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## Toronto ensemble brings Jacques Prévert's fabled beasts back to life

By ROBERT EVERETT-GREEN  
From Monday's Globe and Mail

*With music by Victoria composer Christopher Butterfield and projected images by painter Sandra Meigs, Toronto's Continuum Contemporary Music resurrects 1947's Contes pour enfants pas sages*

Like Maurice Sendak and Roald Dahl, Jacques Prévert didn't believe that stories for children should smooth away the world's sharp edges. Prévert, a poet best known in the English-speaking world as a screenwriter (especially for Marcel Carné's 1945 classic *Les Enfants du Paradis*), filled his eight *Contes pour enfants pas sages* with animals that are more humane than the people who oppress them.

On Tuesday, Prévert's beasts will sing their grievances in a new setting of the 1947 tales - which translate roughly as *Fables for Naughty Children* - with music by Victoria composer Christopher Butterfield and projected images by painter Sandra Meigs, in a repeat performance by Toronto's Continuum Contemporary Music. (The first show was Sunday.)

This is the second time in just over a year that Canadian artists have put the fables on stage: Choreographers Pierre-Paul Savoie and Marie-Josée Chartier presented a dance version at Montreal's Place des Arts in 2011, with music by Benoît Côté.

Butterfield was introduced to the stories almost 20 years ago by Finnish cellist Anssi Karttunen, when both men were looking for saccharine-free books for their small children. The composer wrote a solo cello setting, with narration, of Prévert's relatively happy tale of a philosophical elephant seal, who reasons that he's better off than a king.

"It's an identifiable world," Butterfield says of Prévert's narrative situations, "but where it goes is anybody's guess." A caged lion puzzles over his keepers' harsh treatment, and eats his tamer "more to restore order than from hunger," Prévert writes. Horses decide they've had enough "gifts" from humanity (including whips, spurs and forced labour), and secretly plot a rebellion. An ostrich, tired of being stripped of eggs and feathers, corners a neglected boy and flies away with him.

Prévert's early career as a surrealist (alongside André Breton and Marcel Duchamp) shows through in an opera-style tale of giraffes who are slaughtered in the colonies, but who also stroll Parisian streets like pretty girls. The violence of empire flickers throughout the fables, which seem at times like allegories for the postwar unravelling of French rule in North Africa.

Some of Prévert's poems became hit songs covered by Edith Piaf, Yves Montand and Iggy Pop, all of whom recorded his *Les feuilles mortes* (*Autumn Leaves*, music by Joseph Kosma). The fables also feature song-like verbal

patterning, though Butterfield took their wayward narratives and absurdist logic as his cue to write music that follows its own impulses.

"They let me sail from one thing into the next," he says, referring especially to the vocal melody, which doesn't repeat much. My audio preview of a few pieces revealed a lean and brilliant instrumental score, with bright overlapping patterns, some quite hummable tunes, and nimble alternations between the delicate and the grotesque.

"I wanted to make playful musical characterizations that wouldn't put children off," Butterfield says, "though I can't say I was thinking: 'What would little Freddy like to hear now?'" He'll get little Freddy's opinion of the tales during a children's matinee today. His own kids are college-aged now, but the Continuum shows will be family affairs in another way: The soloists are tenor Benjamin Butterfield (the composer's brother) and Benjamin's wife, soprano Anne Grimm. Choreographer Laurence Lemieux will help animate the stage, which will be shared by Continuum's six-piece ensemble and Choir 21, led by David Fallis.

Continuum co-director Jennifer Waring says she plans to shop the piece in Canada and Europe. There are plenty of naughty children in both places, though like the stories of Dahl and Sendak, Prévert's fables speak to adults too.

*Continuum presents Contes pour enfants pas sage: 8 cautionary entertainments, at 918 Bathurst Centre in Toronto, May 29.*

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