



Of music and sweet poetry

The Canadian Art Song Project
wants to put a new focus on an
unsung genre of our vocal arts
BY NEIL CRORY

ART SONG (n): *A song written to be sung in recital, typically with piano accompaniment, and often set to a poem* (Oxford Dictionaries)

When the young American tenor Lawrence (Lance) Wiliford came to Canada in 2003 to study for a Master's in Performance (Voice) at the University of Toronto, he was taken aback by the fact that so few singers seemed drawn to or interested in Canadian art song. "In the States," he said, "you worked on American song as much as you did on German *Lied* and French *Chansons*." But here in Canada, Wiliford, who has since taken on Canadian citizenship, found the opposite to be true. Singers programmed Canadian songs primarily when mandated to do so. Instead of being driven by an appreciation for the music and the art form, the programming was driven largely by Canadian-content requirements for competitions, entrance auditions, graduating recitals and the like.

In 2007, after the sudden death of Richard Bradshaw, former General Director of the Canadian Opera Company, Wiliford was instrumental in organizing a commission in his memory. The resulting work was a song cycle, *The Four Seasons* (2008), by Canadian composer Derek Holman. When Wiliford and pianist Liz Upchurch premiered this new cycle, the audience response, he says, "was so positive and so overwhelming that, quite frankly, I was just astounded. People said they had never heard anything contemporary like this





before. That is, new songs, songs written in our time, songs that moved them. And I couldn't understand how that could possibly be the case, especially when there are so many fine composers and singers in this country."

Inspired by this experience, he began to talk with colleagues, mentors, friends and musicians to find out more about Canadian song, but what he discovered shocked him even further. "The overwhelming response was either that they didn't have any interest in Canadian song at all or that they knew a little bit about it, but didn't particularly want to know more."

It was at this point that Wiliford started talking seriously with pianist Steven Philcox, who teaches collaborative piano on the Faculty of Music at the University of Toronto, sharing his feelings about Canadian art song and his ideas about founding an organization to help spark renewed interest in existing repertoire and commission new works. "I was one of the audience members at the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre [of the COC's Four Seasons Centre] in the Spring of 2009, when Holman's cycle was premiered," says Philcox. "It had a profound impact on me. So when Lance approached me about joining him as co-Artistic Director of an organization to promote Canadian art song, it was really a no brainer. To have both sides of the coin represented—a singer and a pianist—made ideal sense."

And so the Canadian Art Song Project (CASP) came into being. "We started in March of 2012 with a Brian Harman song cycle, *Sewing the Earthworm*. The work was written for soprano Carla Huhtanen and myself. It was our first commission, and we recorded it last December as our second release on the CentreDiscs label." (CASP'S first release, *Ash Roses: Music of Derek Holman*, which includes *The Four Seasons* cycle, was released to critical acclaim on CentreDiscs last year.)

"Our next commissioned work is by

Marjan Mozetich, one of Canada's great composers, who will be writing for piano and voice for the very first time," Philcox continues. "This is a major coup for us. I can mention the name 'Marjan Mozetich' to a lot of singers, and they have absolutely no idea who I am talking about. Many other very fine composers out there are in the same predicament."

In part, however, that may be because composers are not immediately comfortable with the idea of art song. "In talking with some," says Philcox, "we occasionally sensed discomfort with the prospect of writing for an instrument—the piano—that they, perhaps, do not play. Can they be 'pianistic' in writing for keyboard? Plus piano and voice can be so exposed, so revealing. There are only so many things that you can do with these instruments to change colours."

While there has been a long tradition of choral writing and performance in Canada, art song with piano accompaniment seems more sporadic. After World War II, says Wiliford, many composers used the voice increasingly as a "mechanical" instrument, constantly striving to



Creators of *Sewing the Earthworm*, CASP's first commission: (from left) pianist Steven Philcox, composer Brian Harman, soprano Carla Huhtanen and writer David James Brock

push the boundaries or physical limitations of what that instrument could do. And while some composers continued to write art song (including Srul Irving Glick, Oskar Morawetz, Harry Somers, John Beckwith and Walter Buczynski, among others), the form was perhaps considered too mainstream for the driving force of the Canadian avant-garde and

the songs did not attain the visibility and popularity that was their due. About the only real impetus to develop Canadian art song was our national broadcaster. "Fortunately," says Wiliford, "the CBC was extremely active in its commissioning of new works of all kinds over the last 60 years or so. It was a major force in making sure that there was Canadian content for the likes of Maureen Forrester, Jon Vickers, James Milligan and other important figures in Canadian vocal history who sang internationally."

But the CBC is no longer actively commissioning, so the task of finding funding for new works is ever more onerous. Part of the challenge of establishing CASP for the principals is to find money to underwrite the projects it has in mind. "So far," says Wiliford, "we have had support from councils and other institutions, including the Toronto Arts Council, Ontario Arts Council, Canada Council, SOCAN and Institute for Canadian Music. But often, it is the big orchestral works that get the most funding. So we have to get the message out: 'Let's find money for an intimate and special genre that needs and deserves our attention and care.'

"We also appeal to our many private donors, who give us constant support. What is interesting about song is that it is modest in scope. All you need is a singer and a piano. As a result, we can completely fund a project within the realm of a few thousand dollars. And with that, we can create something entirely new. We have a new cycle written for mezzo Allyson McHardy and pianist Adam Sherkin premiering in January 2015, for example, that is generously supported by one of our supporters, as was Norbert Palej's cycle, *Cloud Light*."

From the beginning, CASP wanted the focus to be strictly on the commissioned work. "We didn't set out with the idea of becoming concert presenters," says Wiliford. "We saw ourselves more as facilitators for the creation of new music than as impresarios. So it was crucial that we find a sympathetic presenter and an intimate performance space." Fortunately,



CASP co-Founding Artistic Directors Steven Philcox and Lawrence Wiliford

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CASP COMMISSIONING PROGRAM

2012

Sewing the Earthworm

COMPOSER/TEXT:

Brian Harman/David James Brock

PREMIERE PERFORMERS:

Carla Huhtanen (sop)/Steven Philcox

2013

Cloud Light

C/T: Norbert Palej/Jan Zwicky

PP: Lawrence Wiliford (ten)/

Steven Philcox

*Extreme Positions
and Birefringence*

C/T: Brian Current/

bp Nichol and Christian Bök

PP: Simone Osborne (sop)/Anne

Larlee

2014

Moths

C/T: James Rolfe/André Alexis

PP: Brett Polegato (bar)/Steven Philcox

2015

TBA

C/T: Peter Tiefenbach/James Ostime

PP: Geoffrey Sirett (bar)/

Peter Tiefenbach

Enchantments of Gwendolyn

C/T: Marjan Mozetich/Gwendolyn

McEwen

PP: Allyson McHardy (mezzo)/

Adam Shirken

The Living Spectacle

C/T: Erik Ross/Charles Baudelaire

(trans. Roy Campbell)

PP: Ambur Braid (sop)/Steven Philcox

2017

TBA

C/T: Ana Sokolović/TBA

PP: Vocal Quartet (SATB)/TBA

competition for young composers. With so much planned, perhaps the prospects for Canadian art song are most aptly capped in some lines by Swinburne from Holman’s *The Four Seasons*, the cycle that set things in motion:

And in green underwood and cover

Blossom by blossom the spring begins. **OC**

CASP was able from the outset to develop a close relationship with the COC and its popular series of free noon-hour concerts in the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre. They have mounted one recital per year as part of that series, though now CASP’s co-Artistic Directors are thinking of expanding their concert season to feature two or three concerts annually.

Looking ahead, one of CASP’s most exciting projects involves the legacy of Healey Willan, one of Canada’s most outstanding composers of sacred choral and organ music—repertoire that has been performed and recorded internationally. Of his 800 works, however, many were songs with piano accompaniment. Given his stature, Wiliford was surprised to discover when he set out to explore Willan’s works that none of the songs were in print. “That’s right, you can’t buy them. You can’t find them anywhere, except for a few in libraries. Finally, I got a list of what the Healey Willan estate had placed into the National Archives in Ottawa. I discovered there are about 100 songs in

manuscript that have never been published before. So I have since acquired all of the manuscripts, and we’re currently having them transcribed and edited. Eventually, they will be made available to everybody. We’ve also given a lot of the Willan scores to baritone Gerald Finley, who is interested in possibly doing a recording.”

With the almost passionate commitment of its principals, CASP looks set to become a critical focus for Canadian art song past and present. It recently announced the commissioning of Montreal-based Ana Sokolović, composer of the highly acclaimed opera, *Svadba—Wedding for a capella* female ensemble, to writing a piece to celebrate Canada’s sesquicentennial in 2017. This new work will feature a vocal quartet rather than solo voice, using members of the COC’s Ensemble Studio of young artists. Apart from commissioning, performing and recording new works, CASP is also exploring other intriguing possibilities—the most exciting of which, perhaps, is the possible launch of an art song