

## In the company of cellists

The inaugural International Cello Festival of Canada celebrated both the legacy of local hero Zara Nelsova, and the diversity and camaraderie of the international cellists who took part. **William Littler** reports

**SURROUNDED BY MILE AFTER** seemingly endless mile of open prairie, the small Canadian city of Winnipeg is not devoid of associations with the cello – after all, Zara Nelsova was born and nurtured there before her family took their precocious daughter to London for advanced studies. And in June, musicians from as far apart as Sweden and Shanghai gathered for the first International Cello Festival of Canada, held in this mini-metropolis at the crossroads of the Red and Assiniboine rivers.

The new festival owes its existence to English-born Paul Marleyn, a former principal cellist of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra who emigrated to Canada to teach at the University of Manitoba (from which he subsequently moved east to the University of Ottawa). It was Marleyn's attendance as a young musician at the now-defunct Manchester International Cello Festival that planted the idea of a Canadian successor in his mind – he even invited Ralph Kirshbaum, the Manchester event's founder, to become his festival's honorary patron.

Another of Marleyn's enterprises – the annual Agassiz Music chamber festival, which he helped found while resident in Winnipeg – mounted the five-day event in conjunction with Winnipeg Cultural Capital of Canada, with Marleyn as artistic director. It was in part a desire to showcase Canadian talent that motivated Marleyn to found the festival in the first place. 'Canada is my adopted country and I am proud of what is happening here,' he says. 'There are eleven Canadian compositions by nine different composers featured on the programmes. And some of the country's finest players are appearing alongside their international counterparts.'

Winnipeg's widely acknowledged cultural appetite goes a long way toward explaining the cello festival's instant popularity. On its opening day, cellists literally took to the streets for a festival preview, roving through Market Square

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PAUL MARLEYN

and playing music ranging from Bach to the Beatles. Later in the day, a student cello orchestra took up residence in Westminster United Church, offering equally eclectic repertoire that embraced French and Japanese folk songs, as well as the finale of Brahms's First Symphony.

A democratic atmosphere infused the entire event, with off-beat ensembles of two, three and four cellos performing music by Duke Ellington, Stravinsky and Metallica, and performer-composers such as Ontario-based Kirk Starkey extending their instrument's traditional expressive range through live electronics.

Instruction played a role as well, and masterclasses filled many of the daylight hours. In one of them, a young cellist



Patrick and Thomas Demenga gave a dazzling recital of contemporary music



Jian Wang, one of the stars of the festival

from Vancouver looked surprised as her teacher broke into a broad smile and the audience giggled as he shouted, 'Attack the cello! Don't be so nice. You're such a nice girl. I hate you! Be an Italian girl!'

**NO FEWER THAN EIGHT VENUES**, ranging from the rotunda of Manitoba's impressive, neo-Classical Legislative Assembly – the setting for a dazzling recital of contemporary music by Switzerland's Demenga brothers, Thomas and Patrick – to The Forks, Winnipeg's al fresco downtown culture park, were drawn into the festival's ambit to accommodate a morning-to-evening array of performances, classes and demonstrations.

Programming included all of Bach's Cello Suites, performed by candlelight on a single evening by six different cellists: festival director Paul Marleyn, Canada's Denise Djokic, British cellist Colin Carr, Sweden's Frans Helmerson, Russian-born Yegor Dyachkov and China's Jian Wang.

This last cellist turned out to be one of the festival's stars, and his highly charged performance of the Shostakovich E flat major Concerto ranked alongside

Carr's breathtaking performance of the Haydn C major Concerto as a real festival highlight.

Other outstanding performances included an evening devoted to Britten's three cello suites, played by Helmerson, Djokic and Yuri Hooker, principal cellist of both the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra and Manitoba Chamber Orchestra. Hooker also teamed up with Dyachkov to premiere Manitoba composer Jocelyn Morlock's *Aeromancy* for two cellos and orchestra, and Djokic joined Thomas Wiebe and Brian Yoon for the first performance of fellow Manitoban David Raphael Scott's *After lines* by Guillevic for three cellos, both works idiomatically written and listener-friendly.

#### **WINNIPEG'S LOCAL CELLO HERO**

was remembered in the inaugural Zara Nelsova Memorial Award for Canadian cellists, which was incorporated into the festival. Korean-born Se-Doo Park, a Royal Conservatory alumna currently studying in New York's Juilliard School, won the prize with the cool assurance of her playing.

Although Canada may not yet have produced another Nelsova, the festival had no difficulty in bringing 55 cellists, most of them Canadian, to the stage of Winnipeg's Centennial Concert Hall to conclude the final concert with a performance of the Pablo Casals arrangement of *The Song of the Birds*. 'Cellists like to spend time together,' commented Marleyn. 'It wasn't hard to persuade them to come here. The atmosphere has been collegial rather than competitive. And I learnt from the Manchester festival the importance of a policy of equality. Everyone received the same fee.'

Whether the energy and enthusiasm of the first International Cello Festival of Canada will lead to a second remains an open question, however. 'There is an extraordinary audience here,' Paul Marleyn argued, 'and if we can secure funding in the future it would be wonderful to do it again.' His fellow participants would be unlikely to disagree with this desire. As Kirk Starkey observed after the final concert: 'I've been to festivals before, but in all honesty, this week was one of the highlights of my musical life.' ■

During the final concert, 55 cellists performed Pablo Casals's arrangement of *The Song of Birds*

