

ART OF TIME ENSEMBLE WITH STEVEN PAGE

A Singer Must Die

Biography

"Now the courtroom is quiet, but who will confess?
Is it true you betrayed us? The answer is Yes.
Then read me the list of the crimes that are mine,
I will ask for the mercy that you love to decline.
And all the ladies go moist, and the judge has no choice,
A singer must die for the lie in his voice."

Leonard Cohen, "A Singer Must Die"

When Andrew Burashko called me in the spring of 2008 and asked if I would perform with the Art of Time Ensemble at their upcoming Songbook concert in Toronto, I was flattered. And honoured. And scared, a little bit. Here was this group of some of Canada's most accomplished and creative musicians from the Classical and Jazz communities, and they're asking me to choose some songs to sing. Each song would then be arranged by some of the finest contemporary arrangers out there. I knew right away this was something special, and I knew I had to choose my songs wisely. Here was an opportunity to sing the songs that had kept me awake at night. The songs that had made me wonder how their composers could peek into the hidden corners of my soul and see my greatest fears, my greatest desires, my take on myself and on the world around me.

I instantly thought of Elvis Costello's masterpiece, "I Want You." I remember lying in bed the first time I heard it, late at night with the radio on. I was fifteen. How could this song of desperate jealousy have pinned me to my mattress in awe? Because that was the kind of teenager I was. Some things change little. The song still leaves me breathless with embarrassment, shame and envy, but the chance to sing it was too good to pass up. It became an opportunity for a song that had long been a part of me to come out. And when we stood onstage together in front of that first audience, it howled out of my throat like the blast of warm air that heaves out of us when there are no tears left to cry.

In other words, these songs gave me the chance to use my Big Voice. As a child, I used to terrorize my younger brother by singing at him as loudly as I could. Then I joined a choir, and I learned about blending with other voices. As a desperately shy child, singing gave me a chance to come out of my shell, but also a place to blend in. Then I joined a band: Some material was about blending, some about raw emotion, but the real goal was always about Entertainment. Here, with Art of Time, the focus was on Art, a word that had always embarrassed me. In Barenaked Ladies, we were always conscious of making music that had real emotional and aesthetic honesty, but for me it was sometimes easiest to hide behind a cloak of pop music and showbiz pizzazz. We saw ourselves as the Charlie Chaplins of popular



music. Over time, we grew and evolved, as all good bands do, and eventually grew apart, as many good ones also do. Liberated from the self-imposed image of Canada's Good Time Band, I was able to explore other styles of music, and other modes of expression. Andrew Burashko opened that door for me.

It's been well publicized that I've had a pretty rough few years recently, and as a songwriter, I feel compelled to explore it. But as a singer, I understood also that many of my favourite writers had done much of that exploration for me, and that singing their songs became a sort of catharsis. From the alienation and isolation of Radiohead's "Paranoid Android" to the wistful, romantic hope of The Divine Comedy's "Tonight We Fly," from the rage and regret of The Mountain Goats' "Lion's Teeth," or the feelings of loss and forgetting in The Weakerthans' "Virtute The Cat Explains Her Departure," to the quiet desperation of Jane Siberry's "The Taxi Ride," I could explore a wide range of emotions and a wide range of musical styles. The arrangers, including Gavin Bryars, Robert Carli and Cameron Wilson brought us music that touches on Jazz, Pop, Avant Garde, Rock, and on the rethink of Barenaked Ladies' own "Running Out of Ink," a winking take on Mozart.

The Art of Time Ensemble featured on this recording, made up of piano, bass, guitar, saxophone, violin and cello (and no drums!), create the perfect setting for these songs and for my voice. I am indebted to Andrew and his group for this opportunity. I think he's had fun with it, too. When we planned this concert, it was intended as a one-off, but we were both so energized by the whole experience that we decided to make a studio recording of the program, and then a concert tour. Is this a full-time venture for either of us? Nope. Art of Time have their own incredible concert series, featuring collaborations with all kinds of other great artists, including last year's collaboration with Sarah Slean, "Black Flowers." Me? I'm still a Pop fanatic at heart. My upcoming solo record, to be released later this year, is a collection of new original songs, firmly rooted in the pop and rock traditions. But will we work together again? You can count on it.

- Steven Page, January 2010

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