

Jackson burns up stage as Vonda

By STEPHEN PEDERSEN | Concert Review
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Vonda de Ville in *Temporal Follies* is something of a tour de force. As a vehicle for the flamboyant virtuosity of soprano Janice Jackson it is rich in imaginative possibility, and Jackson makes a full-deal meal of it in the 40-minute opera that opened Wednesday in the Bus Stop Theatre and plays through Sunday at 8 p.m. every night.

Lukas Pearse, independent Halifax composer/ improviser/ double-bassist, has created for Vonda a prodigiously detailed electronic score of samples and digitized sounds that roams the early days of radio and recording to illustrate his opera's thesis: Vonda is an early 20th century music hall singer who is one of the first stage performers to be recorded and who, in the somewhat grandiose terminology of the opera, "loses her soul" to technology.

What we see in *Vonda* is no threat to the Faust legend, our culture's most infamous story of selling one's soul to the devil. If technology, whether analog or digital, is the bad guy, even the devil has lost his soul to it.

It is a glib concept in *Vonda de Ville*. Not something in 2010 that you can get away with in the absence of an agent of evil like, say, Hitler or Stalin or Osama bin Laden. It's hard to see technology in such a role without winding all the way back to the invention of the steam engine and the Luddites who attacked job-sucking machines with crowbars and two-by-fours.

But Pearse's opera does speak to 20th century alienation, a by-product of this increasing mechanization of "reality," although these days we are in less danger of losing our souls to the devil than to the latest Apple iDevice.

Which, perhaps, is Pearse's point.

Apart from begging the question of what exactly he means by the soul, Pearse has created a semi-comical, immensely detailed view of a human being drowning in metastasized technological static. *Temporal Follies* starts innocently enough with sounds of running water, birds, insects and distant thunder that are gradually invaded by Morse Code, a squelched wireless radio sound, the telephone (Hello Central, Get Me Heaven), laugh tracks, a hilariously brash version of Charles K. Hall's *After The Ball* (1891), and a motivic phrase — "You had to be there!" — which is repeated by Jackson in a nasal intonation as sharp as a screwdriver.

Jackson runs through a repertoire of singing voices all born, it seems, from Ethel Merman — brash, penetrating, loud enough to shatter plate glass. A garbled collage of Victrola windup record players and radio shows, a hilarious sequence of catcalls in which Joplin's *Maple Leaf Rag*, jazz, electricity, radio, Muzak, phonographs, and reel-to-reel (real-to-reel?) are accused of killing music.

Jackson's costumes (by Arianne Pollet-Brannon) are variations on a theme of rags, and bustles, and circus clown colours in which headpieces mark the progress of the story. At one point Jackson wears a megaphone looking like a giant Victorian lampshade, which appears to have bitten off her head, and at another a red plastic LP, jauntily tilted on the top of her hair.

The powerful creative team bringing this bizarre work of imagination to the stage includes Marty Burt (director), Leigh Ann Vardy (lighting design), Mary Lou Martin (choreographer) and Bob Chiasson (set design).

As performance art and musical/ electronic wizardry, Temporal Follies is amazingly imaginative — brilliant even. But as art, it does not penetrate further, and, in fact, not anywhere near as far as James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, written in 1941. Not an easy read, but a fabulously rich motherlode of verbal cultural disintegration.

Vonda de Ville in Temporal Follies is Pearse's own night mare vision of music culture's disintegration: Vonda's Wake.