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November 19, 2016 November 19,

Healey Willan and the Art Song: A New CASP project



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Friday, November 18, 2016

7:30pm

The Art Song of Healey Willan

Trinity-St. Paul's Centre for Faith, Justice and the Arts
427 Bloor Street West, Toronto [MAP](#)

This concert will showcase the fruits of our ongoing research activities, as soprano Martha Guth, baritone Peter Barrett, mezzo Allyson McHardy, and pianist Helen Becqué present some of the more than 100 unpublished songs by Healey Willan, with special guest Matthew Whitfield as Organist.

A pre-concert chat will be lead by Dean Burry to discuss the styles and evolution of Willan's song writing staring at 6:30pm. [TICKETS](#)

This concert is co-presented with Syrnix Concerts and supported by the Hal Jackman Foundation, The Jackman Foundation and the Ontario Arts Council.

Since I didn't grow up in the Anglo tradition, the name Healey Willan was completely unknown to me before this concert. I'm told anybody who's ever attended a protestant church service in Toronto—or sung in one—would know of Willan, but they will know him primarily as a composer of music to accompany church functions, and likely think of him as part of the stuffy hardcore British line of the (pre-)Canadian music in Toronto. The Canadian Art Song Project people thought that that judgment is unfair, and opened up and sifted through the vault of Willan's little performed art songs. And they found some gems that absolutely withstand the test of time.

The pre-concert talk given by the composer Dean Burry, with occasional footnotes from a singer's perspective by Lawrence Wiliford, helped situate the man in the history of music and the history of Canada. British (Empire) music at the turn of the twentieth century lagged behind the European Continent in experiment and innovation, and still very much looked back to the nineteenth century. Most frequently performed composers were of Elgar's ilk, and this musical culture spilled over to the ex-colonies. Willan moved to Toronto in 1913, became a big fish in a small pond and continued to compose in the late Romantic tradition.

But within that idiom, he created some mesmerizing art songs. There are composers who function as brilliant systematizers of the established and popular musical idioms of the recent past—Reynaldo Hahn, for instance—and Willan himself would probably belong to that group. Some his early songs, which opened the recital last night, would not stand out if found in a Schubert or a Rachmaninov song book. Others expand on the French *mélodies* vocabulary: those selected last night (“Eve”, “Dreams” and “Dawn”, all from 1912, sung by soprano Martha Guth, mezzo Allyson McHardy and baritone Peter Barrett, with Helen Becqué at the piano) remained unpublished during his lifetime, *hélas*. As did, said Lawrence Wiliford at the pre-talk, the most experimental songs in his portfolio: Willan's playing with the form and potential new languages remained hidden in his unpublished works.

There were a number of folk songs in the program last night, and some are clearly better left aside as artifacts from the past: the *jolly England* “Drake's Drum” and his take on the Scottish folksong don't really add much to the conversation. Dean Burry was right, though: “Lake Isle of Innisfree” sounds spacious and new. Willan's effort with Canadian francophone folk is also interesting: “Rossignol du vert bocage” and “Laquelle marierons-nous”, sung by McHardy with Becqué at the piano, were not in any way predictable.

The concert finished with the 1914-1920 set “War and Innocence” and the only trio of the evening, “A Song of Canada” (1930) which, as ‘patriotic songs’ go, was almost pleasant.

All in all, I'm glad for this discovery. My understanding is that some chosen items of the Willan songbook may end up being recorded on a future CASP CD. For that and other updates on CASP ongoing research, revival and commissioning projects, head [here](http://www.canadianartsongproject.ca/) (<http://www.canadianartsongproject.ca/>).