

Louis Riel. Music by Harry Somers, text by Mavor Moore with the collaboration of Jacques Languirand. 1 video disc (2:06:26). Roxolana Roslak, Mary Morrison, sopranos; Patricia Rideout, mezzo-soprano; Donald Rutherford, Bernard Turgeon, baritones; Joseph Rouleau, bass; Canadian Opera Company Chorus and Orchestra; Victor Feldbrill, conductor. Toronto: Centrediscs CMCDVD 16711, 2011. Contents: Act 1 (40:40) – Act 2 (35:20) – Act 3 (47:12) – Interview with Mavor Moore and Harry Somers (10:21) – Introductions by Mavor Moore (7:14 and 3:48). \$29.98.

Louis Riel commands a position of prominence in Canadian opera and must be counted among Canada's most significant cultural achievements. Written by composer Harry Somers and librettists Mavor Moore and Jacques Languirand, it was first performed in 1967 as part of Canada's centennial celebrations. The opera embraced the spirit of these celebrations, if perhaps not the tone, with a plot addressing historical events that resonate deeply for Canadians and which played a crucial role in establishing an early sense of nationhood. The librettists found a distinctly Canadian means to convey the tensions and allegiances among Protestant English Ontario, Catholic French Québec, and Riel's Métis by taking a multilingual approach involving the English, French, Cree, and Latin languages in situations appropriate to each character's background and circumstance. Somers complemented the linguistic diversity of the libretto by embracing a range of musical styles that placed diatonic melodies, popular song, and lyricism in juxtaposition and superimposition with abstract atonal writing, *Sprechstimme*, and electronically generated sounds. The opera is a dramatic tour de force that brings the story of Riel vividly to life while acknowledging many of the fundamental challenges faced by Canada throughout its first century.

For a sophisticated new work in an idiom that was largely unfamiliar to Canadian audiences, *Louis Riel* achieved a remarkable initial success with both critics and the general public. The opera was performed five times in Toronto and twice in Montreal during the 1967-68 season and broadcast in its entirety on the CBC's FM and AM radio networks. The CBC subsequently undertook a special television production of the opera with the original cast and company. It was broadcast coast-to-coast in colour on the English television network in October 1969 to an estimated audience of 1.41 million viewers. The Canadian Opera Company revived *Louis Riel* in 1975 for performances in Toronto and Ottawa and took it to Washington, DC, as part of Canada's contribution to the US's bicentennial celebrations. On this occasion an American critic writing in the *Washington Star* proclaimed it "one of the most imaginative and powerful scores to have been written in this century."

Since then, however, there have been disappointingly few opportunities for audiences to experience the opera in any medium. A broadcast tape from the 1975 US performance was used to produce a three-LP recording for the Centrediscs label in 1985, but it has been unavailable for years and never re-released on compact disc. The only staging was an acclaimed production at McGill University in 2005 as part of the celebrations of the one-hundredth anniversary of the university's music program. Given these

circumstances, this first commercial video release of *Louis Riel* almost forty-five years after it first appeared is as much a welcome event as it is long overdue.

The DVD release of *Louis Riel* is the twelfth and final installment in the *Window on Somers* series. It presents the CBC-TV version of 1969 produced by Franz Kraemer and directed by Leon Moore. The original broadcast included introductions by Mavor Moore to parts one and two [*sic*] of the opera and an interview with Somers and Moore by Warren Davis at its conclusion. All three items are included as special features on the DVD. In adapting the opera for television, the producers rethought the sets and staging to make them more realistic. They also exploit the possibilities of multiple camera angles to provide a strong sense of intimacy in many of the scenes. Kraemer's production delivers a riveting experience of the drama even though some details of the production place it jarringly in the 1960s. These included occasional allusions to political issues and the Prime Minister of the time, Pierre Trudeau, and a set for Sir John A. Macdonald's office in the House of Commons that emphasizes the colours of the Union Jack to an extreme that suggests psychedelic extravagance.

For the most part, the dated aspects of the production are easily transcended as the intimate staging and camerawork reveal the brilliance of the performances and the writing. Bernard Turgeon's singing and acting is excellent, enabling him to deliver a portrayal of Riel that is utterly convincing. The historical Riel was perceived as both a visionary and a madman, and Turgeon manages a balance that shows both Riel's inner turmoil and his charisma. This is especially apparent in Riel's soliloquy to God in act 1 and his address to the congregation in act 3. Marguerite's "Kuyas", easily the best-known number from the opera, is devastatingly poignant in the context of the full opera. Sung with great beauty and sensitivity by Roxolana Roslak, the music for this scene establishes a powerful reference point for all that Riel stands to lose by returning to Canada to resume his mission. Sir John A. Macdonald is rendered by Donald Rutherford with strong elements of farce and vaudeville leading to genuinely humorous scenes. At the same time, there is an underlying toughness to the character, so that we never doubt the negotiating powers of the man who overcame enormous obstacles to achieve Canada's confederation.

The only commentary in the DVD booklet is an excellent essay by Andrew Zinck on the enduring nature of *Louis Riel*. Zinck argues compellingly for the continued importance of this work in the construction of a Canadian identity in the twenty-first century. He further explains the dramatic significance of Somers' stylistic eclecticism, outlines the importance of Riel's mysticism, and shows how the "Kuyas" aria of Riel's wife, Marguerite, is used to create coherence throughout the second half of the opera. Beyond this, however, the booklet is sadly lacking in essential information. Although it lists the names of the cast and provides biographical details for Somers, Moore, and Languirand, there is no information at all on the details of the production: no names of producers or directors, no date of original broadcast, and no indication of the motivations behind the production. Since the DVD performance of *Louis Riel* is clearly an historic document, it would have been wholly appropriate to follow the conventions found in similar historical audio and visual recordings to provide information on the

production. In this case, a short note supplementing Zinck's essay could have been easily added by gleaning the information in R. Murray Schafer's 1972 article, "Harry Somers' *Riel* on Stage and Television," reprinted in *R. Murray Schafer on Canadian Music* (1984).

An even more problematic issue with the booklet concerns the libretto. Although the full text of the opera is included in the booklet, only the stage directions are translated into French and English. Otherwise, the text is given only in the language in which it appears in the opera. The exception is the "Kuyas" aria which is translated from Cree to English, but not French. This leaves large portions of the opera inaccessible to viewers who are not fluent in both French and English. This in itself would not be a serious issue if the disc at least contained subtitles. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Subtitles do not appear when the language changes and there is no option to select subtitles from the main menu. At a time when subtitles are ubiquitous on opera videos, their absence here is inexplicable. Even the navigation on the disc is cumbersome. Although the main menu offers an option to select chapters, the twenty-six individual chapters each appear on a separate screen that can only be navigated by scrolling through them consecutively. This means, for example, that selecting the scene with "Kuyas" in act 3, scene 1, requires scrolling through seventeen separate screens. One gets the impression that the primary concern was converting the video to a DVD format with little thought given to any additional features or functions that might have made the performance more appealing or accessible to a wider audience. Certainly *Louis Riel* deserves better.

Despite the flaws in the DVD's presentation and packaging, there is no question that the release of *Louis Riel* on DVD is an important accomplishment. This is a definitive performance of a major work that is central to the Canadian operatic repertoire and musical culture. *Riel* should be part of the teaching curricula in Canada and prominent in the repertoire of opera houses. As a reviewer for the British publication, *Opera*, suggested in 1967, *Riel* "may do for Canadian opera what *Grimes* did for English opera. It is a massive, moving and probably exportable historical opera." As we approach the fiftieth anniversary of *Riel*'s premiere this has clearly not come to pass, but this release is certainly a confident step in the right direction.

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