

## Sweetwater Composer Andrew Ager Discusses His Work

Andrew Ager strolls into our place of *rendez-vous* at Bathurst and Bloor in Toronto, at the exact time of our pre-arranged appointment -- dapper, quietly confident and exuding an aura of Victorian propriety, like the novels from that era he professes to admire. The Pauper's Pub where we spend the next two hours amicably enough, could be -- except for the bustle on the street outside -- just around the corner from *Barchester Towers*, so appropriate to the nineteenth century is its somewhat down-at-the-mouth *décor* and stodgy appointments. Only the pendant television monitors, and the glass of brand name Steam Whistle, might strike the observer as out of sync.

He has been accused "many times," so he confesses, "of being a throw-back, or stuck in the past," a verdict he strenuously refutes; and is quick to point out that "anyone who writes in a style reminiscent of the aesthetic of another era" should not be dismissed lightly because such endeavor forms part of an honourable tradition amongst composers and creative people generally: of toying with stylistic purity in order to create works similar to, but different from, the originals supposedly copied. Debussy dabbled with this process in the creation of his so-called Oriental music, as has Tavener in our time, with his own eastern fabrications. According to Ager, neither of these composers is authentically "eastern," but the effect is nonetheless often stimulating, sensuous and elegant. No purist himself, Ager celebrates such experiments as coming from a well spring of "delightful impurity": the source, in his opinion, of all creation worthy of the name.

Similarly, although there are many authorities ready to strike the death knell of the novel, the sonnet, the symphony or the sonata, the forms creative works take are neither limited to, nor expire with, any particular era. Rejection of such established forms Ager sees as modern posturing, often thinly disguising an inability to create just what is being rejected. In his opinion some of the great nineteenth century composers have not been sufficiently analyzed in terms of their explorations of the variable potential of the standard vehicles of musical expression. Berlioz, for example "(very much a prophetic mind and also a trail blazer) has a very important place, accordingly, in the history of French music in particular, because of who he was and where he was." His experiments and reforms are not fully understood and appreciated by contemporary composers who, Ager thinks, "tend to react against them because of the former's self-imposed dismissal of so-called Romanticism. Structures and forms, within the Wagner operas if you take the trouble to examine them; in the Elgar symphonies; in the great, great works -- the tone poems -- of Strauss -- if you take the trouble to really examine them slowly, carefully and repeatedly, the stretching and bending of form in those works far exceeds in ingenuity practically everything being done these days. Despite all of the trumpeting about how free and unstructured more modern compositions are." Ager feels very much at home in the

great tradition of “stretching and pulling and squeezing and turning” of well known forms.

Although not unmindful of his debt and loyalty to colleagues who have taken different paths, my companion, nevertheless, allows unflappably that he feels “very much out of step with the contemporary music world,” peopled to some extent by practitioners who could easily be characterized as belonging to an “ideological sort of club...reminiscent of the Soviet system of mutual approval, lack of objective criticism, nervous competitive-ness, insecurity within the ranks, looking over one’s shoulder and claiming concerns of a status sort.”

Seizing upon the great practitioners of the nineteenth century as creative inspirations, and rejecting the easy clubbiness of much recent musical endeavour, our composer has nevertheless begun to make his presence felt as a creative phenomenon of some stature. He calls himself an inveterate dreamer, a lover of moods and large effects. Early school attempts at poetry are perhaps significant and his youthful absorption with words and their power find an echo in current works-in-progress: a song cycle, “London Sketches” (based not only on views of London gleaned from a recent walking tour of that city but also based at least in part on the work of the poet Suzanne Bassett) and an opera (*Frankenstein*, with the librettist William Whitla, who knows how to make words “clink” and is himself a musician).

Ager professes himself to be “fascinated by the sense of something going on behind things -- behind what is apparently a fairly bland or unremarkable exterior.” Nondescript Edwardian row houses may mask deeper truths (“London Sketches”). A neighborhood in his native Ottawa may reveal hidden depths (*Heron Road; A Romanza* commissioned by the Duke Trio for performance at this summer’s Ottawa Chamber Festival). An already completed work, “This Solemn Land,” (based on a J.E.H. MacDonald painting) may well afford the listener a glimpse of more than solemnity. What will his *Frankenstein* reveal when it is produced in the coming year (by Tryptych Opera of Toronto)? Obviously the Romantic impulse is very strong in Ager who, although he prefers the big picture and the vast canvas, takes the trouble to flesh out the detail necessary to produce compositions of profundity and sophistication. The breezes of inspiration filter with complexity through the composer’s sturdy lyre.

Forms, words, tones, and colour. He likes “enormously” what an orchestra can produce, and acknowledges it to be his favourite vehicle of musical expression. “When a fruitful sort of dreaming or imagining goes on, then colours occur to one – colours and moods and images – once clear in the mind of the composer, they then correspond to certain colours within the orchestra. This process completed, the most propitious instrumentation becomes apparent; and the composer’s task, except for the performance of the work, is finished.” He is happiest when a “sense of occasion” is created by his music, or when it has been composed for an occasion.

In *Man and Superman* Shaw's Jack Tanner (not necessarily mirroring the views of his creator!) observes that "the artist's work is to show us ourselves as we really are. Our minds are nothing but this knowledge of ourselves." Andrew Ager's considerable ability is to strike this note of recognition in his listeners – whether it be some "sinuous" but recognizable aspect of the human condition reflected in *Mermaids*, a work performed recently and well by the Georgian Bay Symphony, or the more broadly comic *Five Bagatelles*, (performed earlier this year by the Talisker Players), a "work that, " according to the program notes for that occasion, "unfolds like a dance suite, with frequent alternations of metre, tempo and effect ... [but bears the] enigmatic epigram...: 'He not only overfloweth with learning; he standeth in the slops' " – if the contents of a previous paragraph were not enough to make the point that there is a good deal going on behind Mr. Ager's often non-committal titles, surely this epigram would raise a listener's suspicions! And it is important to note that Mr. Ager, himself, took some care, during the afternoon's conversation, to underscore the role played by this banality of life in the process of creation. He hears the voice of the muse in crowded, dirty cities as often as in a tranquil landscape. Consequently, the sonority he praises in his favourite musical compositions is often the outgrowth of "cheapness, vulgarity, sloppiness."

Mark Fewer, Artistic Director for SweetWater Music Weekend, when asked to comment on Mr. Ager's work (see *Romanza* above, composed for the Ottawa Chamber Festival and *Serenata*, created specifically for SweetWater, which Keith Horner has called "an essentially jolly and playful piece, with an odd touch of momentary wistfulness"), has echoed the sentiments of the previous paragraphs. After praising the composer's work for a compositional voice that is "free of excess and clutter," Fewer warily adds that he finds "the length of Ager's phrases deceiving as they are often short – but packed with information." This appears to be one performer's way of affirming the multi-layered sophistication of the composer's creative output mentioned above. Ager, for his part, likes ensembles like the Duke Trio, of which Mr. Fewer is a member, because – given the sophistication and talent of the artists – there then need be "no bounds to what you write technically."

When, to use my own words, I point out to Mr. Ager that, for me, a work of music has to be accessible in some way as well (or, put alternatively, that I need to be touched in some way by the composition in question), he shies away from acknowledging that to be his purpose: "If it happens, it's very gratifying for me. If people are touched, or find an identity or identification of some sort with the music, that is wonderful; but I don't set out to do that to them. I think I'm vaguely aware in the background somewhere not to tamper with that; but just say what I'm saying."

Andrew Ager proves himself to be a most engaging and complex subject of scrutiny: a modern composer unafraid to embrace the past, a reluctant national

figure whose love of the Canadian north reaches only so far as the “armchair,” a Romantic but not too much so, an instrumentalist who makes no claim to being honoured as a performing artist, a composer who is flattered when others compliment his unique voice but is nonetheless wary of being categorized as a result.

One thing is clear: he is a great believer in, and promoter of, events such as the Ottawa Chamber Festival and SweetWater Music Weekend because, without such vehicles of expression, composers might disappear as a significant force in Canadian cultural life. In turn, without the opportunity to perform his compositions, artists (ranging from members of the Duke Trio to Owen Sound’s Kathryn Tremills, would be without platforms on which to perform). That indeed would be a shame.