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**CASP – The Pilgrim Soul**

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“The Pilgrim Soul” was the name given to tonight’s collaboration between pianist Emily Hamper and baritone Phillip Addis for Canadian Art Song Project (aka “CASP”).

I had assumed that tonight’s program would be more conventional, less experimental than CASP’s [last outing](#) (“[The Living Spectacle](#)”), which had included choreography and enough dirt onstage to make Pina Bausch proud. Yet tonight we were truly explorers, in a series of works linked around notions of discovery, pilgrimage and romantic yearning. It’s good to know that this sort of thematic exploration via the songs’ content can still feel so fresh, considering how well-worn that pathway is, with a great many songs and cycles about wandering. One of the delightful aspects of CASP so far has been a willingness to ground their explorations of present and future—including original commissions—in the touchstones of the form’s past. And so their November program included new works alongside a cycle by Richard Strauss, while tonight’s wanderings included Mahler’s *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*.



Forgive me for over-simplifying, but the art song sometimes resembles a balancing act, two contending discourses (each of which can be broken down further), namely

- The art of the song understood through song-writers (composers & lyricists)
- The art of the song understood via performance (singers, musicians plus any other collaborative performers added to the mix)

And so while the evening’s program had a unifying theme, giving us several glimpses of the subject through various compositional lenses, we were firmly rooted in the drama of live performance, particularly because both baritone Phillip Addis and pianist Emily Hamper were reported to be unwell. Their discomfort made the concert far more interesting, a display of remarkable skill.

I am conflicted about virtuosity. We watched Addis conserve his resources, intelligently working his way through the scariest moments of the Mahler cycle in a brilliant display of technique; yet he was in a sense held prisoner by these well-known songs in their exacting requirements. On another day without the infernal virus I suspect the songs would have been more transparent, less about the process and more about the content.

For me the most impressive reconciliation between textual challenge and performer's skill came in the second half of the program, as Addis & Hamper gave us a daring reading of Dominick Argento's epic cycle *The Andree Expedition*. As Argento comes up on his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday his unique voice still has lots to show us, in works that are largely tonal, and enormously articulate & intelligible in their vocal settings of (mostly) English texts.

This is one of the most original uses of the song form I've ever encountered. I'm reminded of the early epistolary novels that told their stories incrementally via a series of letters, assembled into big books such as Richardson's *Pamela*. The setting of a series of songs from letters gives the work a kind of documentary realism, as each song can be as static as an opera aria, seizing the gestalt of that instant, and thereby gradually progressing through the big story. We begin with a grand adventure full of joy and pride, a polar balloon exploration, complete with a lover left behind addressed in some of the letters. Gradually the tone shifts from floating aloft in happy grandeur to an increasing sense of plodding, of struggle, leading eventually to stoicism and death. And of course Addis' symptoms worked remarkably well in telling this story, his own gripping struggle that was all too real, but overcome in a very genuine triumph of a well-trained voice. He poured himself into the songs so totally that he seemed genuinely overcome with emotion at the conclusion.

We had a full evening even though the cycle that gave the evening its name –Raminsh's 2013 cycle *The Pilgrim Soul* –was omitted, the artists unable to continue.

Earlier in the concert we heard four songs, beginning with Chester Duncan's mellow "White in the moon the long road lies," and after the Mahler cycle, Larysa Kuzmenko's *In Search of Eldorado*. In most of these songs, Addis seemed more comfortable, partly because they lie lower than the Mahler, with the exception of the concluding Kuzmenko song "A Dream Within A Dream", that ended in heroic fashion.

The 2015-16 CASP season concludes at noon May 5<sup>th</sup> at the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre in the fifth annual "Celebration of Canadian Art Song" as part of the Free Concert Series at the Four Seasons Centre. Admission is free, artists and works TBA.



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