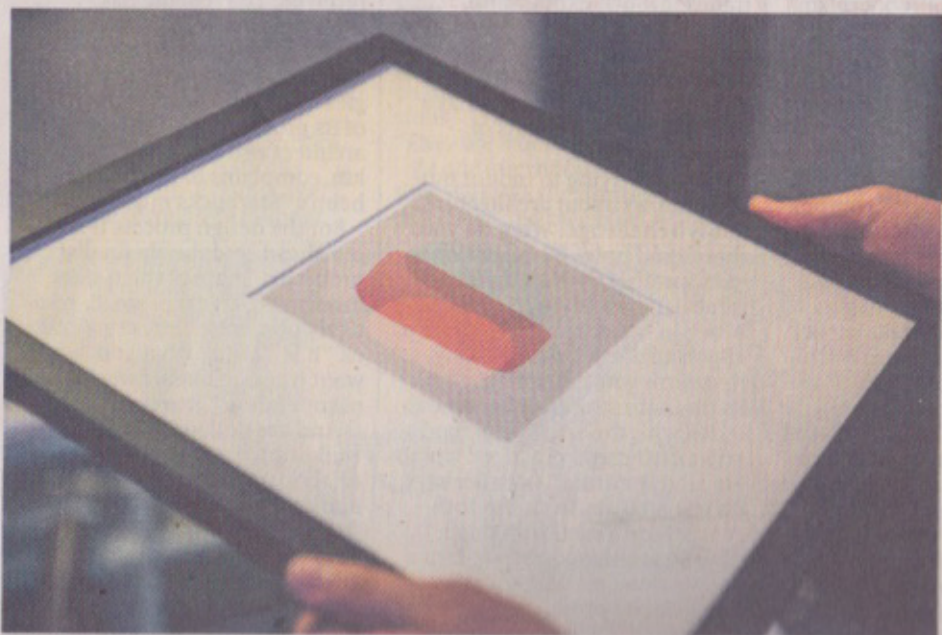


MY VIEW

WHY WE LOVE THE ART WE LOVE

In this series, *The Globe and Mail* partners with award-winning platform *Wondereur* to explore the diversity of contemporary art from a completely new perspective. *The Globe and Mail* and *Wondereur* will approach radically different minds engaged in culture across the country and around the world. Each month, we will ask them to share with us the work of a contemporary Canadian artist who deeply touches them. This month, *Globe Arts* editor **Jared Bland** talks to **Alexander Neef**, the German-born general director of the Canadian Opera Company, about the intersections of art and music, and the work of Neef's chosen artist, Mitchell F. Chan



Was there art in your home while you grew up?

I had a relatively modest upbringing. Before I was born, my father, in his early to mid-20s, had gone through an artistic phase, and he had made a lot of art himself. Paintings and sculptures. By the time I was growing up, I can't remember him doing that any more. So he kind of abandoned it. But the art was still in the house. And then a little later when I would go off to university I would take one of the paintings and have it in my apartment. My father is now retired, but he was a printer. He had an artistic job, he was not only printing books but he was printing exhibition catalogues. And he would be in a fair bit of contact with artists, to get the colours right in those catalogues, and that was really the part that he enjoyed most about his job. But he'd never really pursued the artist's route. But he did all these things, and I think for the longest time I probably didn't know he made them; when I figured that out I was really impressed and proud. So we didn't have any valuable art, but there was my father's art and then my parents would buy, like, little odd paintings. Photographs.

Were you a museum-goer as a child?

We used to go to Italy on vacation, and my mother says that I could not stay out of a single church. The family would stay at a plaza somewhere and say, "You go visit all the churches that you want to visit, and we will be here." I was in awe; I would just take it in. And then later I would start reading up on it. My whole upbringing in art, in music and visual art, everything, was more like an autodidactic approach. I just did what I liked, and read up on what I was more interested in. It was very unstructured, which was wonderful in a way, because I didn't have to follow a curriculum. I had a lot of friends in university who were musicologists and I was always amazed how little they knew. Because they did like a course on the Beethoven string quartets and that's all they did for one semester.

What shape did your autodidacticism take? Did you go to concerts and galleries much while in school?

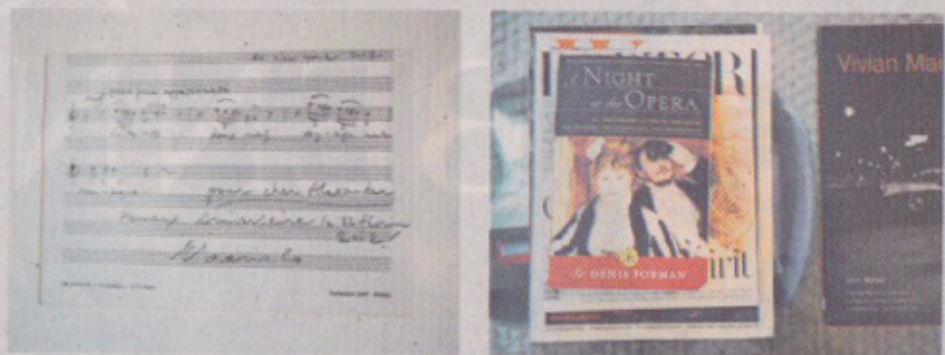
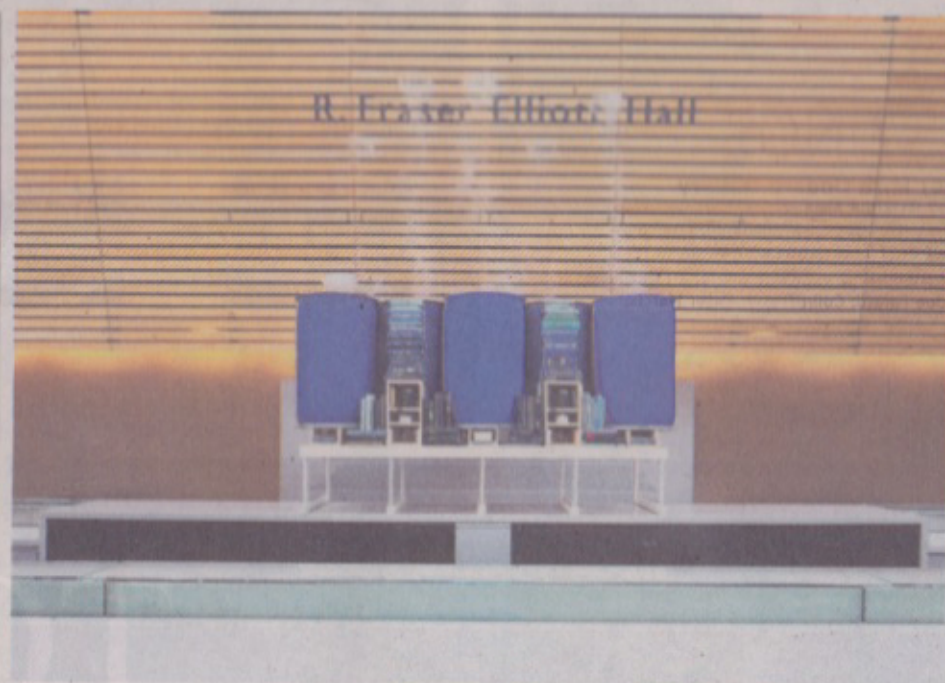
I went to university in a rather small town, one of the old German universities. It was a city of 50,000 people, with like, 25,000, 30,000 students on top. So it was very academic, but it wasn't a high-profile place. There was a very good university, so it was very much about study – there wasn't a lot there to see.

Eventually you moved to Paris, to work at the Paris Opera as casting director. Did you know artists (other than opera artists) while you lived there?

Very, very few.

But you know more of them now, since you've lived in Toronto.

I've been here much longer than I was in Paris. I was in Paris for just a bit over four years. Which is not an incredibly long



Top left: A print by Mitchell Chan; middle: Chan's *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha* installed at the Four Seasons Centre; bottom: scenes from Neef's art-filled home.

time to get roots in. I've been here almost seven years, and that makes a difference. It's something that I wanted, because one of the things that I understood early on about the arts here is that they are very siloed. And I didn't quite understand why artists wouldn't come to the opera. There was no cultural routine of the artist community that would include the opera, I thought. People like Shary Boyle – *Aida* was her first opera, and she's been coming ever since. I find it really important. Obviously I'm fond of my art form. But what I find so interesting is that when you bring artists to it that haven't been exposed, they understand it's the same thing they do, with different means. It's about the same, you know, issues and problems.

Why do people need art in their lives?

I once read a letter from Sigmund Freud to Arthur Schnitzler. And Freud pretty much says, "I've seen your latest play, and I wanted to commend you because essentially, in your way, and with your artistry and your intuitive understanding of the human condition, you're doing exactly what I'm doing scientifically." That's what we need art for, because when you compare it to science, it doesn't require from the audience or the recipient a lot of training. Because it's an emotional approach. I think the way we get to like and understand art always starts with the

emotion, not with the academic training. You know, you like that painting or you don't like it. You like that music or you don't like it. Then hopefully you can support that with education and you can get people to read books about it, and create that desire to know more, know more about the art, and more about themselves. But at the beginning, it can be a completely education-free space. I always tell people, I don't want to be seen as running a museum or a school. We're not an art school. We're a performing-arts organization, and I always tell people that the show doesn't happen if they don't take ownership and bring themselves into it.

Tell me about Mitchell Chan, the artist whose work you've chosen to highlight in this project.

He's a friend of a good friend of mine. I got to know him as an artist from his performance pieces. He still does those – like he puts the singer in front of the microphone and the singer is attached to some strings, and then the microphone goes into the computer, the computer regulates the movement of the strings. That was the first that I saw of his work, and then I just kept going to his gallery openings, and got to know his other work, the paintings etc. What I really like about him is that he's such a boundless creative mind. It's really hard to categorize. I

always criticize him for doing unsellable art. Because all these machines and stuff that he does, it's not what people would usually have in the living room. It's hard to hang, and it needs maintenance. He does machines, and I find them endlessly fascinating. He did a *Don Quixote* installation at the opera house for us, based on a previous project of the same nature.

You commissioned that piece?

Well, he really came up with it all by himself for one of his shows. I think that was still at Angell Gallery. This metal box that he built, that would throw out the book of *Don Quixote* in vapour, letter by letter. When we were programming the opera, which, as you know, was a very romantic, 19th-century affair, Mitch and I started talking about it and something really unexpected happened. The old, the original project was a metal box, which looked a little bit like armour. Mitch said, "Oh, I'm going to have to make it a little bit bigger for the Four Seasons Centre." That's what I had in mind, this metal box, and then he came with these three big blue barrels. Which of course pushed it so much further than what I had expected. I had no idea that he would scale it up so much. And aesthetically, I knew it would be a real challenge for our audience to come in and see the three big blue barrels sitting on the bar, throwing out the book of *Don Quixote*. I called it the "Brain of Cervantes." You know? What I like about this kind of art that Mitch makes, it almost allows you to follow the creative process, even though the mechanisms are usually hidden and you don't really know how it works. But because it's moving, and it's interactive, in some cases, it really allows you to be a part – it's not that you're the spectator in a passive way. And it's narrative, in a way, too, you know, a painting mostly isn't.

Could he work on an opera one day somehow?

You know, maybe. Maybe.

I mean, anyone can do it, right?

No, well, everybody should want to do opera. Because it's such a total art form. It's not about one thing, or one person. It's about a lot of people working together to achieve a common goal. And that, you know, sets the risk of failure pretty high, but it also makes it really successful when that process works.

This interview has been condensed and edited.

WONDEREUR

Documenting the future of the art world, *Wondereur* is a ground-breaking cultural platform capturing the creative process of the most inspiring artists worldwide and providing exclusive access to their work. To learn more about Alexander Neef's contemporary art choice, Mitchell F. Chan, go to wondereur.com.