

## CASP: The Living Spectacle

Posted on [November 8, 2015](#)

(The) Canadian Art Song Project aim to explore the art song in all its manifestations. Tonight CASP took a bold new step in the first in a new series of recitals. “The Living Spectacle”, the first work on tonight’s program, gave its name to the evening, a series of four different works presented by a pianist, two singers and a dancer.

Pianist Steven Philcox –co-artistic director of CASP along with tenor Lawrence Wiliford—played the entire evening both sitting at and reaching into the piano. Sopranos Ambur Braid and Carla Huhtanen each sang two cycles, an intense night of singing for both. And Jennifer Nichols, who is founder of the Extension Room, the site of tonight’s performances, choreographed and danced in the last cycle.

In conversation afterwards, Wiliford explained some of CASP’s ambitions, which were perfectly demonstrated by an evening going far beyond the usual singer + piano. Wiliford was very humble about defining the art song, suggesting that an evening like this one could potentially enlarge the boundaries of what’s possible, but that the definitions & possibilities are open to revision, and changeable from one year to the next.



I feel a bit promiscuous, on a night when four different works seduced me: at least until the next one came along to turn my head anew...

*The Living Spectacle* received its world premiere tonight, Erik Ross’ setting three Roy Campbell translations (or should I call them paraphrases?) from Baudelaire. While I don’t know how Ross works, the composition seemed to be built from the wonderful accompaniment (which isn’t necessarily a bad thing, given that for example Wagner supposedly wrote vocal lines after having sketched the orchestral passages), with the vocals almost like icing on the cake. Each of the three was totally different in mood and with a distinct style, corresponding to three very different texts. In at least one I felt the piano was making something that could be described as pattern music, which makes a lot of sense when we remember that Debussy and Satie were arguably the two godfathers of minimalism, although Ross’s pianism was much richer & more beautiful than my description would suggest. Braid opted for a very dramatic approach to the singing, in a series of very clearly conceived portrayals.

And the next set by Carla Huhtanen took us into a classical realm, both in the first CASP performance that I can recall of a touchstone of vocal repertoire –Richard Strauss—and in the dramatization of a figure from Shakespeare, namely Ophelia in the *Drei Ophelia Lieder* (1918). As she was entering Huhtanen delivered a couple of lines of Shakespeare in English to frame the songs. It seemed particularly apt after [seeing Hamlet](#) just a couple of days ago in a production raising the question of the ages of both Hamlet & Ophelia, to be watching these songs that could be sung by an Ophelia of any age. She seems eternally frozen in that bewildered and broken place poised on the edge of the river before jumping in, a place and a perspective that’s truly ageless.

Huhtanen is one of the regulars with Tapestry, a singer with a gift for singing with great precision that never seems artificial or overly controlled; and when you hear some of the scores she sings, you’d realize what an amazing gift that is. In the Strauss, with its quirky enharmonics and occasionally funny intervals, she always

made it sound natural, even when also sounding mad. She had the guilelessness of a crazy child, heartbreakingly cute even though she's a trainwreck. Philcox had this insane night at the piano but especially in the Strauss, who can be a total killer, remaining playful and delicate throughout.

I've described the first two big pieces as though infatuated, and yet each of the next two were better. Imagine a program with the balls to put the best at the end this way, and you have some idea of what we saw & heard. But maybe I should say "ovaries" rather than "balls" considering that the works could be said to embody feminist principles, particularly the last two items.

The third item on the program, coming before intermission, was Libby Larsen's *Try Me, Good King*. The idea is so juicy, I'm embarrassed that I've never encountered this piece before: because it's so good. Subtitled "Last words of the wives of Henry VIII", each of the five comes from text written by, in succession, Katherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn (whose song indeed cries out "Try Me" over and over), Jane Seymour, Anne of Cleves and Katherine Howard. Before we heard the songs, though, Braid came back to the stage carrying a drink to address us off the cuff before the songs. Is there a smarter singer in this city? Yes we've noticed how attractive she is, how effortless her high coloratura, but let me repeat, I think she's very intelligent. For a few minutes she stood before us riffing on the wives of Henry the VIIIth almost like a stand-up comic, giving us the background while enacting a kind of distancing Brecht would have loved. I couldn't help thinking—as I watched five distinct impersonations, one per song—that at least one motivating reason was that Braid was seeking a bit of distance for fear of becoming too emotional. Even as it was, I was in tears in several places, overwhelmed by the intensity of these songs and her portrayals. I wonder if Larsen has ever heard them done this way, so flamboyantly, yet so distinctly? I would think she'd be blown away, as were we come to think of it. Almost incidentally, there was a high C-sharp, among singing and characterization in a different style for each wife.

After intermission CASP revived a work commissioned in 2011, namely *Sewing the Earthworm* with text by David James Brock, set by Brian Harman. I am reproducing text from the [Canadian Music Centre](#) to describe this work, originally premiered by Huhtanen & Philcox back in 2012 in a concert at the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre

*The character in Sewing the Earthworm is inspired by 1970s punk rock icon Wendy O. Williams. The work dramatizes a private frustration as she looks back on a fragmented life, from the radical punk aesthetic to champion of environmental issues, before her suicide in 1998. This character relates to many other iconic artists: Frida Kahlo, Anaïs Nin and Elizabeth Bishop, for example. Because of these artists' outspokenness, we find their human weaknesses even more intriguing. The setting for the piece is inspired by an anecdote about Albert Einstein: he loved to garden, but couldn't bear the accidental killing of creatures living in the ground. Sewing the Earthworm begins with a lonely woman contemplating her garden as a haven for both herself and the many forms of life she tends to within it. The language of Sewing the Earthworm is that of myth, poetry, and spectacle. A physically deteriorating woman remains thankful that her hands can still control larger clumps of dirt in the maintenance of her private garden. She remembers her former abilities, especially with finer manual endeavours, and laments that her mind has remained long enough to know her body's condition. When she accidentally cuts an earthworm in half while gardening, she decides to attach the pieces with needle and thread to save its life. The seemingly futile attempt is compounded by her desire to prove that physical control has not abandoned her, and the piece makes a rapid shift both musically and textually as a mental struggle takes over.*

Clearly Huhtanen has had additional thoughts about the work, as the 2015 presentation is the most involved piece of theatre yet created by CASP (and I say this after chatting with the composer & librettist, who credit her with the key ideas in the presentation). Joined onstage by dancer Jennifer Nichols. Huhtanen & Nichols are

dressed so alike that one might think that they are aspects of the same person. Huhtanen sings, Nichols dances, although Huhtanen did a bit of dance as well. Both Philcox and Nichols reach into the piano (I'm not sure if Nichols only mimed or genuinely strummed any strings inside the instrument, as Philcox did). Huhtanen empties a wheel-barrow of peat moss onto a portion of the performance space, in front of the mirrored surfaces (the Extension Room is a dance studio, which makes it perfectly natural to have mirrors behind the performance). The dancer & singer both reach into the peat moss, whose gentle aroma permeates the space. I was reminded of some of Pia Bausch's works, whereby the organic materials gently perfume the air, creating an effect of great sensuousness. Watching the two blonde women –virtually twins in their black outfits—probing into the soft living material while Huhtanen sings about earthworms was highly suggestive. We're in the presence of some wonderfully ambiguous dualities, that the earth is rich with life but the place where we put our bodies when they die, that the earth teems with little worms, even as those same worms might infest or devour our remains if we were buried there. At one point Huhtanen has her hands into the dark peat moss while Nichols has her hands into the big dark open piano.





(l-r) David James Brock, Erik Ross, Brian Harman, Steven Philcox, Jennifer Nichols, Ambur Braid and Carla Huhtanen

And I couldn't help noticing that while the performers are so young in this performance that hints at death and decay, most of us in the audience were much older, much closer to the death to which they gently allude.

CASP will be back in February, in a program titled "The Pilgrim Soul" featuring Phillip Addis and pianist Emily Hamper performing songs by Canadians Chester Duncan, Larysa Kuzmenko (*In Search of Eldorado*) and Imant Raminsh (*The Pilgrim Soul*) as well as works by Gustav Mahler (*Songs of a Wayfarer*) and Dominick Argento (*The Andrée Expedition*), at the Enoch Turner Schoolhouse.



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