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Thursday, November 19, 2015

Songs of the Earth: Canadian Art Song Project and The Living Spectacle



Photo by Karolina Kuras.

Art song is a centuries-old musical practice that the Canadian Art Song Project has made avant-garde. **The Living Spectacle**, the first in a series of recitals that the Toronto-based organization is presenting as part of its 2015/16 season, was a startlingly original show whose experiments with the art song genre resulted in a polyphonic experience which engaged all the senses.

The performance that took place within the mirrored walls of downtown Toronto dance studio, The Extension Room, showcased the individual talents of a small group of artists who came together on the night of November 7 with the shared intent of reviving tradition with a jolt of electricity down the spine.

Sopranos Ambur Braid and Carla Huhtanen joined forces with pianist Steven Philcox (co-director with American-born tenor Lawrence Wiliford of Canadian Art Song Project which launched in 2011) and dancer/choreographer Jennifer Nichols who provided not only the evening's venue but its coda full of verve.

Dance is not typically a component of art song which is defined as a vocal recital set to a poem and performed with live piano accompaniment. Its inclusion in this instance demonstrated just how far the Canadian Art Song Project is willing to go in expanding the boundaries of the musical voice. The moving body here articulated an idea of art song as an interdisciplinary form of creative expression as intimate as it is incisive in exploring ideas about the human condition.

Divided into two parts, separated by a cash-bar intermission, the program featured the premiere of Erik Ross's **The Living Spectacle** and a revival of Brian Harman's 2001 work, **Sewing the Earthworm**, both Canadian Art Song Project commissions. Fleshing out the Canadian contributions was a dramatic presentation of contemporary American composer Libby Larsen's **Try Me, Good King**, and the **Die Ophelia Lieder**, dating to 1918, which was composed by Richard Strauss, the granddaddy of German art song. While representing a mix of historic times, nationalities and gender, the seemingly diverse works were united in having death and dying as a shared focus.

Motto

Never trust the artist. Trust the tale. The proper function of the critic is to save the tale from the artist who created it.

D.H. Lawrence in *Studies in Classic American Literature*.

In Memory of David Churchill (1959-2013)



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The ironically named **The Living Spectacle**, the work which lent its name to the evening as a whole, took direction from three passages by Charles Baudelaire, the 19th century French poet who wrote extensively and perceptively on a theme of human decay as witnessed in the dank streets of urban life. The title comes from the Baudelaire poem, "The Evil Monk," included in the **Les Fleurs du mal** anthology and reproduced in full here, in which the poet speaks of redemption as a hopeless cause. Elsewhere, Baudelaire's symbolist poetry, as translated into English decades ago by the South African literary figure Roy Campbell, a gifted poet in his own right, contains (literally) haunting images in which the soul is compared to a tomb and love to a carcass whose form grows fainter with the passage of time.

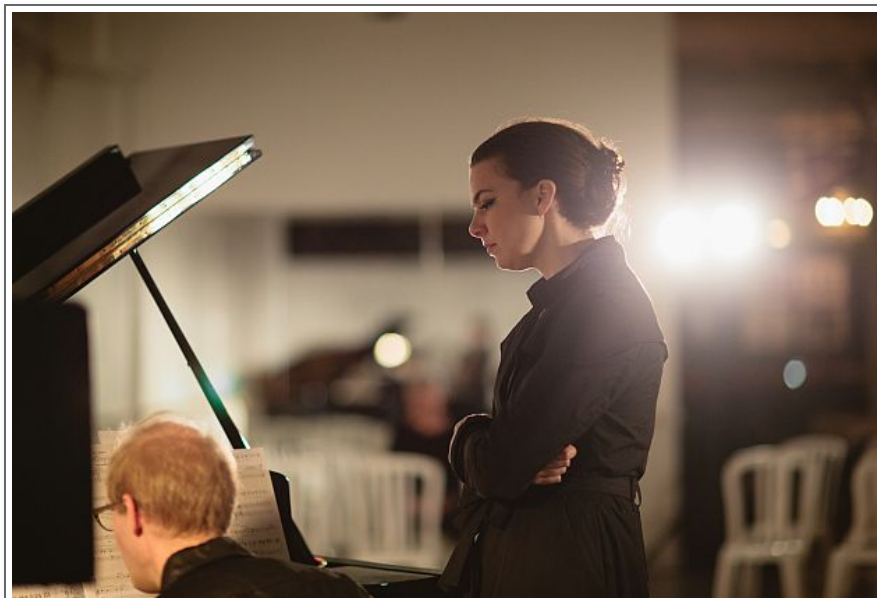


Photo by Karolina Kuras.

Baudelaire's potent musings on life, love and moral indifference loomed large on this occasion thanks to the projection of his words on a rear wall and Braid's concise and carefully considered enunciation of them in song. Each passage was distinct, characterized by its own range of perspectives on matters of sin and spoiled sensuality. Braid sang complex lyrics with sustained notes and dramatic coloratura that brought an appropriately dark timber to her readings of the lines. Philcox's piano accompaniment, by contrast, sounded understated to the point of allowing the emotion enlivening the triad of music, song and poetry to be its own focus. The performance sent shivers through the audience positioned close to the performers on chairs forming a semi-circle around them and brought tears to the eyes of Ross. The composer took his bow looking visibly moved.

A hard act to follow, but Huhtanen, who next entered the intimate performing area, kept all eyes riveted on her performance as the tragic Ophelia. Prefacing her singing with fragments of Shakespeare which she spoke aloud while approaching the spotlight, Huhtanen appeared dressed in a white costume with a long gauzy veil which signalled both her character's innocence and imminent passage into the spirit world. Huhtanen augmented the dramatic with wide-eyed facial expressions that showed her character oscillating between madness and awful clarity about her own deteriorating frame of mind.

Separated from reality emerged as a theme of the evening's second half in which Braid and Huhtanen returned to the stage accompanied by Philcox who both played the piano and plucked its strings in giving musical shape and heft to remaining pieces on the program. Braid again started things off with her performance of a work inspired by the last words of King Henry VIII's rejected wives: Catherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, Anne of Cleves and Catherine Howard.

As funny as she is statuesquely beautiful and poised, Braid played MC in advance of her performance of the Larsen work, regaling the audience with tales concerning her own fascination with England's dysfunctional royal family and the lives of the discarded queens in question. If she played her intro for laughs, she performed the ensuing song cycle with dead seriousness, bursting into impassioned song that captured the pathos and poignancy of the stories they communicated.

Each queen got her due, Braid singing her final words in a flowing, recitative, way that drew out the personality behind the pleas for love and understanding. Larsen, in a past interview, has said that the work poses great challenges for the singer in terms of breath and stamina. The pianist, too, is tasked in the playing of the piece, in particular the staccato Anne of Cleves song where the finger is especially hard to master. But any struggles with this compelling material, if indeed they did exist, were, on this occasion, expertly hidden behind a great surge of artistic expression by both performers. Together Braid and Philcox pulled off a tour de force.

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Photo by Karolina Kuras.

Could it get better? In a word, yes. The final work on the program, Harman's **Sewing the Earthworm**, presented song as a conduit of the soul in which the various fragments of consciousness – memory, feeling, a sense of identity – capture the dissonance arising from a disintegrating mind. Inspired by the real-life story of Wendy O. Williams, leader of 1980s shock-punk band the Plasmatics who died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound in 1998 following two previous suicide attempts, Harman created the song cycle as a dramatization of a private frustration. He made it for Huhtanen and Philcox who in January recorded the album version now available for download on [iTunes](#).

The text of poems by David James Brock captures the essence of a radical punk esthete who becomes an environmentalist and whose control over her own body slips away from her as a result of a neurological disorder that puts fissures in her sanity. Again, this is a true story. The song cycle, however, is hardly literal in telling this tragic tale of a former no-holds-barred stage performer whose death was violent as her high-volume theatrics. Huhtanen, in playing her character, appears unhinged. But her increasing dementia is landlocked in a way that grounds her flights of madness, making them like expressions of a self in search of greater understanding. She is not so much scary as sad, and this humanizes her even as she sings about wanting to stick a needle in her eye.

Mirroring her descent into the irrational is Nichols, identically dressed in black and dancing the essence of Huhtanen's sung words, frustrated grunts and distracted hums. A ballerina who dances with Opera Atelier, Nichols dances here in ankle socks and with the ferocity of a succubus, a female demon who frightens away dreams. Her movements are sharp, spiky and angular. They careen all over the performing space, bouncing off the floor and steaming up the mirrors on which the dancer has scribbled a diatribe in red ink – choreography made word. She interacts with Philcox, buried deep inside the chest of his piano, and mimics his hitting. She physically lifts and carries Huhtanen who treats Nichols not as a doppelganger but more as a physical threat, throwing dirt into her face when the character she is portraying feels trapped by her growing frailty. That dirt is real.

The simple but sensually potent set consists of a bed of peat moss mixed with black soil which both Huhtanen and Nichols have dumped on the floor from a wheel barrow, using their hands to keep the fragrantly smelling earth rightly contained in the elongated shape of a grave mound. Nichols in particular submerges herself in this elemental garden bed, her pale flesh covered over in soil. Huhtanen meanwhile vainly sews together an earth worm whose body she severed when planting her flowers, a case of art looking to maintain its ties with reality as a way of staying relevant. It's an illusion of course. The only worm that exists is in the protagonist's mind and it's eating her alive. She will soon become one with the dirt in which she is kneeling, the art of her song forming both a beginning and an end. A never-ending cycle of voice-inspired music.



– **Deirdre Kelly** is a Toronto-based journalist, author and internationally recognized dance critic. She writes for *Dance Magazine* in New York and the *Dance Gazette* in London, and is a contributor to the **International Dictionary of Ballet** (St. James Press). A staff writer at *The Globe and Mail*, she was her newspaper's award-winning dance critic from 1985 until 2001 before transitioning to the Style section as the fashion reporter. She has also served as the paper's rock critic and as an investigative reporter in the visual arts with a focus on art crime. The best-selling author of **Paris Times Eight** and **Ballerina: Sex, Scandal and Suffering Behind the Symbol of Perfection**, recently re-released in paperback, she writes on dance, theatre, the visual arts and fashion for *Critics At Large*.

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