



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
FACULTY OF MUSIC

Harry Somers at 100: Reflections on His Life and Legacy

Recital: Harry Somers—A Centenary Sampler

Saturday, September 27, 2025 at 11:00 am | Walter Hall, 80 Queen's Park

PROGRAM

***Rhapsody* for violin and piano (1948)**

Amy Hillis, violin
Adam Sherkin, piano

Sonata for Guitar (1959)

1. Prelude
2. Scherzo
3. Molto lento
4. Finale

Liam Jaeger, guitar

Two songs:

1. **"A Bunch of Rowan"** (1947)
2. "Loon cry, night call" from ***Evocations*** (1966)

Monica Whicher, soprano
Adam Sherkin, piano

Piano Sonata No. 1 "Testament of Youth" (1945)

1. Largo
2. Adagio molto
3. Largo – Allegro – Largo

Adam Sherkin, piano

Three Excerpts from *Serinette* (1990):

1. "We're counting thy favours"
2. "I'll haste away to Jordan's stream"
3. "Bless'd is the garden of the Lord"

Choir 21
Adam Sherkin, piano
David Fallis, conductor

We wish to acknowledge this land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years, it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

As part of the Faculty's commitment to improving Indigenous inclusion, we call upon all members of our community to start/continue their personal journeys towards understanding and acknowledging Indigenous peoples' histories, truths, and cultures. Visit indigenous.utoronto.ca to learn more.

WALTER HALL

Peter Olsen, *sound technologist*

PROGRAM NOTES

Rhapsody for violin and piano (1948)

Rhapsody dates from the spring of 1948, when Somers was reaching maturity as a young composer and finding his personal style. It was written just before *North Country* for string orchestra, one of Somers's best-known works, which dates from October 1948. *Rhapsody* is dedicated to Catherine Mackie, who would become Somers's wife in 1949 (tragically, she died by her own hand in 1963 at age 35). It was first heard on CBC Radio on November 10, 1948, with the composer at the piano with the Toronto violinist Morry Kernerman—Somers's exact contemporary, who at 100 years of age is a living connection to the work's premiere.

Rhapsody marks a turning point in Somers's style, blending earlier expressive gestures with greater structural assurance. It is in two *appassionato* sections and builds tension through the structural use of dynamics; the juxtaposition of harmonically ambiguous passages derived from a twelve-tone series with tonal material; and the interruption of intense melodic lines by sharp accompanimental interjections—all techniques that Somers would return to in later works.

Rhapsody showcases Somers's great skill in developing extended, emotionally charged lines to create a convincing dramatic arc. It has been recorded by Duo Pach (Joseph Pach, violin and Arlene Nimmons Pach, piano) on RCI 244 in 1967, and by Andrew Dawes, violin with Kenneth Broadway, piano for the "A Window on Somers" series (Centrediscs CMCCD 7401) in 2001.

Sonata for Guitar (1959)

With its four relatively brief and beautifully contrasted movements, Somers's Sonata for Guitar (1959) is a popular recital piece and has been recorded three times: by Peter Acker (for a CBC archival recording, 1964), Michael Strutt (RCI 409, 1976), and Vincea McClelland (CODA 9402-1, 1994). Somers studied classical guitar seriously, taking lessons with the Viennese-born Toronto teacher Eli Kassner in 1957 and becoming proficient enough to perform professionally on the instrument. His Sonata for Guitar was commissioned by the Guitar Society of Toronto, which Kassner had founded in 1956. A second commission from the Guitar Society resulted in Somers's Concerto for Guitar and Orchestra in 1984.

The Sonata for Guitar was the first major work for classical guitar by a Canadian composer. It was premiered by Peter Acker in 1964 and was published by E.C. Kerby in 1972. In a CBC radio interview, Somers with an ironic sense of humour called it "the sonata for fifty bucks," citing the price of his commission. The work's four movements offer a vivid cross-section of Somers's compositional voice, blending idiomatic guitar writing with bold harmonic and rhythmic invention.

The *Prelude* opens with stately quartal harmonies and then moves into a free-flowing highly ornamented cadenza, while the *Scherzo*—the most technically demanding movement—features driving ostinati, intricate chromaticism, and arpeggiated climaxes that prefigure gestures found in Somers's later Guitar Concerto. The introspective *Molto lento* has a reflective, improvisational quality; it ends with a major ninth chord that seems to pose a question for the finale to answer. The spirited but brief *Finale* which answers that query is an animated movement with repeated intervallic cells and chord sequences that creates a highly satisfying conclusion to the work.

“A Bunch of Rowan” (1947)

This exquisitely dark and brooding song was one of Somers’s first works to be published; it was issued by BMI Canada in 1948, selling for the princely sum of 60 cents. The poem is by Diana Skala, who has almost slipped beyond the biographical threshold. She emigrated from Poland to Toronto and emerged on the Canadian literary scene in the mid-1930s, publishing a small number of poems and short stories. Sporadically active for the next decade, she faded from view and then reappeared briefly with a published book of poetry titled *Sojourn in Israel* in 1980. Despite her contributions to Canadian literature and connections to artists such as Charles G.D. Roberts and Somers, there are few public records available about her later life and none about her death.

Skala’s poem “A Bunch of Rowan” is a stark and haunting meditation on love, betrayal, and desolation. Like much of Margaret Atwood’s poetry, it shares a dark, unsentimental view of love, where intimacy is often entangled with violence, isolation, or existential angst. In European folklore, the rowan tree guards against evil powers and was often planted near cemeteries to protect the spirits of the departed. Somers’s setting of this poem bears a certain resemblance to German expressionist music of the 1920s. The song unfolds in modified strophic form; its heart-rending vocal line and evocative piano part deftly captures the disturbing mood of the poem.

***Evocations* (1966)**

Evocations, a set of four short songs for mezzo-soprano and piano to texts by the composer, was completed in February 1966 on a commission from the CBC. It reflects Somers’s shift in the 1960s to a concentration on music for voice, after an intensive cultivation of instrumental music during the 1950s. The cycle is a vivid showcase of Somers’s experimental vocal writing, with its use of spatial notation, extended vocal techniques, and wide expressive range. The singer is called upon to produce bird calls, glissandi, ululations, and even screams, interacting with the piano in a free, flexible dialogue. Each song balances bold sonic gestures with moments of lyrical stillness, creating a haunting atmosphere that is heightened by the use of the piano’s sustain pedal and vocalizing directly into the piano strings.

Despite its technical demands, *Evocations* offers performers rich interpretive freedom and remains one of Somers’s most striking and imaginative vocal works. There are two complete recordings of *Evocations*, the first by Patricia Rideout, who premiered the work in 1966 (CBC SM-108, 1970, with Somers on piano), and the second by Jean Stilwell for the “A Window on Somers” series (CMCCD 7001, 2001, with John Hess on piano). There is also a recording on YouTube of the baritone Donald Bell singing the cycle accompanied by the pianist Denise Gaudry in Toronto in 1978.

In today’s performance, we hear the first song from the cycle, “Loon cry, night call,” which is often done as a stand-alone excerpt. Writing about his text for this song, Somers wrote “The words were selected for their evocative and phonetic properties to conjure up the sense of things experienced ... the cry of the loon heard in the North Country, one of the most beautiful and haunting sounds of all Canadian wildlife” (Cherney 1975, p. 123). Brian Cherney adds: “The central image here is the loon; the ‘oo’ sound in loon, the ‘crah’ sound in the word ‘cry,’ and the ‘cah’ sound in ‘call’ are both extended with repeated-note figures and a short single note preceded by one or more grace notes. The damper pedal is held down throughout this first song, thus allowing the voice part to echo in the vibrating piano strings—this is an imaginative way of evoking the sound of a loon over a northern lake (at dusk, perhaps?).” Brian Cherney, “The Art Songs of Harry Somers (1925-1999): A Brief Survey” [Art Song Canada](#) (April 2025).

Piano Sonata No. 1 “Testament of Youth” (1945)

Somers's first piano sonata was written in 1945, just after the composer completed two years of wartime military service in the Royal Canadian Air Force (which he spent entirely in Canada). Brian Cherney says of the sonata, “dedicated to the memory of Dudley Garrett, Jr, *Testament of Youth* is a grand, romantic work, with rich, full sonorities, maximum use of the entire range of the keyboard, and difficult passagework; in terms of piano writing, it is effective and convincing” (*Harry Somers*, 1975, p. 18). Garrett, a professional hockey player and close friend of the composer, enlisted for wartime military service in the Royal Canadian Navy. He died on 24 November 1944 at the age of 20 when his ship, the HMCS Shawinigan, was sunk by a German submarine off the southern coast of Newfoundland with the loss of all 90 men on board. The piano sonata was completed in October 1945, less than a year after Garrett's death.

The sonata unfolds in three movements, each marked by vivid contrasts and stark emotional intensity. The outer movements are dramatic and rhythmically charged, featuring abrupt shifts, strident harmonies, contrasting tempi and textures, and recurring interval cells that help to lend coherence to the work. The central movement offers a moment of lyrical stillness, built around a poignant falling semitone figure that recurs throughout Somers's early music and here evokes a mood of quiet sorrow as a musical lament on the loss of Garrett.

Reginald Godden, Somers's piano teacher and close friend, championed the work and called it “a landmark in creative music in this country” (Cherney, p. 20). Reviewing the US premiere of the work on May 7, 1978 by the Canadian pianist Robert Silverman, *New York Daily News* critic Bill Zakariasen noted that “it's a strong, passionate work that says a lot in a refreshingly concise manner.” Godden recorded the work for the CBC (RCI 450, 1976); the recording was re-released on CD in 2009 for the “A Window on Somers” series (CMCCD 14509). Archival recordings by Robert Silverman (AR508, 1978), Bernadette MacDonald (AR2898, 1981), and Ishay Shaer (AR3163, 2013) can be heard on the Canadian Music Centre's *Centrestreams* service.

Three Excerpts from *Serinette* (1990)

Serinette is the fifth of Somers's six operas, followed by *Mario and the Magician*, which was premiered by the Canadian Opera Company in 1992. The idea for *Serinette* was born at a meeting between Somers and Lawrence Cherney at the Brunswick Tavern on Bloor Street in 1983, but required seven years for its realization. Commissioned by Music at Sharon, of which Cherney was the artistic director, the chamber opera had its public premiere in July 1990 at the Sharon Temple, located ca. 50 km north of Toronto. It is scored for 14 singers and a chamber orchestra of 12 players. The opera was revived by Soundstreams in a concert version given at St. James Cathedral in Toronto in 2001, and was released on the Centrediscs label (CMCCD 76/7701) that same year as part of the “A Window on Somers” series.

A serinette is a small, hand-cranked mechanical musical instrument developed in 18th-century France. It was originally used to teach tunes to canaries, and the name is derived from *serin*, the French word for canary. The libretto of *Serinette* by James Reaney is set in Upper Canada shortly after the War of 1812 and follows the Jarvis family, whose matriarch owns a serinette. Her elder son, Sam Jarvis Jr., is a brash soldier, while his younger brother Colin, a fictional character, is gentle and musically inclined. The opera explores themes of pacifism, cultural identity, and personal expression, set against historical events like the founding of the utopian Children of Peace community in Sharon by David Willson in 1812 and the Ridout-Jarvis duel of 1817. The serinette becomes a symbol of Canadian colonial society's yearning to find its own voice, or as Reaney puts it, to “sing our own song.”

Somers noted about his music for the opera that it “attempts to evoke an historical time and place without, apart from a few specific quotations, reproducing it ... In reverting to the use of traditional materials, I am not attempting to be neo-anything. I have always pursued a number of directions that have been completely different from each other. In *Serinette*, I have only attempted to realize what seemed to me to be the musical characteristics implicit in the libretto” (note in the program for the premiere of *Serinette*, reproduced in the liner notes for CMCCD 76/7701).

The three choral excerpts from *Serinette* heard today are all from the second of the opera’s two acts, set in Sharon. The first two, “We’re counting thy favours” and “I’ll haste away to Jordan’s stream” appear in Act II, scene ii. Although heard first today, the chorus “We’re counting thy favours” follows right after “I’ll haste away” in the opera (the two choruses are separated by a short instrumental interlude). “We’re counting thy favours” is a “fuguing tune” hymn setting, which includes both homophonic textures as well as phrases that are sung in a freely imitative fashion (though not following the complex rules of actual fugues).

In “I’ll haste away to Jordan’s stream,” a leader “lines out” (in a loud speaking voice) the words to each line of text, after which the choir sings the line in harmony. The tune for this chorus is based on the British hymn tune “Wells” composed by Israel Holdroyd ca. 1724 (the tenors have the tune). “Wells” was one of the hymn tunes that could be played by the mechanical barrel organ at the Sharon Temple. The instrument was in use until the late 19th century and was restored in 1970s.

The third chorus, “Bless’d is the garden of the Lord,” is an original chorale tune by Somers that is set to a text by David Willson. In the original production, this beautiful chorale was performed inside the illuminated Sharon Temple, while the audience listened from the grounds outside the building. It had a magical effect on the audience and made a stirring conclusion to the opera.

TEXTS

“A Bunch of Rowan” (1947)

Text by Diana Skala

When I walked like a prairie land,
With honey on lips and thighs,
My love came from the northern woods
And scooped out both my eyes.

When I lay burning in hell,
With all its tongues of flame,
I called to my lovers out in the world,
But no one heard nor came.

Place me where willows are listening,
Lay me where whispers brood,
And a bunch of rowan upon my breast,
For I know not evil from good.

***Evocations* (1966)**

Text by Harry Somers

1. “Loon cry, night call”

Loon cry,
Night call,
Mist, wreath of night,
Darkness, womb of night.
Above infinity of points of light.
Water, stillness,
Night sounds.
Loon cry
Echoes, haunts, dies
Loo ... Loo ...

Three Excerpts from *Serinette* (1990)

Texts by James Reaney (1, 2) and David Willson (3)

1. "We're counting thy favours"

We're counting thy favours,
Because they are known,
Thou gav'st us a Saviour
A Son of thine own;
Our praise is to bless him,
The pearl of our joy,
May nations embrace him,
Nor kingdoms destroy.

His name is salvation,
And glory and peace,
The light of the nation,
That never will cease;
He gave us this building,
His name to adore,
The serpent he's stilling,
The lions that roar!

2. "I'll haste away to Jordan's stream"

I'll haste away to Jordan's stream
Where wisdom doth chastise,
I'll bow my neck and wash me clean
And watch with wakeful eyes.

I'll offer God my hands and feet,
I'll make my offerings clean,
And when the lamb of God I meet
My sin shall not be seen.

3. "Bless'd is the garden of the Lord"

Bless'd is the garden of the Lord
Where ev'ry plant do grow,
The vine the joyful fruit doth bear,
Nor moth, nor thief can steal.
Messiah is our shepherd there,
And doth his heart reveal.

'Tis there the flocks of Jacob feed,
And distant tribes are one:
There grow the pasture that we need,
And crystal streams do run.

The walls around are strong and high,
No partialist can rise
Our love and kindness to deny,
Our love to all, despise.

Our gates are as the open door,
And ev'ry kind comes in;
The wise, the great, the rich, the poor,
And all the souls that sin.

The Lord hath made our off'rings free,
And unrestricted love,
We own, O Lord, hath come from thee,
As dew from heav'n above.

As the rain that waters distant hills,
By thee our plants do grow;
Thy love to all, the bosom fills,
To all, our cup doth flow.

BIOGRAPHIES

Soundstreams Choir 21, founded in 2010 by Lawrence Cherney, is a pre-eminent group of exceptional singers selected by Music Director David Fallis. Soundstreams Choir 21 members are handpicked for their ability to perform contemporary choral music. They are drawn from a pool of professional choristers that includes the Canadian Opera Company Chorus, Tafelmusik Choir, and The Elmer Iseler Singers. The choir appears in Soundstreams' concerts under David Fallis and with renowned guest conductors such as James MacMillan, Tõnu Kaljuste and Péter Eötvös. Choir 21 has performed for the Toronto Symphony Orchestra's New Creations Festival, Toronto International Film Festival, Art of Time, Continuum, and presented a joint concert with Frieder Bernius' Stuttgart Chamber Choir. Committed to keeping choral music alive, Choir 21 supports the ongoing evolution of this compelling and enduring medium into the 21st century.

Conductor **David Fallis** is one of Canada's leading interpreters of operatic and choral/orchestral repertoire, known especially for his work both in contemporary music, and in the Baroque and Classical periods. He has conducted across Canada and around the world, including for the Luminato Festival, the Glimmerglass Festival, the Singapore Festival, the Royal Opera House in Versailles, the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, Festival Vancouver, Houston Grand Opera, and the Seoul Arts Centre. Fallis directs Soundstreams Choir 21, a vocal ensemble specializing in contemporary choral music, which has performed with Soundstreams Canada, the Toronto International Film Festival, the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, the Art of Time Ensemble, and Continuum Contemporary Music. He has conducted world premieres by leading Canadian composers, including R. Murray Schafer, James Rolfe, Christopher Butterfield, Christos Hatzis, Andrew Balfour, and Andrew Ager.

Amy Hillis has "a rich, warm sound and has mastered the violin with such ease, that it is impossible to ignore her passion in performance" (*Ludwig van Montréal*). As a soloist, she has commissioned Canadian works by Carmen Braden, Matt Brubeck, Andrew Downing, Gabriel Dufour-Laperrière, Fjóra Evans, Vincent Ho, Laurence Jobidon, Nicole Lizée, Jocelyn Morlock, Jordan Pal, Randolph Peters, Luis Ramirez, and Andrew Staniland. She is winner of the Pan-Canadian Recital Tour, the Eckhardt-Gramatté National Music Competition, the Canada Council Musical Instrument Bank competition (on two occasions), and an artistic residency at La Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris. She is currently Associate Professor of Music at York University and in May she was named the new Artistic Director of the [Women's Musical Club of Toronto](#). For more information, visit her professional website at [AmyHillis.com](#)

Liam Jaeger is a Toronto-based classical guitarist and recording artist. He began his studies at a young age at the Royal Conservatory of Music with William Beauvais and completed an MMus degree at the University of Ottawa with Patrick Roux in 2008. He has studied in masterclasses with Roland Dyens, Fabio Zanon, and Odair Assad. With decades of experience in classical and pop/rock projects, he blends tradition with contemporary influences. Jaeger has performed internationally, collaborated across genres, and continues to expand the boundaries of classical guitar through teaching, recording, and new works.

Adam Sherkin has been acclaimed for "dazzlingly displays of hand and ear virtuosity" (*Opus One*) and "technical prowess and uncommon lyricism" (*Musical Toronto*). He is a dynamic artist who commands a multi-dimensional approach to performance and composition. Admired for his innovative programming and engaging virtuosity, Sherkin has performed at significant venues throughout the United States, Canada, and Britain, enjoying recent premieres of his works in New York City, Montreal, and Amsterdam. In 2018, Sherkin founded *Piano Lunaire*, a new-gen organization that produces contemporary performances, houses a record label and collaborates with the American-Canadian musical community at large. Sherkin's recordings are available on the NAXOS, Centrediscs and Centretracks labels. He is thrilled to be celebrating the centenary of Harry Somers throughout the 2025–26 Concert Season. Follow Adam: [@adamsherkin](#) and visit his professional website at [www.adamsherkin.com](#).

Monica Whicher is an Associate Professor and Head of Voice Studies at the University of Toronto, where she teaches English Song and studio voice. A graduate of U of T and former member of the Canadian Opera Company Ensemble Studio, she has performed internationally in opera, oratorio, and chamber music. Her acclaimed recordings span classical, contemporary, and Canadian repertoire. A Juno and Dora nominee, Whicher is also a dedicated educator and adjudicator whose students have gone on to major institutions and opera companies. In 2019 she received the University of Toronto Faculty of Music Teaching Award for her outstanding contributions to music education.