

**Ash Roses.** Music of Derek Holman. Toronto, ON: Centrediscs CMCCD 19914, 2014. 1 compact disc (59:03). Contents: *The Four Seasons* (20:55) (Lawrence Wiliford, tenor; Liz Upchurch, piano) – *Ash Roses* (22:37) (Mireille Asselin, soprano; Liz Upchurch, piano) – *Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal* (3:45) (Lawrence Wiliford, tenor; Mireille Asselin, soprano; Liz Upchurch, piano) – *Three Songs for High Voice and Harp* (7:58) (Lawrence Wiliford, tenor; Sanya Eng, harp).

*Ash Roses* is the first commercial CD release from the Canadian Art Song Project. The Project was founded in 2011 by tenor Lawrence Wiliford and pianist Steven Philcox to commission new works and celebrate the art of Canadian composers, poets, singers, and collaborative pianists. This premiere CD features the art songs of Derek Holman.

I have always admired the choral works of this British-born (1931) Canadian composer, who is also a highly respected choral conductor and organist. I was excited to hear these art song compositions since previously I was only familiar with his choral music.

Tenor Lawrence Wiliford and pianist Liz Upchurch perform the first cycle, *The Four Seasons* (2009). Commissioned by the [Canadian Opera Company](#) in memory of its director, Richard Bradshaw, the cycle was premiered by Wiliford and Upchurch in 2009 at the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre in Toronto. Holman chose the words of English poets in this setting of eight songs. The poems are ordered by season, beginning with winter and ending with autumn. Holman is quoted in the program notes as saying the cycle was “an echo of Richard’s strength and optimism: ‘If winter comes, can spring be far behind?’”

The clear and direct harmonic language of Gerald Finzi and Ralph Vaughan Williams is apparent in the immediacy, spontaneity and tonal imagination of these songs. Wiliford’s singing is expressive, musical, and dramatically exciting, with an exquisite dedication to the text. Upchurch demonstrates her mastery of the piano, sophisticated collaborative skills, and sensitivity to color, line and meaning in the music. Her artistry and impeccable technique shine particularly in “Towering Camelot” and “The West Wind.” Another highlight of the cycle is “Summer Thirst.” The performers capture the charm and playfulness of the text with aplomb. Wiliford’s singing demonstrates solid technical prowess and potent expressive gifts.

*Ash Roses* (1994), the album’s title, is a cycle of six songs. Coloratura soprano Mireille Asselin performs these beautiful songs with Liz Upchurch again at the piano. Holman composed the cycle for soprano Karina Gauvin who, with pianist Michael McMahon, premiered it at the University of Toronto in 1995. The poet of these songs, Tricia Postle, was a University of Toronto student at the time Holman was composing another song cycle for Gauvin. Postle wrote these lyrics specifically for *Ash Roses*, and they are rich and full of possibilities. Holman brilliantly delivers a score with a wide palate of colour and musical expression in these highly charged songs. Asselin, who possesses a gorgeous, sparkling, soaring voice, offers a tour de

force performance with her dazzling coloratura and impeccable legato. “Maze” is an alluring, sensual song about finding one’s beloved. Especially memorable is “Sweet Breath at Night” for its manic, playful text, and fiery, acrobatic writing, that is spectacularly sung by Asselin. Another highlight is “Arabesque.” Asselin has exquisite control of her instrument displaying stunning pianissimo singing in high tessituras. Her voice is brilliantly hued and gains luminosity as it ascends into its upper register. I absolutely loved her singing of this cycle; her coloratura is impeccably voiced and fluid, and her intonation flawless. Beyond that, she sings every one of these songs with a rapturous joy that is utterly irresistible. Upchurch also deserves credit for the recording’s outstanding musicality. Specifically, her playing draws in the listener with its simplicity, well-defined clarity, energy when needed, and subtle rhythmic elasticity, all of which serve to illuminate the songs.

*Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal* (2007) is an alluring duet for tenor and soprano. Holman cleverly sets the Tennyson poetry as if the singers are having a dialogue sharing and alternating lines of text. The lush, ravishing harmonies are reminiscent of Richard Strauss’s lieder. Upchurch provides responsive, clear voicing in the keyboard textures. The duet of Asselin and Wiliford is an absolute gem.

The final piece of the album is *Three Songs for High Voice and Harp* (2011). Here, harpist Sanya Eng is the collaborative performer with Wiliford, both of whom also gave the work’s premiere at Walter Hall, University of Toronto, in 2011. Wiliford’s superb diction, youthful, lyrical sound, and storytelling ability are showcased in the verses of Thomas Hardy, E.H. Thomas and A.E. Housman. Eng provides a dreamy, rhapsodic accompaniment; the timbre of the harp adds a starkly refreshing air to the words and melodies. Holman dedicated the final song, “Loveliest of Trees,” to his wife Margaret. The unexpected harmonies and the moving performance by Wiliford make it my favourite of the set.

The album comes with a generous booklet in English and French that includes the poetry, liner notes by Lawrence Wiliford and Steven Philcox on Derek Holman and the contemporary Canadian art song, and the inspiration and creative process of the Canadian Art Song Project. Commendations belong to Wiliford and Philcox, both of whom are largely responsible for putting this first release together. I eagerly look forward to the Project’s next CD!

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