

Macmillan hits the mark

Within Sight of Shore ranges from rich, gritty, savage to smooth, sweet

By STEPHEN PEDERSEN Arts Reporter

Halifax Chronicle Herald

Tue. Apr 29

Ordinarily a baroque ensemble makes an odd fit with a concert featuring members of the navy's elite Stadacona Band. But the group Tempest, headed by David Greenberg, really is a fit with Scott Macmillan's *Within Sight of Shore*.

It was the Halifax premiere of his blazing new work which depicted the final hours of HMCS Esquimalt — the last Canadian navy ship sunk by a submarine, less than a month before the end of the Second World War.

Tempest opened the concert with three sets of baroque pieces, as well as members of the Stadacona Band along with John Overton on piano, and Steve MacNeil on electric bass. Macmillan played lead electric guitar and conducted.

Macmillan is a prolific composer, but this tightly written, dramatically scored four-movement suite (*The Hit*, *The Wait*, *The Rescue*, *Ashore*) is his most impressive and exciting original work since his 1998 masterpiece, *Mass For The Sea*.

The sonic texture, rich, gritty and savage in the dramatic tone-painting of *The Hit*, ranges all the way to smooth, sweet and lyrical in elegiac and scene-setting passages. The complexity of the writing is set off by Macmillan's superbly insightful mastery into his resources, and his unerring ear for orchestration.

The simple elegance of Macmillan's use of imagery is exemplified in the way he deploys his brass quartet (John Cumin and Tim Elson, trumpets, Julie Cuming, French horn, and Tim Keels, trombone/tuba) to dramatize the surviving sailors of the Esquimalt hailing one another across the water. The quartet surrounds the audience as they call and echo across the hall.

Also striking is the interplay of solo guitar and saxophone to represent an imaginary dialogue between LtCdr Macmillan and the U-boat captain characterized by Brian Coughlan with his overtone-rich alto sax sound.

The musical language is that of a jazz ensemble in which extended harmonies and driving rhythms are mixed down into a riveting score. There is no dead time in this work, not a bar or a section that does not compel attention and reward the ear with sounds it can bite into and chew upon.

Macmillan works with extreme musical cunning in combining rhythm and harmony into a musical documentary. He finds suggestive musical imagery to characterize both the action and his father, already a war hero for his distinguished service in the

Mediterranean, whose dreams are now shattered along with his ship and the loss of 44 of his 71-man crew.

The concert, at the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, began with David Greenberg on violin and Macmillan on acoustic guitar playing a medley of mostly traditional Cape Breton tunes, echoing their long-time collaboration in *Puirt a Baroque*.

Then Greenberg led the Tempest string quintet (Karen Langille, second violin; Kirsty Money, viola; Hilary Brown, cello; Max Kasper, double-bass; with John Overton on harpsichord) in music by Vivaldi, Jean-Fery Rebel, and Henry Purcell. It included Vivaldi's violin concerto *Tempesta di Mare* (Storm at Sea).

Greenberg is unique in his approach to this repertoire. It is sculptural sound rather than stone, its material creating forms and substances that arise and vanish, leaving behind an impression of rhythm, energy and tone shaped into space and contour.

His players work as one with him, inflecting their notes with length and weight of sound to create accents and rhythmic impulses.

So convincing is Greenberg's musical authority you come away thinking you don't want to hear Vivaldi played any other way.