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# THE PARCIVAL PROJECT

## “PARZIVAL & FIEREFIZ”

*A Contemporary Re-telling of the Grail Myth*



Music by JOHN MCDOWELL & EMMANUEL VUKOVICH

Libretto by GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE

PHILIPPE SLY, Baritone    KWASI DUNYO, African Drum    EMMANUEL VUKOVICH, violin

TORQ PERCUSSION QUARTET    CANADA COUNCIL MUSICAL INSTRUMENT BANK ENSEMBLE



Canadian violinist **Emmanuel Vukovich** has been fascinated by Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* story for over twenty years. This 13<sup>th</sup>-Century medieval poem about the search for the Holy Grail was the inspiration for Richard Wagner's final opera *Parsifal*. Wagner, however, chose to omit a critical element in Eschenbach's story – the encounter between Parzival and an unknown dark-skinned knight who reveals himself to be Parzival's half-brother and whose name – *Fierefiz* – means 'he of many colours.' This “hidden” brother of a mixed race opens the grail myth to a wide range of narratives and symbolic interpretations.

Inspired by Eschenbach, Vukovich began working on a new musical narrative of the grail story with award-winning American composer **John McDowell** who also introduced him to the music of West Africa. During his studies at The Juilliard School, Vukovich travelled to The Gambia, West Africa to study with McDowell's teacher, Karamo Sabally. Almost two decades later, they have now gathered an extraordinary group of collaborators – including Governor General Award-winning African Canadian-Métis poet **George Elliott Clarke**, Ghanaian Canadian drummer **Kwasi Dunyo**, the **TorQ** percussion quartet, and renowned Canadian baritone **Philippe Sly** – to explore a more complete musical narrative of Eschenbach's tale.





"This story could not be timelier in describing the individual's search for identity as a collaborative process" comments Vukovich. "Eschenbach's tale is about a 'brave soul, yet slow to wise' who initially fails to ask a critical question – a question that has the power to heal an ancient wound. Only after the reconciliation between apparent strangers has taken place can the reunited brothers return to the Grail *together* and redeem the question that Parzival had failed to ask alone."

**"Parzival & Fierefiz"** is an original composition for strings and percussion ensemble with solo voice, African drum, and violin currently being co-created by McDowell and Vukovich in collaboration with Clarke. Clarke has explored the intersection of race theory and opera composition for the past 25 years, including his ground-breaking 1998 opera *Beatrice Chancy*. The new libretto will "challenge the Darwin-derived, white-supremacist views that poisoned the era in which Wagner composed and which have even seeped down as 'acceptable' xenophobia today," comments Clarke.

In honouring Eschenbach's original story, *Parzival & Fierefiz* strives to transform the Grail narrative from the individual-centred quest of Wagner's *Parsifal* into a contemporary journey of collaboration, community, and a return to wholeness. Parzival's transformation from ignorance to understanding occurs not only through the power of the intellect, but more importantly, through an awakening to the other.



### ***Emmanuel Vukovich & Philippe Sly perform an excerpt from "Parzival & Fierefiz"***

*Additional musical excerpts may be heard [here](#)*



Along with Ghanaian drummer Kwasi Dunyo, Canadian percussion quartet TorQ, and recently JUNO-nominated baritone Philippe Sly (who contributes both vocal narration and sung text in the medieval troubadour tradition), the musicians of this project also include a number of recipients of the prestigious **Canada Council for the Arts Musical Instrument Bank**. Through an open score and space for improvisation, a cooperative

development of story, and a creative process of collaborative leadership, *Parzival & Fierefiz* proposes to demonstrate its vision of reconciliation and collaboration through its content as well as form.

The official premiere performance of *Parzival & Fierefiz* will take place in **November 2020** in Toronto, in conjunction with the Canadian Opera Company's production of Wagner's *Parsifal* and the University of Toronto's "Opera Exchange" Conference. To date, excerpts of the work have been heard at New Music for Strings Iceland, at the Consulate General of Canada in New York City for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Canadian presence in New York City, and will be heard in Chicago in **June 2020** for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Waldorf education around the world.

*Parzival & Fierefiz* is a creation of **The Parcival Project** an international performance collaborative and Canadian charitable organization founded in 2012 by Emmanuel Vukovich and Canadian clarinetist **Dominic Desautels**. The Parcival Project Board Chair is **Don McLean**, Dean of The University of Toronto Faculty of Music.

**[www.parcival.ca](http://www.parcival.ca)**

## PARZIVAL & FIEREFIZ ~ ARTISTS

A revered poet, writer, and scholar, **George Elliott Clarke** was born in Windsor, Nova Scotia, near the Black Loyalist and Afro-Metis community of Three Mile Plains. The inaugural E.J. Pratt Professor of Canadian Literature at the University of Toronto, Clarke has also worked as a researcher, editor, social worker and newspaper columnist. Among his numerous honours are the Governor-General's Award for Poetry, the National Magazine Gold Medal for Poetry, and the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Achievement Award. An Officer of the Order of Canada, Clarke is the recipient of eight honorary doctorates.

Master drummer **Frederick Kwasi Dunyo**, from Ghana, West Africa, has directed, coached, taught, drummed, and danced extensively in a variety of contexts. In 1992, Dunyo was the recipient of a Visiting Foreign Artist grant which provided the basis for his first trip to North America. He is a member of the faculties of York University, University of Toronto, the Royal Conservatory of Music and is a member of the Society of Ethnomusicology of North America.

**John McDowell** achieved worldwide recognition with his soundtrack to the Academy Award winning documentary *Born into Brothels*. Composer of several additional film scores and a highly gifted pianist, percussionist, producer and conductor, McDowell's work draws on classical, jazz, pop, and world music. He has served as founder, artistic director and leader of projects including the world music band Mamma Tongue, has toured and recorded with Rusted Root and Krishna Das, and has produced several albums.

The **Musical Instrument Bank of the Canada Council for the Arts** a collection of over 20 exceptional string instruments crafted by world renowned luthiers, including Stradivari, Gagliano and Pressenda. Preeminent Canadian classical musicians compete for the opportunity to become the steward and performer of an exceptional instrument from the Instrument Bank on a three-year loan.

French-Canadian bass-baritone **Philippe Sly** has gained international recognition for his "beautiful, blooming tone and magnetic stage presence" (San Francisco Chronicle). Mr. Sly is the first prize winner of the Concours Musical International de Montréal and a grand prize winner of the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions. He has performed with the Paris Opera, San Francisco Opera, and Glyndebourne, and in concert with the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Handel & Haydn Society, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and elsewhere. His solo recordings are available on Analekta.

Described as "outstanding - no, make that astonishing!" (Ottawa Citizen) and as having a "sense of unbreakable continuity and energy" (Toronto Star), **TorQ Percussion Quartet** brings a new vitality to percussion repertoire and performance. Richard Burrows, Adam Campbell, Jamie Drake and Daniel Morphy have performed throughout North America and Europe, and have appeared with the Toronto Symphony, Buffalo Philharmonic, and Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal, among others.

Violinist **Emmanuel Vukovich** is a three-time recipient of the Canada Council for the Arts Musical Instrument Bank, the first recipient of McGill University's Schulich School of Music Golden Violin, and grand-prize winner of the Fischhoff Chamber Music Competition. He is co-founder and artistic director of The Parcival Project and artistic director of Montreal's Bach Odyssey. Upcoming highlights include the creation and world premiere of a new violin concerto inspired by North Indian Classical Hindustani music by award-winning American composer Sheila Silver.

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