

**Sound Mind:
A Classical Music Blog**

Local pride 2009: These five musicians made me proud to be a Torontonian over the past year

I can't repeat it often enough: Toronto is home to an embarrassment of classical music and opera riches. What helps me bound out of bed every day (okay, some days there is a bit less bounce in my step than others) is not just the great hometown-made music I'm going to witness, but the amazing people that I will cross paths with.

I lost count of the number of times, over the past 12 months, that I spoke to visiting artists who commented on how welcoming and collegial the Toronto Symphony and Canadian Opera Company were. Contrary to big-company stereotype, they are functional families who are eager to welcome guests into their fold.

That's SO not like the infamous Coors Light billboard we saw this past summer that declared the brew to be "Colder Than Most People In Toronto." A big *pfrrrrrrrr!* to that. I decided to put together a list of people who particularly warmed my heart with their talent, giving nature, humility and all-'round great contributions to Toronto's performing arts scene over the past year. Then I had to narrow it down to five, which I've listed in no particular order, to keep it democratic.

To all five of you, thank you for making Toronto a better place, and for helping keep classical music and opera relevant in this noisy world:

ALISON MACKAY, bass player, Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra



About as self-effacing as a musician can get, Mackay has been stroking away at her double-bass at the back of the stage at Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra concerts for as long as I can remember. Rather than treating it as a routine job, Mackay has become a font of creative ideas on alternative programming. Her most brilliant inspiration to-date was the Galileo Project, unveiled by Tafelmusik at Banff last year, and premiered in Toronto in January.

This was multimedia at its very best, working as an integrative force, not a series of add-ons. An orchestra playing from memory? Unheard-of. An orchestra following stage choreography? Impossible. Or so everyone thought.

RUSSELL BRAUN, baritone



In the prime of his career, Braun is welcome on the grandest operatic stages in North American and Europe, yet has chosen to remain firmly rooted with his wife (pianist Carolyn Maule) and kids in Halton Hills. Nothing showed off his generous nature better than the night in November when he stepped in to help the Canadian Opera Company celebrate its 60th anniversary without its star guest, tenor Ben Heppner. Although there were international stars on stage with him -- tenors Ramón Vargas and John Treleaven -- Braun was the real star in the quality of his singing and the graciousness he displayed on stage.

PETER LONGWORTH, pianist



So much of any great city's great music depends on dozens of high-calibre musicians who are not marquee names, who don't have frequent-flyer points and whose finest moments come from collaboration rather than taking the spotlight. Longworth is one of those gems, ready to step in as piano accompanist, teaching at the Royal Conservatory of Music, and essential participant in fine chamber music such as we heard from the Duke Trio recital at teeny-tiny Heliconian Hall in May, and a Classical Music Consort presentation earlier in the spring.

Here is a typical instance of Longworth in action, at the Royal Conservatory's Mazzoleni Hall, accompanying young violinist Mark Johnston in Richard Strauss's Op. 18 *Violin Sonata*:

SHANNON MERCER, soprano



There doesn't seem to be anything that this elegant, lyric soprano doesn't gild with her open attitude and golden voice -- from a disc of Welsh music that started out the year to a glorious *Messiah* with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra a couple of weeks ago. Brava!

PETER SIMON, president & CEO, Royal Conservatory of Music



It takes a very special person to completely revamp a hidebound, 125-year-old institution, raise tens of millions of dollars a year and oversee a massive construction project.

Visionary, cheerleader, taskmaster and also artist. It's a very rare combo. Anyone -- and I do mean anyone -- who can accomplish this much is going to make as many enemies as friends, which doesn't make the tasks any easier to tackle.

Not only does the city now have a remarkable new recital space in Koerner Hall, it also has an institution that offers an intriguing educational alternative to a traditional school system that still owes far too much to the Victorians.

ASHIQ AZIZ, young firecracker, artistic director, Opera Erratica and Classical Music Consort



This 20-something Toronto native decided to return home from London, England with big ideas and plans to make Baroque and Classical-era music hip to his fellow 20-somethings. He hasn't let a lack of money or marketing muscle stop him, and his work, so far, has been impressive. Every city needs enterprising young people like Aziz to help keep the music scene fresh and vibrant.

Here is Aziz conducting his Classical Music Consort in the premiere of the third movement of Ian McAndrew's *Sinfonia for String Orchestra* in 2007. The video montage is McAndrew's own:

DEREK HOLMAN, composer



Now 78, this retired University of Toronto professor and church organist and choirmaster has been pushed to the sidelines as much younger voices make themselves heard. But who else could have composed the magical eight-song cycle, *The Four Seasons*, he wrote in memory of former Canadian Opera Company general director Richard Bradshaw. Premiered in June at the Four Seasons Centre by wonderful Toronto-based tenor Lawrence Wiliford and accompanist Liz Upchurch, the songs wove a magical art-song tapestry that was at once a celebration of life as it was an acknowledgment of how quickly it passes. Both Upchurch and Wiliford hope to be able to perform it again and again, which is the highest praise any composer could get. I hope that others will be

tempted to approach Holman with commissions that may yield more such gems.