

The versatile sound of Ensemble Vivant
Toronto chamber group celebrates their 20th anniversary
By Kerry Doole, Tandem News - www.tandemnews.com



In any form of music, 20 years as a recording act is a significant milestone, and one well worth celebrating. Internationally acclaimed Toronto-based chamber music trio Ensemble Vivant are doing just that this year, via their superb new CD, Audience Favourites.

We recently interviewed Ensemble Vivant's leader, pianist/composer Catherine Wilson, about the group's career and future plans. They were initially known as Trio Vivant, but changed the name to reflect their expansion into larger chamber works. The core trio comprises Wilson, violinist Erica Beston, and cellist Sharon Prater, and frequently expands to a quartet with the addition of virtuoso bassist Dave Young, or a septet, featuring Norman Hathaway (violin); Jonathan Craig (viola); Philip Seguin (trumpet).

Stylistic diversity is a signature of Ensemble Vivant. "Our styles are uniquely diverse," says Wilson. "It is not typical for mainstream classical players like us to also have an affinity for the jazzier genres. There is a lot of mainstream repertoire for piano trio. Material written for that instrumentation, and a lot of piano trios only play that side of things."

Not so for EV. They're equally at home with the music of Astor Piazzolla, Puccini, Gershwin, Saint-Saens, Debussy, and jazz great Leroy Anderson, and Audience Favourites showcases their skilled eclecticism by incorporating repertoire from all those composers. This record is the ensemble's first release on Opening Day, the Toronto-based record label headed by Canadian Brass members Chuck Daellenbach and Stuart Laughton, and one quickly making a name for itself with the quality of its roster.

"In the summer of 2007, we were between record labels, though we had some offers for the next Ensemble Vivant recording," explains Wilson. "I'd been friends with Chuck for many years, and I'd always heard good things about Opening Day. We had a beautiful meeting, and soon heard back that they wanted to get something going. The first thing we decided to do was to commemorate the landmark, so we recorded Audience Favourites."

Earlier Ensemble Vivant recordings had been released on such prestigious labels as RCA Gold Seal, RCA Red Seal, and Pro Arte, but Wilson sounds especially pleased about her new affiliation. "Canadian Brass are such a legend, so it's an honour to be on the label."

Another recent Ensemble Vivant recording to be warmly received was The Music Of Leroy Anderson. This placed the American composer's compositions in intimate chamber settings. Wilson performed Anderson's only Piano Concerto with members of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, conducted by the legendary Skitch Henderson. "He loved my playing so much he wanted me to perform with the New York Pops at Carnegie Hall, I did that to a sold-out Hall in 2005," says Wilson, with justified pride. Her TSO performance was filmed as part of a documentary on Anderson's life called Once Upon A Sleigh Ride, one that has received plenty of U.S. exposure on PBS and the Classical Arts Showcase label.

Earlier EV recordings receive frequent play on National Public Radio (NPR) stations in the U.S., as Wilson says. "I'll often get e-mails from people saying things like 'I just had to pull over in my car to listen to your beautiful playing. Where can I find your Christmas Tidings CD?' That's a record that actually came out in 1992! I get enquiries like that almost daily."

Rather than resting on their laurels, Wilson and Ensemble Vivant are looking ahead to their next releases. Planned for early 2009 is Post Romantic French Music, featuring Ensemble Vivant's performance of compositions from Debussy, Saint-Saens, and Charles Marie Widor. This will be followed by the release of Music of Piazzolla and His Contemporaries, featuring both well-known and unknown material from that pioneer of tango.

"I am very passionate about Piazzolla's music," says Wilson. "We're working with a wonderful expert on his music, Julien Labro, and he has written arrangements of his music exclusively for Ensemble Vivant. We have some great music happening with that, and it will be a two volume effort."

Wilson hints that those attending the upcoming Ensemble Vivant concert at The Jane Mallett Theatre will get "a sneak preview" of this, as well as a retrospective look at the group's career. It should be a very special evening.

Audience Favourites is now out on Opening Day/Universal. Ensemble Vivant perform at The Jane Mallett Theatre in the St. Lawrence Centre on Nov. 21.

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