

# The Song Scholarship and Performance Program at the Vancouver International Song Institute

## The Dynamic Engagement of Scholarship and Performance

*The Vancouver International Song Institute (VISI), a multifaceted and interdisciplinary art song festival held at the University of British Columbia's School of Music each June, inaugurated its Song Scholarship and Performance program (SSP) in 2010. Since then, SSP has flourished as a model of productive interaction between scholars and performers, bringing together graduate students and professionals in musicology, music theory, and performance for an intensive and illuminating exploration of art song. AMS Newsletter editor Andrew H. Weaver recently sat down with SSP participants to learn more about the program. Contributing to the following discussion are Rena Sharon (University of British Columbia), founder and artistic director of VISI; Benjamin Binder (Duquesne University), director and co-founder of SSP; Susan Youens (University of Notre Dame), SSP faculty member in 2012 and 2013; and Kenneth Stilwell (Catholic University of America), a musicology graduate student who has attended SSP since the program's inception.*

**Weaver:** How did SSP get started?

**Sharon:** The creation of the VISI project in which SSP is situated followed fifteen years of my personal observation of the art song's erosion as a performance modality. Many concert presenters across North America assert that programming vocal recitals results in low audience turnout; some have even predicted the disappearance of the art song recital from the concert stage within the next twenty years. The impetus to add a new entity to the existing network of summer art song institutes, therefore, was to provide an experiential laboratory for research, study, and creative innovation to catalyze proactive solutions and new models for training, pedagogy, and performance. Placing the searchlight upon my own

processes as a collaborative pianist I began by asking: how does art song differ from solo and chamber music in its preparatory interpretive exigencies? Is art song a medium apart, and if so, what special actions are needed by performers during the creative process? My answers identified a spectrum of fascinating components, which VISI addresses through a continuum of integrated programs. Of these, SSP represents the crucial foundational base from which all else emerges. Its launch was sparked by one of the countless serendipities that has graced VISI's renegade penchant for breaching barriers.

When Benjamin Binder spoke at the international "Phenomenon of Singing" conference in St. John's, Newfoundland in 2009, his presentation blended substantive depth with warm humanity and delightful humor. As both scholar and collaborative pianist, and as a sensitive speaker and listener, he was perfectly poised to lead a pilot exploration joining the two domains of SSP. He is joined by a distinguished cohort who have contributed richly to the program's creation and development: Deborah Stein, Cameron Stowe, and Harald and Sharon Krebs. Susan Youens attended VISI before SSP was launched (2007–8) and returned in 2012 to our great joy. Richard Kramer, Kristina Muxfeldt, and Michael Musgrave have also been honored participants. SSP's home is the UBC School of Music, directed by Richard Kurth. The Dean's Office of the Faculty of Arts has assisted its growth, as has the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies and Green College.

**Weaver:** What are the main objectives of SSP?

**Sharon:** Because art song is an extraordinary symbiosis of poetry fused to music, its study is intrinsically multidisciplinary. To

bring its hybrid language into rich performative dimensionality, artists should be deeply apprised of the poetic content and the analytical relationship between word and sound. These represent fields of scholarship—poetry, translation, cultural history, philosophy, comparative literature, psychology, music history and analysis—that lie beyond the scope of general performance training yet are essential to performers' interpretative prowess. Conversely, scholars may not realize the extent of the need for an expanded library of performer-oriented scholarly work, and the transformative beneficial impact it can generate. To galvanize new ways of thinking about the purposeful interaction of scholarship and performance, I envisioned SSP as a forum through which both groups might experience the sort of unanticipated and breathtaking insights that often emerge through collaboration.

**Binder:** I would add that all too often performers and scholars are afraid or unwilling to enter into substantive discussion with one another across the disciplinary divide. With SSP we have created an open and welcoming environment for the in-depth exploration of song from as many disciplinary perspectives as we can muster. It's a two-week summer camp for scholars and performers, but at the highest level of rigor and intensity. The program aims to make performers aware of the scholarly resources available to them as they pursue creative interpretation of a song. Meanwhile, scholars discover what is really involved in bringing a song to life in performance. We aim to break down inhibitions, open a productive dialogue, and dissolve the boundaries between scholars and performers. It's really a false choice we face between the two identities; at the end of the day, we are all musicians, and the activity that unites us is interpretation.

**Weaver:** How do scholars and performers interact in SSP? What kinds of activities take place on a typical day?

**Binder:** In the morning we attend lectures and master classes. Often these are linked: a musicologist or theorist will explore some aspect of Schubert, for



Rena Sharon



Benjamin Binder



Kenneth Stilwell

example, and then one of VISI's performance faculty will give a master class on related Schubert songs. The afternoon is devoted to interactive seminars led by SSP faculty. One of the innovative group activities we've developed is an open discussion format that includes performance. A student duo performs a song, which provokes ideas about the poem and its setting. Everyone is invited to contribute to the conversation from their own angle and ask questions of the collective wisdom. If we want to see how our ideas might impact the performance of a song, we ask the students to try them out. We also find that having live performers available changes the kind of things we end up saying about the song as scholars.

**Youens:** For me, a typical day at VISI might begin either with breakfast at one of UBC's colleges, set in visually magnificent surroundings, or coffee and croissants at a Vancouver coffee shop with a graduate student whose work we discuss over cappuccino—a fantastic way to meet the next generation of scholars! I might then attend a lecture on a particular analytical topic by the likes of Harald Krebs or Deborah Stein, followed by an illuminating master class led by Cameron Stowe, a lunch filled with still more lively discussion of the participants' projects, a lecture on Brahms's songs by Michael Musgrave, and extraordinary late afternoon performances in which the entire group offers comments and suggestions. After dinner comes a performance or perhaps a lecture on historical singing styles preserved on old recordings. I go home both exhausted and exhilarated after so much musical stimulation at such a high level.

**Stilwell:** For the student scholars and performers, the focal point of the experience is the final lecture-recital, in which we present the musicological and theoretical work we have honed over the course of the program. As we develop introductory talks for the lecture-recital, we also meet one-on-one with SSP faculty. These meetings are designed to further enhance the scholarly work we will present, and it also gives us a wonderful opportunity to discuss the work we do outside of VISI with an outstanding collection of scholars.

**Binder:** Since not all musicology and theory students have experience interacting with general audiences, we work with them on the final lecture-recital to make sure that the presentation will be accessible and engaging. We even set them up with a voice coach to work on public speaking skills. I strongly believe that any musical idea of value can and should be made comprehensible to anyone, provided they are motivated to receive it. This belief informs all the activities of SSP.

**Weaver:** *What can students (both performers and scholars) and faculty expect to get out of participation in SSP?*



SSP performance director Cameron Stowe leads a master class with students Rachel Fenlon, soprano, and Loretta Terrigno, musicologist and pianist.

**Binder:** SSP is an extraordinarily casual environment, despite the high caliber of the discourse. The program gives students a chance to have meaningful, prolonged exchanges with professionals in their field and to observe creative and intellectual processes at close range. For faculty, SSP provides an opportunity to recharge one's batteries, reconnect with the repertoire, and remind oneself of what makes song such a fascinating and vital object of study.

**Youens:** As a faculty member, I derive four-fold stimulus from SSP: 1) I hear about the latest research by both young and senior scholars; 2) I get to discuss my own projects

with experts and inevitably have my ideas changed for the better; 3) I hear performers shape and refine their interpretations; and 4) I learn an enormous amount of new information and insights.

**Stilwell:** SSP is an excellent model for dynamic and creative collaboration. As a student, I find this kind of dialogue particularly helpful, even essential, since it brings new ways of thinking about song. In addition, students often feel they have the freedom to explore new conceptual and interpretive terrain, with the full support and encouragement of the faculty. This is what is so empowering about SSP, and why it continues to stimulate vibrant

approaches to scholarship and performance.

**Weaver:** *What have been some of the greatest insights gleaned from SSP?*

**Sharon:** Our pilot event included a memorable session on translation prepared by Sharon Krebs that, for me, defined the thrilling possibilities of moderated cross-disciplinary discussion. The music scholar and artist cohort, joined by translation, poetry, and literature scholars, spent several hours exploring the consequences of the translation of Lord Byron's "My Soul is Dark" in Schumann's "Mein Herz ist schwer" from *Myrthen*. The plethora of topics—from compositional choices and philosophical dissonances to performer conundrums and the confusing nuances encountered in diverse alternative translations—were electrifying and opened the floodgates to a spectrum of further conversation.

**Binder:** Broadly speaking, performers want to fix an interpretation of a song, so that they can rehearse toward the very practical goal of a successful performance, whereas scholars usually regard conclusive interpretations as reductive. SSP has shown that the tension between these two imperatives can be beneficial for both sides. Performers become newly sensitive to the wide range of interpretive possibilities available to them in song, while scholars see what's at stake when their speculative notions collide with the requirements of making a song "work" in real time. Of course, in talking about "performers" and "scholars" I'm referring to abstract stereotypes;

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## The Ecomusicology Listening Room

Over a hundred people attended the Ecomusicology Listening Room (ELR) in New Orleans last November. The cross-disciplinary conversation took place as part of an alternative format, joint association (AMS and SEM) event featuring seven soundscape compositions. ELR design teams combined photography and sound compositions in order to inspire reflection, questions, and new ideas concerning music and the environment. Themes of identity, place, sustainability, biodiversity, and environmental justice were woven throughout the interdisciplinary exchange. The exhibit lives on at [ecosong.org](http://ecosong.org), including an audio recording of the session in New Orleans.

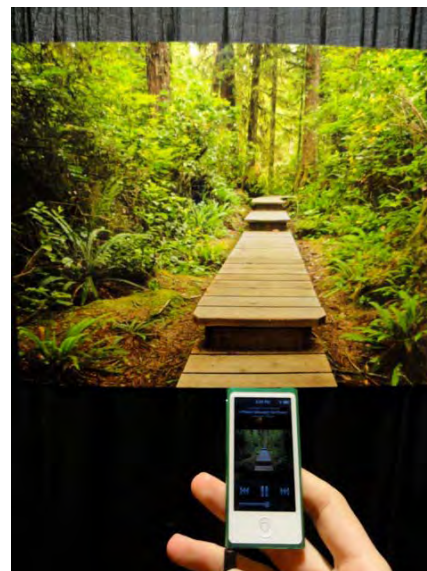
Violinist Mati Braun's performance of J. S. Bach's Partita No. 3 was a highlight. Braun performed in front of a photographic image of the endangered pernambuco tree, from which prized violin bows are crafted. Braun's performance was followed by an interactive discussion, facilitated by Aaron S. Allen, chair of the AMS Ecocriticism Study Group (ESG) and a leading researcher on the topic of sustainable instrument manufacture. In similar fashion, AMS and SEM scholars facilitated discussions after each soundscape

presentation, with topics ranging from human-animal musics to Thoreau's resonance in John Cage's compositions.

The ELR was also on display in the Exhibit Hall throughout the conference. QRS barcodes allowed participants to listen to the sound compositions on their smart phones. Headphones and iPods were provided as well.

The New Orleans ELR session and exhibit were co-sponsored by the ESG (AMS), Ecomusicology Special Interest Group (SEM), Popular Music Study Group (AMS), and Special Interest Group for Sound Studies (SEM). The ELR continues to serve as a communication tool for building the interdisciplinary discussion around ecomusicology or, as aptly titled for the ESG preconference, "ecomusicologies." A feedback feature below each soundscape composition at [ecosong.org](http://ecosong.org) allows online participants to share their thoughts, interpretations, questions, and ideas; this is one of many ways to take part in the growing interdisciplinary conversation concerning music and the environment.

Participants at the New Orleans session recommended the incorporation of video installations, moving images to match the moving musical compositions. That suggestion will be



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Room 7 of the ELR, accompanied aurally with "Beneath the Forest Floor" (1992) by Hildegard Westerkamp. See <http://ecosong.org/room-4.html>.

incorporated into future ELRs. Meanwhile, the physical photo-sound exhibit will be on public display at the University of Minnesota Institute on the Environment (IonE), February through May 2013. The ELR was funded by a grant from the IonE.

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SSP participants are actually quite adept at switching roles, so much so that the very notion of separate roles tends to disappear by the second or third day of the program.

**Youens:** What I hope all the participants take away from SSP—I know I do—is the extent to which all these disciplines that are often kept separate (theory, musicology, performance, literary matters) merge to produce a much deeper understanding of song. To see performers delve into the musical workings of a song, to hear everyone discuss how Wolf or Mahler understood a particular poem, to listen to rehearsals in which different ways of interpreting a gesture, a phrase, a passage are tried out: everyone is up to his or her elbows in every aspect of song.

**Stilwell:** For me, beyond the creative scholarship, the development of skills necessary for close poetic and musical readings, engagement with some of the highest conceptual work being done in the area of song, and exploring the outermost liminal boundaries of the Lied in all its multiplicity, I've learned the

human dignity and intelligence of art. Passionate scholarship and inspired performance work together and arise from total immersion in the beauty of song itself, and there is great honor in sharing ideas with an audience that waits just past the edge of the stage and within earshot of the lecture hall.

**Weaver:** *What suggestions might you offer to other AMS members on how to do something similar within their own areas of expertise?*

**Binder:** Let participants speak from their own perspective first, in the specialized language of their discipline, even if they won't initially be entirely understood by everyone. A genuine exchange of ideas can only begin when these languages collide. Eventually, everyone will feel comfortable and respected, and that's when the forging of a common language can begin.

*The 2013 Song Scholarship and Performance program (6–20 June for performers, 8–17 June for scholars) will focus on "Mahler, Strauss, and the Fin-de-siècle Lied." For more information, including a list of faculty and application instructions, please visit [www.songinstitute.ca/song-scholarship-and-performance](http://www.songinstitute.ca/song-scholarship-and-performance).*

### Doctoral Dissertations in Musicology

Hundreds of listings in DDM have been added over the past year, and the database now includes nearly 15,500 dissertations. Is your own listing correct? See [www.ams-net.org/ddm/](http://www.ams-net.org/ddm/) to use the database.

### Ongoing Grants and Fellowships

Grants and fellowships that recur on annual cycles are listed at the AMS web site. Granting agencies include the following:

- American Academy in Berlin
- American Academy in Rome
- American Council of Learned Societies
- Guggenheim Foundation
- Humboldt Foundation
- International Research and Exchanges Board
- National Endowment for the Humanities
- National Humanities Center
- Newberry Library Fellowships

Details: [www.ams-net.org/grants.php](http://www.ams-net.org/grants.php)