

From A To Z, Boston's A Far Cry Ensemble Cycles Through Carolyn Forché's 'Blue Hour'

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By [Keith Powers](#) 



We use the alphabet to set the edges. The phrase "from A to Z" takes us from

beginning to end, from start to finish. It's a simple enclosure — metaphorically containing everything.

In literature, ABCs have a firm place in children's books, of course. But the abecedary, a lesser used literary device, also has its place. Like in Carolyn Forché's collection "Blue Hour," a set of linked poems, the longest of which, "On Earth," creates an abecedarium that becomes a snapshot of a life, one blurry image after another, partly nostalgic, partly unsettling, entirely captivating.

"On Earth" is mesmerizing and musical — and entirely appropriate for the Boston string ensemble A Far Cry's latest commission, a collaboration that brought together five composers to create an evening-length song cycle. The Criers' "[The Blue Hour](#)" will feature vocalist Luciana Souza, and, as part of a six-city tour, comes to Jordan Hall on Friday, Nov. 10.



A Far Cry's latest commission was inspired by Carolyn Forché's collection "Blue Hour." (Courtesy Don J. Usner)

Following the letters of the alphabet, but after that following no narrative, simply stacking remembrances and images upon each other, "On Earth" posits "memory as a kind of fiction," as Forché has said. Beginning with A:

as for the children, so for the dead
as gloves into a grave
as God withdrawing so as to open an absence ...

“I’ve never worked with so many people before,” says Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Caroline Shaw. “We tried to keep it a natural process, without defining a structure. We lived with the text, and got together and talked about it.”

Shaw joins composers Rachel Grimes, Angélica Negrón, Sarah Kirkland Snider and Shara Nova. Negrón will write a brief invocation, and recorded snippets of the poem may also be used, perhaps read by Forché herself (even at this late stage, the final touches are still being put on the song cycle).

“There weren’t any guidelines,” says Grimes. “We did adapt the text, but we maintained the structure, and the sensibility. There are no characters, and the fragmentary nature allows more flexibility.”

*leaf-cutter ants bearing yellow trumpet flowers along the road
left everything left all usual worlds behind
library, lilac, linens, litany ...*

“It feels natural,” Shaw says of the poem, and its form. “It feels like living, how you interact constantly.”

It’s an ambitious, almost ungainly project -- bringing five different composers together, to create a through-composed, concert-length song cycle.

The Criers have taken on other commissions — this fall, the group has already premiered piano concertos by Philip Glass and Elena Ruehr — but this was something different.

“Typically individual musicians will bring full-formed ideas to the group, and we look at them,” cellist Michael Unterman says of the Criers’ programming process. “This was an exception. It came out of a free-form brainstorming session.”



A Far Cry's "Blue Hour" will feature vocalist Luciana Souza.
(Courtesy Kim Fox)

"When we traveled to Los Angeles for the Grammy Awards" -- A Far Cry was nominated in 2015 for their "Dreams and Prayers" recording — "we saw a performance by Annie Lennox and Hozier. They did 'Take Me to Church,' and Annie blew our minds."

"We knew we wanted to work with another singer like that," Unterman says. "And we wanted to work with the women composers that we've known. From that, a

song cycle came together naturally. It's a dream team.

“We've done three sets of workshops, to internalize the music, and to get some feedback,” he says, noting that one final set of rehearsals, in Boston, are in place to put on the finishing touches. “To finally sit down with the music feels like Christmas.”

*une enfant qui meurt wrapped in a trouser leg
unspeakable in language
unspoken thoughts, leaving us in their proximity, alone ...*

“This is how your memory works,” Grimes says. “You accumulate. You pick up on repetitions. You switch gears.”

The musical setting followed no guidelines. The composers were free to use the orchestra the way they wished, and to incorporate text into the score in any manner. “Luciana might be singing after a string phrase, or after a violin solo,” Grimes says. “There might be a little interweaving. There's also a kind of dramatic quality at times, where the orchestra sets up a texture under what she's saying. I think it's a dreaming atmosphere.

“None of us has written a piece like this before,” Grimes says. “We did agree on some key centers, and things like that. It has been pretty labor intensive. But mostly we just let things unfold, and created music.”

“Nothing really feels like a song, or an aria,” Shaw says of her contribution. “Whenever the text calls for clarity, I kept it as clear as possible. Nothing wild. Music that was honest and sincere.”

*war-eyed in the warehouse of history
war no longer declared but only continued
warning us of its nature and our own
washing its windows until they vanish ...*


“I’m starting to think of this like a modern-day ‘Winterreise,’ ” Unterman says, referring to Schubert’s famous song cycle. “The structure is like a catalog, like telling the story of a life that is coming to an end, choosing the most poignant moments.”

“The Criers will make it come to life,” Grimes says. “It is distinctly each person’s voice, but once we shared with the orchestra, we were surprised how things flowed. You can be as specific as you want on paper, but it won’t come alive unless there is a sensitivity.”

A Far Cry, with mezzo Luciana Souza, performs “[The Blue Hour](#)” at Boston’s Jordan Hall on Friday, Nov. 10.

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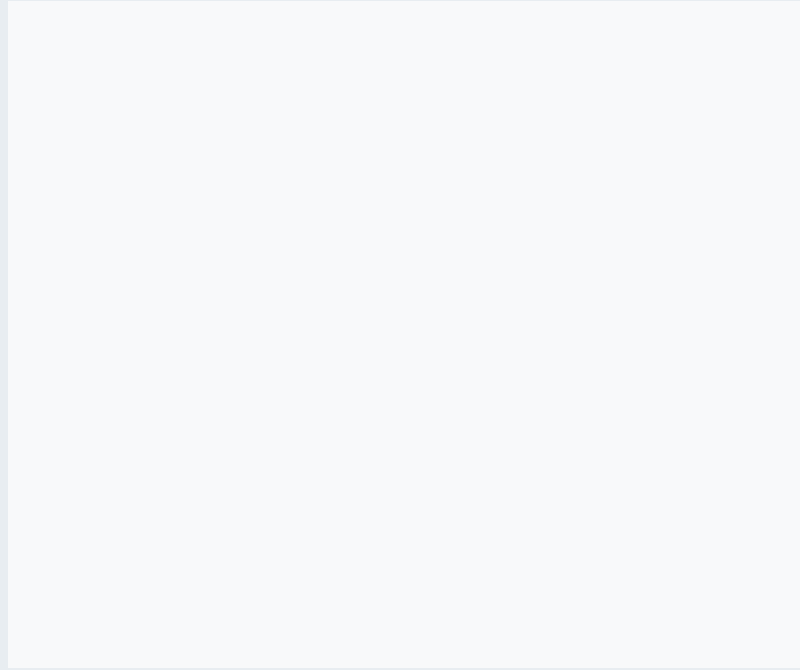
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