

# He Can Be Our Wingman Any Time!

## MICHAEL MATTHEWS BREAKS CANADIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC'S 10-MINUTE RULE IN HIS ORCHESTRAL TOUR DE FORCE

### A SPACE ODYSSEY

Featuring the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra in works by Michael Matthews, Joseph Haydn, and Gustav Holst. Winspear Centre (9720-102 Ave). Fri, May 8 (7:30pm) & Sat, May 9 (8:00pm). Tickets: \$20-69. Info: [www.edmontonsymphony.com](http://www.edmontonsymphony.com).

"No Longer Than Ten (10) Minutes."

That's how R. Murray Schafer, Canada's best-known classical composer, entitled one of his pieces back in 1972. The tongue-in-cheek work made fun of Canadian orchestras' lamentable fear of ... Canadian music. How many times have Canadian composers heard those dreaded words? A lot.

"Things have not changed much since Schafer poked fun at our orchestral moguls, have they?" I'm directing my question to Michael Matthews. A performer who has played all over the world, and a composer who has received a string of important commissions and awards (including the coveted Italian Premio Musicale Città di Trieste), the Winnipeg resident should easily be counted among Canada's most successful musicians. His work "Between the Wings of the Earth" appears on the ESO's innovative programme *A Space Odyssey*, which combines sound with outer-space imagery supplied by NASA.

"They haven't and they have," is Matthews' diplomatic answer. "I often think about it and am becoming convinced that a lot depends on such factors as individual preferences of conductors and orchestras' board of directors; as always, you will find those who will not hesitate to take risks and those who will only do the necessary minimum to meet the quota."

Matthews is talking about the much-discussed — some like it, some hate it — "Canadian content" re-

quirement. To get certain grants, our orchestras must show commitment to domestic repertoire. So they will commission new works, but often their assumption is that Canadian composers cannot deliver and compete with either European classics or American populist fluff. The commissioned work must therefore be short and sweet. Would Matthews agree?

"Yes, to a degree. It's not the rule, though. Look," he smiles, "my piece is almost twice as long! Perhaps I'm lucky, but the situation in Winnipeg is different. I can, and I do, write longer pieces. Ha, I can even write my own music! ... Orchestras dread alienation. Composers have separated themselves from society. Society has separated itself from composers. And orchestras are in between ... How do you get out of this conundrum?"

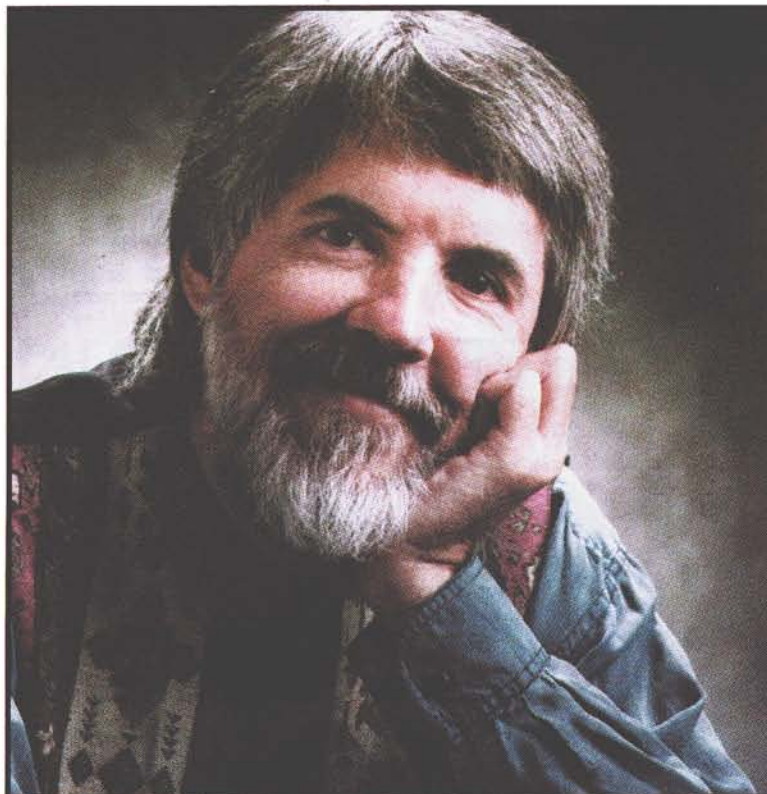
"Usually by commissioning those who are ready to compromise!" I reply.

"Maybe so," Matthews says, "but there are orchestras out there that will ask for something different. They believe in innovation."

True. Commissioned by the Manitoba Chamber Orchestra and based on a poem by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, "Between the Wings of the Earth" is a powerful study of personal emotions and a rarity: a Canadian orchestral work of real value. "To me," he says, "this music is a metaphor for our experiences of nature and life as an ever-changing kaleidoscope of events from which we then try to draw meaning. It's a very personal piece."

I ask Matthews a final question: "Pop music rules, yet you still compose. Are classical works relevant today?"

"On a bad day, I would say no," he says. "On a good day, I would say yes." The answer is ambiguous, but it looks like Matthews has a great many good days ahead of him.



**Message From Michael** | Michael Matthews' "Between the Wings of the Earth" sits comfortably next to Holst's "The Planets" at the ESO's *A Space Odyssey* concert. PHOTO SUPPLIED