

Generations/Conversations: Robert Rival

February 28, 2017

Submitted by Matthew Fava on Tue, 02/28/2017 - 23:00



ROBERT RIVAL (b.Calgary, 1975) has created a widely-performed body of work in widely varying genres: orchestra, choral and chamber music, art song, solo piano and music-theatre. After receiving his DMA in composition from the University of Toronto in 2010, he served as the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra's Resident Composer from 2011 to 2014. He currently lives in Ottawa with his wife and son and teaches as a Part-Time Professor at the University of Ottawa.

According to his [well-designed website](#), he "enjoys playing hockey, swimming, running and exploring nature with his family." Several of his major compositions reflect his deep connection to the Canadian outdoors. His *Symphony No. 1* "Maligne Range" was inspired by a hike in the mountains near Jasper. *Symphony No. 2* "Water" includes "a depiction of monumental Helmcken Falls" and "pounding waves...the ocean's raw force." His symphonic poem *The Great Northern Diver* pays homage to the loon, while the string quartet *Traces of a Silent Landscape* evokes the "hushed landscape" he and his wife encountered "while snowshoeing in Algonquin Park during the dead of winter."

Rival is also active as a writer *about* music, with scholarly articles about Nielsen and Shostakovich, and a catalogue of program notes covering over 400 works, individually available for rental on [his website](#).

Robert Rival was interviewed this past February by music journalist Michael Schulman

MS: *When I first read your name on the CMC website, I had to ask if it's pronounced in French or in English. Have others had the same problem?*

RR: Yeah, that happens frequently, so on my website, I actually recorded it in both languages. It's RYE-vul in English and in French it's Ree-VAHL. I operate in both languages.

MS: *You started out playing violin. Do you still play?*

RR: No, I stopped playing in my twenties, when I was at the University of Ottawa. I played in the orchestra there but I was encountering some discomfort playing, injury-wise, while at the same time becoming more and more drawn to composition, and I made the transition then.

MS: *Is that when you decided to devote yourself to composition?*

RR: Pretty much, yeah.

MS: *As the Resident Composer of the Edmonton Symphony, what was the most surprising or significant part of the experience being so closely involved with one of Canada's major orchestras?*

RR: One of the great things was the ability to devote myself to writing orchestral music for a couple of years. It was such a privilege and it allowed me to think symphonically, to think about the orchestra most of my days and then to see it come to life, by working with conductors who premiered or conducted my music. And probably most significant was working with the musicians and getting their detailed feedback on passages that I wrote. There are a lot of things that I learned from their comments after rehearsals and passages that I changed as a consequence. They influenced the way I thought about writing for the orchestra.

MS: *Did you ever get to conduct?*

RR: No. I took a conducting course as an undergrad but that's something no one should ever witness.

MS: *From listening to your music and reading what reviewers have said about it, I'd include you in the category of "Neo-Romantics." Do you accept that designation?*

RR: I feel more aligned with what Jacques Hétu said about his own music, which, to paraphrase, he saw essentially as "classical" in structure but "romantic" in sentiment. I feel that describes my own music as well. When I think of "romanticism" what comes to mind are large, sprawling forms, often fantasy-like, that wander and meander. I think that in my own style I have a much more "classical" approach to structure, I use more concise types of forms and modes of expression. But at the same time, I do incorporate "romantic" harmonies and effects. If "neo-Romantic" means "tonal", then sure, to a degree, though I prefer the term "contemporary tonal" or "extended tonal".

MS: *Some of your major works were inspired by treks in the Canadian wilderness. Can we look forward to more of this landscape tone-painting?*

RR: Yeah, that's one strand in my sources of inspiration, nature and particularly wilderness. My first symphony was inspired by a 40-kilometre hike across the Maligne Range in the Rockies. It's a one-movement work that in a way imitates in a musical contour the ascent, the walk along the summit—there was a storm at the top—and then the descent after that. It's kind of like Strauss's *Alpine Symphony* in that respect. I didn't have Strauss in mind at all and my symphony is on a much smaller scale as well at just 20 minutes. Think more Sibelius's Seventh Symphony. It was my doctoral dissertation and is my only work that has yet to be performed, so if anyone out there wants to play it, get in touch with me! The string quartet was inspired by a snowshoeing hike in winter in Algonquin Park. What struck me was the serenity of the experience, the quietude of the outdoors. It was still, there was no wind, there was an enormous amount of recent snowfall. Part of the wonder of the whole experience was stopping from time to time and hearing practically nothing. So what I tried to recreate in that work was the feeling of silence, even though the music of course evokes that through *sound*. When you did wait long enough, however, you would start to hear quiet sounds interrupt the silence. That's in there, too. I'm delighted that Toronto's Windermere Quartet, which commissioned the work, has just released the [premiere recording](#).

Traces of a Silent Landscape recording session with Windermere String Quartet, June 27, 2016, St. Anne's Anglican Church, Toronto. Left to right: Michelle Odorico, Norbert Kraft (engineer), Elizabeth Loewen Andrews, Robert Rival, Laura Jones, Anthony Rapoport. Photo credit: Robert Rival

Lately I've been taking my interest in evoking nature in music a step further by contemplating researching the "rhythms of nature." It would involve analyzing video frame by frame of selected natural phenomena that have periodic structures with the goal of discovering what these rhythms really are rather than merely representing impressions of them, as I have in the past. Curiously enough this intersects with my brother's own scientific research in fluid dynamics—he's a professor at Queen's—so I've had some interesting conversations. As an example: I love watching jellyfish. But what, precisely, is their rhythm? How about layering a colony of jellyfish in a score? What about spiraling maple seeds? And so on. There's the individual and the group. I feel that this may significantly affect my compositional voice.

MS: *How did you get started on what seems like a subsidiary career, writing concert program notes and album liner notes?*

RR: By chance! I was doing my doctorate at the University of Toronto and a job came up to write program notes for the school's concert series. I submitted some samples of my writing, program notes I had written for my own music and got the job; it just went from there. Others saw my work and I kept getting requests to write for them. I have long associations with Toronto Summer Music and ATMA Classique. Although I usually teach advanced theory, which is very technical, I find it a refreshing challenge—and quite enjoyable—to write for a lay audience that dispenses with all the technical jargon.

MS: *Does it pay? I've done a fair bit of that kind of writing myself but it never paid much, considering the amount of time and research involved.*

RR: I find I've gotten pretty efficient—I know where to turn for my sources—and I insist on a decent pay rate. I don't get enough work for it to be significant, but it certainly supplements a composer's many sources of income.

MS: *In the course of writing all those program notes, you've had to immerse yourself in hundreds of scores, across the centuries, genres and styles, more than most composers, even those with doctorates like yourself, have done. Are there any composers, from any era, whom you find yourself particularly resonating to?*

RR: It's difficult to make such choices, but I'm always delighted to come back to Mozart. Every time I experience Mozart it's with fresh ears. There's something about the complexity below the veneer of simplicity that just fascinates me and touches me. It's dramatic in its own right, lyrical and earnest and so well written. A living composer whose music blows me away is Thomas Adès, notably his string quartet *Arcadiana* and the more recent *Violin Concerto*. I find these works, and others, stunningly beautiful and possessing a wonderful clarity despite their rhythmic and textural complexities. It's music that speaks to me deeply and yet you might not know it as my own style differs considerably. I often find that my own music doesn't resemble composers whose music I admire the most. Not sure why.

MS: *What composers or styles do you find least sympathetic?*

RR: I'm quite able to analyze the music of the Second Viennese School, but I have to say that I'm rarely moved by music written in strictly twelve-tone or the serial methods that came afterwards. I find they're processes that I can't follow intuitively as I listen. Music like that leaves me cold and wondering what exactly it's intended to do. My answer deserves some nuance. I do like early Schoenberg (*Verklärte Nacht*) and some Berg (the *Violin Concerto*). And I find Webern rather witty because his music is so bitty yet brief. But music that is all dissonance all the time I find intolerable. That extends beyond the Second Viennese School, of course, to various modernist tendencies. At the same time, like Shostakovich and others, I have occasionally incorporated twelve-note technique into a tonal framework. That I find highly satisfactory.

MS: *You're certainly not the only one who has felt that way, which is why that whole style of music is already relegated to musical history, rather than part of a vibrant musical present. Let's get back to your own music. What have you been up to lately, in terms of new compositions?*

RR: I'm in the initial stages of writing a work commissioned for the French public school board in eastern Ontario (CEPEO), for the orchestra based at De La Salle High School here in Ottawa. They're resurrecting a house orchestra as a training centre for young Franco-Ontarian musicians. The commission is for a 12-minute work as part of the Canada-150 celebrations. Jean-Philippe Tremblay, the distinguished Quebec conductor, will be leading the orchestra in August in Ottawa. That's my immediate project. I have marching orders to do something about Canada's history, sufficiently vague that it allows me to address it rather broadly. So I'm hoping to write a piece that is not simply a jingoistic type of work - I want to address some of the darker undercurrents of our history as well.

I have one other commission, for the chromatic concert kantele, a kind of plucked zither with a lovely, delicate sound. I'm writing it for Hedi Viisma, an Estonian musician based in Helsinki, where she will premiere it. It's nice to be able to work at both extremes—the orchestra and the individual solo instrument—and this is the most unusual instrument that I've ever had the opportunity to write for. It's a fascinating project.

You can visit Rival's site to hear samples of his music, including [L'Aube \[Dawn\] for mixed choir a cappella](#).

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