

MUSICAL TORONTO

FEATURE | Pondering The Direction Of Canadian Classical Music

By Jennifer Liu on February 4, 2017

150 Years of History, Another Good 150 of Innovation: A commemoration of classical music in Canada.

[excerpt: see full article here: <http://www.musicaltoronto.org/2017/02/04/feature-pondering-the-question-of-canadian-classical-music/>]

Step into the future, and we see pianist Darren Creech stepping on stage in tropical short shorts, glittery hair and a big grin on his face. But in fact, as his audiences from Montreal to Toronto have witnessed, Darren has already pulled off the dress code to rave reviews, including for his Master's graduation recital (to which a jury panelist gushed "LOVE those legs!") How does Darren project his many identities through music — from his Mennonite heritage, to identifying as queer, to experiences from his eclectic childhood on three continents?

Darren was born in Ottawa before his family went on the move — first to Texas, then to France, then to Dakar, Senegal. There on the African continent, Darren sought out a local piano teacher who had studied with the venerable pedagogue Alfred Cortot. Thus Darren gained his entry into the authentic classical tradition: through his teachers in Dakar and eventually in Canada, he is the direct heir to the musical lineages of Chopin and Beethoven. But how does a disciple carry out their legacy for today's audiences, whether in Africa or in North America? Here Darren counters with a question: "Why perpetuate classical music in the context of social disparity. What is its relevance?" That was the probing sentiment that instilled his spirit to search for answers — and self-made opportunities. Darren ran his own in-home concerts, cobbling together a community that was curious about this exotic music. In this environment of solidarity, Darren developed a knack for presentation, which has become an integral aspect of his performances.

Darren returned to his homeland for piano studies at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario. For the native Canadian, this proved to be a culture shock on his pianistic upbringing. Where the institutionalized approach had been unheard of in Africa, he entered a world where hundreds of students were brought up within the Royal Conservatory of Music exams system which centred more around technique. As a versatile musician, Darren shifted his focus from sharing his craft to building up his resources, emerging with his Bachelor's in Music. Following graduation, he took two years away from school to think about his musical career before beginning a Master's Degree in piano performance from the University of Montreal. With that

now under his belt, Darren has relocated to Toronto in pursuit of opportunities to put his performance philosophy to work.

Sure enough, Darren made his immediate mark on Toronto, collecting the “Best Artist” prize at last year’s Nuit Rose Festival of Queer Art and Performance. Even if the musical program may not have been the most accessible to passers-by, the premise to “queer the classical stage” resounded loudly with the crowds in his tribute presentation to the Orlando shooting victims — all were unified whether or not they were members of the LGBTQ population or arts workers.

In today’s context, the elephant in the room is the centuries-old influence of “The Institution” on classical music’s evolution: its proponents defy the shift to accessible platforms and simplified content. In a field that underscores disciplined preparation according to instructions passed down like biblical scripture, this aging business model does not adequately embrace modern possibilities that could keep classical music fresh and relevant for years to come. There should be no need to justify the course that proponents such as Darren are charting, as audiences and promoters increasingly jump on board with a more relevant vision for classical music.

Darren actively challenges stodgy conventions of classical music performance, compelling audiences to think outside the box. These performances are tour-de-forces, propelled by a powerful narrative which puts audiences in touch with their emotional and spiritual cores. No matter what the medium, an engaging concert cannot ride on a single-dimensional display of dazzling technique: “People are incredible players today, the best ever. But they often isolate music into its absolute form.” For Darren, music is merely a single element of contextualizing the storyline within a complete sensory experience: for example, statement fashion and choreography can be adapted from pop shows, which enhance classical music’s appeal. He acts to lessen the discrepancy between pop and classical forms: “society values the emotional contributions of pop artists, [while] classical artists aren’t innovating as competitively to offer as meaningful an experience” in concert. Without necessarily surpassing pop concert dimensions, all performances should generate some form of excitement. All audiences should demand a concert experience where they feel connected with the performer and moved to the soul.

So long as borders are imposed upon populations, Darren affirms that human activities will be politically motivated — individual preferences and social ranks are inherent in cultures around the world. Like Tony, he agrees that Canada is a welcoming space for all backgrounds, where our collective strength is drawn from responding favourably to diversity. Where googling “queer classical pianists” didn’t turn up search results in the past, today he has cornered the market as his name appears atop the search results: “If it’s not there, you have to become or make that.” As his activities garner him more page views, institutions are also tuning into his cause: McGill University has engaged him as the Keynote Performer for their Music Graduate Symposium on March 10th, thus forging new alliances between a diversified consumer base and Institution-type authorities. In this culture of inclusivity, Darren is “very optimistic and excited to see where this will go, and to continue thinking and to question [...] myself, what’s best and what I want.”

In an increasingly interconnected world, Jamie, Tony, and Darren are proud ambassadors of Canadian classical music who have respectively left their mark on its past, present, future legacy. The winning formula for its continuity seems simple: pitch a comprehensive story to connect with audiences on many levels, and get the word out through mixed media. We need classical music that keeps pace with us as we look to celebrate Canadian culture for another 150 birthdays!

<http://www.musicaltoronto.org/2017/02/04/feature-pondering-the-question-of-canadian-classical-music/>