

A&E

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Hats off to the oddball Hatzis

William Littler, Toronto Star, March 23, 2003

There must be something wrong with Christos Hatzis. He is a living, Greek-born Toronto composer with serious academic credentials, yet at the end of a concert devoted entirely to his music at Walter Hall Friday night, the audience leapt to its feet cheering. Composers are supposed to be dead before that sort of thing happens.

Some of his fellow composers probably wish he were dead, because he doesn't play by the rules of academic respectability, which consistently rate intellectual challenge over aural pleasure. Hatzis appeals to the ear, unashamedly and unreservedly.

He did so in all six of the works on this 50th birthday concert, presented by his academic employer, the University of Toronto Faculty of Music, but most of all in the last one, *Constantinople*, originally commissioned by the Gryphon Trio as a work for piano trio, currently expanded with multi-channel audio playback, as a study of cultural and religious encounters and overlaps, and eventually scheduled this coming summer for full-scale, 90-minute theatrical staging at the Banff Centre.

Hatzis flirts dangerously close to cocktail jazz and film music in some of the parts of this score heard on Friday. The melodious movement titled "Old Photographs," which has become a hit for the Gryphon, even breaks into an Astor Piazzolla-style tango.

But in Patricia O'Callaghan's singing of "Kyrie" and Maryem Tollar's of "Ah Kalleli," there were also wonderfully ornamented evocations of Western and Eastern

religious music, and the final section, "Alleluia," reached out toward a joyous cultural synthesis.

The concert opened with *Melisma*, a highly effective solo for clarinet (the excellent Peter Stoll) and drone in an improvisatory, klezmer-like Greek folk style, and continued with a harpsichord and audio playback tribute to... Bach (who shares a birth date with Hatzis) based on *Contrapunctus XII* of *The Musical Offering*. Michael Jarvis was the able harpsichord soloist.

In this Bach-inspired piece and in *Arctic Dreams I*, he applied the palimpsest technique of composing over an existing work, though I can't say that in the latter case the New Age wash he spread over what he had earlier written for a CBC radio documentary about the Inuit enabled flutist Susan Hoeppe and vibraphonist Beverley Johnson (Mrs. Hatzis) to become much more than purveyors of kitsch.

Inuit material sounded more convincingly incorporated into *String Quartet No. 1* (The Awakening), along with train sounds remembered from his youth, as well as in *Viderunt Omnes*, which juxtaposed a recording of the Toronto Consort performing Perotin's organum with pre-existing recordings of Inuit throat singers (presented on this occasion in the context of Jacques Collin's Veronica Tennant-produced music video, *Northern Light*).

An eclectic composer? You bet. And one of the most listener-friendly currently working in Canada.

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