

Sampling the sounds of the North

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Sampling the Sounds of the North

BY WILLIAM LITTLER, Music Critic

Six-movement suite fascinates the ears

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Music Critic

In 1996 the Prix Italia special prize in radio music was won for the first time in its 50-year history by a Canadian composer, Christos Hatzis, the Greek-born associate professor of composition and electro-acoustic music at the University of Toronto whose *Footprints In New Snow* has since been broadcast internationally.

A highly distinctive electro-acoustic composition for tape alone - inspired by a policy paper on the new Northeast territory, Nunavut - the six-movement suite is notable primarily for sampling the sounds of the North and the throat-singing of Nunavut natives.

Presented as it was Friday night in the University of Toronto's Walter Hall as a concert piece - its various movements interpolated between other Hatzis pieces performed live - it still sounded very much like a radio soundscape. A soundscape obviously designed to evoke atmosphere it may well appeal most to lovers of New Age music - which it strongly resembles - when it appears on compact disc shortly on the Naxos label.

The northern material incorporated into the piece and recorded a couple of years ago by CBC producer Keith Homer at Iqaluit and Cape Dorset on Baffin Island, turned out to be a fascinating combination of descriptive reminiscences (some of them similar

to those found in Glenn Gould's famous radio documentary, *The Idea of North*) and environmental sounds, electronically manipulated by the composer.

What was equally fascinating was the almost seamless way in which Hatzis dovetailed this material with his other pieces. Save for an intermission, the entire concert proceeded without pause, the movements of *Footprints In The Snow* flowing easily into and out of the other music.

That other music included, first, *Melisma*, a composition for clarinet (with drone support by a pair of double basses positioned at opposite sides of the stage) based on improvisatory Greek folk music. Slow in tempo and almost Klezmer in style, the sensuous clarinet solo was expressively played by Peter Stoll.

In the next piece, *Of Threads and Labyrinths*, there were two featured instruments, oboe (played by Joe Salvalaggio) and harp (played by Sanya Eng), but they mostly went their separate ways, as if to suggest the difficulty of communicating in the midst of labyrinths.

Hatzis turned extensively to throat-song quotation in *Fertility Rites*, with the brilliant Beverly Johnson introducing her five octave marimba almost as an extension of the heavy breathing of the throat-singers.

Finally, in *Tetragrammaton* (a Greek word indicating the Hebrew name of God), the soprano voice of Barbara Hannigan soared aloft intoning words from the Book of Job.

Even through these individual pieces emerged from different periods of Hatzis' eclectic creative career, there was enough of a common voice in them to foster a sense of kinship. The interaction of the live and the electronic worked surprisingly well.

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Review

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