

Our Man In Tallinn

EXPERIMENTAL COMPOSER SHAWN PINCHBECK LIVES A THREE-PRONGED LIFE IN CANADA, ESTONIA, AND THE U.K.

Shawn Pinchbeck is an artist I wholeheartedly admire. He is, after all, so much like me.

Like me, he wanted to be a musician – not in pop, as is usually the case, but in the experimental classical domain. Like me, he was largely self-taught. Like me, he decided to get the official stamp of approval by pursuing formal music education rather late in his career. And both of us achieved that goal in another country, I here, he in England. Pinchbeck is now completing his PhD at the University of Birmingham in the U.K., studying with the great British electroacoustic composer Jonty Harrison.

Back in Edmonton for a few weeks to do a show with Gerry Morita's Mile Zero Dance, Pinchbeck (who lives here but spends most of the year teaching and composing in Estonia) was able to meet up for a chat at a Parkallen Restaurant. Inspired by the fantastic Lebanese food and friendly service, Pinchbeck was at his eloquent best.

"The main difference between Edmonton and Tallinn, or Canada and Estonia," he explains, "is that over there they have such a long and rich tradition of classical music, you just cannot ignore it. It's huge. Of course, in Estonia, as elsewhere, pop culture has been making serious inroads into the collective consciousness, but their [classical] audiences are still very good, and the overall level of so-called 'average listeners' is very high. They actually appreciate classi-



Halo, I Must Be Going! Shawn Pinchbeck's brain practically glows with unconventional new musical ideas. PHOTO SUPPLIED

cal music and understand why it is so important to cultivate."

"So it's not considered elitist?"

"Oh, no! On the contrary, they see it serves people exceedingly well! Believe me, despite their wretched university salaries – at the Tallinn University, a full professor makes about 1,000 bucks a month and comparatively the cost of living is freaking expensive – it's quite cool to work there."

I'm still dubious. After all, what about his technology-driven approach to creating music? Surely finding the money to buy decent equipment presents a challenge – especially in Estonia, a country whose economy is still recovering from Soviet mismanagement.

"Not at all!" Pinchbeck replies. "For me it was very exciting to have gotten that job because I soon realized how open-minded their artistic community was. The equipment is getting cheaper, and somehow they always manage to use the most current technology.... The other thing is that what counts most is skill; there's

an awful lot of talent there, and they've absorbed new technologies and begun experimenting quite 'naturally,' almost without any thought as to the previous forms and genres developed in classical music. Their multimedia/interdisciplinary scene is lively and excellent. In this regard, Edmonton seems quite stagnant and rather provincial in its attitude.

"Luckily, it seems to be changing. There's a group of young kids here who experiment in noise, and noise is just one step away from serious work in the electroacoustic medium. Some of them will make that step. They're not yet professional, but they're serious about what they do and enthusiastic. And there's an audience for this type of music too. So there is hope."

With a string of acclaimed interactive projects behind him, Pinchbeck has achieved cult status in some important Canadian music circles. Would he ever come back for good?

"I have never left," he says. "But, as they say, what's next for me only time will tell."