

CANADIAN MUSEUM OF HISTORY

Power & Elegance: The Collection of Cantonese Opera Records at the Canadian Museum of History

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A new web module featuring audio highlights from The Collection of Cantonese Opera Records of the Canadian Museum of History is a welcome addition to the growing body of online resources for theatre scholars. Cantonese opera (*yueju*) is historically the dominant genre of Chinese opera (*xiqu*) in Canada and throughout the Americas. Research over the past two decades has done much to integrate it into histories of Asian-Canadian communities and lives, although it is still grossly underrepresented in accounts of Canadian theatre history. *Xiqu*, far from being peripheral or a footnote to national narratives, has been an enduring and consistent Canadian stage practice since the nineteenth century. These recordings, representing a range of theatre arias from the repertoire, were digitized from LPs produced mostly in the 1920s, a period when Cantonese opera in Canada was popular on immigrant stages and in community associations, not to mention, as this collection shows, in private homes. Once common, these recordings have suffered from a worldwide absence of institutional interest. For the first time, these materials—of international as much as Canadian importance—are available to scholars and the general public in a user-friendly format.

The account of the collection's genesis is among the most solid work on the site. Marius Barbeau and Kiang Kang-hu (now usually known as Jiang Kanghu), pioneers of Canadian ethnology and Sinology respectively, acquired the collection from a Montreal Chinese shopkeeper in 1933. Barbeau and Kiang's original project was conceived as an attempt to connect Cantonese opera to the music of Canadian First Nations, but Kiang returned to China in 1933 (eventually taking a major position in Wang Jingwei's collaborationist government) and the collection gathered dust in museum holdings until its rediscovery in 2008. The site, produced by researchers affiliated with the museum, explains the collection's history cogently, although the farfetchedness of Barbeau and Kiang's hypothesis is not made clear. Instead, the site presents Tsimshian music and a Cantonese aria one above the other on the same page, appearing to invite comparison. This sort of wild conjecture, also elaborated in Barbeau's article "Buddhist Dirges on the North Pacific Coast," might be understandable in 1933, but the site's creators need to present their work more critically today, as an artefact of the cultural and colonialist thinking of that era, not as a viable hypothesis.

Beautifully designed and French-English bilingual, the site is divided into tabs labeled "The Collection," "The Characters," "The Instruments," "The Performers," and "The Operas." Eighty-two highlighted operas or scenes, often consisting of several discs each (the whole collection totals 238 playable discs), are available under the last tab along with images of their original disc sleeves, and organized by plot theme, such as "War, Honour and Loyalty" and "Love, the Erotic and the Obscene." A link to the entire catalogue is also available here, though those recordings have no plot context and less bibliographical information than the individual entries featured on "The Operas" page.

The recordings are accompanied by plot summaries, many of which present information not otherwise accessible in English or other Western languages. However, the English text is often stilted, giving the impression of a direct translation from the Chinese; the French text, apparently translated from the English, reads much more smoothly. Unfortunately, the translation strategies are sometimes peculiar, as when the risqué folk ditty *sbi ba mo* (“the eighteen touches,” eighteen being a spuriously specific number and the title indicating some kind of sexual relations), is given a false equivalence with “The Erotic Massage.” Frequently, instead of citing the classical narratives that produced these operas, the elevated register of Chinese opera titles is turned into earthy locutions such as “Going on a Binge” or “The Badger Game”—the equivalent of translating *Così fan tutte* as “Women All Do It.” More problematically, in “the eighteen touches” entry, the musical category (*xiao diao*, i.e. little melody) is incorrectly identified as an opera type, and the role type (*buadan*, i.e. a vivacious, unmarried young woman) is incorrectly identified as a character’s name.

But the recordings are remarkable in themselves, and the module makes a massive contribution simply in that there is no better audio collection of early Cantonese opera accessible online—Chinese University of Hong Kong’s excellent Chinese Opera Information Centre, for instance, has nothing comparable on its site. Unfortunately, the recordings are placed in an historical void. What ought to have been elucidated—the context of Cantonese opera in Canada, and of the North American Chinese theatre recording industry—is wholly absent. For the former, the reader must look to research by prominent scholars in the field such as Chun-kin Leung, Nancy Yunhwa Rao, Elizabeth Lominska Johnson, and especially Wing Chung Ng, or to the dissertations of Stephen Li and Helen Cheung. For the latter, still largely unfamiliar, the reader must turn to Du Min Jun’s 2008 article “The Development of Chinese Records to 1911” to understand the context in which Cantonese opera records were produced in Canada. Du’s research suggests that the Canadian-made recordings in the collection were largely, if not entirely, pressings of American Victor records; others in the module’s collection were pressed in the US and imported to Canada. But one cannot really learn anything about all this from the information presented in the module itself, and its creators make no effort to present the actual history of the objects, performers, or listeners included.

Instead the site provides an account of Chinese opera history that traces it “at least to 300 A.D.” The academic consensus, however, is that full-fledged theatre in China is approximately a thousand years old (Idema and West ix-xi), and the emergence of Cantonese opera, a distinct regional form, dates roughly from the mid-nineteenth century (Yung 9). The account then goes on to confound musical and literary genres, for example treating *chuanqi* and *kunju* as successive genres when the latter is the dominant performance style of the former, which is a script format. The bibliography is impractical for English and Chinese speakers alike, since the Chinese works are identified by (often faulty) transliteration alone. The resulting information is not a useful overview of Chinese theatre as it is practiced, nor a well-researched account of its development—and neither bears on the collection. It looks very much as though no practitioner or academic of Cantonese opera was involved in the module’s development, despite the ample presence of both in Canada.

While the importance of the collection itself means its online availability is cause for celebration, the explication and contextualization of these recordings is inadequate, and readers must search out other sources for a reliable account of any related subjects. This is a

shame, for we are no longer in the 1930s, and Cantonese opera should not be a mystery for the Canadian academic world; the scholarly materials and human resources are available to put these recordings into historical perspective, but they have not been used. For that reason, it is tempting to call the module a lost opportunity, but since it is an online project, and can yet be improved, one may hope that the opportunity is only temporarily misplaced.

Works Cited

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DONNA COATES, ed.

Sharon Pollock: First Woman of the Canadian Theatre

Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2015. 328 pp.

MOIRA DAY

In 2012, Sharon Pollock received an unusual gift for her seventy-fifth birthday: a conference completely devoted to her life and work. While fully engaged in the event, Pollock was also reportedly a bit bemused, quipping, "I should be dead" (qtd. in Coates 6).¹ It was a wry acknowledgement that canonization is a process that generally presupposes your demise.

This volume of essays, No. 8 in UCP's *The West* series — and arguably the second half of the same birthday gift — tackles that paradox head-on. On one hand, editor Donna Coates unabashedly argues that Pollock's canonical stature *is* reason enough to justify another volume of essays of her work. One may quibble with Coates' claim that "Pollock became the first woman in Canadian theatre history to have had a volume produced on her life and work" (3). Even in terms of Alberta playwrights alone, surely Geraldine Anthony's seminal book on Gwen Pharis Ringwood (1981) preceded Sherrill Grace's very fine 2008 biography on Pollock by several decades. However, there is little reason to dispute Coates' claim that as "playwright, director, theatre administrator, critic, teacher, and mentor, Sharon Pollock has played an integral role in the shaping of Canada's national theatre tradition" (1).

At the same time, Coates also works hard to dispel any impression that canonical be equated with "dead" in any sense of that word. To the contrary, she stresses that Pollock, on the verge of her eightieth birthday, still remains a very active member of her theatre community, as well as one of Canada's most frequently published, produced, anthologized, and analyzed playwrights. About half of the twelve essays illustrate the point that the range and density of Pollock's work continues to invite new critical and stage interpretations by offering fresh looks at what could be considered "classical" Pollock: the writer of seminal history,