

The Complexity of Musical Influences from the Opera *Louis Riel*: Vocal Challenges and Performance Perspectives

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As the title of this paper suggests, I would like to discuss some of the unique vocal challenges that singers encountered during the preparation and performance of a production of Harry Somers' opera *Louis Riel* by Opera McGill. This complex work, divided into three acts with over 17 scene changes, is a challenging work due to the size of the production requirements alone. The score is equally challenging, both instrumentally and vocally and requires singers to explore a variety of vocal techniques ranging from half-spoken, half-sung spoken text to full voice singing. I will divide the topic of vocal challenges into three specific parts: the interpretation and performance of preexisting music; the multiplicity of ways in which the voice is used; and finally, the relationship of the voice to the complex instrumental texture.

Introduction

Louis Riel by Canadian, Harry Somers (1925-1999), is arguably the greatest Canadian opera ever written. A large orchestra including strings, woodwinds, brass, piano, and a large percussion ensemble requiring six players accompanies the cast of 35 named characters, including six principals, a host of historic characters, and large chorus. The libretto, by Canadian playwrights Mavor Moore and Jacques Languirand, is written in French and English, incorporating Cree and Latin whenever appropriate. The story of the opera unfolds around two controversial events in Canadian history: the execution in 1869 of Thomas Scott, a short-tempered, Orange Irish Protestant fanatic, at the hands of Riel and his Métis followers and the dramatic trial and execution of Louis Riel himself in 1885 by the Canadian authorities (Cherny, 1975). The role of Riel, created for Canadian baritone, Bernard Turgeon, is "an...heroic and constantly tragic figure, one obsessed by social justice and pursued by mystical delusions (Turp, 2005, pp. 24-26)."

Subtitled "a centenary opera" and commissioned jointly by the Canadian Opera Company and the Chalmers Foundation with additional grant support from the Canada Council for the Arts, the goal of *Louis Riel* was "to use the conventions and traditions of grand opera as a form of nation-building, a platform for discovering who it is we are

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(Stubley, 2005).“ *Riel* premiered in Toronto and Montreal as part of Expo ‘67, with subsequent performances in Toronto in 1968, a production for CBC television in 1969, and a touring production to Toronto and Washington in 1975 as Canada’s cultural contribution to the American bicentennial celebrations. Upon first consideration, the life and times of an outlawed ‘half-breed’ (in the language of the day) rebel makes for a curious subject for a celebratory centenary opera. However, in choosing Louis Riel and his story,

(Somers) uses Riel’s inner turmoil to dramatically heighten and fill the silence of the gap between linguistic cultures carved out in the libretto. The strategy weaves Riel into the musical geography of the Canadian landscape, and in doing so makes his story an essential component of our divided nature (Stubley, 2005).

The Musical Language in the Words of the Composer

The figure of Louis Riel and his life as a revolutionary (Siggins, 1994) was a part of our Canadian cultural identity before Somers was inspired to write his story into an opera. Irish born, Canadian playwright, John Coulter’s play *Riel* premiered in 1950 and toured the country with Mavor Moore in the title role. Coulter succeeded in capturing the flavour of language in a style he termed “Canadian speech,” a style that undeniably influenced Moore’s writing of the libretto for *Louis Riel*. Somers’ compositional preoccupation with details of rhythmic organization serves to enhance the rhythm of the language used in the libretto. *Louis Riel*, the opera, succeeds at blending the story of Louis Riel, the historic figure, with the richness and beauty of French Canadian and Métis culture. This layering of complex speech-rhythms in the voice, in combination with short melodic fragments in the orchestra, reinforces the central theme of conflict and tension creating a unique language of musical expression. Somers identified four stylistic approaches used in the composing of the opera: the use of abstract or atonal orchestral writing for the purpose of dramatic intensity where the singing on stage is entirely separate from the orchestral forces; electronically produced sounds played at the same time as the live orchestral performance, used in the battle scene and prologue as a way to present to the audience totally unfamiliar sounds; folk material from Native Canadian peoples in contrast with European folk melodies; and straightforward diatonic writing as used at the opening of Act II, scene iv, as the Orange Protestants of

Ontario call for revenge for the death of Thomas Scott, and in Act III, scene ii, as Father André presides over Maundy Thursday mass incorporating Latin chant.

Sources and Interpretation of Preexisting Music

Much of the music sung by the chorus has been taken from preexisting musical sources inspired by popular songs from the period or the traditional music of the Métis and Native Canadian people. Somers' merit as a composer can be judged by the ways in which he develops his own personal musical vocabulary in the transformation of preexisting musical material. Performing music from a different era or culture and incorporating traditions in a variety of different languages and styles present a significant performance challenge for any group of singers. Principal characters and members of the chorus are required to switch musical styles ranging from music inspired by French Canadian and Métis dance to Roman Catholic Latin chant and Native Canadian traditional song. This movement between musical styles and languages must be comfortable and fluid for the chorus in particular as the dramatic function and intention of the singers on stage must also change to match the cultural context of the scene being played out on stage. The challenge, therefore, is not only vocal, but also dramatic in that there is little time between scenes to switch styles from French Métis in one moment to Victorian, English-speaking Orangemen nationalists in the next.

The musical inspiration for the prerecorded solo voice is extracted from "The Marching Song" of 1869, with text by Hunter Murray set to a preexisting melody (MacLeod, 1960). Soldiers heading west sang this song in their advance to defend Canadian interests during the Red River Rebellion. The simplicity of the original folk tune is in the structure of the melody sung by the solo tenor voice, which, in Somers' hands, becomes highly ornamented and stylised (see example below). Later harmonised for men's chorus, the melody is manipulated and mixed with other sound samples to produce prerecorded materials that are amplified and played over the live orchestral music in performance.

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Introduction

The image shows a musical score for the Introduction of the opera *Louis Riel*. It consists of four staves of music. The first staff is labeled "Pre-taped" and "Slow - not rigid (Possible in my higher composition...)" and contains the lyrics "Ri - el" and "sis in his cham - ber a' stato". The second staff contains the lyrics "Wi' his sto len sil - ver lookes an' by sto len sil - ver plait". The third staff contains the lyrics "An a' his brow things spread out in style so great:". The fourth staff contains the lyrics "Hert not break fast a - lanc this morn". The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like "f" and "p".

First phrase of the music from the pre-taped voice, *Introduction*, sung by the composer in surviving pre-recorded materials (Somers, 1967).

"Est-il rien sur la terre?" and "Le Roi maleureux," sung by Riel's men in Act I, are two French Canadian folk songs taken from *Songs of Old Manitoba*, a collection of traditional songs edited by Margaret Arnett MacLeod (1960, p. 7). By contrast, Somers borrowed the English song "We'll Hang Him up the River" from John Coulter's 1950 play *Riel*. The origin of this melody is from a memory of Coulter's youth growing up in Ireland and was transcribed by composer Healey Willan (Cherney, 1975, p. 135).

Perhaps the most impressive example of music representing Native Canadian peoples is found in the arioso "Kuyas" (a Cree word for long ago) sung by Riel's wife Marguerite in the style of a lullaby to her son, and as a lament representing the passing of a people (Roslak in Stubbley, 2005). The motivic material for the aria is taken from the song of Skateen, the Wolfhead chief of a Nass River Tribe, collected and noted by Marius Barbeau and Sir Ernest MacMillan (Garfield, 1951). The aria is written in the style of a lament with long melismas on vowels coloured by smaller note values that are meant to evoke a Native Canadian vocal style. As the piece continues, a thin accompaniment is added by solo flute, sleigh bells, tom-tom, tenor and bass drums. The end result is at times sensitive and at times a dramatic creation of an aria inspired by a Native Canadian melody presented in the context of a Western operatic art form.

One of the most spectacular moments of choral performance in the opera occurs in the last scene of Act II in two dances sequences entitled "Buffalo Hunt," intended as a

reenactment of a Métis buffalo hunt. The importance of this annual event in the lives of the Métis people shaped not only their economic future, but also their cultural expression. At the centre of the music composed to accompany this visceral, primal form is a complex layering of melodic fragments further intensified by cross rhythms scored for percussion and string instruments. In the context of the opera as a whole, the two dances are the most difficult to perform as the rhythmic patterns for both the singers and the orchestra are invariable with no clear pattern to assist in the learning process.

Ways in Which the Voice is Used

Somers' *Louis Riel* contains few traditional elements of opera. There are no arias in the conventional sense and no rousing choruses reminiscent of the nineteenth century grand opera. Most of the story is told in a declamatory vocal style that is neither recitative nor spoken. At the opening of Act I we are introduced to Sir William McDougal, the new Lieutenant Governor of the Red River; Ambrose Lépin, the leader of the Métis; and Thomas Scott, the short-tempered Orangeman from eastern Canada. Each of these characters uses his own unique form of vocal expression chosen by Somers to best represent his particular dramatic persona. Lépin, a tenor, sings long passages of text on one or two notes as he communicates the terms and conditions of the Métis people in rapid *recitativo* fashion. Sir William McDougal's vocal colour is a heavier, more substantive bass voice as he represents the voice of authority and opposition. His vocal delivery is more dramatic in tone, more sung than spoken. And finally, Thomas Scott, neither classified as a tenor nor a bass, must half sing, half speak his dialogue with short utterances in a rapid, rhythmic declamatory style. Somers notes in the score that Scott's lines must be spoken, with pitches acting more as a guide to vocal "intonement" instead of sung. The dramatic success of the role depends more on the singer's ability to use the voice in a dramatic "spoken" way than in a dramatic "sung" way. Additionally, the use of a forced or pushed spoken vocal style makes the character of Thomas Scott one of the most demanding roles in the opera where adherence to speech rhythms takes precedence over conventional vocal issues of pitch and intonation.

The character of Riel represents both a visionary and a romantic; he neither sings entirely in *recitativo* or aria fashion. In the court scene towards the end of Act III, Riel makes an eloquent and impassioned plea requesting that he be acquitted of his crime. This *arioso* perfectly contrasts the two vocal styles that lie somewhere between sung

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aria and vocal recitative, and captures the two aspects of Riel's mental condition, that of sane leader on the one hand contrasted by religious fanatic on the other. At the climax of Riel's dramatic development, Somers once again chooses the clarity and rawness of an unaccompanied aria. With the disintegration of the orchestral barrier, the audience enters into the space of the drama being played out. We are aware of our role in the condemning of Riel. We are the chorus; we become the jury. We are silent. By contrast, the character of Sir John A. Macdonald, the "political realist, the pragmatist" in the words of the composer, occasionally sings, but more often "sing-speaks" in a vocal *parlando* style that rests somewhere between a sung line and *recitativo* delivery (Cherney, 1975, p. 132). This vocal style comes across as weak and unconvincing to perfectly mirror many of the historic promises offered to the Métis at the time.

Choral Speaking

The half-sung, half-spoken style of vocal declamation is not reserved for solo voices alone. As the drama of the opera builds to a climax at the end of Act III, Riel's lawyer, Francois Xavier Lemieux, leads witnesses in rapid succession through their testimonies. B.B. Osler, the lawyer for the crown; Dr. Francois Roi, a French Canadian doctor who ran an asylum where Riel was a patient; and the British General Middleton who was responsible for Riel's defeat and eventual capture after the battle of Batoche are all called to bear witness against Riel. The music that corresponds perfectly with the confusion of this scene is constructed of short, rhythmic motives in the orchestra, which coincide with outbursts from the chorus and solo voices. The instrumental musical language is atonal with short, rhythmic segments of four or five notes in rapid succession passed between instrumental sections of the orchestra. The brass and percussion instruments make loud spontaneous utterances that add to the tension and confusion of the court proceedings.

Riel's lawyer, Francois Xavier Lemieux, leads the fray with vocal lines half-spoken, half-sung with tremendous attention to the smallest rhythmic detail. Pitch accuracy is of secondary concern due to the speed of the exchange of dialogue between vocal forces and the music in the orchestra. When there is absolute attention to rhythmic accuracy in all voices of the chorus, the end result delivers maximum dramatic impact in the bloodthirsty cry for revenge. It takes hours of rehearsal time to teach a choral ensemble to choral speak in unison. The choral machine must perform short, rhythmic phrases at varying dynamic levels and varying phrase lengths, all independent of the orchestra having been assigned a different voice and dramatic function. Dynamic markings in the

chorus range from *pp* to *fff* where extreme changes must be executed within the space of a measure. Choral voices must be coached and reminded to shout in a fully vocal, supported manner so as not to cause vocal fatigue over the run of the show. This is best achieved by using the strength of absolute unison declamation, and constantly reminding singers to focus on the percussive qualities of consonance and resonance through support in their declamatory sound in exactly the same way that they support their singing voices.

Instrumental and Vocal Independence

Somers reveals his own political allegiances to the cause through the contrast in the ways he wrote the music supporting the two male protagonists, Taché and Sir John A. Macdonald. Monsignor Taché, a friend to Riel in his youth and a confidant in his adult life turned political pawn, sings long, melodic phrases that are supported beautifully by tonal music in the orchestra. Consistent to Somers' unique style, Taché's vocal lines remain independent of the orchestral accompaniment, but somehow more closely resemble the beauty and line of conventional Romantic operatic vocal writing. By contrast, the comical, dance-like banality of the orchestral *non*-accompaniment written under the voice of Sir John A. Macdonald reveals the true nature of Somers' feeling toward the deplorable political dealings of Sir John and the issue of the Métis. Additionally, the character of Sir John must sing difficult intervallic leaps within vocal lines "in a rather satirical form of speech...heightened, inflected, and ...guided (Cherney, 1975, p. 132)" making it some of the most challenging vocal writing in the opera. The function of the orchestra is not to accompany but to act as the voice of an advisory expressing the banality of the political diatribe through the use of dance music in the woodwind and brass instruments. The listener hears two independent musical ideas working in opposition, rather than a more traditional approach to the voice being supported by the orchestra.

Finally, one of the most difficult obstacles to have been overcome in the recent preparation of Opera McGill's production of *Louis Riel* was the winning over of young singers to the musical language and vocal demands of Somers' work. It is hard to imagine that the musical language is still very unfamiliar to young singers 35 years after the opera was first premiered. Many of the performers in the Opera McGill production were not even born in 1967, and few of them had even heard of *Louis Riel* before the work was selected for performance. The complexity of rhythmic notation in the vocal lines coupled with atonal, unsupported orchestral writing (at times working at cross-

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musical purposes with the singers on stage) is confusing and disconcerting for vocal performers. This is compounded by the challenges of having to navigate sometimes sung, sometimes spoken vocal lines, resulting in a feeling of frustration and defeat.

Source Materials and Research Challenges

Unfortunately, there is no definitive, performing edition for the opera *Louis Riel*. This void became the single greatest production challenge for the Opera McGill project. If this new production had not occurred in the context of a university opera training program, it probably could not have happened at all. Included in the list of difficult-to-locate production materials was a playable piano reduction for piano vocal rehearsals, a complete conductor's score and accompanying orchestral parts, and finally, access to prerecorded sound materials integral to the music of the prologue and battle scene. When Opera McGill received orchestral parts two weeks before the first orchestral rehearsal, we discovered a long list of errors in note and rhythmic values with bars of instrumental music missing in individual parts or in the conductor's score. It quickly became obvious that the conductor's score and accompanying parts had not been verified since the 1975 production, with no attempt to edit any of the materials toward the creation of a definitive performing edition. The pages of errors and omissions took hours to correct and verify, time that any opera company could ill afford. The piano vocal score is fiendishly difficult and, in many places, unreadable or unplayable with an equal number of notational errors and omissions. Prerecorded vocal and sound-sampled materials were not to be found with any of the performing materials from the Canadian Music Centre in Toronto. These were only made available through a joint effort on the part of CBC producer, David Jager, and sound recording technician, Charles Grey. Based on our experience with the piece, one was forced to ask if there was any reason to wonder why this work was never performed after 1975.

Critical Response

Turp (2005) in his article in *Opera Canada* states that McGill Opera's production of *Louis Riel* was "a major achievement, all the more notable for being presented by an educational establishment...the commitment displayed by the cast was awe-inspiring (p. 26)." Turp also alludes to Opera McGill taking a risk in choosing to present a new production of *Riel*, which artistically, and financially was the case.¹ In *La Press*, Gingras (2005) comments that "*l'immense distribution de près de 40 rôles, dont plusieurs très courts,*

est, pour l'ensemble, très satisfaisante, surtout de la part d'étudiants [the large distribution of the nearly 40 roles, many of which were very short and, on the whole, very satisfactory throughout on the part of the students]." Writing in the spirit of the French grand opera tradition, Somers' artistic vision for *Louis Riel* includes many minor named characters in addition to a large mixed chorus to balance the size of the orchestra. This became a tremendous challenge of a different sort for the vocal forces available to Opera McGill. Careful planning during the casting process allowed for the double and triple casting of male singers to allow for the 29 named male roles and the three male and three female principals. Additionally, all chorus scenes needed to be planned carefully in the staging process to allow for a reasonable passage of time before a named character was allowed to reappear on stage as a member of the chorus.

Kaptainis (2005) of Montreal's *The Gazette* remarked that "(one) emerg(es) from the theatre not humming, but impressed...Maybe Louis Riel will go another decade or two before it is revived. But revived it will be. Of that there is no doubt (p. D2)." This observation about the "tuneless" aspect of *Louis Riel* works against audience appeal and reinforces the classification of the opera as being too "academic" for the enjoyment of the general public. But we leave the theatre with a sense of having experienced something important. It is the message of the story that moves us, prompting us to reflect on how Riel and his message helped to shape our history. While we may not leave the theatre humming, we are sure to be left with the impression of the message of equality found in the voice of Riel. His message of equality and fair treatment touches us, even through the complexities of the musical score. As difficult as the style may be for opera goers and, in my experience, young singers alike, I would like to think that as the cast of Opera McGill grew to appreciate its complexities through the process of rehearsing and performing the opera, so too will general members of the public give *Riel* the listening time and patience it deserves to be understood. I am in support of Kaptainis' confidence in the long-term survival of *Louis Riel* through a future revival into the repertory of Canadian opera companies.

Conclusions

Somers' opera *Louis Riel*, in spite of its many performance challenges, has gained its rightful place as one of Canada's most famous operas, in part because of the scope and enormity of performance forces. The controversy and historical drama that surrounds the story of Riel helped to build and shape the country that we have become and is an important part of the history of the multicultural fabric we now live in. Somers' genius

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as a composer is evidenced in his ability to bring together the music, language, and culture from diverging backgrounds and create a musical drama of grand proportions, expressed in a unique and personal musical language. While a professional revival of the opera may yet be a way off, I would like to think that the chances of Somers' *Louis Riel* being remounted at all owes something to the inspiring talent, dedication, and vision of the Opera McGill production under the direction of Dixie-Ross Neill.

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Endnote

- 1 Opera McGill spent close to \$250,000 to mount *Louis Riel* in a new production, nearly four times the regular budget for the annual main production. This figure is not outrageous when one considers the costs regularly associated with professional opera productions.