

Cross-Country Collaboration

Quebec's René Lussier brings new ideas to NOW band

Mention René Lussier's name to Ron Samworth, and he laughs. Samworth is director of the New Orchestra Workshop musicians' collective, which next week brings Lussier and his frequent playing partner, percussionist Pierre Tanguay, to Vancouver for two concerts as part of its annual Hear It NOW music festival. And because one of those perfor-

Off Beat

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mances will feature an extended work that Lussier has scored for the NOW musicians, the two have spent a lot of time on the phone together, ironing out details both logistical and musical.

"The other day we were talking," Samworth says, "and, just out of the blue, he told me that maybe we should be making music with our social-insurance numbers." He laughs again. Samworth is one of Vancouver's most creative guitarists, but the idea of using a government-issued code to suggest a melodic sequence had never occurred to him.

For Lussier, though, such sociomusical puns are second nature. After all, he and multi-instrumentalist Jean Derome, performing as Les Granules, cowrote one of the comic classics of the Canadian avant-garde in their "Avez-vous travaillé?", which puts a dadaist spin on the dry prose of the unemployment-insurance report card. A larger and more serious project, the CD *Le Trésor de la langue*, used transcriptions of the rhythmic and melodic cadences of rural Québécois speech as its source material and is one of the most intensely focused musical explorations of regional culture this country has produced.

For works such as these—and also for his ongoing performances with English and European improvisers such

as Fred Frith and Hans Reichel—Lussier has won international acclaim. But his chosen form of music, which he calls "*musique actuelle*", remains underappreciated both in Quebec and in Canada at large. His two Glass Slipper concerts—with Tanguay, pianist Paul Plimley, and saxophonist Coat Cooke on Thursday (February 16) and with the NOW Orchestra on Friday (February 17)—should help to change that situation, in Vancouver at least.

Musique actuelle, Lussier says, is a "hybrid blend". "It's a *courant*—a current?—that's borrowing in a lot of avenues, like free music, rock music...a lot of music," he explains from his Montreal home, speaking in occasionally fractured English. Essentially, it's a postmodernist form, drawing freely from the wealth of musical resources made available to us through contemporary recording technologies and using ironic juxtapositioning as one of its key tools. But it's also an idiom that is new enough—and hence loose enough—to allow its practitioners scope for developing their own individual musical voices, which makes it an ideal framework for the NOW players. The local ensemble's music is grounded in contemporary jazz, but, individually, the musicians are experienced in rock, funk, Latin, and various classical forms. Lussier's score should allow the group to present more diversity and musical colour than ever before.

"What I would really like to do would be to put everybody's strengths up front instead of just having a collective thing," he says. "At the end, the project's going to be collective, because it's going to be a suite of events—a *tableau*, would you say?—but I hope that everybody's going to find his place there, to give the most beautiful thing he can give."

Lussier says that although he has been impressed by some of NOW's recordings, especially the group's recent collaboration with British bassist and composer Barry Guy, *Study: Witch Gong Game 11/10*, the

ensemble's tendency to play what he describes as "very, ah, *maelstrom* kind of things" is something he hopes to rein in, and he jokes about the "tenor madness" aspect of NOW's admittedly impressive saxophone section.

"I need to hear more of the instruments," he explains. "There are some instruments in there, like cello and voice, that are very, very different aspects of the music that I would like to make even, in a way, rather than just having the big horn section. There are certainly going to be some periods where there are going to be very delicate things, little ensembles. It won't be like a 15-piece song that lasts for an hour. It's going to be more like sketches. There's a piece for two drums and piano. There's gonna be a cello solo. There's gonna be a quintet with two guitars, voice, trumpet, and another instrument. I don't know what, yet. There are going to be collective sections, but it's more like bringing small groups out of the group. But, as you notice, I don't know exactly what's going to happen."

That's part of the *musique actuelle* ethos, too: chance occurrences are not to be dismissed, and the music should always remain flexible enough that it can adapt to the particulars of any given situation.

"In improvised projects such as this, it's always more difficult to work with a band that is already in existence," Lussier says. "When you do a workshop and people come from all over the place, everybody's an individual, so everybody's even. When you arrive with a group that has already been working for years, there's going to be a hierarchical thing there—the good improvisers or the good readers. And I would like to avoid this direction, even if I ask questions about who's a good reader or whatever."

"Maybe the thing to do is to make improvise the good readers and to make read the good improvisers," he jokes. "There's no rules." ■