

*Domaine Forget Summer Academy*

Deep in Québec's far-flung and visually stunning Charlevoix region, at the base of a sloping 150-acre plot of land, sits what must be one of the nicest sounding small concert halls in Canada. The Francoys Bernier Concert Hall was named for the Canadian pianist, conductor, and advocate for the arts, who in 1976 converted the property on which it sits into a non-profit music and dance foundation, the Domaine Forget. Every summer, the Domaine houses a festival with concerts and masterclasses, along with an academy with an international reputation offering sessions for students in chamber music and dance. This includes, at the end of the season, a two-week program for composers and performers of new music, started in 1995 by Canadian composer Denys Bouliane and conductor Lorraine Vaillancourt.

The **New Music Session** (*Rencôtre de musique nouvel*) is open by application to 15 young composers, who come for two weeks of lessons and masterclasses and for the chance to have a work performed by Vaillancourt's internationally renowned Nouvel Ensemble Modern (NEM). Much of the composer participant experience is similar to that of other bucolic North American new music festivals such as Aspen or Tanglewood: the sound of multiphonics wafting through the summer air; hours-long picnic-table discussions on the relative merits of recent aesthetic developments; distinguished faculty composers in shorts. There are some subtle differences: while a couple of other Academy groups dovetail with the New Music Session (the choir session, made up mostly of affable retirees, had their last Sunday brunch on our arrival day; the jazz attendees arrived amidst the blur of our hectic second week), all of the chamber musicians are gone by the time the composers arrive. The campus is thus almost entirely populated by the composer students and faculty, the small group of student performers, and the NEM and their staff, which, along with the intensity of the scenery, gives it a real 'composers retreat' feel. And the uniquely fervid atmosphere of the seminar discussions, which grow from regularly-scheduled two hour classes in the first week to the-cafeteria-closes-in-ten-minutes-and-we're-all-going-to-

miss-lunch four hour marathons by week two, is mostly due to the direction of the irrepressible Denys Bouliane.

Denys Bouliane is Professor of Composition at McGill University, where he also conducts the Contemporary Music Ensemble and runs two new music festivals in Montréal. Each year he is joined by two guest composers – when I attended in 2010, these were John Rea (also a Professor of Composition at McGill, and a frequent Domaine Forget guest) and French composer Phillippe Leroux. Another wild card in the summer festival experience is the level of faculty/student interaction, and, at Domaine Forget, it is high. Private lessons are readily available, and the typical 'getting to know you' composer presentations routinely morph into long and penetrating public lessons. The familiar (for most of us) experience of being thrown together with a 'faculty' composer and attempting, in an hour or so, to demonstrate enough musical method and personality to allow him or her to make insights into your work can be contrived and awkward. Here those meetings are at least urgently sincere, and one is given the distinct and rare impression that all of the faculty composers are familiar with the students' music – have actually listened to their portfolio recordings – before the course begins. Each of the faculty composers is

also given ample time to expound upon their own music and compositional strategies: during my session, Rea gave a couple of meticulous powerpoint presentations on the compositional method, Leroux went into fascinating detail on his voice and electronics masterpiece *Voi(Rex)*, and Bouliane unloaded a densely complex system of harmonic and pitch organisation, in addition to all three presenting analyses of new and old works. You will get to know the faculty well, not just in the context of these classes but at occasional meals or during breaks or on the mid-session whale-watching trip (sadly, a bust).

Aside from personnel or details of surroundings, the most striking difference between Domaine Forget and every other music festival I've ever been to, American or European, was the diversity of the students. This is probably due to both the directors' selection criteria and to the international reputation of the Academy and the NEM, which seems to be somewhat less well-known in the U.S. than elsewhere. My colleagues included composers from Brazil, China, Canada (3), Israel (2), Iran, Norway, and Spain (a Russian student had to cancel due to travel difficulties). I was the sole American, a new experience for me and one that I relished for the unexpected questions it raised. My 'teachable moments' included the fact that, despite long years of feeling very distanced from most of the compositional activity in my homeland and largely alienated from its 'National Values', I was identified by my colleagues as an American composer not only in biographical fact but by certain features in my music, leading me to wonder whether, despite all the grumbling and Euro-envy, there is something about my work that indeed reflects its country of origin. The Iranian composer's affecting piece for violin and electronics on the subject of his reaction to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's 2009 election and the composer from Hong Kong's use of traditional Chinese instruments in a Western orchestral setting both generated interesting, if heated, discussions in class. And nine nationalities makes for a wider array of non-music-related campfire and beachside discussions, in the rare and valuable instances when composers get tired of shoptalk.

What makes the course really unmissable, though, is the presence and commitment of the NEM.

They are a fantastic group of musicians, and Vailancourt is a serious pro. My ill-conceived plan to win her over by communicating in broken, heavily American-accented French during my rehearsals was met with barely veiled impatience, but only because she is a conductor who gets things done and knows exactly what kind of rigour and concentration it takes to whip fifteen premieres into shape under the tightest of schedules, amidst continuous composer revision and hand-wringing. She is involved in every aspect of the music, even lending ears and expertise to conductor-less pieces (I had a horn and piano duo performed by two of the performer students in addition to my NEM piece), and has a fortuitously high tolerance for last-minute changes. I was not the only composer to impose upon the NEM's tireless production coordinator Alain Beachesne for the printing of revised parts and scores – twice. The NEM put on four concerts during my session, including the composer pieces, large-scale pieces by the faculty, and a few classics by the likes of Donatoni and Xenakis. Having a piece played by these musicians, in this (delicious-sounding) concert hall, is worth enrolment alone.

And, like the faculty composers, the NEM musicians and staff are there from day one. While their time is fairly strictly regimented by rehearsals, they are active participants in daily life and interested in and curious to talk to the composers. One memorable and all too familiar lunchtime query, posed in a much more affable way than one would think possible, went something like this: "if you're going to write music that's this brutally difficult, why use instruments at all when you could just have a computer play it?" The offending passages in this particular case were not the always defensible result of the search for new sounds or of a particular compositional/conceptual style/method, but were the byproduct of a regrettable unfamiliarity with woodwind fingering combinations, and the charge was laid to rest by the end of lunch. In general, the NEM musicians took the demands of the student works very seriously, doing everything possible to produce each piece according to its composer's vision even when the realization of that vision remained elusive for reasons of sheer technical difficulty. This open and dedicated approach to the potentially impossible should, of course, be the standard attitude for every new music ensemble,

especially when dealing with student works: the fact that it is not makes it a relief to encounter. Vaillancourt and the ensemble even managed to find time to offer a reading session for those of us wanting to try out works-in-progress for other groups, an incredibly instructive practicality.

As to daily life and facilities: in addition to the concert hall, there is an impressive new building that houses both the rehearsal room (large enough for an audience) and the cafeteria, a clean modern design with a huge overhanging patio looking out onto the St. Lawrence river. The NEM and faculty stay in a charming-looking apartment complex halfway down the campus' hill, and the students stay in a row of dorms at the top. (This hill becomes inexplicably steeper and longer the colder the night, the longer the rehearsal, and the thirstier for beer the composer.) The dorms are about as barely serviceable as you might expect, although I did discover a bonus to being a female composer: as I was one of two women, and thanks to the discretion of our male colleagues, I ended up sharing with one person a cabin that could have bunked fifteen. There are picnic tables under a canopy of (occasionally shooting) stars, and a barn that seems to exist for the sole purpose of drinking beer and playing foos-ball, all more or less what you'd expect. There are hiking and other activities in the area, allegedly, but the schedule being what it is – mind-rattling, by the last week – nobody made much noise about going off-campus.

What we as young composers get from all this, and from the whole adult-band-camp racket in general, is a larger view of our, at times, claustrophobically small world. The performance and recording of a new piece is of course important, but I've drawn just as lasting inspiration from the institutionalised cross-pollinisation of my various festival excursions as from the music I created at these places. Living in New York City for the past seven years, I've found it temptingly easy to define myself in terms of the composers and musicians with whom I associate and those from whom I actively distance myself. Once out of orbit, these resources are unavailable: you alone speak for your music, as it hopefully speaks for itself. I return from courses like *Domaine Forget* grateful for the reminder of how far-flung the network of like-minded artists really is, and with a welcome

sense that we are all able to communicate with this network, despite local composer catfights and the threat of general cultural irrelevance. In an artificial hotbed of musical activity like *Domaine Forget*, musical personalities and points-of-view are introduced and subsequently devoured in such a relatively short space of time that the forging of intense artistic and professional relationships is inevitable. I've found that it's these relationships that end up impacting my post-festival trajectory the most, whether through forced contemplation of my own music's impact on new friends in an unfamiliar context, absorption of the work others are doing or, more generally, friendships and collaborations with the musicians, faculty, and fellow students I've just spent two weeks in a compound with.

These courses can also provide opportunities in a very direct way. At the end of the festival, on the last concert night, the directors announce from the stage the composer and the performer selected to return the following year, and I was thrilled to be selected for participation at the 2011 New Music Session. This year the guest composers are John Rea and Julian Anderson, and I plan to bring a suitcase full of granola bars (the food, which I haven't mentioned, is, well, unmentionable) and to check all my double-reed passages thoroughly. Watching the cellist, clarinetist and flutist improvise on the lawn in front of the dorms on the last day, as we sat on our suitcases waiting for taxis and gazed at the river in the far distance, I was pretty sure there wasn't much I would wish differently for my repeat visit.

Except the whales. The whales better be prepared to show themselves this summer.

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**Kate Soper** (b.1981) is New York City-based composer and performer with a diverse background. Her current compositional interests include the integration of drama and rhetoric into musical structure, the transformation of visceral gestures in and out of time, and the potential of the human voice to communicate abstractly (or not). She likes Machaut, Henry James, and immersive theatre, and has recently drawn inspiration from the artwork of Anselm Kiefer, the poetry of Jorie Graham, and the films of Carl Dryer. Her music, described as “exquisitely quirky” by the New York Times, has been played by ensembles such as the American Composers Orchestra, the BUTI Wind Orchestra, the Nouvel Ensemble Modern, Ensemble Linea, Dinosaur Annex, the Ostravska Banda, the Second Instrumental Unit, and the Due East Ensemble, among others. She has received awards from the Fromm Foundation, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Music Theory Society of New York State, and ASCAP, and has been commissioned by Carnegie Hall, the Nouvel Ensemble Modern, the Tanglewood Music Center, the Museum of Biblical Art, Yarn/Wire, and the Kenners. As a singer with experience in Western Classical and Indian Carnatik music, pop music, and improvisation, Kate performs frequently as a new music soprano in her own work and in the work of others, including U.S. and world premieres of works by Rick Burkhardt, Richard Carrick, Beat Furrer, George Lewis, Caroline Mallonée, Alex Mincek, Matthias Spahlinger, Lew Spratlan, and Eric Wubbels. Kate received her D.M.A. in composition from Columbia University in 2011. She is Managing Director and vocalist of Wet Ink, a new music ensemble dedicated to performances of adventurous music across aesthetic boundaries.