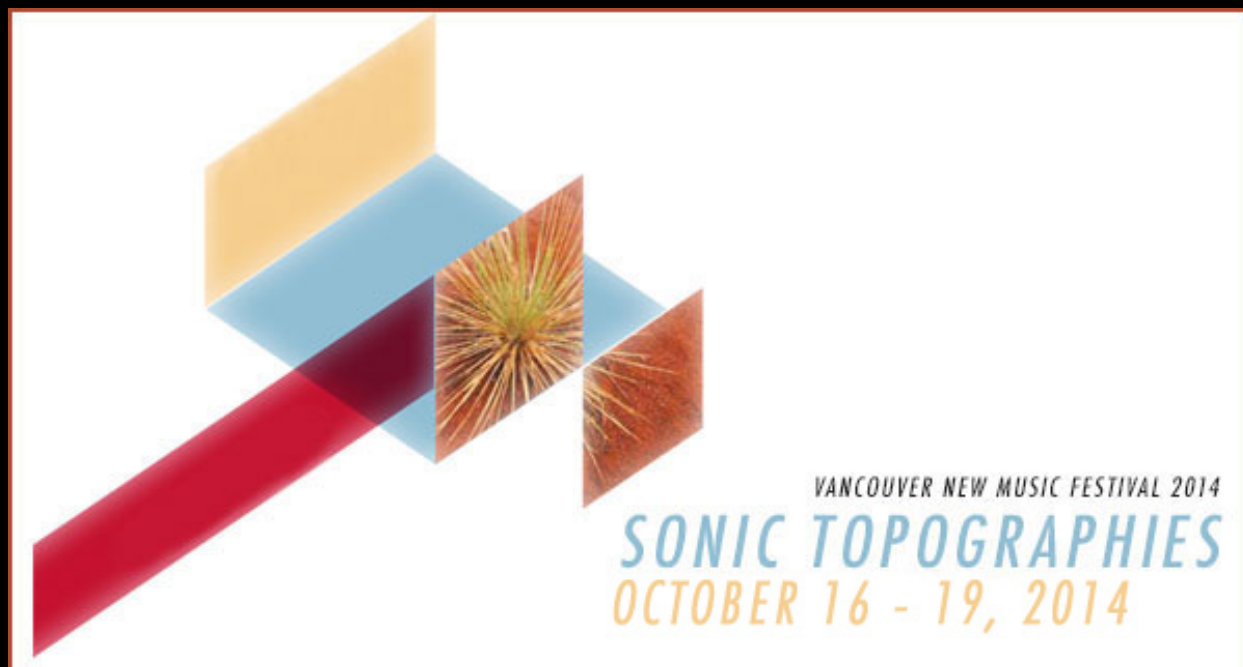


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INNOVATION AND ENGAGEMENT AT THE VANCOUVER NEW MUSIC'S 'SONIC TOPOGRAPHIES' FESTIVAL

Compositions by John Luther Adams, Raven Chacon, Leslie Garcia, Annea Lockwood, Tristan Murail, Michael O'Neill, and Hildegard Westerkamp; performed by Nick Anderson, Scott Deal, Ethos, William Fried, Peggy Lee, Christopher Marano, Akio Suzuki, and others; Orpheum Annex and UBC, October 16-19, 2014.



"Sonic Topographies" celebrated the 41st Anniversary of Vancouver New Music. Largely through the inspired programming of Artistic Director Giorgio Magnanensi, it showed remarkable success in meeting its mandate to encourage us to, "...reconsider what artistic creation means in a context that fosters sustainable ideas about creativity, culture, and

tradition.” Mr. Magnanensi builds a dialogue between the human imperative to survive in an increasingly troubled environment and the ideas we may need to achieve this goal. Thus, we have a four concert festival that highlights the work of three particularly innovative composers, as well as providing a platform for newly commissioned work and new techniques. The outstanding thing that one took from this festival is a better understanding of a complex and pressing problem through a wonderful variety of sonic lenses.

John Luther Adams works on musical material as physical phenomena, using meter and periodicity to create phase shift within sounds and flawlessly beautiful interactions between live performer and his pre-recorded sound tracks. His penchant for mathematically derived teleology was most apparent in *Ilímaq*, in which the brilliant solo percussionist, Scott Deal, serves as a Shaman, guiding one on a journey into one's own interiority. All of the pieces of Adams chosen for performance do suggest the

view that the path to truly sustainable way of life is a journey that will begin with changes made within the individual self. Six members of The Ethos Collective gave a committed and faithful performance of *The Light Within*, pianist Christopher Morano facilitating the inner journey with the same insight and engagement as Scott Deal did in *Ilímaq*. These were a joy to watch. That these two pieces share subject matter but result in entirely different musical experiences testifies to the artistry of John Luther Adams, deservedly the most widely-known composer featured at this festival and possibly the most accessible. His two other compositions were *Four Thousand Holes* and *Songbirdsongs*.



John Luther-Adams



Annea Lockwood

Annea Lockwood's soundscapes rely heavily on the idea that many sounds of everyday occurrence will no longer be easily accessible to a wide audience as natural environments decay. Field recordings, made by herself and sourced from various areas of scientific research, are used as the foreground in these soundscapes (*Buoyant*), almost to the omission of mid and background. That sounds can become semiotically encoded is exploited intuitively by Lockwood and when combined with

established electro-acoustic compositional technique (*Jitterbug*), lush, immersive work is the result. But just how interesting is it? Since the novelty appeal of indeterminacy has been long spent, the material must deliver a coherent and potentially implementable new message to the listener, and sometimes I am not sure that it does.

The use of sound as semiotics (signs) is brought to epic realization within the works of Hildegard Westerkamp. Unique within the composers represented is her willingness to explore past events (*École Polytechnique*) as well as current and possible future events. Westerkamp's powerful *Like A Memory* highlights exactly how we might have come to a cultural and environmental sustainability crisis in what Magnanensi terms our "post-aesthetic world". By juxtaposing master-works of the Germanic 'Classical Music' canon with post-war staging and images, and combining this with the visual/aural sensations of live performance versus soundtrack, a direct confrontation with the implications of encoded cultural meaning is produced.



Hildegard Westerkamp

Westerkamp's works are text-objects, irreducible to any simpler state or meaning. In order to ascertain the ways in which a possible re-ordering of a shared cultural payload of semiotics could break through to the popular conscience of contemporary society, a firm grasp of how those signs came to be disordered in the first place is needed. In Westerkamp's world, this is the task of the composer, made painfully abstract by the nature of the musical medium. At the same time, this abstraction ensures that, when a work is successful, it can bypass all consciousness and be the most direct mode of communication. The composer's complex appreciation of the human condition gives her entitlement to provide direct commentary in *Liebes-Lied/Love Song*. She prefers the certainty and accuracy of working solely with electroacoustics, which is why it was a privilege to see and hear *Fantasie for Horns II*, with Vancouver hornist Nick Anderson. Anderson played a protagonist, a horn among other types of horns, set uniquely apart by special qualities in an electroacoustic soundscape that free associates and expounds on the composer's ideal of sound as symbol.

To bring these three composers together for four successive performances was a master stroke by Magnanensi, made all the more evident by his wisdom in interspacing their works with those of emerging artists, virtuosic displays of technique, and new fields of sound research. The Orpheum Annex proved to be was a surprisingly ideal space for "Sonic Topographies". I originally had some reservations about its box-like shape and upper gallery but, from the very first performance, these fears were allayed.

Akio Suzuki brought a reminder of the joy to be had by play though sound as he combined objects and textures in a mesmerizing display, which also gave one an aural handshake to the dimensions of the room. Suzuki's use of hand-made vibraphones and strikers, made of stone, wood, and bone betrayed a love of the echo phenomenon and had a superlative resonance in this soundspace. Due to the forces required for the vast bulk of the selected pieces for the festival, excellent acoustics and competent recording play-back and live mixing were a firm requirement. Of the 14 pieces performed at the Orpheum Annex, no less than 11 required the use of amplification, and 7 of them utilized live musicians with electronics or electroacoustic sound tracks. Eight speakers, arranged throughout the space provided just the sort of unobtrusive ambiance required. It is true that one only notices technology when it goes wrong; nothing raised my attention.



Raven Chacon

Visiting from Mexico, Leslie Garcia displayed additional pioneering techniques that allow an aural representation of the reaction of plants to various stimuli. Raven Chacon showcased his ability to manipulate noise to create almost-tangible environments. Chacon's performance caused some trepidation within the audience as the volume grew to a dangerous level. Combined with the quality of the noise being produced (electronic feedback), this was far from comfortable. Clearly Chacon is an artist who wishes to provide a painfully accurate portrayal of his state of mind. A newly commissioned work from Michael

O'Neill, written in memorandum of well-loved and committed Vancouver poet Gerry Gilbert (1939-2009) will certainly find a place in the tradition of inter-cultural composition and performance practice that is so distinctly Vancouver.

Stand-out performances included pianist William Fried's presentation of Tristan Murail's *Territoires de l'oubli*. In possession of an incredible technique, Fried seemed to effortlessly transport the listener into the receptive, meditative state that spectral music demands. Cellist Peggy Lee's improvisation for Hildegard Westerkamp's *Liebes-Lied/Love Song* embraced the full



depth of feeling, and commitment to the moment, that marks her as one of Vancouver's most expressive musicians. The accuracy, exuberance -- and sheer endurance -- shown in percussionist Scott Deal's performance of *Ilimaq* cast him within the realm of a Herculean hero!

While the festival indeed offered a catalogue of riches, programmed with taste and balance, from my perspective it still remained a largely intellectual experience for initiates and devotees of new music. Perhaps there can be no other way when there seem to be few bridges between tonal and post-tonal music and when the vast majority of music listeners are trapped in misunderstandings about these. But there should be some way to increase general accessibility to the valuable offerings of the type we saw here. Perhaps a mini-festival designed to guide the listener to the realization that no break really exists within the art music tradition is not out of the question? It would be fascinating to see what composers would produce if that was the exclusive objective. Nonetheless, with four decades experience in bringing the best of what contemporary sound artists and musicians are creating and exploring, we can be assured that Vancouver New Music remains a truly essential institution for music and arts communities in Canada, as well as a conduit for general musical ideas and experiment to the international community.

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