MCO commission that made this piece possible, I’d like to say something about our New Concerto Project (NCP), the umbrella project for all such concerto commissions. Close friends of the MCO will probably already know something about this initiative, through which we’re commissioning some of the most promising, adventurous, and beloved composers working today to write brand new works for orchestra.

All commissions have the goal of pushing forward the tradition, expanding the Canadian repertoire, and empowering a diverse group of artists to share their gifts and stories. MCO audiences can almost always expect from our concerts to hear the megahits of the common practice tradition. But it’s in no small part through initiatives like the New Concerto Project that we stay relevant: ensuring concert music remains

a living tradition that reflects something of the fabric of our pluralist society. As so many signs in the world show today, multiculturalism is more tenuous than we may have believed, and must be supported proactively, with even with the modest means available to us as individuals and community organizations. And we couldn’t be happier with the wonderful music this outlook produces.

Other NCP-centric concerts on the horizon include our March co-concert with the Cluster Festival, which includes a new percussion concerto, blending Western and Asian influences, by the great Canadian composer Alexina Louie. We hope you’ll check out this concert, and pick up our latest two albums: *Mirage?* *Concertos for Percussion* with percussionist Dame Evelyn Glennie (which just earned the MCO a Western Canadian Music Award for Classical Ensemble of the Year) and *Cello Concerto* with cellist Ariel Barnes. Both feature some of the most engrossing Canadian concertos (and commissioned by the MCO!) of recent years.

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Carla Bluebow
Photography

Manitoba Chamber Orchestra

Anne Manson, Music Director
7.30pm, 30 October 2019
Westminster United Church

Dinuk Wijeratne, conductor & piano soloist

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TICKET WINNER

Congratulations to **Leslie Stechesen**
winner of season tickets on September 25th!

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**
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First violin

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Mary Lawton
Mona Coarda
Chris Anstey
Momoko Matsumura

Second violin

Rachel Kristenson
Narumi Higuchi
Boyd Mackenzie
Shao Jun
Maya De Forest

Viola

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