

BOOK REVIEWS

Opera Indigene: Re/presenting First Nations and Indigenous Cultures. Pamela Karantonis and Dylan Robinson, eds. 2011. Farnham, UK: Ashgate Interdisciplinary Studies in Opera. xxvii, 357pp, photographs, musical examples, tables, bibliography, index. Hardback, £58.50.

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This book is a collection of engaging essays whose authors use a variety of methodological approaches to examine the representation of Indigenous cultures in opera. Contributors include scholars, composers, theatre and opera practitioners, historians, and ethnomusicologists, many of whom are Indigenous and well known in Indigenous advocacy work. The strength of this book lies not only in the diversity of its contributors and theoretical approaches, but in the interdisciplinary assessments from postcolonial, literary, and nation-building discourses, to ethnomusicology, musicology, performance studies, cultural geography, and multicultural studies. The writers look at how Indigenous, Aboriginal and First Nations cultures, particularly from the Americas and Australia, are represented in opera (as early as 1867) as well as how Indigenous artists have begun to re/present and develop self-determined cultural practices using the operatic medium. As the intriguing title signals, *Opera Indigene: Re/presenting First Nations and Indigenous Cultures* offers a powerful new understanding

of Indigenous presence in opera and considers historical and contemporary works in light of Indigenous theory.

Richly interdisciplinary, this collection brings together various Indigenous concepts in the same collaborative approach that is an essential component of new opera projects themselves. The contributors address some of the effects of opera's boundaries on the representation of cultural traditions as well as the effects of Indigenous worldviews on the creation of new operatic works.

Divided into five parts, the book's first section focuses on theoretical perspectives and recent developments of Indigenous subjects in opera. In the opening essay, "Orpheus Conquistador," Nicholas Till suggests that the libretto of *L'Orfeo* is a modernist manifesto of scientific and colonial exploitation. Beverley Diamond, in "Decentering Opera: Early Twenty-First Century Indigenous Production," examines decolonizing strategies made possible by hybridity in opera created by First Peoples. In "'Singing from The Margins': Postcolonial Themes in *Voss* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*," Michael Halliwell discusses two postcolonial novels and how their operatic adaptations work to deconstruct colonial power.

The second section looks at operas about Aboriginal Australians from perspectives of gender, feminist, educational, and cultural theory. Anne Boyd's "'To Didj or Not to Didj': Exploring Indigenous Representation in Australian Music Theater Works by Margaret Sutherland and Andrew Schultz"

explores Australian educational, political and literary movements, including the “Two Ways” educational philosophy. Linda Kouvaras, in “Giving Voice to the Un-voiced ‘Witch’ and the ‘Heart of Nothingness’: Moya Henderson’s *Lindy*” examines the marginalization of gender and Indigeneity as reflected in the opera libretto about an unjust criminal case from 1980. Anne Power’s “*The Eighth Wonder: Explorations of Place and Voice*” analyzes how Aztec identity is used to construct a “universal” Australian Aboriginal identity in Alan John’s opera and in the construction of the Sydney Opera House, where it was premiered.

In the third section, writers discuss the development of *Indianism* in nationalist “new world” operas, specifically in Brazil and the United States. Maria Alice Volpe’s “Indianismo in Brazilian Romantic Opera: Shifting Ideologies of National Foundation” shows how operatic adaptation of Indianist literature has affected the discourse of nation-building through the arts, specifically as a comparative analysis that considers which myths are maintained and which are ignored. In “Native Songs, Indianist Styles, and the Processes of Music Idealization,” Tara Browner uses Cadman’s opera *Shanewis* to look at certain repercussions brought about by collaborations between field ethnographers and composers upon American Indian consultants and their communities. Catherine Parsons Smith, in “Composed and Produced in the American West, 1912-1913: Two Operatic Portrayals of First Nations Cultures,” examines an opera by Mary Carr Moore and another by William F. Hanson and Gertrude Simmons Bonin

as works that depict an expanded view of the American West, increasing our understanding of missionary passion and land possession as well as the post-contact Sioux Sun Dance Ceremony.

Smith’s essay is a good example of the interdisciplinary methodologies employed by contributors to this volume. She provides historical context for the exoticization of Native cultures and the rise of theatre in the United States that together gave impetus to the production of two Indianist operas in the early twentieth century. She considers performance histories; geographical, racial, and religious influences; libretti synopses; notated musical excerpts; and specific information on the collaborative experience taken from art critics, scholars, and performers. Smith also makes suggestions for the possible reconstruction of the operas.

The fourth section of the volume is about Canadian operas written between 1867 and 1967, concentrating on assimilationist policies, notions of citizenship, and the institutionalization and commodification of difference. Mary Ingraham’s “Assimilation, Integration and Individuation: The Evolution of First Nations Musical Citizenship in Canadian Opera” is a semiotic analysis of political ideas of citizenship. She examines how governments in Canada have attempted to control and institutionalize difference and how this is manifested in Canadian operas. In “‘Too Much White Man in It’: Aesthetic Colonization in *Tzinquaw*,” Alison Greene looks at the reactions of composers, ethnomusicologists, and the Cowichan community to *Tzinquaw*, which was a Native/non-Native collaboration. Dylan Robinson, one of the volume’s

editors, contributed “Peaceful Surface, Monstrous Depths: Barbara Pentland and Dorothy Livesay’s *The Lake*,” which examines the interaction between settler and First Nations characters through concepts of commodity and ownership. Colleen L. Renihan’s essay, “The Politics of Genre: Exposing Historical Tensions in Harry Somers’s *Louis Riel*,” explores the conflicts inherent in the operatic genre as a platform for nation-building.

In the final section, authors look at new Indigenous opera creation and collaborative processes. In “Creating *Pimootewin*,” Robin Elliott discusses the collaboration that resulted in what is considered the first Cree opera, created by two Cree artists (Tomson Highway, librettist, and Michael Greyeyes, choreographer) and a composer (Melissa Hui) born in Hong Kong and raised in Canada. The article deals with a variety of topics of multidisciplinary interest, including the creative process; genre issues; dissemination; cultural, political and performance theory; literary traditions; myth; humour; and issues of determination. Victoria Vaughn analyzes an opera about Balinese culture, “After McPhee: Evan Ziporyn’s *A House in Bali*,” whose protagonist is a Canadian composer who lived and studied in Bali. She discusses the effects of culture on the work of McPhee and his impact on the representation of Balinese culture. The essay “West Coast First Peoples and *The Magic Flute*: Tracing the Journey of a Cross-Cultural Collaboration” consists of an interview with Robert McQueen by Dylan Robinson, together with responses from Cathi Charles Wherry, Tracey Herbert, Lorna Williams, and Marion Newman, about the Salish

First Nation’s adaptation of Mozart’s opera. The final essay, “*Pecan Summer*: The Process of Making New Indigenous Opera in Australia” is an interview by co-editor Pamela Karantonis with Aboriginal composer and singer Deborah Cheetham and filmmaker Daniel Browning.

Opera Indigene is especially interesting in its development of Indigenous theory as applied to music, and these studies should encourage more scholarship in this area. Theoretical and musical analyses, interviews, musical transcriptions and score examples, tables, photographs, footnotes, bibliography and index are all indicative of the breadth encompassed by this volume, which should be of interest to scholars, researchers and artists interested in music, literature, performance studies, gender and identity studies, as well as Indigenous cultural and historical studies.

This collection can engage any reader in understanding the impact of cultural representation in art, with opera as exemplar. The essays show Indigenous processes of innovation in new and older opera, while exposing, analyzing and dispelling stereotypes of Indigeneity in the world of contemporary music. *Opera Indigene* will inspire further studies of Indigenous contemporary classical music throughout the world. It is an important publication for the progress of decolonization and provides artistic encouragement and vision for the development of new works and collaborations reflecting Indigenous worldviews that may be useful for us all.

