

Canada's best piano trio as thrilling as flight

November 8, 2008

BY KEN WINTERS

The Gryphon Trio's extraordinary concert Thursday night for Music Toronto was an object lesson in what an astutely "hooked-in" group, in the full bloom of its maturity, can achieve. By now, besides being easily the best Canadian piano trio, in full charge of its repertoire, the Gryphon is also a busy educator in Claude Watson School for the Arts and at the University of Toronto; a generous commissioner of new works (some 30 so far); and the reigning programmer of the Ottawa International Chamber Music Festival, said to be the largest of its kind in the world.

Talk about being hooked in as a tireless force for the good health of music. It's hard to imagine what more these three players - Annalee Patipatanakoon, violin; Roman Borys, cello; and Jamie Parker, piano - could bring to their art, their students and their audiences. And for their audiences, the best news is that they are still playing at heady levels of virtuosity, of musical understanding, and of stylistic versatility and aplomb.

To be picky, one could say that their superbly elegant performance of Haydn's mature *Trio No. 32, in A*, composed in 1797, six years after the death of Mozart, was a bit glacial, a bit generic in its spotless classicism, where one might have preferred an approach more robustly sanguine. And the two Canadian pieces - Heather Schmidt's *Lunar Reflections*, which the trio commissioned for the 2008 Ottawa festival; and high-school student Paula Gil's *Gryphon March*, which the trio assisted in developing - were both somewhat less successful than their performances.

Schmidt's *Lunar Reflections* - five picturesque yet somehow stereotypical mood pieces, their titles and substance inspired by full moons of different seasons (the rare blue moon, the April pink moon, the frozen wolf moon, the February snow moon, and the high summer thunder moon) - was naturally the more resourceful and sophisticated of the two. But though it was frankly tonal or harmonic in its fabrics, the harmonic use was coloristic, not structural. The listening ear was

not carried forward by its discourse, and the final movement, for all its thunderous bombast, sat dully on the tonic of its diatonic scale.

The same harmonic immobility afflicted Gil's otherwise perky and attractive *Gryphon March*. The piece was an unaffected A-B-A structure, very nicely set out for the three instruments, and I thought for a moment the harmony might get moving in the B section. But if movement there was, it was too timid to flourish. One can only hope that both young Canadians, having chosen to write harmonically, will come to a command of the harmonic language. Both of their works, it must be said, were beautifully performed by the trio and enthusiastically applauded by the Music Toronto audience.

The concert ended with Mendelssohn's *Trio in D Minor, Op. 49*, which, like the Haydn, is an authentic masterpiece of the repertoire. The Gryphons treated it as a living manifestation of the soul of chamber music. Each player revelled in an ardent individuality while at the same time forwarding the discourse of the three.

The results were gorgeous. The three quick movements were as thrilling as flight - the first with a sculptural cogency, the *Scherzo* like airborne quicksilver, the finale magisterially propulsive and cumulative. The lovely aria of the second movement could not have been more touching and patrician. This was one of the very best performances I have heard of this music - one that gave it its due.

One must hope that the two young Canadian composers, both of whom were in the audience, both of them harmonists by choice, could hear the mastery of harmony here and in the Haydn.