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THE ARTS

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Winnipeg Free Press - PRINT EDITION

Cluster operas grand, with dark undertone

Canadian compositions performed at three-day new music, arts fest

By: Alison Mayes

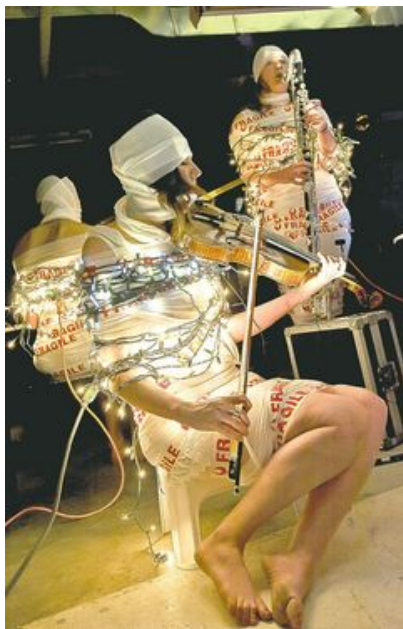
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SUPPLIED PHOTO Trio 86 (shown in 2011) performs again this year at Cluster New Music and Integrated Arts Festival.

Move over, Verdi, Puccini and Rossini.

Three short operas by young, emerging Canadian composers will be staged at Winnipeg's third annual Cluster New Music and Integrated Arts Festival, which kicks off tonight.

"All the operas have some degree of humour and a dark undertone," says Heidi Ouellette, who co-founded (under her former name, Heidi Ugrin) and co-directs the edgy interdisciplinary festival with fellow University of Manitoba music grad Luke Nickel.

"The productions are quite grand. There's costumes, staging, lighting and video along with the music."

The three-night Cluster drew about 600 people last year -- double the inaugural year's attendance. The number of participating artists has been scaled back from about 60 to 30, but the festival is using somewhat more upscale venues: the Rachel Browne Theatre (tonight), the Winnipeg Art Gallery's main-floor Eckhardt Hall (Friday) and the Exchange Community Church (Saturday).

All three operas are directed by guest artist Kelly Lovelady, an Australian conductor, now based in England, who maintains a connection to Winnipeg after attending the University of Manitoba about 10 years ago. Each concert is rounded out by guest ensembles.

Two of the operas are composed by Ouellette, 27, and Nickel, 23. The third is by Matthew Ricketts, a McGill University music graduate who lives in New York. The Cluster festival received its first government grant this year from the Winnipeg Arts Council, using it to commission Nickel's opera.

Here's a look at the three shows:

Tonight at 8 p.m. at the Rachel Browne Theatre, the evening is titled Shifting Signs. It includes a 20-minute excerpt from Nickel's opera, Ophiuchus Rising,

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described in part as "a darkly humorous foray into the paranoia surrounding the January 2011 horoscope-changing scare." Ophiuchus is the so-called 13th sign of the zodiac that caused an astrological kerfuffle last year. The opera will be staged with singers, video and musicians. Montreal/Boston flute, electronics and piano duo Electric Noise is also on the program, performing new works.

Friday at 8 p.m. at the WAG, the world premiere of Ricketts' hour-long opera No Masque for Good Measure, commissioned by the festival, will take the form of a rehearsal. The plot concerns three elaborately costumed drag queens who are practising for a wedding masque (a kind of entertainment popular in baroque times). Guest ensemble Trio '86 (clarinet/viola/piano) and other artists will also perform.

Saturday at 8 p.m. at the Exchange Community Church, Ouellette's opera The Gashlycrumb Tinies -- based on Edward Gorey's morbidly funny 1963 mock-alphabet book of the same name -- will be collaboratively reinterpreted by musicians. In this finale show, most of the artists from the first two evenings will appear. The evening ends with a "dark dance party" with audio by DJ e-Bison and visuals by jaymez.

Tickets are \$15 (students \$10) at the door or McNally Robinson Booksellers. A festival pass is \$40 (students \$25). For complete information, visit www.clusterfestival.com.

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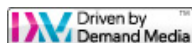
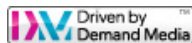
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