

otherness.” Marlatt’s attention to this poem, with its image of “Tangent souls that can legitimately confront / Each other’s otherness,” is to me a beautiful description of *Reading Sveva*, a gift internalized and then made manifest, re-offered.

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## Unfinished Business

### Louis Riel, *Louis Riel*, and the “Song of Skateen”

Colin Browne

When the playwright Mavor Moore and the publisher Floyd Chalmers first discussed the idea of a grand opera based on the life of Louis Riel in 1963, their subject had been in his grave for seventy-eight years.<sup>1</sup> In some parts of Canada, Riel remained a controversial, if not tragic figure. In Métis territory, and in francophone Québec, his execution was seen as a betrayal and a reminder that English-speaking Canada could not be trusted. Anglophone Canadians, on the other hand, had long seen Riel as a threat to Confederation and had branded him a traitor. His hanging in 1885 had provoked celebrations in Ontario.

But things were changing; freedom and independence were in the air, decolonization was radically transforming the world. Outlawed leaders of independence movements were becoming the fathers of new nation states. In the spirit of the times, Louis Riel, a visionary poet, patriot, peacemaker, legislator, and armed insurrectionist, was beginning to look like a revolutionary hero. Like Ernesto Che Guevara, he’d been hounded by the army and executed by the state, and everyone knew that it was because he’d sought to free his people from tyranny. His transformation in the Canadian imagination was further encouraged by historian George Stanley’s new biography.<sup>2</sup> Unsurprisingly, his rehabilitation coincided with growing demands for self-determination in Québec, demands that challenged the foundation of the Canadian state.

Canada’s centennial year was fast approaching. The Floyd S. Chambers Foundation provided the initial commission for an opera. Mavor Moore would write the libretto, and Harry Somers, one of Canada’s pre-eminent contemporary composers, would compose the music.<sup>3</sup> A world exposition was being planned for Montréal. It would be an

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1 Brian Cherny, *Harry Somers* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1975) 129.

2 George F.G. Stanley, *Louis Riel* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1963).

3 Cherny, 129.

opportunity, as the world looked on, to unite Canada's two "founding nations" as one. Perhaps the example of Riel's selfless love for his people would help to heal the wounds embedded in Confederation and lead the country toward a united future. Riel, astonishingly, was being recast as a Canadian patriot.

*Louis Riel* was the first Canadian Opera Company (COC) production entirely written and composed by Canadians and performed by an all-Canadian cast. It received its world premiere in Toronto in September 1967, and travelled to Expo 67 in Montréal.

The COC revived the opera in 1975, and after two subsequent university productions, the UBC School of Music and Theatre, Opera Ensemble, and Symphony Orchestra produced the work in the week leading up to the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, supported by an ambitious academic symposium and a Louis Riel Youth Symposium. Professor Nancy Hermiston, the stage director, regarded the production and symposium as "an important opportunity for us to highlight Canadian opera and Canadian history and to inspire a debate on human rights and indigenous human rights."<sup>4</sup> As Canada and its First Nations welcomed

athletes and visitors to Vancouver to enjoy the privilege of winter sports, *Louis Riel*, and perhaps Canada itself, were being placed on trial.

The Indigenous nations of "the North West" are not represented in Moore's libretto. The single reference to Indigenous communities is sympathetic, but their absence is a matter of grave concern to anyone producing the opera today. When the COC and the National Arts Centre announced a new production for Canada's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2017, they vowed to address this concern. Harry Somers' intelligent, moving score remains as vital as ever and deserves to be heard, but how would the producers adapt the work to reflect the active presence of the First Nations during the Métis resistance? How might their roles be articulated, and how would the revival stand up to scrutiny? Such questions made *Louis Riel* the most anticipated opera of the season and shone a critical light on one of the opera's most luminous and controversial moments, the moving aria at the beginning of Act III sung by Riel's wife Marguerite.

*Read the full essay at [thecapilanoreview.com](http://thecapilanoreview.com)*

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4 "Canada's Chief Justice takes part in Western Premiere of Louis Riel opera," UBC Public Affairs media release, 2 February 2010, accessed 13 September 2017.