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Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon



Otherhood Issues: Post-National Operatic Narratives

Benedict Anderson has provocatively argued that nationhood is a matter of “imagined community,” and that this sense of collective identity is something that, in Europe most obviously, was conceived in the last century and born largely of the printed word and novelistic narrative.¹ But there is also that other—often somewhat darker—side to nationhood: the emotional (and yet still public) aspect of communal identification that we call “nationalism.” And, when it comes to documenting the art forms that historically did the most to create this affective sense of belonging and, indeed, to rally people around a national cause, it is not only the novel but also drama (Lindenberger 1984, 257) and, especially, music that have to be considered. In the case of music, its importance is likely related to the power and immediacy of its ability to *evoke* and *provoke*—and not only *represent*—nationalist feeling. While many may still think of music as an apolitical art, a political scientist has recently argued that there is no other ideological force or creed that has had a more “profound and lasting impact on music in the past two centuries than nationalism” (Arblaster 64). But, as just suggested, the same was also true in reverse.

To cut a very long story very short: in nineteenth-century Europe, music often became the locus of the search for the authentic voice of a people. The desire for a national musical idiom made music inseparable from politics in general and patriotism and nationalism in particular.² Operatic narratives—perhaps because they are both oral and performative—came to play especially important roles in the articulating of national identity, often through their structural connections to the oral epic and communal narratives (Lindenberger 1984, 262). One theory even has it that opera houses became the covert site of political activity in countries where political expression was forbidden in the arts. So, the in-

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credible flourishing of Italian opera in the nineteenth century can be explained by its allegorical engagement with suppressed national politics.³

In fact, the unofficial national anthem of Italy, since the nineteenth-century drive for Italian unification, has been “Va pensiero,” the oppressed Israelites’ chorus from Verdi’s opera, *Nabucco*. Such operatic choruses are highly suggestive in their ability to represent aurally the “collective voice of a people, a nation, a community” (Arblaster 99). The “masses” sing, and sing powerfully. However, in nationalist narratives about Canada—our focus here—the “masses” do not sing in at all the same way as they do when expressing displaced Italian patriotism; instead, they are terrifying. Equally frightening is the solo voice of the political leader as nationalistic demagogue. Here, we change centuries—from the nineteenth to the twentieth; we change continents—from the Old World to the New. Nationalism and narratives of national identity are still at the core of the Canadian operas we will address—but the manner and the politics could not be more different from what we have just described as the European scene: as a bilingual, multicultural New World nation, caught in the emotional and ideological double bind of being tied historically to Europe and economically to the United States, Canada is bound to figure these debates in different ways.

Our time shift to a period after two world wars (in which nationalism played an important and devastating role) is obviously important, but so too is this shift from Old to New World. The historical moment of the rise of nationalism in Europe coincided—not accidentally, of course—with the moment of European imperialism. In opera, as in other art forms, Europe defined itself against its non-European Other. In the eighteenth century, that Other was the Islamic Orient—close enough geographically to be threatening, and alien enough culturally to be open to exoticization in terms of sexuality and violence.⁴ By the nineteenth century, the Other could be from places as diverse but exotic as Scotland, South America, or Japan.⁵

Here is one critic’s wry description of the paradigmatic plot of this kind of operatic “othering”:

Young, tolerant, brave, possibly naive, white-European tenor-hero intrudes, at risk of disloyalty to his own people and colonialist ethic, into mysterious, dark-skinned, colonised territory represented by alluring dancing girls and deeply affectionate, sensitive lyric soprano, incurring wrath of brutal, intransigent tribal chieftain (bass or bass-baritone) and blindly obedient chorus of male savages. (Locke 263)

Whether the opera be Verdi’s *Aida* or Meyerbeer’s *L’Africaine*, and be it displaced to ancient Egypt or involve fifteenth-century Portuguese imperial profiteering (Conrad 131), the colonizing mission’s orientalized⁶ figuration of the Other did indeed get articulated in those nineteenth-century operatic narratives of European national identity.⁷ As Edward Said has argued, “[t]he power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them” (Said 1993, xiii). And musical narrative—opera, in particular—is part of the “leg-

acy of the imperializing processes” (Said 1991, 53) of stereotyping and essentializing.

When opera crossed the Atlantic to Canada—and it did (see Willis; Kallmann; Potvin; Jones)—the link between opera (as a European art form) and the narratives of both nation and Empire was inevitably going to be configured a bit differently. Over the years, there have indeed been Canadian operas on Canadian themes—often commissioned by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and Radio Canada. But it took the Centennial year of 1967 (and the government money made available for commissions) to see a veritable explosion of Canadian operas:⁸ including the work that is the focus of the first part of our discussion—Harry Somers/Mavor Moore’s *Louis Riel*.

In order to set the post-colonial Canadian context, we should point out that in 1967 Canada celebrated the centenary of its official founding moment of nationhood.⁹ It was a moment of high English-Canadian nationalism. Given that double bind mentioned earlier, for some this was translated into relief at the diminishing weight of the British heritage, especially in cultural terms, while for others Canadian nationalism meant a rejection of the increasing Americanization of Canada’s economy and culture. As a result of this new self-consciousness, the years that followed were to see the first real valorization of (and serious attention given to) Canadian culture as a separate entity. Of course, some cynics would still argue that, in some ways, Canadians have not yet recovered from their colonial complex: they still look elsewhere for validation, but now they may look southward instead of across the Atlantic.¹⁰

That, very briefly, is the post-*colonial* frame. But the term used in our title is “post-*national*.” Here we invoke the title of Frank Davey’s recent book, *Post-National Arguments*, where the word is used to describe the state of Canadian culture in the last 25 years since that 1967 Centenary. While acknowledging that, in Canada, narrative has been intimately tied to nationalism, Davey argues that, in the contemporary world of economic and political globalization, Canada, unlike other parts of the the world, shows little sign of any revitalized nationalist impulses. Indeed, English-Canadian fictional narratives show, if anything, a decided *lack* of nationalist discourses, “unless ironically deployed” (258). He goes even further, and argues that, since 1967, English-Canadian fiction has shown such a distrust of the political, the social, and the national that this thing called “Canada” has been linked to “treachery, betrayal, and actual or symbolic violence” (255). English Canada’s narrative of identity, he implies, is not only diverse, but “deeply fractured” (5), a matter of “continued debate and irresolution” (8). But, of course, any sense of any English-Canadian communal identity (fractured or whole) would have to be considered alongside at least two other, very real nationalisms today within that one nation: those of Quebec¹¹ and of the Aboriginal peoples.¹²

What all of these nationalisms share, though, is the fact that they are social constructs, most recently rooted in the late 1960s. However, all of them construct national narratives in very different ways, be it in fiction or in opera.¹³ It is arguably true that, because of social and cultural change, opera does not have the same role in both representing and provoking nationalism in modern Canada

that it might have had in nineteenth-century Europe. Nevertheless, it is striking that two important operas, both written by Canadian composer Harry Somers, should present such a startling critique of nationalism and its dangers, and that they should do so in the particular years in which they were written: the date of the first opera, *Louis Riel*, is 1967—that year of Canada’s hundredth anniversary; the date of the other opera, *Mario and the Magician*, is 1992—the year of the ill-fated National Referendum that attempted (and failed) to get a consensus on the definition of Canada as a nation as articulated in what was called the “Canada Clause” in the Constitutional Accord.

Unlike either the French or English versions of the Canadian national anthem, “O Canada,” the “Canada Clause” did try to deal with “otherhood issues.” In one critic’s words, the clause “repopulated the country with Aboriginal peoples and immigrants, it identified that Canada’s ‘sons’ [in whom ‘true patriot love’ is ‘commanded’ in the English rendition of the national anthem] came in two sexes, whose equality was in need of attention, and it recognized both individuals and collectivities as central actors” (Jenson 6–7). Yet, not even *that* narrative was one a majority of Canadians could agree upon. So, perhaps it was not only the *fiction* written in the 25 years between 1967 and 1992 that has denied what Davey calls any tendency to “construct the national text as unitary and thus devoid of political contestation and debate” (17). Certainly these two operas composed by Somers—from precisely 1967 and 1992—reflect a deep suspicion of unitary national narratives of identity and an even deeper distrust of the emotional power of nationalism.

Mavor Moore’s libretto of the 1967 opera of *Louis Riel* was loosely derived from John Coulter’s somewhat earlier play, simply called *Riel*. This is a play that has been called an important contributing factor to the growth of Canadian nationalism in the 1960s (Anthony 62). The way this argument goes, Canadians lacked and so sought a “leader of heroic proportions” and found in the nineteenth-century Métis leader, Riel, “an heroic statesman, a victimized leader, the Father of Manitoba, and the symbol of those Indian, French, and English elements that constitute Canada’s heritage” (Anthony 62). If you knew anything about Riel at all—and we realize that some readers of this article won’t yet), Margaret Atwood’s famous theory (in her book, *Survival*) about the Canadian tendency to identify with the victims in any narrative would ring true; for just about anyone else, Riel might seem to be a strange “leader of heroic proportions” for Canadians to choose. Yet, this choice of Riel—who was hanged as a traitor to Canada in 1885, and whose death reawoke hostilities between Ontario and Quebec, Orangemen and Catholics, English and French—was actually called, by one critic, an “appropriate” choice for a centennial opera because its protagonist was a “potent symbol of various divisive forces which have shaped Canada” (Cherney 129). We doubt that we are alone in finding the foregrounding of a fractious history of linguistic, regional, racial, ethnic, religious, and political difference a somewhat bizarre way—in most conventional terms—to celebrate publicly a century of national collective identity.

But, on second thought, maybe it *is* appropriate, after all. As Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer put it, using an apt musical metaphor: Riel may

personify the “dissonance at the root of the Canadian temperament.”¹⁴ The opera named after Louis Riel enacts that dissonance and those differences openly in its plot—the story of the two rebellions, the one in Red River in 1869 and the other in Saskatchewan in 1885, that ended with the defeat of Riel at Batoche. But it also enacts the nation’s diversity in more structural terms. The libretto is written in English and French,¹⁵ but also in Cree. There is even “a little Latin and less Greek” in the church and prayer scenes. Add to this the fact that the kinds of voice production used vary from speech through to a *parlando* or inflected “sung speech,” to full singing. The music is diverse as well. The dialogue of the political scenes in Ottawa is accompanied by a kind of banal dance music, as if to underline the manipulative political dance underway. This contrasts sharply with the highly lyrical and melismatic arias of the visionary poet and leader, Riel.

The opera’s musical stylistic diversity is, in fact, equally marked, with four major types of music being superimposed one upon the other.¹⁶ The core is what Somers himself (in Graham 4) calls “abstract, atonal” orchestral music, and it is used, with its strong dissonances, for both dramatic intensity and as a kind of “platform” for the singing.¹⁷ Against this is heard original folk music,¹⁸ whose motives weave in and out of the entire opera. Some of these are Aboriginal: for example, Riel’s Métis wife sings a lullaby in Cree, “Kuyas,” which is from the “song of Skateen,” a Wolfhead chief of a Nass River tribe.¹⁹ Others are white folk songs, both French (“Est-il rien sur la terre?” and “Le Roi malheureux”) and English. The chilling repetition of the song, “We’ll Hang Him up the River,” is taken from Coulter’s play, and was evidently a memory of the playwright’s Ulster childhood.

The third type of “music” is better described as electronically produced “sounds” which are used to interesting effect in Riel’s final trial in order both to jolt the listener and to give us a feeling of the kind of confusion and surreal distortion of justice and sense felt by the defendant. But Somers also uses straight, tuneful diatonic music. This is the most accessible and conventional music in the opera and—as in *Mario and the Magician* 25 years later—this is the music associated with and meant to arouse mass patriotism in the audience on the stage—if not in the theatre. But if our own experience is any indication, that theatre audience—rather relieved to hear melodic music—ends up being implicated by this very reaction in the politics represented on stage. Such (involuntary, but noticeable) complicity is thought-provoking, for this is not Verdi’s “Va pensiero” chorus, “spontaneously” voicing the yearnings of a people for a liberated nation; in *Louis Riel*, it is an excited mob that has been urged to start what the libretto calls “another holy crusade / to rescue yet another land from savages” (Somers/Moore 24). This is a mob of Ontario Protestants joining together to sing: “Canada First; Canada is British. Oh Or’ngemen unite!”²⁰ In the musical difference between Verdi’s Israelite chorus and Somers’ Canadian mob lies, perhaps, the separation of Empire and colony, of the national and the post-national.

If Riel were an appropriate hero for an opera about Canada, it would be because his is a narrative in which imagined communities are formed, legally acknowledged, and then destroyed—and destroyed by the force of *other* national narratives; it is a story of defeat and exclusion, of enforced exile and execution

for treason. The opera is *not*, for example, the story of his friend, Gabriel Dumont—the buffalo hunter, sharpshooter, daring and shrewd fighter. Nor is it the collective story of the Métis people. Instead, it is the individualized story of one Louis Riel, the self-styled religious “prophet of the New World,” charismatic deliverer of his people—and (to some) dangerous traitor to the new nation called “Canada.”²¹

Having spent ten years, from age 14 to 24, at the Collège de Montréal, Riel returned to the west educated and eloquent—in both English and French. The time: just a few years after Ontario and Quebec had united with the maritime provinces to form that new nation called “Canada.” The place: the Red River area in what is now west central Canada, and was then part of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s holdings that were in the process of being handed over to the new nation of Canada (to be opened up for Anglo-Protestant Ontario settlers). This was being done without any consultation with the settlers already on the land—who included the British, French, Irish, Métis (that is, those born, usually, of Indian women and French-speaking men)—not to mention, of course, the indigenous Aboriginal peoples. The government in Ottawa sent out survey crews to mark off the land even before the transfer was made legal; the Company, now a lame-duck administration, collapsed; the enraged Red River settlers set up their own provisional government, owing allegiance to the British Queen—and not to Canada. This was, according to the Law of Nations, an entirely legal act, in the absence of other effective government. Nevertheless the Canadian Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, sent out a governor—the anti-French, anti-Catholic McDougall, and that’s where the opera opens, with the governor referring to the “damn half-breeds” he will teach to “be civilized” (2).

From the very first scene, Canada is the villain of the piece: the Métis repeatedly cry “A bas le Canada d’Ottawa!” Riel, as leader of his people, wants to fight for what he calls their “British rights.” Bishop Taché, the go-between, as the libretto puts it “entre les métis de l’Ouest/et les obstinés d’Ottawa” (13) (between the Métis of the West and the obstinate ones in Ottawa), tries to explain this position and its history to Macdonald:

Before there was a Canada,
the peoples of the West were free;
. . . .
their only ruler a distant queen.
Now comes the giant Canada,
measuring miles from sea to sea,
taking their homes without their leave.

Before you tell them anything
you send surveyors out to grab;
before you ask them anything
you send a tyrant governor;
before you give them any choice
you order them to change their ways;

before you grant them anything
you take their all, and promise nothing. (9)

Riel continues to have faith in the British until their Canadian representatives prove his faith ill-founded. Interestingly, in exile after the failed rebellion, Riel becomes an *American* citizen, before returning in 1884 to lead the Saskatchewan Métis in another uprising. His defeat and capture, his trial and execution, form the rest of the opera's narrative.

But we have omitted one important irony—one that has structured both history and the opera. In that first confrontation between the Métis and the Canadian governor, a Scottish Protestant bigot named Thomas Scott is arrested by the provisional government for attacking the leaders, both physically and verbally. To a Métis' question of "Pourquoi?", he responds: "Speak English, mongrel" (3), and then calls him a "low Popish half-breed." His physical and verbal violence—his rhetoric of miscegenation as bastard mongrelization—and his attempt to foment rebellion against the provisional government lead to his being not only arrested but put on trial by the Métis. Riel acts as both official translator and prosecutor. The trial is conducted in French, alienating Scott from the proceedings and leading to accusations of unfair legal practices—according to British law, at least, if not to Métis custom.

Riel condemns Scott to death, in full knowledge of the consequences: the outrage of Orange Ontario and the likelihood of retribution. His reason, given first in French and then repeated in English, is: "I cannot let one foolish man / stand in the way of a whole nation" (21). These are the *very same words* that Sir John A. Macdonald will repeat when refusing to reprieve Riel himself 15 years later, after a trial with an equal number of legal improprieties and in equally full knowledge of the consequences: the further alienation of Québec. Between those two repetitions echo the ironies of history.

Those same *words* may be repeated, but they have utterly different meanings: though both are equally suspect in ideological terms in the opera, Riel's *Métis* "nation" is not Macdonald's *Canadian* "nation." When the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation televised this opera in 1969, it ended the production with the words of Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau about how a country is judged by the way a majority of its people treats a minority. Trudeau added: "Louis Riel's battle is not yet won." When Elijah Harper, the Aboriginal Member of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly, refused to agree to a definition of Canada a few years ago (in the "Meech Lake" accord) that did not take "Louis Riel's battle" into account, that situation may have begun to change: the federal and provincial government leaders had to sit down once again and, this time, draft a definition that would include the Métis and First Nations peoples. But Aboriginal—not to mention Québécois—distrust of Ottawa is not new, as Moore and Somers suggest in their portrayal of Canada's very different, first Prime Minister: smug, cynical, sarcastic—though witty—Sir John A. is more than simply a political opportunist and manipulator, a prevaricator and a procrastinator. E.D. Blodgett once ironically "Canadianized" Derridean *différance* when he noted that the "impulse to defer is at least as old as Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald,

who acquired the nickname ‘Old Tomorrow’ because of his policies toward western indigenous people” (562).

Macdonald, however, is also the voice of Canadian nationalism, and it is *he* who articulates what, in this context, is the (now) problematic identity narrative of the nation:

Nothing can stop this country now.
 . . .
 If we unite from sea to sea
 we shall become a mighty power:
 if we do not, we’ll all be naught . . .
 shouting unheard in French and English both. (11)

In the very next scene, Riel’s mother tells of hearing, as a young woman, the voice of God tell her not to become a nun, but rather to marry, because her first born son would be “chef de sa nation” (13). Indeed, her son has visions himself in which God names him David, king of that nation. But this king is a strangely solitary leader of men, as Somers underlines by having Riel’s major arias—and only his—begin without any orchestral accompaniment of any kind. The sudden silencing of the instruments effectively isolates the voice, as the narrative action isolates the man.

Riel’s “mission” was not only political, however; it was also religious. By 1885, the pious, visionary Riel had rejected the Catholic Church, preferring to speak directly to God. From the start, megalomaniac madness is offered as an alternative or corollary to Christian mysticism as an explanation for his behavior. In a scene in a church, Riel casts out the priest, announcing the “fall of Rome” and proceeding to give the terrified congregation a “sermon” (of sorts) about his mission and his prophetic vision. The stage directions tell us that Riel is in a “mystical trance” and that the people listening to the charismatic leader are “hypnotized.” In other words, for all his resistance Riel turns out to be as dangerous a nationalist as Macdonald. Twenty-five years later, in *Mario and the Magician*, Somers, with Rod Anderson as librettist this time, would again bring the solo voice of nationalist pride together with associations of hypnotism, control, and violence. In fact, the chorus’s response that greets Riel after this aria, with its chant of “Riel avait raison! / Riel l’avait prédit! / Riel est prophète!”, echoes in musical style, verbal rhythm, and even thematic content the later opera’s collective response to another nationalistic and demagogic orator, the hypnotist Cipolla: “Viva la cultura italiana! Viva la civiltà Romana. Viva Cipolla!” Both men are frightening; both are charismatic; both are nationalists.

In the 1992 opera, the setting changes, and the concerns get displaced from those of the Métis in nineteenth-century Canada to those of visiting Germans in 1928 Italy, but the paradigm of a strong, post-national suspicion of the emotive power of nationalism continues and receives a new—but *medical* rather than *religious*—configuration. Somers and Anderson based their opera of *Mario and the Magician* on Thomas Mann’s 1929 novella, *Mario und der Zauberer*, adding the narrative frame of a lecture given (in spoken voice) by the narrator, here

called Stefan, to an audience in Munich. His topic is what he calls “our disease” (9). With this, he invokes the structuring metaphor of both novella and opera: illness, specifically, transmissible illness. “Disease?” he repeats, as he forestalls the possible objections to his seemingly exaggerated term for apparent economic prosperity in Germany. The first of many ironies, of course, is that the lecture is being given in 1929, just before the October stock market crash. Stefan claims, however, that “there is a disease infecting our world,” a disease he calls a “paralysis of will” (9). To illustrate its terrifying ubiquity, he proposes to tell the audience—in the room and in the theatre, of course—the story of his Italian holiday the year before. The retrospective irony of a German using Italy as the site of a cautionary tale about nationalism and fascism is one we can savour—though Mann, writing in 1929, obviously could not . . . or at least, not yet.

The novella opens with words echoed by Stefan in the opera, describing the ominous feeling of the resort: “The atmosphere of Torre di Venere remains unpleasant in the memory. From the first moment the air of the place made us uneasy” (133).²² For those who know either the Benjamin Britten opera or the earlier Mann novella of *Death in Venice*, these references to the stifling sirocco air may recall familiar miasmatic theories of disease, and in particular, of cholera. The pestilential possibilities of what Mann codes as “the South” are always risks for the “northern soul” (139) of his German travellers. Mann’s narrator is both attracted to and worried about what he calls “the emotionalism of the sense-loving” south (141), a trait that starts to take on political meaning when combined with another Italian characteristic: the pleasure in and respect for oratory. This is what makes Italians, he says, particularly vulnerable to those whose mastery of speech plays to their nationalistic pride—as does the story’s titular magician, Cipolla, and, of course, the country’s then leader, Mussolini.

Both this nationalism-*cum*-xenophobia of the Italians *and* their auditory sensitivity are made the focus of attention in the first major episode of conflict in the opera, as in the novella. Stefan’s child coughs during a meal in the hotel dining room, and an Italian Principessa quickly has her baby taken out of the room, loudly berating people who travel with “diseased children.” The Hotel Manager insists that the family move rooms—for theirs adjoin the Principessa’s. Stefan assures him that German doctors have declared the child healed of her whooping cough and no longer infectious; the hotel doctor agrees. Nevertheless, the Principessa, it appears, is afraid that her baby will be infected simply by the *sound* of coughing, through what the Manager calls “acoustic contagion”—a phrase repeated by a number of characters on stage and thereby fixed firmly in our ears and memory.

In addition to being a suggestive metaphor for the power of opera as an art form, this concept of “acoustic contagion” picks up the disease metaphor with which the entire operatic narrative is framed, and sets up a further allegorical force field that structures the rest of the work. Just as Mann has his narrator return obsessively to what he calls “this stupid business of the whooping-cough” (139) to explain his unease in the Italian town, so the opera libretto returns again and again to references of aural contagion—but always connected to images of control and nationalism. For instance, in a scene on the beach, the Ger-

man children are harassed because they are foreigners; they are told they shouldn't be playing with the Italian flags someone at the hotel had given them. Stefan then sings of his worries: "These flags. This stiff sense of dignity. . . . The fear of coughing . . . Fear and pride . . . Symptoms of an illness we might all catch" (30).

When his young child then washes the sand out of her bathing suit and is momentarily naked on the beach, there is a general outcry. Stefan is taken to the municipal offices where he is lectured about "Roman discipline" and cultural purity in relation to Il Duce's laws protecting Italian civilization from what are called "the excesses of foreign licentiousness" (33). The librettist cleverly includes here part of one of Mussolini's own speeches, thereby setting up considerable dramatic irony when the Hotel Manager admiringly says: "Parlate benissimo. Il Duce himself could not turn a phrase more eloquently" (33). But this joke actually serves to underline the dangers of "acoustic contagion" in the form of manipulative nationalistic oratory to which the Southerners, the Italians, are deemed more susceptible than the Northern Germans—or at least (as Mann later saw) until Hitler arrived on the Northern scene.²³

The playing out of precisely those oral nationalist dangers is the topic of the rest of the narrative. In the opera, a band of blackshirts arrives with posters announcing the visit of the Cavaliere Cipolla.²⁴ He is called, in Italian, "Forzatore, Illusionista, Prestidigitatore." The latter terms are the same as in English—illusionist, prestidigitator—but "forzatore" usually means a strong-man, as in a circus, and exactly this idea of forcing or compelling (*forzare*) is central to the identity of this manipulative and frightening performer, whose very first mention in the opera is followed by a chorus of an actual fascist anthem, "Giovinezza, giovinezza" with its call to youth to realize that, in fascism, lies the salvation of liberty. Just as in *Louis Riel's* Orangemen's song about "Canada first," Somers inserts quite recognizably diatonic, melodic music into a basically atonal score in order to represent and to elicit patriotic mass emotion in the stage listeners. Once again, however, the theatre audience's manifest pleasure in hearing comfortably familiar tonal music for the first time implicates it in subtle and historically interesting ways: what does it mean that "Giovinezza, giovinezza"—a fascist song—is the only tune heard whistled on the way out of the theatre?

Acts II and III place the theatre audience in the same (physical and psychic) position as the characters who attend Cipolla's performance: that is, as potential victims of his compelling power. His oratory in the show is a curious and contradictory mixture of arrogant self-confidence and thin-skinned prickliness. He constantly calls attention to his own physical imperfections, his ill-health, and difficult life—but always in the context of a comparison with sexually attractive young men in the audience or, rather, with young men *he* constructs as sexually attractive to women. To compensate for what he presents as his own lack of success with women, he boasts of his successes on stage, of the praise of even Il Duce's brother. The crowd then mutters respectfully: "Il Duce!" Not surprisingly, someone makes the connection—echoing the Hotel Manager's earlier one—between Mussolini and elegant speaking, complimenting Cipolla too with the words: "Parla benissimo!" and "Che ispirato oratore." Indeed Cipolla's patter constantly

calls up nationalistic sentiments, flattering women for bearing glorious Roman sons, or asserting that Italy “brought the flower of culture to the world.”

Lest we forget the force field of that “acoustic contagion” image, Act III opens with Stefan’s reminder about the miasmatic, oppressive atmosphere of the town and about how that all seemed personified in the person of Cipolla that night. The original meaning of miasma—polluting, defiling—is transferred from a general theory of physical contagion to an allegory of political (and acoustically transmitted) infection, as Cipolla reveals his true identity. He is not only an effective orator; he is also a hypnotist.

It is the display of his hypnotic powers that brings the nationalist allegory to the fore, for these are powers that play to the will and the instinct. Both source text and libretto illustrate the vulnerability of human reason and will in the face of the power and attraction of the Dionysian—something fascism fed into. Each of the demeaning demonstrations of his power to which Cipolla subjects the audience involves the confrontation of their will with his; in each, he is victorious. The claw-handled riding whip that he cracks becomes the sadistic and insulting symbol of his domination. The librettist has said that Cipolla to him was “the symbol of the fascist leader, of the hypnotic domination of fascism over the masses, and of its expropriation of individual liberty in the name of service to a nationalistic hysteria.”²⁵ Here there is no other nationalism to counter his—as Macdonald’s effectively counters Riel’s—but, nonetheless, as he cracks his whip, Cipolla finally goes too far.

In both opera and novella, Mario—a young, quiet waiter—is brought on stage by the hypnotist, who first praises his name as a classic one in the “heroic traditions of the Fatherland” (87). Twice Cipolla does the “Roman salute,” further encoding this as a scene with political significance. But, twice, he also calls Mario “Ganymede”—after the beautiful youth loved by Zeus. The scene thus connects that nationalist/fascist network of associations with “acoustic contagion” with another set that, as in *Death in Venice*, organizes itself around homoerotic desire. From the start of the novella, the resort town’s name has been both sexualized and ironized: it seems that Torre di Venere—tower of Venus—no longer has the phallic tower that once gave it its name. After an early confrontation with a youth in the audience whom he calls the “lady-killer of Torre di Venere” (151), Cipolla immediately calls attention to his own bodily form and does so in an openly nationalist context: “I have a little physical defect which prevented me from doing my bit in the war for the greater glory of the Fatherland,” he says (151). Immediately after, he again complains about the handsome youth, the one “spoilt by the favours of the fair sex.”

This youth, whom Cipolla has constructed as heterosexual, is one for whom he feels a genuine antagonism. In the narrator’s words: “No one looking at the physical parts of the two men need have been at a loss for the explanation, even if the deformed man had not constantly played on the other’s supposed success with the fair sex” (151). Opera, of course, has a long and now perhaps embarrassing history of associating physical malformation with moral deformation: Verdi’s *Rigoletto* or Wagner’s *Alberich* in *The Ring of the Nibelung* are typical examples. But Mann calls attention specifically to the *kind* of malformation he

gives Cipolla. As his narrator puts it: though “the chest was too high . . . the corresponding malformation of the back did not sit between the shoulders, it took the form of a sort of hips or buttocks hump” (152). The placing of the malformation in the area of the pelvis might well be meant to suggest some sexual dimension. Indeed, the descriptions of his relations with various young men, upon whom he exerts his hypnotic powers on stage, would appear to code that sexual dimension as specifically homosexual. For example, Cipolla induces a trance by “stroking and breathing upon a certain young man who had offered himself as a subject and already proved himself a particularly susceptible one” (167).

But it is with Mario that the homoerotic suggestions take on a definitely ominous character. Cipolla teases Mario about his love for—and suffering over—a young woman named Silvestra. He characteristically follows this with a reference to his “little physical defect” (176), despite which he claims to know a lot about love. Hypnotizing Mario, he convinces him that he, Cipolla, is really Silvestra, and he does so in interesting terms: “It is time that you see me and *recognize* me, Mario, my beloved!” (177). In silence the audience watches what the narrator calls “a public exposure of timid and deluded passion and rapture” (177), as Mario kisses Cipolla. Shocked at what this form of “acoustic contagion” has made him do, Mario runs away—but then turns and shoots his mocker dead.

Does the fascist narrative meet its own end through the violence engendered by its own irrationalist power and duplicitous self-representation? Do demagogic oratory and chauvinistic hypnotic power release repression and libidinize both authority and submission to it (Lunn 91–2)? Both the sexualization of fascism here and the earlier medicalization of nationalism as something spread by “acoustic contagion” are different from those structuring force fields of religious mysticism and megalomaniac madness in *Louis Riel*, but both operas share a distrust, not to say a terror, of the power of the solo voice of the demagogic nationalistic leader.

A Canadian Opera Company press release for the 1975 revival of *Louis Riel*²⁶ referred to the opera as a “provocative foray into Canadian political mythology” because it captured “the tragedy and high drama of an episode that almost tore the country asunder, an episode which has had important and lasting effects on the relationship between French and English-speaking Canada” (not to mention, of course, between both and the Aboriginal peoples, including the Métis). In Coulter’s play, Macdonald executes Riel for “the public good,” before he can “fatally” marr “everything Confederation may mean” (131). Macdonald delivers the verdict of history: he says Riel will go down in history as “one of the mortal instruments that shaped our destiny.” He does this, according to the stage directions, in an ironic manner, “slightly burlesque and pompous.” But the joke’s on him. The people whose needs he ignored and whose rights he refused—the Métis as a New World people who racially²⁷ and culturally embody the hybrid nature by which some theorists (e.g. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin) define the postcolonial condition—became the symbolic operatic representatives of the Canadian people, still caught in 1967 (and maybe 1994) between many cultures, languages, religions, local affinities, and national self-identifications.²⁸ *Louis Riel*

may indeed be, as it was called, the “music drama from the birth pangs of the nation,”²⁹ but it is a very fractured and divided nation. In *A Midwinter Night's Dream*, an opera written by Somers and Tom Wynne-Jones, an Inuit Shaman says: “Stories are who we are.” If so, then the Canadian “we” are not simple, single, or easy to read as narratives. And perhaps that is just as well, since, as Edward Said has claimed, “[t]o tell a simple national story . . . is to repeat, extend, and also to engender new forms of imperialism” (1993, 273).

It is amusing, therefore, to read of Said's confidence that “[d]espite its extraordinary cultural diversity, the United States is, and will surely remain, a coherent nation. The same is true of other English-speaking countries (Britain, New Zealand, Australia, Canada) . . .” (1993, xxvi). But Canada has never been either an “English-speaking” nation or a “coherent” one. If most narratives of nationhood are narratives of integration, Canada's is not: at its core is what we have been referring to as “otherhood” or what Frank Davey would recognize as the narratives of diversity, division, exclusion, of the “beautiful losers” even more than the winners. And with all that seems to come a deep suspicion of the very narrative act of nation-making. How, then, is the “imagined community” of multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial Canada ever to be invented (Itwaru 9)? Should it be? Nationalism may well be neither reactionary nor progressive in itself³⁰ but, if most “nationalist politics is a politics of identity,” as Said argues (1993, 267), then for these two Canadian operas, both written at moments of particularly heightened national self-awareness, nationalistic politics seems to be a politics of identity-refusal. It is not so much a lack of “narrative competence” (Prince 61); it is more of a post-colonial challenge to the narrating of the self against the internal Other,³¹ and a post-national deconstructing of patriotic sentiment. And, to make the entire context even more ironic or provisional—or perhaps simply Canadian—this message comes in an art form that itself should be suspect: the hybrid or mongrel art form of opera is, after all, a perfect vehicle of “acoustic contagion”—even if the ideology, this time, is anti-nationalist.

ENDNOTES

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1. See also Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration*.
2. See, for example, Jane Fulcher's *The Nation's Image: French Grand Opera as Politics and Politicized Art*, on opera as the mixing of patriotic sentiment and public spectacle in the context of the larger political issues in France between 1830 and 1870.
3. On Verdi's role in the Italian Risorgimento, see Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 111–132. In their different ways, Rossini and Bellini also contributed by writing operas about national oppression and struggles for liberation. See Anthony Arblaster, *Viva la Libertà!: Politics in Opera*, 66–88.

4. See W. Daniel Wilson, "Turks on the Eighteenth-Century Operatic Stage and European Political, Military, and Cultural History."
5. See Elaine Brody, *Paris: The Musical Kaleidoscope 1870-1925*, especially chapter 3, "Le Japonisme et l'Orientalisme," 60-76.
6. The term is Edward Said's, from his *Orientalism*; see the continuation of this in twentieth-century operas such as Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*, with its "Dance around the Gold Calf, an orientalist purple patch with the lurid appeal of the Bacchanal in *Samson et Dalila* or the Dance of the Seven Veils in *Salome*" (Lindenberger 1989, 41).
7. Today, of course, directors are fond of foregrounding precisely this operatic act of Empire- and nation-building in their productions: in his version for the English National Opera, Jonathan Miller took the *Mikado* out of orientalist Japan and put it right back in the England from which it sprang.
8. For example, Murray Adaskin's *Grant, Warden of the Plains*, Kelsey Jones/Rosabelle Jones' *Sam Slick*, Robert Turner/George Woodcock's *The Brideship*, Raymond Pannell's *The Luck of Ginger Coffey*. This latter adds an interestingly typical Canadian element: it was based on a novel by an Irishman who lived for a time in Canada (Brian Moore) and its music was openly influenced by the work of Copland and Bernstein, or more generally, by what the composer has called his major musical culture, that of the United States.
9. Though it had only been a self-governing dominion since the Statute of Westminster in 1931.
10. Canadian composer Barbara Pentland, in 1969 (to *MusicCanada*), lamented that "[w]hat comes from outside the country *must de facto* be superior. Prime example: the opening of our multi-million-dollar 'National' Arts Centre [in Ottawa] with an imported French ballet company dancing to a score by a Greek composer conducted by an American born in Germany." Cited in the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, ed. Helmut Kallmann and Gilles Potvin, 1033. Amusingly, Toronto's latest theater, decorated by an American artist (Frank Stella) opened with *Miss Saigon* just last year. *Plus ça change*. . . .
11. At a recent session on "Canada and the United States: Literary Studies from Cross-Cultural Perspectives" at the Modern Language Association Convention in Toronto, December 28, 1993, Sherry Simon spoke of the two warring paradigms of "nation" in Québec literary criticism today: that of nation-building (e.g. Jacques Pelletier's, *Le Roman national*) and that of nation-deconstructing (e.g. Pierre Nepveu's *L'Ecologie du réel*).
12. See Jane Jenson, "Mapping, Naming and Remembering: Globalisation at the End of the 20th Century," 3-4.
13. Compare, for instance, the operatic narrative representation of the immigrant experience in anglophone Canada in R. Murray Schafer's *Patria I* to the Québec context of Gilbert Patenaude/Thérèse Tousignant's *Pour ces quelques arpents de neige* (1989) to the Derek Healey/Norman Newton's *Seabird Island* (1979) based on a legend of the Tsimshian tribe and influenced by British Columbian Aboriginal music. This latter cannot really be called an Aboriginal opera, however. What has been billed as the first of these, *Diva Ojibway* by Tina Mason (which opened in Toronto in April 1994) is said to have been inspired by Mozart's *Don Giovanni*.
14. Cited in Cherney 130. Canadian operas in general, it has been argued, also "reflect the individuality of the country's composers and the diversity of their inspiration" (Jones 711), and so there is no recognizable Canadian national musical style or school.
15. Moore was aided here by Jacques Languirand.
16. Kenneth Winters, in the *Telegram* (25 September 1967) called it a "pastiche . . . big, efficient, exciting, heterogeneous."
17. Cherney's description of this core music focusses on its "nervous rhythmic figures (often entrusted to brass) and sustained single pitches or vertical aggregates with pronounced individual dynamic fluctuations" (133).

18. Marc Gagné's opera from F.-A. Savard's novel, *Menaud, maître-draveur*, also uses folk music in its melody, rhythm, and harmonies, but to rather different effect.
19. As collected by Marius Barbeau and Sir Ernest MacMillan (Cherney 134) and orchestrated by Somers with sleigh bells, flute, tom-tom and other drums. The melismatic music and its ornamentations become coded as "Aboriginal" in the opera and have been seen as giving "authentic, realistic flavour" to the music (Cherney 133). For us, the inevitable operatic intertext of this lullaby is the Indian woman Wowkle's song to her child in Act II of Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West*, but in contrast to Puccini's desire for a robust sound, "a little savage" and exotic (Knosp 140; see also Carner 406 and Ashbrook 147), Somers did ethnographic research and sought historical material: the end of Act II features Indian dance music transcribed by Margaret Arnett MacLeod in *Songs of Old Manitoba* (Toronto: Ryerson P, 1960). See Cherney 135. Somers also used Inuit singing (mixed with Broadway musical and pop influences) in his Inuit-theme opera, *A Midwinter Night's Dream* (1988).
20. On the narrative and structural significance of reflexive songs being sung in opera, see Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century*, especially chapter 3, "Cherubino Uncovered: Reflexivity in Operatic Narration," 61-118.
21. Compare George Woodcock's *Gabriel Dumont: The Métis Chief and his Lost World* or his *Gabriel Dumont and the North-West Rebellion* and, say, Thomas Flanagan's, *Louis 'David' Riel: Prophet of the New World*.
22. Because Anderson based his libretto on the H.T. Lowe-Porter translation of *Mario and the Magician* (in *Death in Venice and Seven Other Stories*), citations will be from this translation.
23. The opera, written in the 1990s, in full knowledge of the historical events Mann could not have known about in 1929, makes Stefan into an anti-fascist (as Mann himself was later to become), even before Hitler's rise to full power. It is also, perhaps, for this reason that Anderson has made the rather pompous and elitist narrator of the novella into a much more sympathetic stage character.
24. Sir Onion would be a literal translation of his name, recalling the character from Boccaccio's *Il Decamerone*.
25. Rod Anderson, "*Mario and the Medium: Necessary Liberties*," printed in the libretto (2).
26. This revival was in Toronto, Ottawa, and Washington, the latter as part of Canada's contribution to the U.S. bicentennial celebrations.
27. See Earl E. Fitz, *Rediscovering the New World: Inter-American Literature in a Comparative Context*, 71; on Riel as mediating racial, linguistic and political splits in Canada, see Leslie Monkman, *A Native Heritage: Images of the Indian in English-Canadian Literature*, 119-20.
28. See Margery Fee, "Romantic Nationalism and the Image of Native People," 17, on the role of nationalism as the ideological drive behind the use of the native in contemporary Canadian literature.
29. COC press release, 1975.
30. See Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Patricia Yaeger, "Introduction" to their edition of *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, 5.
31. We cannot resist citing a 1964, utterly unself-conscious moment in Canadian opera criticism that reads very differently for many of us today, after the consciousness-raising around the 1992 encounter between Columbus and the Americas: "Opera and Canada—twin manifestations of the Renaissance spirit of exploration and adventure, the one intellectual in dimension, the other geographical. Both arose from the quest for something previously known but now lost, the Greek application of music to drama and the passage to a continent. Both resulted in new discoveries" (Kallmann 10).

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