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Organ Blitzkrieg



Reinhard With A Vengeance | Keyboard aristocrat Reinhard von Berg cuts a musical swath across Europe. PHOTO BY EVELYN BERG

REINHARD VON BERG LAUNCHES HIS SECOND EUROPEAN OFFENSIVE AND INVADES FOUR COUNTRIES INSTEAD OF JUST ONE

Edmonton composer and keyboard guru Reinhard von Berg is every inch an aristocrat. With the title of count and a coat of arms going back hundreds of years, his blood is as blue as it gets. Throughout the centuries, the Bergs, Baltic Germans from Estonia, played important rôles in many significant events. In 1863, for instance, Reinhard's direct ancestor, the infamous Field Marshal Friedrich von Berg, brutally suppressed the largest Polish insurrection against tsarist Russia, the so-called January Uprising (during which time many Germans served the Russian empire). A failed attempt on his life resulted in one of the most painful acts of retaliatory vandalism in Poland's history, the destruction of the composer Chopin's very first piano by the Cossacks who pursued the culprits.

Times change! This past June, von Berg opened his European tour in no other country than Poland, and to a very warm welcome. But how did his family find their way to Canada in the first place?

"We had no choice," von Berg explains over the phone, "but to escape from the Red Army. By 1945, they subjugated Estonia; we had to run for our lives! They did not make any distinction between 'good' and 'bad' Germans. When you're brainwashed, you'll kill whoever you're told to. Today, we see it clearer than ever. Only in Canada were we able to find peace of mind."

Educated at the U of A, in Germany and the U.S., von Berg quickly became a force to reckon with and, since the mid-'60s, has steadily created a body of work, ranging from simple hymns and clever exercises

stimulating children's creativity to intricate improvisations and multimedia projects performed with poets, painters, actors, and dancers.

"Really," one of his friends says, "there are two von Bergs: a von Berg-Jekyll and a von Berg-Hyde, the former writing nice music for kids or his congregation, the latter slashing at and ripping apart piano guts, albeit rather gently; in a word his sadism is highly refined. Under his fingers, piano strings and other parts turn out an orgy of timbres so beautiful one can easily forget that that instrument is usually played by pressing keys!"

Here is a composer whose real significance has never been, and may never be, fully recognized — largely due to his own personality, disarmingly lacking any overly selfish assertiveness, and largely to the overall nature of the artistic climate in Canada, where Prairie composers might well be justified in their bitterness towards the proverbial "big centres." But as of late, von Berg is finally getting his due, the current European tour already his second since 2007.

"This is pretty big, isn't it?" I ask.

"I went to Europe in 2007 and had about six dates in Germany," he replies. "Later, a CD of my music was released there. I must have done something right because I'm now playing 12 gigs in four countries, Poland, Estonia, Sweden and Germany. Stockholm, Tallinn, Kassel ... Good stuff. I'm doing a mixture of older and newer music, from Baroque to my own, plus works by other Canadians. Some are solo and some with my German friend, flautist Veronica Kraneis. It's great to see how well the Europeans react to our music! We have a bit of a European complex, but I don't think it's justified."

Sweet smell of success: although von Berg's tour does not end until August, he is already planning another.