The first concert of the Boston Modern Orchestra Project’s 2011-12 season is an all-Canadian composer concert—at least on the surface of it. What the program really tells us is that the cut-and-dried, predictable definition of what a Canadian composer might be is elusive—refreshingly so, in a way: to define is to limit and exclude. The composers represented here are both Canadian and “other,” a situation demonstrably present throughout the Americas. Colin McPhee, born in Canada, spent a significant part of his life redefining himself as a student of the Balinese musical culture and lived much of his life in the U.S. Claude Vivier’s music, here, represents the unique Quebec region of Canada, but he, too, was strongly influenced by his life outside of his home country, gaining much from study in Europe. The two living composers on the program are further studies in the porousness of the Canadian experience. Michael Colgrass, a major figure in the music of the past half-century, was born in Chicago but took up permanent residency in Toronto over thirty years ago. Kati Agócs was born and raised in Windsor, Canada, but she has spent time in her late father’s homeland of Hungary and for many years has lived in the U.S., in New York City and Boston. This is a wild range of worldliness to be shared among only four musicians *not* specifically chosen for their diversity, and their musical styles are similarly divergent.

**Kati Agócs** (b. 1975)

***Vessel*** (2010)

Born in Windsor, Ontario, across the river-border from Detroit, to Hungarian and American parents, Kati Agócs has a complex multinational identity. She has embraced, and been embraced by, the new-music community in the U.S., and has also developed connections in Hungary while maintaining strong ties to Canada. She achieved her master’s and doctoral degrees in composition from the Juilliard School, where her primary teacher was Milton Babbitt. She has also participated in the Tanglewood, Dartington, Norfolk Chamber Music, Aspen, Virginia Arts, and Great Lakes Chamber Music festivals. Fluent in both English and Hungarian, Agócs spent a year in Hungary as a recipient of a Fulbright Fellowship to study at the Liszt Academy in Budapest, and also organized a continuing exchange program between that institution and the Juilliard School. She has been recognized with a Charles Ives Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters as well as an inaugural Brother Thomas Fellowship from the Boston Foundation. Kati Agócs joined the New England Conservatory composition faculty in 2008.

While fulfilling a range of commissions, Agócs has focused in recent years on works for larger ensembles, including orchestra. Her *Requiem Fragments*, a work with autobiographical underpinnings related to her Canadian childhood, was premiered by the CBC Radio Orchestra in November 2008. *Perpetual Summer* was premiered in summer 2010 at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa. Commissioned for the 50th anniversary of the Canadian National Youth Symphony Orchestra, *Perpetual Summer* was awarded special distinction in ASCAP’s 2011 Rudolph Nissim competition. Earlier this year her concert opener for orchestra *Shenanigan* was premiered by the Hamilton (Ontario) Symphony Orchestra led by its music director, James Sommerville. (She is in the process of rescoring that piece for concert wind band for a performance at the New England Conservatory under William Drury next spring.) Other recent works include *Elysium* for amplified cello, ensemble, and tape, written for the culmination of Canada’s Cultural Olympiad in Vancouver in 2010. Harpist Bridget Kibbey has included Agócs’s *Every Lover Is a Warrior* into her regular recital repertoire, and her violin and piano work *Supernatural Love* has toured the world. The new music ensemble eighth blackbird toured the U.S. with *Immutable Dreams*, which was written originally for the Da Capo Chamber Players. In January her solo harp piece *Northern Lights* will be premiered at Le Poisson Rouge in New York City.

Agócs also performs as a singer, and works for voice are a significant part of her output; she is meticulous in her search for appropriate and resonant texts. ***Vessel***, for ten musicians including three sopranos singing in “straight tone,” is in musical terms a direct successor to *Awakening Galatea* for soprano, flute, and harp, and *By the Streams of Babylon* for two sopranos and chamber orchestra, which was performed by BMOP with Agócs and soprano Lisa Bielawa as soloists. (BMOP has also performed her *Requiem Fragments* and *…like treasure hidden in a field*.) *Vessel* was commissioned by Meet the Composer with support from Nancy and Joe Walker for the Metropolis Ensemble, which gave the premiere in April 2011 at Symphony Space in New York City.

*Vessel* is based on the idea of the Renaissance genre of the polytextual motet, multi-language pieces whose texts typically clash (often sacred and secular texts within one piece). Here, Agócs combines three poems with interrelated themes and is characteristically attentive to layers of cultural and poetic meaning as well as to the sound of the language itself. The central poem of the setting is E.E. Cummings’s “i carry your heart (i carry it in),” sung by soprano 2, which provides a major part of the overall structural armature. The Hebrew “The Garden of His Delight” (soprano 1) by the 11th/12th-century Spanish Jewish poet Jehudah Halevi provides active commentary for the Cummings. Excerpts from the Catullus poem “This Boat,” sung in Latin (alto), give a third layer of meaning via the detached, concrete, and compact metaphor of the ship. Agócs uses Tibetan prayer bowls at the end of the piece both for their sonic quality and for the fact that they, too, are vessels.

The composer writes:

**[indent as block quote]**[The] three female voices each embody a different side of a lover addressing her beloved. Each sings a distinct text in a distinct language, and each text is a different manifestation of the idea of a Vessel. Let us imagine that the beloved is from another culture; in an attempt to forge a rapprochement, she adopts her beloved’s language, learns to speak in his tongue. The three poems in English, Hebrew, and Latin complement each other and enlarge each other’s resonances. The setting of each text has its own rhythmic metabolism and intervallic palette. In the well-known Cummings text “i carry your heart (i carry it in)” the poet becomes the physical vessel; the Jehuda Halevi text functions as a vessel itself, rhapsodically enticing the beloved into a garden, and culminating in a “Song of Songs” quote (“my beloved is mine, and I am his”). The Latin text, a fragment from a Catullus poem, boasts about the speed and reliability of a sea vessel—a boat which can be viewed as a symbol of love and prowess as it carries the man from faraway foreign lands back to where his woman dwells…. The result is a polytextual motet—in the spirit of the Renaissance macaronic motets that used simultaneous settings of texts in multiple languages, often to mask hidden meanings.**[end block]**

Agócs balances the strata of meaning and sound in the three texts with an equally layered instrumental ensemble, mostly bright and high in its timbres. The pulses played by piano and harp at the start of the piece set up the expectation of pulse that is then subverted and made richer with layers of different tempos. Agócs relates the pulses, the spaces between the notes, to the stars in the Cummings poem: “and this is the wonder that’s keeping the stars apart.” At significant moments, the audible sense of forward motion may be either suddenly clarified or almost destroyed: a “reset” to clarity follows each of the thorniest rhythmic tangles. Such moments adhere to shifts in perspective within the text(s)—for example at about the halfway point, with the re-entry of the voices after an instrumental episode, with the Cummings text beginning its third stanza at “here is the deepest secret nobody knows.” The singers here begin a clear new phrase precisely together, which in turn allows Agócs to begin, not much later, to fragment the vocal lines and present them as mosaic. This also has the effect of absorbing the voices into the general instrumental texture (corresponding to a shift in perspective in the Hebrew text). The result of these intricate interactions is an organic and fluid continuity.

**Colin McPhee** (1900-64)

Symphony No. 2 (1957)

Colin McPhee’s far-flung musical activities had an extraordinary effect on succeeding generations of composers, despite the fact that his compositional output was very small, and much of that was destroyed or lost. Born in Montreal, he studied composition at the Peabody Conservatory and in Paris, and piano in Toronto. While living in New York City in the 1920s he was a part of the ultra-modern musical circle of Henry Cowell and Lou Harrison, and shared with them an interest in world music. He wrote in a neoclassical vein with a debt to Stravinsky, and even before being exposed to recordings of Balinese gamelan music in the late 1920s was drawn to rhythmic patterns (very much in the air in the 1920s). He wrote two piano concertos with orchestra in the early 1920s, and the brilliant Piano Concerto with wind octet (a double echo of Stravinsky) at the end of the decade.

An interest in Balinese music consumed McPhee in the 1930s; he lived there for seven years, a period documented in his book *A House in Bali*. He eventually wrote and published a musicological/theoretical treatise on Balinese music that is still of interest, although it is now considered somewhat outdated in its Western-centric analyses. His illumination of this music, hitherto anecdotally known in the West, had a powerful impact on the expanding cultural consciousness of musicians in the post-World War II decades.

Following his permanent return to the United States in 1938, McPhee only gradually returned to composing, coming to grips with the need to incorporate his Bali experience with his own musical voice. Much of his activity involved attempts at straight transcription of gamelan music, as in his two-piano *Balinese Ceremonial Music*, which he recorded with Benjamin Britten. A work from the mid-1930s, *Tabuh-tabuhan*, was requested by the Mexican composer and close Aaron Copland colleague Carlos Chávez and given its first performance in Mexico City in 1936; its first U.S. performance in 1953 helped revive McPhee’s reputation as a composer. In 1960 he joined the faculty of the University of California–Los Angeles. He died in Los Angeles in 1964.

McPhee’s Symphony No. 2 is a late work, written in 1957. (The score of the Symphony No. 1, from 1930, was lost, and the piece never performed.) It was commissioned by the Louisville Orchestra during that ensemble’s remarkably fertile commissioning years, and was premiered by that group under Robert Whitney on January 15, 1958. The score is dedicated to Oliver Daniel. McPhee wrote of the three-movement piece:

**[indent as block quote]** It is primarily a lyrical work, based largely on pentatonic scale forms, and making considerable use of Balinese melodic material collected during the years I spent on the island of Bali. The various melodies employed here no longer retain their original Balinese character. They serve primarily as motifs, as points of departure for the creation of a broader and more personal melodic line. The symphony is cyclic in form, consisting of three movements, which might be described as exposition, interlude and transformed restatement. The work is framed by the opening section of the first movement, which not only terminates the first movement, but forms the conclusion to the complete symphony. **[end block]**

McPhee uses his Balinese-derived materials like a musical tourist (I do not mean this as a pejorative), in much the same way as a Romantic-era Russian composer might use Spanish melodies. The pentatonic character of the music and the transitionless sidesteps from one episode to the next, marked by sudden changes in tempo if not in character, reveal the piece as a modern and exotic endeavor nonetheless. (Such shifts might be both Stravinskian and Balienese.) McPhee’s nickname of *Pastoral* for the symphony gives an indication of how the composer himself viewed its bucolic personality. The middle movement, “Elegy,” is a good example of a movement completely consisting of cyclic melodic phrases. The finale, “Molto energico,” taps into a nearly Bartókian energy at certain moments but ultimately relaxes back into the languid, “moderato misterioso” mood of the opening movement.

**Michael Colgrass** (b. 1932)

*Letter from Mozart* (1976)

Michael Colgrass was born in Chicago, but has lived in Toronto since 1974. A performing percussionist, he played in jazz, new-music, and classical contexts and was a sought-after freelancer in the late 1950s and early 60s. He had studied composition as well at the University of Illinois, and counts Lukas Foss, Wallingford Riegger, and Darius Milhaud among his teachers. His first important compositions were percussion-oriented. His orchestral work *As Quiet As*, commissioned by the Fromm Foundation and premiered by Gunther Schuller with the Berkshire Music Center Orchestra at Tanglewood in 1966, was performed and recorded by Erich Leinsdorf and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, helping to establish his full-time career as a composer. Around this same time, study of dance and theater led to a fundamental change in his approach to composition. Already highly concerned with instrumental color, Colgrass began to incorporate aspects of theater, game play, humor, and quotation to his works. In turn, Colgrass has become well-known in the field of neuro-linguistic programming and frequently teaches and runs workshops on performance and creativity. He has published two books: *My Lessons with Kumi*, a kind of novel/handbook for developing visualization skills; and *Adventures of an American Composer*, essentially a series of vignettes from his life in music.

Colgrass won a Pulitzer Prize for his New York Philharmonic-commissioned *Déja vu* for percussion and orchestra in 1978. Recent large-scale works include the double concerto *Crossworlds* for flute, piano, and orchestra (2002), premiered by the Boston Symphony Orchestra; and his concerto *Side by Side*, written for pianist/harpsichordist Joanne Kong (the piece calls for both keyboard instruments) and commissioned by a three-orchestra consortium including BMOP, which gave the U.S. premiere in November 2007.

***Letter from Mozart*** was commissioned by New York’s Musica Aeterna Orchestra, and was premiered that ensemble with Frederic Waldman conducted at Alice Tully Hall in New York on December 1, 1976. The piece is a pastiche somewhat in the vein of Foss’s *Baroque Variations* or Berio/Schubert’s *Rendering*, although here, of course, the melody is not one from music history but rather a new one transmitted through the ether by the spirit of the great Austrian. Colgrass’s treatment of this seed material places it in a context of expanded tonal and timbral resources, but within that larger scope the development of “Mozart’s” melody is essentially along classical lines. The piece can be heard most readily in distinct layers, sometimes proceeding at different rates of speed; the result has an inevitably surreal cast.

The letter from Mozart that was the trigger for Colgrass’s piece is included in the score, and is reprinted below:

Dear Michael,

I would like to be your inspiration for a piece of music. I have been watching the development of music since my time and especially interested to see how an idea of mine would come out when filtered through the mind of a 20th-century composer. Let me give you a typical Austrian-type folk melody (I’ll think up an original one) and you apply to it techniques of contemporary music in any way you like.

Now, you may wonder why I chose you for this task. First, I know I’m your favorite composer and that counts a great deal with me. Second, you are a percussionist, and one of my secret dreams has always been to write something for percussion—but in my day it wasn’t dignified. But perhaps my primary reason for choosing you is that your name would have been Michele Colegrassi, had you been born in Italy like your father. I loved Italy more than any other country.

Getting back to this new piece, may I suggest that it be a work of light quality—not superficial, Mozartian! Many artists today seem to feel their work must “express the age I live in” and cite war, corruption and crime as reason for creating bitter and angry work. My God, if only you could have experienced some of the miseries of the age I lived in—disease, oppression, poverty. And corruption! Life wasn’t all bad, of course, and there was much beauty in my age—but so there is in yours, and why not try to capture that spirit, too.

One last word: don’t quote any of my existing music—just use this melody I send you (Goodness, I’ve written so many pieces I hope I didn’t use this tune and forget having done so!).

Good luck to you, and I hope you have fun with it.

Your friend,

Mozart

**Claude Vivier** (1948-83)

*Orion* (1979)

The remarkable Quebecois composer Claude Vivier developed one of the most original compositional voices of the past fifty years in his brief career. Raised in an adoptive family on the path to a life in the Catholic Marist brotherhood, as a teen he turned from this goal in order to study music. He studied with Gilles Tremblay at the Montreal Conservatory and received a scholarship to study in Europe, where he worked with the electronic music composer Gottfried Michael Koenig in Utrecht and with Karlheinz Stockhausen in Cologne, both significant figures in the European avant-garde. He delved into the concert music fashions of the 1960s, including element of theater, but beginning in the mid-1970s began to become interested in the makeup of the harmonic spectrum. He considered *Chants* for seven women’s voices (1973) his first mature composition.

Vivier’s concentration on timbre, an expansion of the work of Stockhausen and Messiaen and to some degree parallel to that of Gérard Grisey and Tristan Murail, lent his later works a lush, vibrant quality. At the same time, he was preoccupied with the possibilities of melody, as demonstrated in the major orchestral work *Siddhartha*.

Just after writing that piece Vivier made a “journey of self-discovery” to the Middle East and Asia, with stays in Bali, Japan, and Iran. His works of the late 1970s build upon and codify the early experimental ideas as well as the refined melodic and timbral language of *Siddhartha*. He embarked on several large-scale projects, including the opera *Kopernikus* and an unfinished opera on the life of Marco Polo. In 1981 he was named Composer of the Year by the Canadian Music Council. In addition to *Orion*, other late works include *Lonely Child* for soprano and orchestra, *Zipangu* for amplified string ensemble, and *Glaubst du an die Unsterblichkeit der Seele* (“Do You Believe in the Immortality of the Soul”) for voices, synthesizers, and percussion. In March 1983, at age thirty-four, he was murdered in Paris by a young man he met in a bar.

The quality of Vivier’s commissions at the end of the 1970s is testament to the composer’s reputation at that time. ***Orion***, a thirteen-minute work for moderately large orchestra, was commissioned by the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, which premiered it on October 14, 1980, under Charles Dutoit. A portion of Vivier’s original program note is printed in the score:

**[block quote]**A melody on the trumpet, instrument of death in the Middle Ages. Destruction ecstasy-euphoria of egocentric despair. Beauty, pure beauty, sorrowful beauty, cosmetic, lacquered beauty or wild, monstrous and sexual beauty.

*Orion*, named after the constellation, consists of six sections, statement of the melody, first development of the melody about itself, second development of the melody about itself, meditation on the melody, memories of the melody and finally, the melody on two intervals. Eternal recurrence, like history with a capital H, always impatiently awaiting the return of its hallowed reformers and of its dictators.**[end block]**

Vivier’s comments manage to combine a degree of practical information about *Orion*’s form with a poetic gloss on the music. This dichotomy is reflected in the music, which blends melodic phrases within a dizzying and completely unique orchestral sound-world. The episodes the composer delineates above are somewhat evident even on first hearing. The melodic idea is presented by a trumpet with a plunger mute, which radically changes its personality. The first episode undergoes a big, violent climax before the second, a series of surging orchestral chords and overlapping heterophonic phrases, begins its own crescendo. The third section is resonant, making use of metallic percussion, especially gongs, for a brief gamelan-like sound. The third section begins with a short cadenza for gongs. The fourth (“meditation on the melody”) begins with two solo violins, then a duet of violin playing harmonics against gongs. In the fifth section (“memories of the melody”) Vivier has the double basses create a low texture of harmonics to accompany a solo trombone. In this section percussionists are asked to sing into the big tam-tam to create a resonance. The final section is a big, intense, organ-like chorale. Intense, with a capital I.

—Robert Kirzinger

Robert Kirzinger is a composer and member of BMOP’s ScoreBoard. He is a writer, editor, and lecturer on the staff of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.