

Vancouver Inter-Cultural Orchestra

At the Chan Centre for the Performing Arts on Saturday, September 30

The six-year-old Vancouver Inter-Cultural Orchestra has a noble aim: to promote tolerance and diversity through music. On a more specifically aesthetic level, its goal is to arrive at a new and satisfying synthesis of the many strands that meet on Vancouver's multiethnic streets. Or, as the ensemble's founder, Moshe Denburg, put it in his program notes for VICO's season opener, his organization hopes to create "an art whose aesthetic stands on its own within a new and vibrant context".

Of the pieces presented on Saturday night, probably the most fully realized success was John Oliver's *Eagle Flies to Mountain*, performed by members of the B.C. Chinese Music Ensemble, augmented by accordionist Amy Stephen and clarinetist François Houle. In his notes, Oliver gave an elaborate explanation of how his work has been influenced by the four elements and how they interact with the 12 signs of the zodiac. The result, appropriately enough, is a kind of fractal structure, in which several themes twist around each other in various recombinant and hallucinogenic ways.

At times, Oliver's writing sounds like fairly standard postserialist chamber music, given an Asian twist by the substitution of erhu for violin and pipa for guitar. At times it sounds like the Chinese storytelling tune its title suggests—but warped, as if reflected in a fun-house mirror. And at least once it sounded like a close cousin of '70s progressive rock, with zheng virtuoso Geling Jiang threading a slippery lead line through "Stairway to Heaven" chords played in 4/3 time.

Both intellectually stimulating and a great deal of fun, Eagle Flies to Mountain deserves to become an intercultural standard.

In contrast, Michael O'Neill's Luffness is doomed to be infrequently played, but only because of the very specific forces it requires: three experimentally inclined bagpipers, three taiko drummers, and one shakuhachi player. According to The Meaning of Liff, Douglas Adams and John Lloyd's dictionary of invented terms, luffness is the "hearty feeling that comes from walking on the moors with gumboots and cold ears", so it's appropriate that O'Neill's music conveys a sense of distance travelled, of stoic endurance, and of stark beauty. It's a remarkable invention.

Denburg's own El Ginat Egoz (Into the Walnut Garden) used a much more conventional musical language but was fittingly lyrical and sensuous in its invocation of vineyards, pomegranates, and love. The piece was also a good showcase for the Laudate Singers, who were less successfully deployed on Farshid Samandari's cluttered Asheghaneh (Monologues Aglow) and Hua Yan-jun's simplistic Ting Song (Listening to the Pines).

Missteps are inevitable in this kind of work. What's important is that it's being done at all—and in VICO's hands it's improving every season.