

A 35-minute musical feast

By Stephen Pedersen
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Pierre Boulez's *Le marteau sans maître* is a 35-minute, nine-movement work of unbelievable complexity for seven players.

Yet when you hear it, as we did in St. Mary's University Art Gallery on Janice Jackson's *Vocalypse* series Wednesday night, you definitely want to hear it again, only perhaps not right away.

Hearing it live like this was better than hearing it on a recording.

You can listen to this music as texture, which is easiest on your brain, or you can try to follow its tiny gestures, its gamelan flow, the way it echoes the abstract, non-sequitur artistry of the three poems by French surrealist poet René Char.

Listening the latter way is more interesting and more rewarding but demands more than one hearing. And it is almost as exhausting as playing it.

Le marteau (The Hammer Without A Master) is an amazing piece of music and Victoria, B.C.'s Aventa Ensemble delivered an amazing performance of it under the direction of conductor Bill Linwood.

What makes it so difficult to play, and yet so easy to listen to when it is played as precisely as Boulez intended it, is that the time signature constantly shifts and even includes such rarities as the notation of two-thirds of a quarter note, and that every note in every one of the six instrumental parts as well as the solo contralto vocal part, has a different dynamic, a different expression marking.

The score is as spiky as a cactus-covered desert landscape with *p*'s and *pp*'s and *f*'s and *fff*'s and *sfz*'s and *crescendo* and *diminuendo* expression markings, for alto flute, guitar, viola, xyloimba, vibraphone and percussion — drums, gongs, tam-tams, tiny cymbals called *cymbalettes* or *crotales* — as well as for the voice.

But nothing in all this array of pitches and timbres, every one of which Boulez precisely placed so even the tiniest tones could be heard like tiny birds flitting through the gapped light of a leaf-filled forest, could have prepared us for the first entry of Israeli contralto Noa Frenkel's voice.

Every listener sucked in an astonished breath at the powerful vibrancy, depth, richness and sweet edges of Frenkel's voice, not to mention the artistry of her interpretation.

She is a true contralto, the *basso profundo* of the female voice. So rare is this voice that the parts written for it are usually sung by mezzo-sopranos. But it has a rare, unique quality and like the deepest male bass voice, can shake you to the core.

Frenkel's vocal clarity, and the sweet buzz of her quick vibrato, lent an exciting edge to the vocal colour in this piece, which is a live, audio catalogue of refined and delicate instrumental sounds.

Le marteau came last on a program which had already scaled the heights with soprano Jackson's singing and Aventa's playing of Quebec composer Gilles Tremblay's Chants Convergens, a setting of three mystic poems. Jackson's singing of this was powerful and moving.

The music shares a common vocabulary with Le marteau but it is less dense, more spacious and full of light. It features Aventa clarinetist Brent Besner, a player with an ice-cracking attack, and a tone of astonishingly penetrating purity.

Pianist Miranda Wong as well as two Aventa percussionists provided layers and washes of sound, as they also did for the first work on the program, composer Estelle Lemire's Cantus arborescens. Lemire was a student of Tremblay.

While Tremblay did not study with Boulez, he had met him and his own music is proof enough of Boulez's influence.

The music on this concert was played so accurately and with such attention to detail by eight of Aventa's 15 musicians. It was of uniformly high quality.

That explains why so many audience members stood around talking to each other and to the musicians for some time after the playing ended.

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