

# Composer still king with Esprit Orchestra

Before Alex Pauk picked up his baton at Saturday night's concert by the Esprit Orchestra at the Jane Mallett Theatre, president Ellen Pennie stepped forward to invite the audience to purchase a souvenir poster and have it signed by "three living Canadian composers."

After each of those composers had his piece played, he was duly invited on stage to share the applause as well. And after the concert, over complimentary coffee in the lobby, listeners and composers enjoyed yet another chance to get acquainted.

Business as usual? For the Esprit Orchestra, yes. At Esprit concerts the composer is king. At other concerts these days, the performer — ostensibly the composer's servant — sits on the throne.

## Priorities right

While it may be asking too much to expect a star-struck society to undertake some corrective regicide, surely Esprit has its priorities the right way around, if Canadians are ever to celebrate their own music.

For all three of the Canadian composers heard on Saturday's program (the fourth composer, John Adams, happens to be American) deserve celebrating. They meet international standards of craftsmanship, they have ideas and they obviously care about the act of communicating.

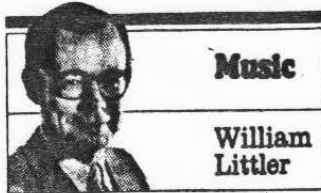
Into the *Distant Stillness* (1984), one of the first works commissioned by the Esprit Orchestra, reflects a fascination Peterborough-born Brian Cherney has had with the quality of stillness in music and life.

Not that his music remains soft and subdued. But the color-conscious scoring is usually light and specific, sometimes almost Middle-eastern mysterious in mood, so that the musical activity is highlighted by its contrast to the stillness which is its periodic and ultimate destination.

*Contrasts (the Web and the*



**HARRY FREEDMAN:** Toronto composer never loses his strongly linear approach.



Music

William Littler

*Wind*), a 1986 work for string orchestra by Toronto's Harry Freedman, makes some of the same points but in a very different-sounding manner, by contrasting a softly lyrical first section with an energetic successor.

In the opening section, Freedman achieves stillness in a literal way by separating his brief musical figures with rests, giving them a short-breathed quality that changes dramatically when the music broadens melodically.

Yes, melodically. Even in his 12-tone works, and in those in which his painter's color sense dominates, Freedman has never lost his strongly linear approach to composition and the bold orchestral unisons of the second section of *Contrasts* proclaim it proudly.

Where boldness is concerned, however, Peter Paul Koprowski's 1989 opus, *Sinfonia da Camera*, took the program's laurel wreath. Opening with French horn solos and isolated crashing piano chords, it filled its staves with surprising shifts of mood and temperature before coming to a close with a single gong stroke from maestro Pauk.

Apparently inspired by memories of a Norwegian mountain Easter, the music didn't sound overtly descriptive, but its sometimes warm, sometimes frenetic pages did convey the message of an individual voice.

## Historical document

For several years now, John Adams has projected one of the most individual voices in the minimalist movement and has been rewarded for his imagination by considerable Esprit attention.

An early work (1973), the central panel of a triptych called *American Standard, Christian Zeal and Activism*, now sounds like a historical document of the time when composers were playing, like their counterparts in the visual arts, with found objects.

The found objects are verbal in this case (including the voice of John Cleese reading from C.S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters*), against which Adams weaves, oh, so slowly, the melodic and free-ranging harmonic elements of hymn writing (Has *Onward Christian Soldiers* ever been stretched out so interminably?).

In addition to the Esprit performance, one is tempted to conclude, the San Francisco Symphony's former resident composer might have benefitted from some of that Esprit coffee.