

## 'Singing the Earth' - Bella Coola celebrated in Toronto by local composers tribute



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On Thursday, December 5, due to fate and somewhat serendipitous circumstances, I found myself experiencing an evocative evening of Bella Coola culture and music in the heart of downtown Toronto. How, you might well ask, did this happen, considering I live on Vancouver Island?

Currently, I am spending time in Waterloo, only an hour away from Toronto, and my brother-in-law just happened to see a review of an upcoming concert in the Toronto Star, entitled "Singing the Earth", composed by Anna Hostman, who grew up in Bella Coola.

Somehow, the confluence of circumstances told me that I was being called to attend, to renew my connections with Bella Coola, and indeed, the evening magically transported me back to the beauty of the valley and the years that I lived there, while sitting in a dark theatre space in the heart of Toronto. And, returning to my reporter days, I just happened to be covering the story for the Coast Mountain News!

The theatre, though small, was full to capacity for the evening, and extra chairs were brought in to seat the people who seemed to keep coming and coming, in from the cold Toronto night. Filling the small floor space in the front of theatre, ready to play, were the instruments of the musical ensemble, which included saxophone, clarinet, percussion, piano, recorder, bass and accordion, instruments reminiscent of those played in the valley over the years, some by Nuxalk musicians and some by the Norwegians.

Along one wall, hundreds of pages of text were hung in ten rows, clipped to long wires, much like clothes on a clothesline. They were copied from McIlwraith's "The Bella Coola Indians", and excerpts provided the inspiration for the lyrics of many of the songs.

The evening began with a showing of "Cry Rock", a short film by Nuxalk filmmaker Banchi Hanuse, bringing the voices, stories, music, language and images of the Bella Coola valley to life. For Torontonians, Bella Coola must certainly seem very

far removed from urban living, and the film helped to create a strong visual and aural landscape, as well as to establish an evocative atmosphere for the concert to follow. For me, it was wonderful to see the faces and hear the voices of people I know, and to see the classroom of Acwsalcta children who I taught several years ago.

Following the film came the musical part of the evening, best described as a multi-media "concert-installation", and indeed, the performance was as much visual as it was musical.

On a screen suspended above the musicians, the lyrics of the songs were projected, and along two sides of the performance space, multiple long paper banners were hung, on which an ever-changing series of photo and video images of the valley were shown.

Images of the mountains, trees, moss, Nuxalk masks, cars, people, the hill, Uncle Billy's dove-tail constructed barn, and the river. The paper banners were a reflection of the valley's close ties to the forest and the forest industry, and much of the video footage came from the Norwegian Heritage House and the Bella Coola Valley Museum. There was a lot to see in this changing collage of images and text, and together with the music and songs, the visual and aural landscape created an evocative and haunting sense of sound and emotion.

The music was comprised of "11 pieces about a place", some instrumental and some songs. Interspersed between the pieces were commentaries by Lance Nelson, Pat Lenci, and Cheryl Waugh, elucidating further on various current issues within the valley culture. It was disorienting to be sitting in a dark theatre in Toronto, hearing the voices of people I knew discussing issues that affect the valley, and once again, I was pulled back to memories of my life in Bella Coola.

The music and songs were angular, abstract, intricate and complex, at times discordant, rarely melodic, with many unusual sounds and textures. The lyrics of the songs were in various languages, including, English, Nuxalk, Norwegian and Japanese, representing the various cultures that have impacted the valley. The songs were beautifully sung by First Nations mezzo-soprano Marion Newman, who was born in Bella Coola. Her rich, mellow voice brought an operatic feel to the songs, and her deer hide moccasins (bought in Bella Coola) were a visual reminder of her First Nations heritage.

Accompanying the performance was a small, beautifully designed booklet, with historical photographs, composer's notes, thoughts from collaborators Dylan Robinson and Patrick Nickleson, notes about the pieces, and the lyrics of the songs. The eleven pieces were based on various themes relating to the natural setting and the culture of the valley, including moss, smallpox, the potlatch ban, traditional Nuxalk stories, the importance of the herring and oolachen, a Norwegian fiddle tune, Tallio Cannery, and residential school survivors.

Composer Anna Hostman grew up in Bella Coola, and she and her family left in 1986. Anna pursued a career in music composition, doing an undergraduate and master's degrees at the University of Victoria, and she recently completed a Doctorate in Musical Arts from the University of Toronto. Anna collaborated with Dylan Robinson, a Sto:lo scholar and dramaturge, Patrick Nickleson, a musicologist, and the musical talents of the Continuum Contemporary Music ensemble, to bring the stories, the people, and the landscape of Bella Coola to the Toronto audience.

I had a long conversation with Anna after the performance and we talked about the people and places that we both knew. She told me that four Bella Coolans, Ocean Dionne, Odd Knudson, and Dr. Fallis and his wife had been in attendance for the previous evening's performance, and Anna's mother, Carol Hostman (June Vosburgh's sister), was there the night I went, though unfortunately I didn't get to meet her. When I asked Anna how a girl from small-town Bella Coola had become a composer, she said she has always been composing music and this is where life has led her. "Singing the Earth" is Anna's musical tribute to her Bella Coola roots.

"Singing the Earth" had a message for the audience, and in Anna's own words, "Like the people who live there, we consider the piece a collection of eccentricities, struggles, hopes, strengths and contraries. It's a necessarily incomplete portrait of the people and place, our own creative response to their warmth and spirit, as well as to the valley's stunning beauty."

Anna, Patrick and Dylan wish to express their thanks and gratitude to all the people who helped them during their visits to the Valley. Caitlin Thompson helped with newspaper archives at the newspaper office, Lance Nelson and Clyde Tallio gave them a tour of Acwsalcta School, and Lance took them to the petroglyphs. Many people spent time telling stories and talking about the history of the Valley, including Clyde Tallio, the Caspersens, the Dunsworths, the Lencis, Peter Sohljell, June Vosburgh, and others.

The performance was videoed, and when it is available, it will be posted on the Facebook pages of the Arts Council, the Belco Bulletin Board, and the Coast Mountain News.

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