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**Contes pour enfants pas sages**

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Christopher Butterfield's *Contes pour enfants pas sages* premiered in Toronto recently adapting Jacques Prévert's 1947 collection of stories of the same name. It's a cycle adapted as musical theatre in a collaboration between Continuum Music, Choir 21 led by David Fallis, and a few distinguished soloists. In places it resembles a song cycle, although the forces are way too elaborate for the usual understanding of that form. But then again Butterfield wrote in a very pragmatic mix of styles, never surrendering to the latent humour of the texts. The score, like the performers, is completely dead-pan; like a good straight-man, it refuses to mug or wink at its audience, never pandering after laughs. And so I stifled most of mine, seeking to respect the ambiguities of the text.



Composer Christopher Butterfield (photo: Ken Straiton)

I may be under the spell of the French language –a tradition reminding me of those six composers *sans pathos* like Milhaud, Poulenc, and Honegger –but the dominant impression was Butterfield's deft avoidance of sentimentality. The music's surface shimmered inscrutably, challenging one to pay attention to the subtleties of the text & the performances. Butterfield's adaptation was decidedly sophisticated, and while invoking the child in all of us, not really for children: at least not young ones. A casual parent wandering in might have wanted to cover their babes' eyes, yet I think on the whole that Butterfield's & Prévert's hearts are in the right places, in that curiously misanthropic place of a Jonathan Swift or a *Saint Exupéry*, siding with animals while embarrassed at the behaviour of our fellow humans. These are fashioned as cautionary tales, mostly too silly to be genuinely scary, and as I mentioned, avoiding excessive pathos. Animals and humans meet, speak to one another in the whimsical space of children's literature, and as often as not die or kill one another.

Butterfield walks in the footsteps of giants. My first impression may seem narrow-minded, but I thought of smaller-scale works such as Ravel's *Mother Goose* or Debussy's *Children's Corner Suite*, thinking that the large-scale forces assembled could overwhelm the children's stories. But it's a new century. Butterfield isn't cowed by influence nor what's come before, only seeking to follow his own voice, occasionally tonal, sometimes in other mixes of tonalities that eluded my easy grasp (or descriptive classification). Even in this small space at 918 Bathurst, the sounds and the presence of all the performers was understated, I suspect largely due to David Fallis' steadying presence at the helm of Choir 21. In truth there seemed to be a wonderfully collaborative spirit at work, as several different artists conducted at different times, and so I don't really know where to give credit for the subtlety & balance, except perhaps with Butterfield himself.

And speaking of giant footsteps, Butterfield's program note has some remarkable echoes. Having spoken of his preference for setting nonsense poetry or experimental writing to music, he went on to say ...

*“I feel the same way about setting a foreign language. I will never completely understand French cadence, let alone nuance, but perhaps my lack of fluency allows me to create an unlikely set of associations, in which the music will never exactly illustrate the text, and so allow for a more open experience”*

Surely this respectful approach to the text frees the listener to make their own sense of the performances. I’m reminded of composers such as Satie & Glass, who in various ways accompany text with cool surfaces, leaving the interpretation to the audience: which isn’t to say that Butterfield is a minimalist. That “open experience” he spoke of is something less determined than the more Wagnerian approach we sometimes find in late romantic music, reminding me of the “open” of Eco’s [The Open Work](#). I’m much happier with Butterfield’s coolness, an openness conducive to deep irony & ambiguity, and a very inclusive and accessible approach.

Butterfield was ably abetted by such talented performers as cellist Paul Widner—achingly beautiful last week in his cello continuo role, from the Four Seasons Centre orchestra pit in *Semele*—in a very different kind of repertoire tonight. Another Butterfield, namely Christopher’s brother Benjamin sparkled in several of the songs, wonderfully tuneful and especially authoritative in keeping a blank expression on his usually smiley face (which I saw grinning before the show as we chuckled at the spell-check inspired signage outside, advertising “*Contest pour...*” rather than “*Contes pour...*” in the work’s title). The talented performers of Continuum Contemporary Music (Anne Thompson, Max Christie, Carol Lynn Fujino, Paurent Philippe, Ryan Scott as well as Widner) jumped into the fray several times, not just as instrumentalists, but in various dramatic roles that added additional layers to Butterfield’s whimsical texture.

I’d like to hear it again.

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