



Carson Becke

CCSF Award Winner 2017-2018, Molson Coors Scholarship

It was Carson Becke's Great Grandmother, (who studied piano at The Juilliard School in the 1930s) who taught, inspired and encouraged him to study abroad in order to achieve his aspirations as a professional pianist. So, in 2005 at the age of 16 he moved to England and The Purcell School of Music. Carson, born in Ottawa, was so enamoured by the richness of musical life in London he went on to pursue a BMus (First Class) degree in piano performance at The Royal Academy of Music (RAM) who describe him as "a remarkable pianist and a scholar of outstanding ability". Carson is now in his third year of doctoral studies in music at Magdalen College at The University of Oxford where he also received an M.Phil in Performance and Musicology.

Carson's D.Phil. thesis evaluates the pianistic activities of the German composer Richard Strauss (1864-1949). For those of us unfamiliar with the extraordinary canon of Strauss' works, Carson reminds us of the opening of Strauss' tone poem *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (made particularly famous by Stanley Kubrick's use of it in 2001: A Space Odyssey) as one of the most

iconic musical fragments in the entire canon of music history. Apart from Strauss' prodigious compositional output, he maintained a full time schedule of performance engagements throughout his life, both as a conductor and as a pianist. Although scholarship on Strauss is rich, there is virtually no scholarship on Strauss' piano performances. Carson has sourced genuinely fresh material that provides insight into an unfamiliar but crucial aspect of Strauss and his lifelong relationship with the piano. Carson believes that both Strauss' writing for the piano and his manner of playing the instrument, as documented by numerous recordings, hold key information for understanding Strauss' performance aesthetic. Strauss' recordings reveal that he rarely played exactly what he

wrote. His tendency was to treat the musical score as a general guide, not as a literal step by step instruction manual, as many performers tend to treat them today. Carson's associate professor says his thesis promises to be of significance and importance for our understanding of one of the great composers of the twentieth century. Amidst his studies, Carson has produced two albums as part of a multi-album recording project, (including a recording with the Canadian mezzo-soprano Wallis Giunta) to portray Strauss's use of the piano in many different capacities.

Oxford says Carson is unusual amongst his contemporaries. While studying, his activities as a pianist continue to play a large role in his life. He has performed extensively as a soloist and



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chamber musician, including performances in Canada, Germany, Switzerland, Poland, Latvia, Malta, St. Barthelemy, Trinidad and Tobago and across the UK. In 2016 he won the Royal Overseas League Arts Scholarship and undertook a four-week concert tour of New Zealand and Australia with the Dolmen Ensemble. He teaches piano at Magdalen College School, music, theory &

composition at The Purcell School and coaches chamber music at St Hilda's College. In 2010 he co-founded, the Festival Pontiac Enchanté, a concert series based in Luskville, Quebec, which seeks to present young musicians (mostly Canadian) who are in the early stages of their careers and where he is the Artistic Director.

Thanks to a generous donation by Molson Coors, the CCSF is delighted to award Carson Becke a scholarship for a second year. On completion of his D.Phil Carson and his Canadian wife intend to return 'home' where he hopes to teach at a Canadian university. We believe he will go on to make a significant impact and contribution to music and music education in Canada.