

A photograph of a man with glasses playing a piano in a dark room. The piano keys are illuminated, and the man's face is partially lit. The background is dark, suggesting a dimly lit environment.

Devotions in the Dark

» **Eco-warrior and award-winning composer brings his Earth serenade to St. John's**

By Linda Browne

On a crisp winter's evening in March 2009, Frank Horvat was sitting at a piano, tickling the ivories at a high-rise in Toronto's ritzy financial district as toasts of the town like Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty, Toronto Mayor David Miller and others milled about him, schmoozing and sipping cocktails. The Ottawa-born pianist, composer and teacher was invited to play ambient background music for a party celebrating Earth Hour – the last Saturday of every March when people around the globe turn off all their lights and appliances for one hour to raise awareness about climate change.

As the clock struck 8:30 and the lights throughout the building, and the city, started to flick off one by one, the partygoers gathered to another area to listen to speeches. Frank, meanwhile, continued to play on in the darkness with only the sound of distant voices to keep him company. It was at this moment that the proverbial lightbulb flashed on in his brain and his grand opus was born.

"I was left all alone, just me and the piano in this big, giant room in the dark...and I kept playing and improvising and trying out different musical ideas that were inspired by the dark," he remembers.

"And it just hit me like a bolt of lightning right there and then that music can evoke darkness and it can give you the feeling of what it feels like to be in the dark...from peace and tranquility, relaxation to fear, emptiness, all these different emotions... and I sort of just put that connection together at that moment, and then that's how the piece grew and then I started composing it from that point on."

This improvisation morphed into "Earth Hour," a 60-minute continuous piece of piano music that's contemplative, haunting and beautiful. It is a composition that entralls audiences, including those who will attend Frank's concert at St. Andrews Presbyterian Church ("The Kirk") in St. John's, Newfoundland this month.

"Earth Hour" was also the catalyst for Frank's latest album, *A Little Dark Music*. While none of the songs on the album have lyrics, the music speaks volumes and packs an emotional punch. Consisting of "Earth Hour" and three other pieces of original piano music, the album explores sombre topics such as 9/11 and poverty. However, hopeful rays of light shine throughout the album as well. For instance, the opener, "Working With the Sun," is an up-tempo, gleeful tune inspired by solar

power projects for African schools.

"There's a famous piece of music by Mozart called 'A Little Night Music,' and so this title ('A Little Dark Music') is sort of a play on that. It's a little tongue-in-cheek because the titles and the inspiration behind all of these pieces could be interpreted as being on very sort of dark or sombre themes. And I decided I don't want this to necessarily only be about that. I want the music to shed some optimism about us as a society, how we can progress and move on..."

Of course, the environment takes centre stage on the album, not only in theme but in the physical presentation as well. The CD's cardboard case is made from 100 per cent recycled paper with vegetable-based inks, and 25 per cent of the proceeds go to World Wildlife Fund Canada (WWF-Canada), one of the country's leading conservation organizations.

"That's just one of the many initiatives that was really, really important to me in this process. After creating this music inspired by environmental sustainability, I didn't want to turn out a big, hunkin' plastic container with a lot of shrink-wrapping and that type of thing," Frank says.

Green Keys

For Frank, the marriage between music and environmental activism was very much a natural union. He began studying piano when he was five years old. As he grew older, his concern

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about the environment grew with him.

"After becoming educated through the media and reading books and so forth about all these things for many years, I finally asked myself the question, 'What can I do? I'm just a lowly musician. I just play piano and I compose music and I teach music. What can Mr. Ordinary me do?'" he says.

Now 36, Frank has spent the last few years putting his thoughts and words into action. These days, he uses public transit whenever he can to get to gigs or run errands. He's also an avid recycler and uses eco-friendly cleaning products and compact fluorescent bulbs, and he encourages his students to swap or purchase used instruments in lieu of buying new ones. Even the windows of his Toronto studio – which is powered by Bullfrog Power, a company that provides 100 per cent green electricity – are sealed to conserve energy.

This March during Earth Hour in Toronto, Frank kicked off his Green Keys tour – a free, Canada-wide concert tour sponsored by Bullfrog – to pass on the importance of conservation and practising eco-sustainable habits. The tour concludes this March, and includes stops in more than 50 cities, with at least one concert planned for each province.

Of course, Frank's shows are environmentally friendly as well. Upon entering the venue, the audience won't find printed programs, but a digital screen displaying the concert information. For those who

want to bring Frank's music home with them, in addition to physical CDs, they can also purchase sheet music printed on Forest Stewardship Council Canada (FSC) certified paper, as well as download cards made with recyclable plastic.

The eco-warrior and award-winning composer is now preparing to bring his environmental message and music to St. John's. On November 6, Frank will play a free show at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, a fitting venue for his introspective and inspiring music.

Describing his sound as an "interesting balance between popular and classical styles," Frank himself is inspired by a range of influences, everything from Bach and Beethoven to Bjork and Frank Zappa. While the first part of his show will consist of shorter compositions, the highlight will be the second half, when he will perform "Earth Hour" in complete darkness.

"Even though you're at a public event, it almost becomes a very sort of personal thing for a lot of people who hear that piece because it's so ambient and quite relaxing in nature, and it gives people a chance to clear their minds and perhaps think about their place in the world... and that's basically the goal," Frank says.

"If people come to my concerts and get inspired by what I'm doing and then look at their own skills, whatever they might be, then I know I've succeeded in bringing awareness." ☐

