

GUIDE

Gabriel Dharmoo Going Beyond

by LUCIE RENAUD

Premieres, film collaborations, awards... this is a banner year for 30-year-old Gabriel Dharmoo. A few short days after receiving the Robert Fleming Prize from the Canada Council for the Arts, Dharmoo was awarded the 2011 Fernand Lindsay Composition Prize by the Académie de musique du Québec at a gala celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Prix d'Europe; recipients of this award are encouraged to further their education abroad.

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“Composers are relevant to our society; their role is not necessarily a pragmatic or practical one, but it is a vital one—especially in its social dimension.”

- DHARMOO

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PHOTO Achim Liebold

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As a result, Dharmoo is flying to Chennai, India later this month. There, four masters of Carnatic music will teach him theory, rhythm, singing and instrumental technique; he will learn about their tradition through learning to interpret their music.

“This is an unbelievably rich musical culture,” he said during our interview. “The classical and folk arts of India seem very foreign to our Western ears, but they are at least as rich as our traditions. I like to confront radically different realities and musical sensibilities. It is important to hear, listen, experiment, understand and embrace musical traditions that are based on the ear rather than on notation. I want to eat the music, to digest it.”

Dharmoo wants to extract features of Carnatic music, such as typical ornaments, and make them part and parcel of his own music. Each element becomes part of a musical language created from the mingling of different traditions. “I prefer to create soundscapes that suggest things without pointing to them specifically.”

This mode of selective appropriation is also how he approaches the work of other composers, whether they are classical masters or his avant-garde contemporaries. Rather than trying to embrace all of a composer’s production, he will seek out specific pages. When asked for the names of composers who inspire him, he hesitates, then names Bach, Purcell (for the moods and characters he creates), Bartók (the first 20th-century composer he ever heard), Nono, Ligeti, and Xenakis. “I always wanted to be a musical creator,” he says. “I used to be drawn to popular music, but I also wanted to go further. I was inspired by Beck, Björk, and Portishead, so I never wanted to become mainstream.”

After studying the cello, he studied composition with Hugues Leclair and Éric Morin in Quebec City, then with Serge Provost at the Montreal Conservatory. Bit by bit, he explored and conquered. Five of his works were recognized at SOCAN Young Composers Competitions: *Vaai Irlandu* (2nd prize in 2010), *Le jour de mon mariage avec Dieu* (2nd prize in 2008), *Chapelets* (2nd prize in 2008), *D’arts moultis* (3rd prize in 2006) and *À l’Homme* (1st prize in 2002). His compositions have been played by Arraymusic, Codes d’accès, Ensemble Chorum, Erreur de type 27, Motion Ensemble and ECM +, and he was invited by the latter ensemble to take part in Generation 2012. On September 11, 2010, the Aventa Ensemble of Victoria performed his *Sur les rives de* for flute, clarinet, percussion, violin



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PHOTOS Fiona Mak



and cello, and this month, Erreur de type 27 will perform a piece of his for flute, tabla and percussion at its Musica Masala concert.

He regularly works with directors and choreographers. “I want to continue being active on the arts scene; in other cities too, not just in Montreal,” he says. He also wishes to pursue his training in other musical traditions, thinks about teaching and will develop the improvisational side of his art: “To me, composing and

improvising are two hemispheres that join up to become one huge ball.”

Dharmoo firmly believes that the role of the composer needs to be redefined: “Composers must go beyond writing notes. They must believe in their craft, have a positive attitude, discuss with the concert-going public, give opinions that are not based on perceptions only, remain open without compromising themselves as artists.” Composers must renew themselves with each work that is created, while being an integral part of the community: “Composers are relevant to our society; their role is not necessarily a pragmatic or practical one, but it is a vital one—especially in its social dimension.”

Dharmoo feels that contemporary music must review its relationship with the public; concerts must be reorganized around specific themes and the work of young composers should be promoted. “People’s perceptions are influenced by their individual culture. Listeners can sometimes feel alienated, as they might if they were at a kabuki performance. Composers need to rebuild, piece after piece. Art forms must be justified by their context.”

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A piece by Gabriel Dharmoo will be premiered on October 14 at the Café Babylone in Quebec City, gabrieldharmoo.org, erreurdetype27.com

TRANSLATION: ANNE STEVENS