

Dreaming of Carnegie a dry run for ESO

Orchestra heads to New York next week

BY ELIZABETH WITHEY, EDMONTONJOURNAL.COM MAY 8, 2012



Robert Rival with his nine month-old son Raphaël at their piano, with musical score of his composition, Lullaby. This is part of ESO's Carnegie Hall concert.

Photograph by: Shaughn Butts

When Robert Rival took up his post as composer-in-residence with the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra last summer, he got an assignment: write a piece for Carnegie Hall.

But not just any piece. Organizers of Spring for Music, the New York festival where the ESO will perform on Tuesday, "requested a quiet opening piece, to complement the somewhat more extroverted, dramatic, maybe brash or loud music that's on the rest of the program." The festival has some say in each orchestra's action plan, to uphold the goal of showcasing the best in unusual classical music programming.

Rival wasn't bothered by the creative constraints. "I kind of like getting these restrictions," said the Calgary-born composer, who moved to Edmonton from Toronto and holds a doctorate in composition from the University of Toronto. "Otherwise there's an endless possibility of what you can do. When people say, 'We're thinking of this,' it focuses your mind."

The arrival of Rival's son, Raphaël, in August 2011 was fortuitous. "The birth came along and suddenly the two things gelled," the first-time father recalled. "I realized I could be writing a lullaby. It worked out perfectly."

The ESO will premiere Rival's composition this weekend at the Winspear. The Dreaming of Carnegie concerts, Friday and Saturday, are a dry run of the orchestra's Carnegie Hall debut, complete with soloists Angela Cheng, Jens Lindemann, Denise Djokic and Juliette Kang. The orchestra musicians will even wear their colourful, unconventional festival attire (see Saturday's Style section for details).

There have certainly been some raised eyebrows about Rival's subdued concert opening. "Some people were wondering if it was a suitable way to make a big entry in a historical venue," he said. But breaking with tradition and program format is what Spring for Music is all about. "There's something very original about making an understated appearance. It's not going to draw the audience reaction that a more upbeat, loud piece does, but that doesn't really matter to me. I feel strongly about the piece."

Don't expect to nod off. This is not your standard lullaby. The rhythm doesn't conform to the triple metre of most lullabies, including Brahms' Lullaby.

Rival credits little Raphaël with the idea. "I was rocking my newborn son a lot, trying to calm him down in the first couple of weeks. It occurred to me the pulse mattered but the metre not so much. I could switch from two (beats), to three, to one. I could count, ONE-two, ONE-two-three, ONE, ONE-two."

Rival applied that to his music. The effect is "relaxing, because of the pulse, but it keeps you on your toes. The metre is constantly shifting."

The subdued opening number in no way sets the tone for the evening. Things heat up quickly with John Estacio's Triple Concerto for Violin, Cello and Piano, reworked since its 1997 premiere, and the stage should be simmering