

# Gros Morne Summer Music Festival, 2022, Corner Brook and Woody Point, Newfoundland and Labrador

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Volume 37, numéro 1, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1113977ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1113977ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1719-1726 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Bezzina, E. (2022). Compte rendu de [Gros Morne Summer Music Festival, 2022, Corner Brook and Woody Point, Newfoundland and Labrador]. *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*, 37(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1113977ar>

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## FESTIVAL REVIEW

### Gros Morne Summer Music Festival, 2022, Corner Brook and Woody Point, Newfoundland and Labrador<sup>1</sup>

As the COVID-19 pandemic recedes, organizers of summer festivals once again can hold ambitious, in-person events and programs, notably for the Gros Morne Summer Music Festival,<sup>2</sup> held on the west coast of Newfoundland. This year's season orchestrated a brilliant, thought-provoking, and highly dynamic mixture of classical and modern music that intersected with different art forms. As this review will explain, many of the performances delved into distinct themes. In doing so, the Festival could appeal to different audiences, inviting them to appreciate a musical genre or art form that they had been unfamiliar with. The originality and imagination of this season's Festival outdid previous seasons and demonstrated the organization's ability to break new ground.

The Gros Morne Summer Music Festival began as a chamber music festival in Gros Morne National Park in 2002, the creation of Dr. David Maggs, a superbly versatile pianist and interdisciplinary artist and scholar who publishes on the arts, climate change, and sustainability. Over the ensuing years, the Festival has expanded and evolved into something much larger and more varied: an inter-arts festival that pairs classical and modern music genres with different art forms, including poetry, dance, and theatre.<sup>2</sup> The Festival makes great use of local talents, combining them with national and international performers as well as with performers who were taught in Corner Brook and went on to pursue successful arts careers across Canada and abroad. Many of them are gifted songwriters, such as Yvette Coleman.

Enhancing the creativity of the Festival's performances are the public spaces that the organization has retrofitted. Gros Morne Summer Music (GMSM) purchased two ecclesiastical properties, the first one being St. Patrick's Church in Woody Point. This church is a Registered Heritage Structure in a Gothic Revival style that was built in the 1870s in Bailey's Point. In the 1880s, in response to a change in population, the large church building was moved in three pieces over the ice floes to its current site. The church was closed in 1984 due to its deterioration and a decline in the Catholic congregation.<sup>3</sup> GMSM gave the building a new lease on life in 2007, when it was turned into a well-appointed performance and recording venue. St. Patrick's is notable for its superb acoustics, made by the hardwood floors and the "box" between the ceiling and the roof, which amplifies the sound below. Thus, it offers a perfect musical setting for small ensembles and solo instruments like the cello. In 2016, GMSM purchased the former convent of the Presentation Sisters and transformed it into what is now the Graham Academy (referred to communally as "The Convent").<sup>4</sup> Named after the local music teacher and MUN honorary doctorate recipient Gary Graham, the Academy features accommodations for artists-in-residence, studio and rehearsal space, as well as a small, cabaret-style theatre. Saved from demolition or sale to a private buyer, both ecclesiastical spaces evolved as public sites, thus, perhaps something of a consolation to the members of each community who had faithfully served these religious institutions in their heyday.<sup>5</sup>

The 2022 season of the GMSM Festival featured most remarkably the performance of the Bach Cello Suites by the virtuoso Dutch-Canadian cellist Diederik van Dijk. The programs for these five "Bach Home" concerts matched the Suites with other musical pieces and diverse artistic forms and themes. All of these performances produced beautiful synergies. The Suites themselves are a series of baroque dance movements, each Suite introduced by a prelude, followed by differing movements, from the slow and contemplative Allemande and the Sarabande, to the relatively brisk and festive movements of the Courante and the Gigue, to the more light-hearted Galanteries, such

as the *bourées* and the Minuets. The Cello Suites lend themselves to creative experimentation and expression. The music was composed in the 1720s, but the original manuscript of the Suites no longer survives. A bewildering array of copies, scholarly editions, unedited editions, and performance editions exists and, unless one embraces the theory that Bach's second wife was in fact the Suites' composer,<sup>6</sup> no authoritative original version in Bach's hand or anyone else's indicates exactly how the Suites should be performed. That gap leaves much room for interpretation by the performer, *vis.* the order in which the Suites can be performed, in bowing, phrasing, ornaments, or accidentals, but also much room for contrasting a particular suite with different types of music and different art forms.<sup>7</sup>

These Bach Home concerts were captivating, and while this review does not have space to comment on all five concerts, a few stand out. Bach Home 2 "Kinds of Blue," for example, made a striking use of theme and colour, a love letter to the environment revolving around the colour blue. Van Dijk started with the third Cello Suite, in the optimistic key of C major, handling the difficult passages with aplomb while presenting the audience with clear melody lines and flawless timing. The Suite set the tone for the piano improvisations on the Courante movement by Florian Hoefner, assistant professor of jazz studies at MUN. His improvisations conveyed complex jazz harmonies that took the Suite in an introspective direction. Hoefner is also a composer, introducing this audience to his Suite for Clarinet and Piano in B-flat major, which also showcased the expressive clarinet-playing of Christine Carter, associate professor of single reeds, MUN. This piece of music is intended to be heard as a meditation on the environment. Other music and art forms expanded on this theme and colour, namely, the performance of Arvo Pärt's soothing *Spiegel im Spiegel* ("Mirror in the Mirror"). Its F-major key has calming undertones that complement the third Cello Suite's key of C major. The performance of *Spiegel im Spiegel* was accompanied by the fluid choreography of Shannon Litzenberger, the award-winning contemporary dance artist, choreographer, and producer, appropriately dressed in blue. Pärt's

calming music set a suitable tone for the readings from Don McKay's poetry on the many stunning shades of blue found on Earth: blue jays, blueberries, the sky, and so on. In these ways, the arts combined to heighten the audience's appreciation of the natural world in its bounty and splendour. "Kinds of Blue" is a powerful way to bolster an ethic of sustainability because a population that deeply appreciates the natural world will fight harder to save it.

Moving in a different direction, the Bach Home 3 concert "Everything I Know That's Real" was a tribute to Gary Graham, a tribute that had subtle melancholic tones because cancer had cut his life short, but also notes that sounded a profound gratitude for his legacy. Van Dijk first played the Second Cello Suite in D minor, a Suite far more sombre than the Third, a difference made clear by the opening anguished arpeggios of the Second Suite's prelude. Van Dijk also performed two movements from the Sixth Cello Suite in D major, a key that in the baroque period was said to symbolize "triumph and festivity."<sup>8</sup> Here, Van Dijk demonstrated his virtuosity in spectacular fashion, because the Sixth Suite is usually played on a five-string baroque cello, believed to come closest to the unknown instrument the Suite was written for — perhaps a violoncello da spalla, which is sized between a viola and a cello and is played on the right shoulder while supported with a strap that passes behind the neck. Due to this summer's air travel challenges, Van Dijk could not bring his baroque cello to western Newfoundland but instead played two movements from the Suite on his four-string cello. That feat required a far greater degree of technical skill: to compensate for the lacking fifth string, the performer must make incredibly complex movements up and down the fingerboard, especially challenging for the Allemande and Courante movements that Van Dijk played.<sup>9</sup> Following that Suite were pieces performed by Graham's former students, notably Yvette Coleman, Michael Barrett, Jennifer Renouf, and Ian Locke, performances that made clear to this reviewer Graham's prodigious pedagogical talent for producing musical stars. Also memorable was the rendition of Janis Ian's bittersweet song "Stars," sung

beautifully by Coleman to Kevin Hamilton's delightful guitar work and Van Dijk's gentle bowing and pizzicato plucking.

In another performance, the accomplished musical theatre performer Kate Etienne took the audience on a tour of a poignant repertoire from Broadway, Off-Broadway, and Canadian musical theatre, along with solo songs. Accompanied skilfully by pianist Cindy Shepard, Etienne's voice conveyed a range, strength, and emotional intensity that perfectly suited the subject matter. The quality of the performance was matched by the breadth of the program, which included excerpts from musicals with grim historical contexts such as Kander and Ebb's *Cabaret* or Sankoff and Hein's *Come From Away*, to uproariously hilarious fare like Menken and Ashman's *Little Shop of Horrors*.

The Festival also presented more informal shows centring on Newfoundland culture, with the event *A Fine Scoff*. Here, the Blow Me Down Ski Trails lodge provided the congenial setting for a hearty moose stew dinner, made even more appealing with music and story. The outstanding voices of Ian Locke, Chelsea Marks, and Grace Budolowski were matched by Hamilton's guitar-playing, all of which added crisp harmonies and dynamics to some well-known Newfoundland tunes, such as "Seven Years" and "Marguerite." This music was followed by the intermingling of "St. Francis' Canticle" with the "Indigenous Honour Song." Local author Rex Brown read humorous sayings and stories about outport culture, some of them from his new book *Twine Loft: Stories and Sayings from the Oral Tradition*.<sup>10</sup> Short reminiscences such as "Salt Beef and Sin" evoked the simplicity of outport life while Brown's style of recitation radiated the warmth of the evening.

In *Ruralesque*, burlesque humour and contemporary dance probed the complicated, multi-layered issues in Newfoundland culture. The choice of the burlesque for this show was a good one, because the dancing was both provocatively funny and suited to exploring and caricaturing without condescension these facets of Newfoundland identity and collective behaviour. Performed by the professional dancers Candice Pike, Josh Murphy, and Hilary Knee, the dance numbers

delved jovially into questions about what it means to have been born and bred in a Newfoundland community, after one has returned from having spent one's early and formative career stage in a large urban environment. What does it mean to return to those roots, where people are certainly more closely knit but perhaps less heterogeneous?

The Festival also used comic theatre and popular music to investigate questions of community and life in western Newfoundland's history. The short, light-hearted play, *Barley Legge and the Logger's Dream*, written by Ian Locke and David Maggs and featuring the theatrical talents of Mark Bradbury, Ian Locke, and Grace Budoloski, centres on one man's dream to break out of his social class by throwing his strength into the region's burgeoning lumber industry in the 1920s. Although the play is not overtly about class differences in Corner Brook, Legge's great ambition was to find and harvest the fabled Great Tree and make a fortune so that he could buy one of the coveted Cobb Lane houses in Corner Brook. Fittingly, the play was performed at the Hew and Draw boutique hotel. *Lucy Duhart's West Side Saloon* is a delightful farce set in Corner Brook during the Prohibition era, staged ironically at the Convent. Directed by Edmund MacLean, Stephenville Theatre Festival and TNL, and written by Jerry Etienne, associate professor, theatre, Grenfell Campus, MUN, the play involves four engaging characters, notably, a single mother struggling to survive on her establishment's income and a crafty, young hooligan who nevertheless dreams of making something of his life. The play features a spirited pace, dazzling alliteration, and the incorporation of well-known pop songs, such as Gowan's "A Criminal Mind," all performed by the immensely talented Wendy Woodland, Harold Moore, Ian Locke, and Grace Budoloski, with Robert Humber on piano.<sup>11</sup>

Two other performances showcased the brilliant music of cultural and ethnic minorities. The Ukrainian-Canadian group Kubasonics presented meaningful, upbeat songs crafted out of the folk music brought to Newfoundland by their grandparents. The group used intriguing Ukrainian instruments such as the *tsymbaly* (a hammered dulcimer) to recount time-honoured stories, for example, about the

young man who had to leave his family to go to war but never returned home. The musical rendering of such stories worked well in St. Patrick's Church, although the accompanying drums and the electric guitars tended to overpower the vocals and quieter instruments. The performance did not have obvious political references, yet, one could not overlook the difficulty of maintaining in North America a connection to Ukrainian culture during the long years of the Soviet occupation of Ukraine. More recently, the Russian invasion inspired Kubasonics' unshakable desire to affirm and preserve a distinct Ukrainian culture against a large and aggressive imperial power that seeks to snuff it out. Similarly, in Newfoundland, the existence of an Indigenous presence was long denied by the provincial government, particularly under Premier Joey Smallwood. Disproving that cancellation through his music, the versatile Mi'kmaw musician and composer Paul Pike amazed his audience with his solo performance on an astonishing array of instruments set to the sounds of nature. Transported by the music to a lush natural setting, with a wood flute accompanying the sound of chirping birds and the sighing of the wind, the audience was brought back to the roots of music and of instrumentation.

Great imagination and ability produced a fine festival season that fits into a lively musical, dance, and theatre scene on the west coast. This year's Gros Morne Summer Music Festival has established an expectation for future seasons that hold considerable promise.

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## **Notes**

1. Full disclosure: the reviewer is a donor of the Festival.
2. Gros Morne Summer Music website, accessed Oct. 14, 2022, <https://www.gmsm.ca/>



3. “St. Patrick’s Church (Woody Point, Bonne Bay),” Heritage Newfoundland and Labrador, last modified Aug. 2016, <https://www.heritage.nf.ca/articles/society/st-patricks-church-bonne-bay.php>
4. Since 1985, the Presentation Sisters have been running Xavier House, a Level One Personal Care Home offering supervised care for adults with mental illness. “Xavier House,” Presentation Sisters website, accessed Oct. 12, 2022, <https://presentationisters.ca/xavier.html>.
5. Many of the Corner Brook concerts were performed in the Colemans Theatre at the Rotary Arts Centre, a performing space that is ideal for solo performers and small ensembles.
6. The theory that Anna Magdalena was the composer of the Suites is suggested by Martin Jarvis. See “The Significance of Anna Magdalena Bach,” *Musical Opinion* 129, no. 1448 (2005), pp. 36–38; “Did Johann Sebastian Bach Write the Cello Suites?” *Musical Opinion* 128, no. 1447 (2005), p. 78. The theory is discussed in Robin A. Leaver (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Johann Sebastian Bach*, e.g., Stephen Roe, “Sons, Family, and Pupils,” pp. 442–43.
7. On the Suites, see Jeffrey Solow, “Cello Forum: Bach’s Cello Suites—‘A Guide for the Editionally Perplexed’,” *American String Teacher* 46, no. 1 (1996), pp. 81–82; Dimitry Markevitch, “Bach’s Cello Suites Revisited,” *Bach: Journal of the Riemenschneider Bach Institute* 30, no. 1 (1999), pp. 67–69. For a more technical, detailed study of the Suites, see Allen Winold, *Bach’s Cello Suites: Sources and Explorations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), esp. pp. 1–11. See also the engaging book by Eric Soblin, written for a broader audience, *The Cello Suites: J.S. Bach, Pablo Cassals, and the Search for A Baroque Masterpiece* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 2009).
8. “Cello Suite No. 6 in D Major, BWV 1012 performed by Sergey Malov, Gashouder, Westergasfabriek, Amsterdam,” Netherlands Bach Society. Accessed Sept. 19, 2022, <https://www.bachvereniging.nl/en/bwv/bwv-1012/>
9. I am grateful to Heather Tuach, of the Fitzwilliam String Quartet, for these insights on playing the Sixth Suite on a four-string cello. See also Miranda Wilson, “Finding a Creative Solution to the 300-Year-Old Conundrum of Bach’s Cello Suites,” *Strings Magazine* (Apr.

- 2018), last modified July 17, 2019, <https://stringsmagazine.com/finding-my-own-solution-to-bachs-300-year-old-conundrum/>
10. Rex Brown, *Twine Loft: Stories and Sayings from the Oral Tradition*, edited by Stephanie McKenzie and Teri-Ann McDonald (St. John's: Flanker Press, 2021).
  11. This reviewer was unable to attend the workshop for a new production in development, *Fyne's Way Home*, one that features much innovation in terms of live motion capture and virtual production. Audiences can well anticipate the staging of this production, hopefully in the 2023 season.