

Opera Indigene: Re/presenting First Nations and Indigenous Cultures

Edited by

PAMELA KARANTONIS
University of Greenwich, UK

and

DYLAN ROBINSON
University of Toronto, Canada

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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>List of Tables</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>List of Music Examples</i>	<i>xv</i>
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	<i>xix</i>
<i>Series Editor's Preface</i>	<i>xxv</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xxvii</i>

Introduction	1
<i>Pamela Karantonis and Dylan Robinson</i>	

PART I CRITICAL AND COMPARATIVE CONTEXTS: OPERA'S COLONIZING FORCE AND DECOLONIZING POTENTIAL

1	Orpheus Conquistador <i>Nicholas Till</i>	15
2	Decentering Opera: Early Twenty-First-Century Indigenous Production <i>Beverley Diamond</i>	31
3	"Singing from The Margins": Postcolonial Themes in <i>Voss</i> and <i>Waiting for the Barbarians</i> <i>Michael Halliwell</i>	57
4	Performativity, Mimesis, and Indigenous Opera <i>Pamela Karantonis</i>	73

PART II AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVES

5	"To Didj or Not to Didj": Exploring Indigenous Representation in Australian Music Theater Works by Margaret Sutherland and Andrew Schultz <i>Anne Boyd</i>	93
6	Giving Voice to the Un-voiced "Witch" and the "Heart of Nothingness": Moya Henderson's <i>Lindy</i> <i>Linda Kouvaras</i>	115

- 7 *The Eighth Wonder: Explorations of Place and Voice* 141
Anne Power

PART III INDIANISM IN THE AMERICAS

- 8 *Indianismo* in Brazilian Romantic Opera: Shifting Ideologies of
National Foundation 159
Maria Alice Volpe
- 9 Native Songs, Indianist Styles, and the Processes of Music
Idealization 173
Tara Browner
- 10 Composed and Produced in the American West, 1912–1913:
Two Operatic Portrayals of First Nations Cultures 187
Catherine Parsons Smith

PART IV CANADIAN PERSPECTIVES

- 11 Assimilation, Integration and Individuation: The Evolution of
First Nations Musical Citizenship in Canadian Opera 211
Mary I. Ingraham
- 12 “Too Much White Man In It”: Aesthetic Colonization in
Tzinquaw 231
Alison Greene
- 13 Peaceful Surface, Monstrous Depths: Barbara Pentland and
Dorothy Livesay’s *The Lake* 245
Dylan Robinson
- 14 The Politics of Genre: Exposing Historical Tensions in Harry
Somers’s *Louis Riel* 259
Colleen L. Renihan

PART V NEW CREATION AND COLLABORATIVE PROCESSES

- 15 Creating *Pimooteewin* 279
Robin Elliott
- 16 After McPhee: Evan Ziporyn’s *A House in Bali* 295
Victoria Vaughan

17	West Coast First Peoples and <i>The Magic Flute</i> : Tracing the Journey of a Cross-Cultural Collaboration	309
	<i>Robert McQueen Interviewed by Dylan Robinson, with Responses by Cathi CharlesWherry and Tracey Herbert, Lorna Williams, and Marion Newman</i>	
18	<i>Pecan Summer</i> : The Process of Making New Indigenous Opera in Australia	325
	<i>Deborah Cheetham and Daniel Browning, interviewed by Pamela Karantonis</i>	
	<i>Bibliography</i>	337
	<i>Index</i>	347

Chapter 14

The Politics of Genre: Exposing Historical Tensions in Harry Somers's *Louis Riel*

Colleen L. Renihan

We [do not create] tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive.

Martin Luther King Jr.

In previous analyses of historically based operas in Canada, very little has been made of the ways in which the operatic genre creates, enhances, subverts and/or distorts the historical narratives brought forth in these works. In the words of historian Hayden White, “narrative, far from being merely a form of discourse that can be filled with different contents, real or imaginary as the case may be, already possesses a content ... ; this ‘content of the form’ of narrative discourse in historical thought [must be] examined.”¹ If we follow White’s advice and unpack the political and cultural content of the operatic genre in Canadian operas based on First Nations history, several previously controlled tensions are revealed, and previously silenced historical voices are heard. Through an examination of one of Canada’s most historically and culturally significant operas, *Louis Riel*, written by playwright Mavor Moore and “Canada’s darling of composition”² Harry Somers for the Canadian Centennial in 1967, I examine the ramifications of genre on the representation of this extraordinary figure in Canadian history.³ I approach *Louis Riel* with an ear tuned to issues of hegemony, and to the tensions between Riel’s First Nations anti-hero status and the conventions of the operatic genre itself. What does this operatic representation offer Riel’s memory? Do questions regarding the inherent implications of operatic convention limit the way in which

¹ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. xi.

² Harry Somers, Composer Portraits Series CD. Centrediscs Canada, 2007.

³ The opera *Louis Riel* is based on John Coulter’s 1950 play entitled *Riel: A Play in Two Parts* (Toronto, 1962), which, incidentally, has been credited with starting what historian Albert Braz has termed the infamous and still thriving “Riel Industry.” Based on the success of the former play, Coulter produced two later plays, *The Crime of Louis Riel* and *The Trial of Louis Riel*, both in 1968—a year after *Louis Riel* the opera was premiered at the O’Keefe Centre in Toronto.

we can approach works such as *Louis Riel* in contemporary Canadian society? In what follows, I argue that by isolating the tensions produced by the juxtaposition of operatic convention and Riel's identity as a Métis anti-hero we might begin to interpret the elements of conflict and convergence between First Nations and Western cultural voices in the opera. By unveiling the sites of tension in the work where expressions of Riel's Métis heritage and the operatic genre's conventions conflict, we can begin to view *Louis Riel* as part of an ongoing project of decolonization in Canada—as a site where the tensions between past and present, East and West, French and English, First Nations and European are not obscured, but rather positioned in such a way that they might be creatively explored and thus newly understood.

Louis Riel and Canadian History

The story of the opera is based on the post-Confederation Métis uprisings of 1867–1870 and 1884–1885 in what were Canada's Northwest Territories (what are now the provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan). This is one of the most contested chapters in Canadian history, primarily because the country entered into Confederation in 1867—an event preceded and followed by a time when the relationship between Canada's First Nations peoples and European settlers was most disastrously strained, the effects of which still resonate powerfully with Canadians. Both groups had differing views on land ownership and, most importantly, on the nature and conditions of national unity. Louis Riel was the charismatic leader of the Canadian Métis⁴ peoples on the prairies—a mystic, who was central to their establishing a provisional government for the province of Manitoba. Because of his strong opposition to Canada's first Prime Minister, John A. Macdonald, and to Confederation, Riel was exiled to Montana for several years, but eventually returned, passionately raising Métis grievances to the Canadian government in 1885. This unsuccessful mission led to the tragic Northwest Rebellion, where British and French soldiers arrived from the East in a deadly attack on the Métis people at Batoche. Riel was eventually hanged for high treason, but his impassioned legacy looms large in the Canadian national imagination.

Louis Riel is one of the most popular and complex figures in Canadian history, a man whose conflicting representations in literature, painting, sculpture, poetry, music, and theater render him a strangely appropriate representative of the fragmented and conflicted Canadian identity. According to Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer, Louis Riel is the archetypal Canadian hero because of the fact

⁴ The Métis people are descendants of interracial marriages between Indigenous peoples and Europeans (the word Métis is derived from the Spanish *mestizo*, meaning “mixed race”). They are one of the many Indigenous groups that make up the First Peoples of Canada.

that he “personifies the dissonance at the root of the Canadian temperament.”⁵ He also, as I will argue, demonstrates the dissonance at the root of many operatic historical representations, and also the veiled tensions in operatic juxtapositions of First Nations culture and Western culture. In the opera, we gain insight into the man’s inner conflict, and into its broader social implications, as the historical Riel inhabits and also resists the tropes of operatic characterization. The operatic Riel is presented simultaneously as both hero and anti-hero, as Canadian and non-Canadian, and, curiously, as both operatic and non-operatic. For the purpose of my discussion, I will seek out moments of genre-related tension in the work, moments where Riel’s operatic nature somehow defies his own cultural and political beliefs. Historian Dominick LaCapra makes a related argument for the isolation of sites of resistance in historical works, insisting, “it must be actively recognized that the past has its own ‘voices’ that must be respected, especially when they resist or qualify the interpretations we would like to place on them. A text is a network of resistances.”⁶ The resistances within the historical narrative of *Louis Riel* might suggest, as La Capra intimates, that there are voices in the story that have yet to be heard.

Redefining Nationalist Formulations: *Louis Riel* in Context

Canada’s cultural and economic goals in 1967 affected not only the cultural prominence of the work at the time of its creation, but also its meaning in national terms. The most significant cultural force surrounding the work’s production and reception was the Canadian Centennial celebration in 1967, for which *Louis Riel* was created. The opera was commissioned by the Floyd S. Chalmers Foundation, produced by the Canadian Opera Company, and supported through financial assistance from the Canadian Centennial Commission, the Canada Council and the Province of Ontario Council for the Arts. Because of these sanctioned political associations, audiences and critics carried lofty expectations for the opera’s ability to be representative of Canada at a time when looking carefully back and hopefully forward were central to the process of defining a national identity. Geographical unity was still of primary importance in Canada in the 1960s, as was the issue of establishing a common ground between Anglophone and Francophone groups—Canada’s competing colonizers. With the perilous situation in Quebec, national unity was paramount.⁷ *Louis Riel* highlights issues of national cohesion and

⁵ R. Murray Schafer, *On Canadian Music* (Indian River, ON: Arcana Editions, 1984), p. 49.

⁶ Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Context, Language* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 64.

⁷ Quebec experienced the famous “Quiet Revolution” during the 1960s, which resulted in a modernization and secularization of French Canadian society, followed by an increase in confidence and the desire for independence. The terrorist group Front de

regionalism, and exposes the tensions in the very idea of Canadian nationalism, by placing East and West in opposition, and by resonating loudly with First Nations concerns about the nature of this national unity. Intriguingly, through a multifaceted resistance to the traditional marginalization of Indigenous cultures in the image of our national identity, the opera relates uneasily to the nationalist project for which it was created. Riel's mission, after all, involved orchestrating a defiant opposition to Canadian Confederation, rendering his heroic role in the 1967 Centennial opera highly ironic. Mary Ingraham duly notes that the domains affecting Canadian cultural production in general demand consideration of... [the contradictions inherent in] the production and consumption of culture in relation to power structures and the tensions of conflicting [political] interests [...]."⁸ While the relationship between political influence and artistic creation in *Louis Riel* seems at first to be one of compatibility, the creators managed, subversively as I propose, to use the work as a vehicle for cultural and political commentary at this significant historical moment. Other reactions to the revisited issue of Canadian unity in 1967 were less subtle; events of the Centennial celebrations—specifically Montreal's *Expo 67* at which *Louis Riel* was performed—were sites of protest for minority groups including First Nations peoples, who insisted that the Centennial celebrations represented a further indoctrination of British land claims, merely a reminder of past struggles.⁹ As Linda and Michael Hutcheon have noted, "it was [undeniably] a moment of high English-Canadian nationalism," their statement flagging the most prominent problem concerning many cultural products of this era.¹⁰ As *Louis Riel* demonstrates, the political concerns surrounding Canada's Confederation of 1867 found parallels in the concerns of the Centennial, and go to the heart of First Nations issues in contemporary Canadian society as well. The unique contradictions between the commissioned nature of the opera and the cultural work that *Louis Riel* engages in suggests that we have more to gain in confronting, rather than suppressing, the work's inherent tensions.

Libération du Québec (FLQ) gained momentum during this time, leading to the fateful October Crisis in 1970.

⁸ Mary Ingraham, "Something to Sing About: A Preliminary List of Canadian Staged and Dramatic Music Since 1867," *Intersections*, 28/1 (2007), p. 20.

⁹ Olive Dickason, *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992). Dickason describes how *Expo 67* in Montreal provided First Nations peoples with a forum at which to "publicly express for the first time on a national scale, dissatisfaction with their lot" (p. 375).

¹⁰ Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, "Imagined Communities: Postnational Canadian Opera," in *The Work of Opera: Genre, Nationhood, and Sexual Difference*, ed. Richard Dellamora and Daniel Fischlin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 3.

The Significance of Operatic Convention

The tensions between genre and subject in *Louis Riel* are indicative of the inherent promise of investigating the nature of the historical narratives created in Canadian opera. They also suggest that historical opera in Canada may operate differently than it does and has in other national traditions. Somers and Moore seem to have approached the work not only with a fascination for certain aspects of Riel's story, but also with an interest in exploring operatic convention. Like Riel, they had a mission. In the words of Moore, "The goal was not simply to put Riel's story to music, but, rather, to use the conventions and traditions of Grand Opera as a form of nation-building, a platform for discovering who we are."¹¹ This is deeply telling; since both Somers and Moore were interested in the Riel story for its potential to make national statements via the operatic genre specifically, it seems only fitting to consider the success of these goals based on a close analysis of opera's conventional features. "I would love to create legend," said Somers, intimating some level of belief in unconventional narrative constructs, and in the possibilities that he saw in opera for this purpose.¹² While Riel is established as a hero, however—as Linda Hutcheon points out—"From the very first scene, Canada is the villain of the piece."¹³ Creating a narrative structure by which Canada itself is the anti-hero is of course exceedingly problematic, to say the least, in an opera commissioned to celebrate the nation's Centennial, and supported by the Canadian government. Between Riel's apparent status as hero and his revolutionary desire to oppose British colonial structures, the opera's protagonist is a conflicted historical character. The genre, as I will argue, is directly—yet curiously—implicated in this conflict.

Historians such as Alun Munslow, Keith Jenkins, and Hayden White have recently argued for the importance of a close analysis of genre in historical narratives—in the actual *mode* of historical telling.¹⁴ As an extension of their work, we might consider the operatic genre, the actual "story space governing its mode of expression,"¹⁵ to offer important cultural clues to the stories it tells. Many of the tensions within *Louis Riel* arise from the norms of a genre that is itself an immigrant on Canadian soil, through elements that govern the identity of

¹¹ Mavor Moore, quoted in Richard Turp, "Louis Riel: Harry Somers' Canadian Grand Opera Revived at McGill University," *Opera Canada*, 46/1 (Spring 2005), pp. 24–7, p. 24.

¹² Somers, quoted in Eitan Cornfield, "A Documentary of Harry Somers," *Composer Portraits Series* CD (Centrediscs, 2006).

¹³ Linda Hutcheon, "Opera and National Identity: New Canadian Opera," *Canadian Theatre Review*, 96 (Fall 1998), p. 6.

¹⁴ See Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (New York: Routledge, 2006); and White, *The Content of the Form*.

¹⁵ Alun Munslow, *Narrative and History* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 28.

the genre itself. In order to define these elements, I adopt Herbert Lindenberger's framework from *Opera the Extravagant Art*, in which he associates the notion of the operatic "with such terms as histrionic, extravagant, gestural, ceremonial, and performative ..."¹⁶ I would add a history of nationalist tendencies, as well as a direct affiliation with the European tradition, to Lindenberger's list. This self-reflexive employment of genre, what Linda Hutcheon has identified as a parodic mode of self-conscious representation, is evident on many levels in *Louis Riel*.¹⁷ In Act II, Scene 4, for example, Somers notes in the score that the character playing Dr. John Schultz, a leader of the governmental troupe sent to arrange the settlement of the Red River valley, is to sing with "a voice at times melodramatic lieder, at times declamatory grand opera."¹⁸ Associating the unfavorable character of Schultz with an ostentatious style of singing demonstrates that Somers and Moore were undoubtedly conscious of the genre's political and cultural implications, and that, to them, the genre may well have reached an inescapably self-referential point, prompted here by the need to express historical voices that can no longer be silenced. In this way, opera is revealed as a fraught cultural product, its aesthetic conventions being repeatedly and purposefully challenged in *Louis Riel*. For this reason, I pause to consider the problematic nature of representing Métis history through a genre that creates meaning by way of its unavoidably Western narrative constructs. Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer has suggested that "Opera is an aristocratic experience, far removed from the hearts of a people working close to the land in an attempt to open up a new country ... it seems thrust on [people] from 'above' or 'abroad'."¹⁹ How, then, can we interpret Riel's interaction with the genre in a way that advances both the unifying, nationalistic goals of the work as well as the identity-affirming goals of Riel for his people? I will continue my consideration of the ways in which the genre contributes to these narratives by examining additional points of tension in the work, and how the implications of genre take on new meaning in each instance, beginning with an examination of Somers's use of musical quotation.

Quotation: Reinterpreting Subaltern Voices

The musical quotations that Harry Somers has employed in *Louis Riel* inadvertently highlight the work's operatic elements, and increase the complexity of the work's

¹⁶ Herbert Lindenberger, *Opera the Extravagant Art* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 76.

¹⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

¹⁸ Harry Somers, *Louis Riel*. Libretto by Mavor Moore with Jacques Languirand, score, 1967, photocopies of manuscripts in the possession of the Canadian Music Centre, Full Orchestra. Act II, Scene 4.

¹⁹ R. Murray Schafer, *The Public of the Music Theatre, Louis Riel: A Case Study* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1972), p. 7.

meanings; they render the work intertextual, even intercultural, aligning it in some ways with the concept of the Canadian mosaic. These non-operatic references suggest that Somers and Moore were interested in broadening the meaning of the work, and in reforming or at least questioning the historical narrative by bringing other voices into it. The quotations simultaneously challenge the nature of the genre and highlight it by setting the atonal musical “ground” (as Andrew Zinck has referred to it)²⁰ as well as characteristic operatic elements, along with their aesthetic associations, against a contrasting idiom—a folk one, in many instances. The opera begins with an adaptation of “Riel sits in his chamber o’ state,” an unaccompanied folksong that is not sung live, but broadcast into the theater on pre-recorded four-track quadraphonic tape.²¹ The melody, written by Alexander Hunt Murray, was originally sung by Canadian soldiers marching on Fort Garry in 1870.²² In Somers’s adaptation, the lively march becomes a slow, modal, and haunting melody sung by a solo tenor, and the recording features electronic sounds that distort the simple tune. Native-inspired ornamentation such as lower grace notes, *trillo* figures, and descending glissandi at the ends of phrases are specified in the score, rendering the song’s origins ambiguous through a tension that involves both its textual and musical layers. The tape medium contradicts what we interpret to be the traditionally authentic goals of the folk aesthetic (as well as operatic convention). In the folk genre, we expect an intimate encounter with the song, and we expect the song to be delivered in a personalized manner by an individual folksong singer, both of which are betrayed by the taped and electronically broadcast nature of the song. The aforementioned Native-inspired layer of ornamentation also seems strange, foreshadowing the problematic combination of First Nations and European traditions in the opera, and setting up the cultural and historical tensions in the work (see Example 14.1).

Additional quoted material appears throughout the work, such as Ontario hymn tunes, and two Indian dances in the introduction to Act II, Scene 6, the second of which is the “Buffalo Hunt” from Margaret Arnett MacLeod’s collection in *Songs of Old Manitoba* (see Example 14.2).²³ In addition to the words being translated into English for MacLeod’s collection, the song was also musically altered from its original in order to render the dance more “primitive.” The additive metrical organization, the modal setting, the a-metrical accents of the hand-clapping in the second system, and the composer’s indication that it should be sung by “a lyric

²⁰ Andrew Zinck, “Music and Dramatic Structure in the Operas of Harry Somers” (PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 1996).

²¹ Interestingly, Harry Somers himself appeared as the singer on the tape used in the original production.

²² Margaret Arnett MacLeod, *Songs of Old Manitoba* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1960), p. 50.

²³ “The Buffalo Hunt” uses a text written by Pierre Falcon, renowned Métis songwriter who was known as the “bard of the Prairie Métis” (Lillian Buckler, “The Use of Folk Music in Harry Somers’s opera *Louis Riel*.” MMus. thesis, University of Alberta, 1984, p. 26).

Example 14.1 *Louis Riel* Introduction (“Riel sits in his chamber o’state”)

Pre-taped (Possible to try higher transposition.)

Slow - not rigid

Tenor *f*

Ri — el sits in his cham - ber o' state, —

(Strong on the last consonant each time.)

6 sec.

Wi' his stol-len sil-ver forks an' his sto-len sil-ver plate, —

6 $\frac{2}{3}$ sec.

An — a' his braw things spread out in style so great; —

3 $\frac{1}{3}$ sec.

He'll not break fast a — lone this morn — i — ng. —

baritone with a tenor quality” demonstrate the composer’s intentions to evoke a primitive indigenous culture.²⁴

Somers also situates the opera’s story historically through music by quoting several popular songs from the era, such as the uniquely tonal Métis song “Est-il rien sur la terre (Le Roi Malheureux)” in Act I, Scene 2 and Act II, Scene 2, and “Orangemen Unite” in Act II, Scene 4, which features an onstage band that is instructed to play very badly. The song “We’ll Hang him up the River”—which was included even in John Coulter’s original play, on which the opera was based—appears in numerous instances, including Act II, Scene 4 and even in a concealed canon in the orchestra in Act II, Scene 5, creating an Ivesian effect of altering the folk aesthetic by transforming it through a heavily manipulated compositional device.

²⁴ Somers, *Louis Riel*, Act II, Scene 6. The choice to use a baritone for this high-tessitura piece was likely an attempt to imitate the high-pitched, falsetto singing voices of First Nations powwow singers through the indications in the score. Its performance by a trained operatic singer further highlights the tensions between operatic convention and First Nations culture.

Example 14.2 *Louis Riel* Act II, Scene 6 (Dance: “The Buffalo Hunt”)

1 Mod.⁰ **Dance #1** 154. 319.

Perc. T. Dr. & Tom. Tom.: no accents unless indicated.

1 Mod.⁰

hi ya hi ya ya hi hi ya hi ya ya hi ya ya hi ya ya hi hi ya ee-ya hi ya hi hi ya hi ya ya

[SLEIGH BELLS] At least two sets. More if possible 2

(Move into natural voice.)

ee-ya ya ya hi ya ya ya hi ya ya ya hi hi hi ya hi ya ya hi hi ya hi ya ya ya hi ya ya hi ya ya

S.B.'s

hi hi ya ya ya ya hi ya ya hi hi ya ya ya ya hi ya ya hi hi ya hi ya ya hi

hi hi ya ya

The most notable external musical reference—because of its length and its significance as actual First Nations cultural property—is the lullaby, “Kuyas,” which Marguerite, Riel’s American wife, sings to her baby in Act III, Scene 1.

“Kuyas” is based on a five-note motif from the “Song of Skateen,” a Nisga’a song from northern British Columbia—not of the Montana Métis, as the opera implies.²⁵ Aside from “Kuyas,” the non-operatic quotations are mostly tonal, creating contrast in their juxtaposition with the atonal “ground,” as well as with each other. The juxtaposition of musical languages from contrasting geographical milieus and characters demonstrates the larger-level cultural tensions with which the opera is concerned.

Operatic Lyricism Reclaimed?

Perhaps the most significant aspect of Riel’s interaction with the generic conventions of opera is through the highly lyrical mode of self-expression given to him by Somers, which supports the image of Riel as an obstreperous religious fanatic. Of the hundreds of representations intended to capture the essence of Riel, this image seems to be the most prominent, since it is used to explain Riel’s erratic behavior, that of a “mystic madman” as he has often been represented.²⁶ Many authors have been drawn to this particular rendering of the Riel story, perhaps more than any other interpretation, but none has validated it to the extent that the opera does. Steeped in a tradition where presenting supernatural elements, divine inspiration and emotional expressiveness are the norm, the opera expresses this particular aspect of Riel perhaps too easily, inevitably endorsing his emotionalized character.²⁷ In contrast to Eastern Canadian characters such as Prime Minister Macdonald and Thomas Scott, who express themselves in a rhythmic speech-song style, Riel often succumbs to an exaggerated and effusive vocal style in his arias, characterized by highly lyrical and melismatic vocal lines.²⁸ In an aria from Act I, Scene 4, Riel sings in a raw emotional manner, with virtuosic exclamations that push the

²⁵ The “Song of Skateen” was collected and notated by Sir Ernest MacMillan and Marius Barbeau. In an interview about Somers’s composition of the opera, Barbara Chilcott recalls the choice of the piece for this scene, explaining how she convinced Somers to use it because of “the Indian connection; it’s in Cree; and it’s talking about long ago...” Incidentally, Somers did not feel that this was problematic. The piece features accents by flute, sleigh bells, tom-tom, and bass drum (Somers, *Composer Portraits Series*).

²⁶ Thomas Flanagan’s controversial *Louis ‘David’ Riel: Prophet of the New World* expresses an anti-Métis agenda similar to Donald Creighton’s account in *The Story of Canada*, positing Riel as a religious fanatic who is motivated by his own greed. See, for example, Thomas Flanagan, *Louis ‘David’ Riel: ‘Prophet of the New World’* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1996); and Donald Creighton, *The Story of Canada* (Toronto, ON: Faber and Faber, 1975).

²⁷ The negative connotations of Riel’s effusive lyricism echo Catherine Clément’s argument in her book *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

²⁸ Brian Cherney, *Harry Somers* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1975), p. 132.

Example 14.3 *Louis Riel* Act I, Scene 4 (Aria: “Dieu! O mon Dieu!”)

Riel (gliss.) *ff* 165. Indication of pitch contour only manner at delivery almost spoken **Tempo II accel.**
 Comme la boue des che-mins, je les ai pié-tin-és. Vous m'a-vez dé-liv-ré des dis-cords pop-u-laires Pour me plac-er à la
 Vln. 1 *fff*
Tempo II
 Riel tête des nat-ions. Un peu-ple que je ne con-nais-sais pas est dev-e-nu mon su-jet,
 Vln. 1 *ppp*
 Riel *gliss.* 3 6 5 5
 Il s'est sou-mis au prem-ier mot que j'ai dît. C'est pour-quoi je vais vous lou-er de-vant les aut-res nat-i-ons,
 Vln. 1 *fff*
 Riel 6 3 3 3
 Seign-eur je vais chant-er à la gloire de vot-re nom.
Fast (Presto)
 Riel car vous av-ez don-né de grand vic-toires à vot-re roi
 Riel et
rall. - molto
 Riel vous av-ez man-i-fes-té vot-re bon-té en-vers ce-lu-i qui vous est con-sa-cré.

limits of the singer's vocal range (see Example 14.3). Carolyn Abbate's argument for the inherently triumphant nature of the pure, unaccompanied operatic voice attributes it the power that I believe it holds here, as we witness Riel's "undefeated voice speak across the crushing plot."²⁹ Although Riel's emotionalized expression is primarily focused on religious fervor here, his zealousness is understood to also

²⁹ Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. ix. The parallels with

address the national cause to which he is equally devoted. His religious zeal and national passion are one in the opera, and most significantly, they are normalized by the genre.

In this aria, as Riel imagines himself to be the reincarnation of the prophet David, he both reaffirms his identity as religious fanatic, and also aligns himself with a lineage of operatic heroes who are driven by passion or madness to sing themselves into a frenzy.³⁰ Donna Zapf has identified similar incidents as representative of the opera's tendency to universalize the character of Riel beyond historical specificity, thereby, I would argue, confirming the strangely heroic and operatic nature of his mission and of his character.³¹ This aria demonstrates how lyricism, a vehicle of subjectivity in operatic expression, presents an important source of genre-related tension in Riel's operatic expression. The reclaiming of Riel's effusive and emotional character is one of the most significant revisionist contributions of the opera to the so-called "Riel industry."

Electronic Music: Operatic Traditions Reconfigured

Riel's operatic nature is established further through the contrast between his lyrical vocal expression and the electronic elements in the score. The use of electronically mediated voices and recorded sound in the opera exemplifies Somers's manipulation of both the foundations and limits of the genre, in an attempt to create genre-related tension at moments of high dramatic tension, such as the prologue and battle scene. His original intention involved "presenting the audience with a totally unfamiliar sound,"³² and also rendering operatically trained voices powerless when confronted with electronic sound. These pre-recorded sounds, subversive of operatic subjectivity, place Riel in a position where he is forced literally to compete with them, rendering his operatic lyricism more traditional by comparison. At one point during the creation of the opera, in fact, Somers had

Catherine Clément's argument in *Opera, or The Undoing of Women*, transl. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 1988) are instructive here.

³⁰ In fact, the operatic mad scene exemplifies a very typical convention of the genre. These infamous mad scenes to which I refer appear in many bel canto works such as Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Anna Bolena*, Bellini's *I puritani* and *La sonnambula*, Verdi's *Macbeth*, and even Britten's *Peter Grimes*. The tensions arising from the predominantly female gendered nature of this trope are striking, and they contribute, I would argue, to Riel's othering in the work. I am grateful to Professor Emeritus Andrew Hughes at the University of Toronto for sharing his research and ideas on operatic madness with me.

³¹ Donna Zapf, "Singing History, Performing Race: An Analysis of Three Canadian Operas: *Beatrice Chancy*, *Elsewhereless*, and *Louis Riel*" (PhD dissertation, University of Victoria, 2005).

³² Quoted in Cherney, *Harry Somers*, p. 134.

hoped to pit Riel against a cacophony of electronically sampled sounds in what would (if it had materialized) have been a true operatic nightmare:

In the Trial Scene, I want to achieve something Kafka-ish rather than literal: the prosecuted man who really doesn't understand the frame of reference he's in. I want voices from the speakers, sometimes totally distorted, to sound various statements and accusations, while Riel keeps trying to sing over and through them to make his statement.³³

This quotation again shows Somers's forthright desire to place the genre itself at the center of the conflict. Similarly, in the final scene of the opera, the chorus, undeniably the driving center of nationalist tendencies in nineteenth-century operatic works (and in nationalist works), is entirely removed and is replaced by a taped chorus. Genre-subverting manipulations such as these only serve to render Riel's emotional, subjective, and undeniably heroic actions increasingly operatic. Through the manipulation of musical and genre-related tensions, Somers and Moore are able to destabilize, and thereby vindicate, the character of Riel in the opera.

New Essentializing Toolboxes? Issues of Musical Representation

Critiques of the musical representation of First Nations peoples in art music have been relatively few, and most have been directed at the lexicon of essentializing primitive musical elements that have been used to depict indigeneity.³⁴ Although "primitive" musical signifiers—from the "ready-made toolbox of exotica," as Michael Pisani has defined it—were employed to a certain extent by Somers (for example, the musical modifications made to the "Buffalo Hunt," as mentioned above), I would like to suggest that these musical elements are not the most prominently problematic in terms of their representation of the Métis people.³⁵

³³ Harry Somers, *Discussing the Score to Louis Riel*. LP booklet (CMC 24/25/2685), National Arts Centre Orchestra, (Washington, 1975), p. 9.

³⁴ I am thinking, for example, of the work of Michael Pisani and Tara Browner. In Browner's "'Breathing the Indian Spirit': Thoughts on Musical Borrowing and the 'Indianist' Movement in American Music," *American Music*, 15/3 (Autumn 1997), pp. 265–84, she identifies three varieties of Native American musical representation: symbolic, indexical, and iconic. In *Louis Riel*, we find all three: the tom-toms in the Introduction are indicative of battle and therefore symbolic; the Indian dances in Act II, Scene 6 attempt to approximate Native sounds and are therefore indexical; and the Tsimshian lullaby, "Kuyas," from Act III, Scene 1, is appropriated, using actual materials from Native music, and is therefore iconic.

³⁵ Michael Pisani, "'I'm an Indian Too': Creating Native American Identities in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Music," in *The Exotic in Western Music*, ed. Jonathan Bellman (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1998), pp. 229–30.

Rather, the atonal and serial techniques employed to represent Riel and his people seem to create equally problematic historical and genre-related issues. All scenes with Métis characters are depicted through an atonal musical “ground,” and several of the principal characters, including Riel, are depicted through a serial language. Atonality and serialism, with their undeniable ties with the institutionalizing power of Western modes of thought and organization, resonate with a sense of cultural loss or assimilation of the First Nations peoples’ own forms of cultural expression.³⁶ At first glance, the association of Riel and his people with an atonal musical language would seem appropriate, given that atonality originated as a musical approach that resisted conforming to the system of tonal hierarchies that characterized Western music between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.³⁷ Furthermore, Somers’s employment of an avant-garde compositional technique in much of his music from the 1960s might also lead us to assume a sympathetic attitude toward his First Nations subjects, since it was an idiom that inspired him in many compositions from this time.³⁸ Despite this, however, we cannot dismiss the association of atonality with European values and power structures, and thus we cannot leave the atonal and serial representation of Riel and his people unquestioned. Its role in the high-modernist project, legitimized by the academy

³⁶ Atonality and serialism were musical systems adopted by composers who were disenchanted with the tonal system of harmony at the beginning of the twentieth century. While compositional freedom was central to both techniques, both atonality and serialism (in particular) proved to be equally as restrictive for composers, and, more importantly, less accessible for the listener. These techniques, relegated to elite educational institutions in the United States, were thus regarded as the European-based trends that contributed to the creation of the utmost elite compositional stream in America in the early twentieth century.

³⁷ Timothy Taylor’s *Beyond Exoticism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007) attributes the origins and structure of both tonality and opera (and their inherent conceptions of self and other) to the problematic enterprise of European colonialism. To quote Taylor, “Tonality arose to a long supremacy in western European music in part because it facilitated a concept of spatialization in music that provided for centers and margins, both geographically and psychologically” (p. 25). Interestingly, Taylor does not account for the representation of the “other” in modern musical idioms such as serialism, but one might infer its liberating or democratizing potential from his argument.

³⁸ Parallels between *Louis Riel* and Schoenberg’s *Moses und Aron* from the 1950s are limited, but striking nonetheless. The latter work was first staged in Zurich in 1957, and it is likely that Somers would have known about the event. Like *Louis Riel*, *Moses und Aron* is also concerned with the liberation of an oppressed people by a visionary figure. Though Somers didn’t have the same kind of personal investment in the Métis narrative in *Louis Riel* that Schoenberg had in the Jewish message in *Moses und Aron*, both approached their subjects sympathetically, and both acknowledged and strategically manipulated the issues that atonality and excessive lyricism posed for their protagonists. The serial musical language and lyrical singing of Riel in Somers’s opera, however, results in a more politically charged cultural product (in musical terms) than Schoenberg’s, given the associations of these styles with those of the imperialistic cultural power that Riel felt was inimical to his people’s identity.

in the mid-century, cannot be denied. According to Georgina Born, the musical avant-garde, “being no longer marginal and critical of the dominant order as in the early period of modernism, [has] failed to achieve wider cultural currency, [and therefore] remains an elite form of culture.”³⁹ This particular manifestation of the musical avant-garde in opera, therefore, inhabits several hefty political contradictions. In a highly political opera about the struggles against imperialist expansion and influence, the atonal “ground” and Riel’s serial language in the very least pose critical challenges for the work.

Riel’s first row (Example 14.4) is characterized exclusively by interval classes 1 and 3, and is employed in a very vocally restrictive and relatively stringent construction in his arias, particularly in his first aria, “Au milieu de la foule” (see Example 14.5). It encompasses several of the more prominent motifs in the opera, most importantly the “lonely leader” motif, as Somers referred to it, which consists of a rising minor third followed by a falling semitone. This motif appears often in the flute (as it does in this excerpt), creating a dissonance between the serial organization of the musical language and the “primitive exotic” of its instrumentation, as Donna Zapf has observed.⁴⁰ In this aria, Riel’s serially organized—yet operatically lyrical—lines thus create a tension that resonates politically and culturally.

Example 14.4 Riel Row 1



The musical characterization of Riel and his antithesis, Prime Minister Macdonald, presents perhaps the ultimate instance of Somers and Moore’s sympathetic inclinations toward Riel. Somers initially pointed out the contrast between Riel’s and MacDonald’s style of delivery: “What I’ve done essentially is juxtaposed Riel and MacDonald. Riel always sings – I think the Romantic always sings. I think the political realist sings when necessary, but he uses a political form of speech.”⁴¹ Interestingly, though the Prime Minister’s musical language is also atonal, his rhythmic profile defines him very differently than Riel’s, in a more stylized and (foolishly) playful way (see Example 14.6).⁴² The Prime

³⁹ Georgina Born, *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 4.

⁴⁰ Zapf, “Singing History, Performing Race,” p. 131.

⁴¹ Somers, *Composer Portraits Series*.

⁴² The musical depiction of MacDonald in contrast with Riel is important for my purposes. In the opera as a whole, the Canadian government in the “East,” particularly Prime Minister Macdonald, is represented in tonal, popular music of the time—often in banal dance meters. As Eleanor Stubley has suggested, this music imitates “the intricate footwork of the dance that sustains the political machinery of Ottawa.” Riel himself once

Example 14.5 *Louis Riel* Act I, Scene 2 (Aria: “Au Milieu de la foule”)

Flt. **Slow** **long** *pp* *f* *p* *pp* *f* *p*

Perc. *p* (no more than *p*)

Flt. *pp* *ppp* *con moto* *rall.* *con moto*

Riel *p* *con moto* *rall.* *con moto*

Au mil - eu de la fou - le Qui s'a - gi - te et s'é - cou - le

Riel *rall.* *con moto* *Broaden*

Lors - que l'on a - per - çoit un homme au front pen - sif Et que son air de

Riel *con moto* *p sub* *f* *rall.* *con moto*

tris - tes - se Ex - prime de la no - ble - se On lui jet - te un

Riel *f3p* *Piu Mosso* *f*

re - gar - de fur - tif Les gens se dis - sent à l'or - eil - le:

Minister's vocal material, thought to reference a Victorian vaudeville mode, suggests a primarily popular style, whereas Riel's resonates within the more lyrical convention of operatic expressivity—Somers considered him, after all, to be “The Romantic.”

observed that Cartier was “deceitful, false ... one mastered in the political waltz”: Eleanor Stubley, *Louis Riel 2005, The Story*. Program notes for Opera McGill (Faculty of Music, McGill University, 2005).

Example 14.6 *Louis Riel* Act I, Scene 3 (Aria: Macdonald's "Sugar Aria")

16 **Lento con moto** dynamics relative to voice. Might be bit more *f* (Keep previous tempo for 32nds)

Cl. *p*

Bsn. *p*

1 Tpt. *f*

Tmb. 1 *p*

Perc. **Lento con moto** *p* 2 Temple Bkls High *rall.* 3 Make sound like hi-hat cym. 'Susp. Small Cym.' *mf*

Piano **Lento con moto** *p* *rall.*

MacD. *mf* in the manner of vaudeville or 'review' singers *rall.*

Violin *mf* *rall.*

Cl. (even with rall. do 32nds in previous tempo.) **Fast** *rall.* *ff*

Bsn. *rall.* *ff*

1 Tpt. *ff*

Tmb. *ff*

Perc. 'Sticks' *p* 3 'S. Dr.' *rall.* 3 'Cym.' *f*

Pno. *rall.*

MacD. **Fast** *rall.* *ff*

Violin *rall.* *ff*

sug-ar is the oil for pol - it - i - cal ma-chines: with-out it all the gears would ne-ver mesh. A

man must have a weak-ness for a cer-tain kind of sweet-ness be it sooth-ing to the spir-it or the flesh.

Conclusions: Reconceptualizing Tensions in Politicized Operatic Narratives

These points of conflict in *Louis Riel* raise aesthetic and historical questions regarding the complexities of the opera and the equivocal cultural work that it performs. The tensions that I have highlighted deny the work narrative closure, insisting that the intersection of nationalist agendas and First Nations culture in *Louis Riel* remain an open and fluid site for reflection and debate. As Jennifer Reid observes, “Across the broad range of ostensibly contradictory Riels, we find a myth that bears a distinct resemblance to the man . . . and we may well discover that both the man and the myth provide an aperture through which we can discern the foundations for a collective narrative.”⁴³ Notably, the operatic genre, as I suggest, is not an apolitical platform on which to examine this narrative; as David Levin has argued, “opera [as a genre] is unsettled.”⁴⁴ Contemporary historical opera, rife with contradictions, frictions, and representational issues, has the ability to comment on cultural relationships and tensions, to present more subjectively focused and therefore sympathetic historical figures, and to further illuminate our conservatively constructed Canadian history. Indeed, acknowledging the cultural and political nature of the tensions in *Louis Riel* reveals new aspects to this chapter in Canadian and Métis history, thereby illuminating the advantages of examining our history through the operatic lens.

⁴³ Jennifer Reid, *Louis Riel and the Creation of Modern Canada* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), pp. 242–3.

⁴⁴ David J. Levin, *Unsettling Opera* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 1.