

Equus – Story of the Horse: In Concert

Thursday, March 19 – 8 pm

Darren Fung, conductor

Niobe Thompson, filmmaker & narrator

Chronos Vocal Ensemble (Jordan van Biert, Music Director)

FUNG

Equus – Story of the Horse: In Concert – Part 1

INTERMISSION (20 minutes)

FUNG

Equus – Story of the Horse: In Concert – Part 2

program subject to change

Equus – Story of the Horse: In Concert – Program Notes

In 2015, CBC television presented the three-part documentary *The Great Human Odyssey* on its long-running science series *The Nature of Things* (it was also broadcast on PBS in the U.S.). *The Great Human Odyssey* was the brainchild of Edmonton-based anthropologist and filmmaker Dr. Niobe Thompson. The ambitious project was given an equally ambitious film score, and for it, Thompson engaged another Edmonton artist, composer Darren Fung. Musicians from the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra, and local choir Pro Coro Canada, were hired to record Fung's music. The following year, an edited version of the documentary was projected above the stage of the Winspear Centre, while the ESO and another local choir performed the score live.

So when Niobe Thompson's next ambitious film project, exploring the unique relationship between human beings and horses, was being assembled, Thompson once again enlisted the help of Fung – and also once again, musicians from the ESO and Pro Coro recorded the new soundtrack. *Equus: Story of the Horse* was broadcast last fall and tonight, *Equus – Story of the Horse: In Concert* reunites these Edmonton musical threads on the stage of the Winspear Centre.

"I learned to work with orchestral scores through *Great Human Odyssey*," Niobe Thompson tells *Signature* magazine, "so I knew the process by the time we got to *Equus*. And also, we learned about each other's sensibilities. There's always this difficult and nerve-wracking process of getting to know you

at the beginning of a relationship between a composer and a director, because you can't read each other's minds. So all the composer can do is make attempts, and all the director can do is talk in emotions. Because we'd been through that already once – we knew each other – I think that we were really able to jump in much more quickly.”

“From a creative process, Niobe is just a wonderful collaborator,” adds Darren Fung. “I think we push each other. He's certainly pushes me because he signs the cheques,” Fung says with a laugh, “but on the other hand, Niobe's open to suggestions from his creative team. And at the end of the day, we're all working towards making a great film.”

Fung, one of the first up-and-coming composers to have been selected for the ESO's Young Composers Project back in 1996, won a Canadian Screen Award for his score for *Great Human Odyssey*. Lightning struck twice when Fung won again with his music for *Equus – Story of the Horse* (one of three Canadian Screen Awards it won, including Best Science and Nature Program). For *Equus*, Thompson crisscrossed the globe, visiting eleven countries as he charted humanity's relationship with the horse, and the anthropologist knew this was the right kind of project to bring back Fung.

“We needed a big idea to do justice to Darren's kind of music, and this was it,” Thompson says. “Horses are the most charismatic, the most perfect animal that we know of. We fell in love with bears, we fell in love with eagles, but I think that enduring fascination with horses goes back to far before we learned to ride them. They've always been a symbol of nobility, and power, and grace – also intelligence. They kind of symbolize our relationship with the animal world. And for me, as an anthropologist, I was particularly interested in how horses shaped human history. This is a civilization built on horsepower, and I wanted to explore that as well.”

Those who watched *Equus: Story of the Horse*, either on CBC or PBS, will note some significant differences between the three-hour documentary and the concert performance being presented tonight. That's quite deliberate, as the purpose for each presentation is quite different. “That process starts in the edit suite, with the editors who know the material,” states Thompson. “As the writer, I look at the script and ask how can we create a coherent narrative out of three hours of documentary that works as 80 minutes. That was possible, it's just difficult, and you have to put some of your favourite scenes on the floor, but you save the best ones, and in the case of *Equus in Concert*, not just some of the international scenes but very Canadian scenes.”

“And then we kind of reconstitute it,” Fung adds. “We take all the cues that we have, and do sort of an initial pass over what we can do. The aim is obviously to keep integrity of the score as much as we possibly can, but from a listening standpoint, you have to transition from cue to cue. But the big thing, and it takes a lot of time, is tempo changes. How do you create a tempo map that's going to work so that people in the audience won't notice it, but gives the musicians enough time to react to it? So there's a whole series of things that we need to do to get this ready, and one of the big things we learned with *Great Human Odyssey* is appreciating the fact that when you have a film, and the music is a little bit hot, you can just turn one up and turn one down – you can mix it. Live, you don't have that

luxury. So you have to take the time to say, OK, the narration's really important here, so we need to weather down the orchestration – or we can move the narration a little bit here so it's not covered up.”

The bottom line, Thompson and Fung agree, is that making *Equus –Story of the Horse: In Concert* was about providing a viable and worthwhile concert experience, using the documentary as the base. “I think it's important to add that *Equus* in Concert is not the documentary that people have seen on television,” Thompson says. “We understand that this is a musical event, and so one of the jobs I had – and it's very difficult for the writer, but I did it anyway – was to strip out as much information as possible while still maintaining a coherent narrative – so that there's room for spectacle, and there's room for music. It should be more of a musical and emotional experience. That, I think, was the toughest thing about the re-visioning process.”

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