



[When Words Sing: Seven Canadian Libretti](#). Edited by Julie Salverson. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2021. 424 pp. ISBN: 9780369101242.

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When Words Sing represents a uniquely vibrant cross-disciplinary perspective on seven recent operas with Canadian-authored libretti. It is a glowing testament to how vibrant Canadian opera is today, and to its potential to continue to thrive as a rich site of artistic collaboration. It is also one of the only places to access these libretti, which are not available elsewhere. The volume is ideally positioned to be of use to researchers, practitioners, instructors, performers, and enthusiasts alike. It would also serve as an invaluable resource for use in undergraduate and graduate courses on opera or Canadian music. Beginning with a warm and

personal foreword by internationally renowned Canadian soprano and conductor Barbara Hannigan, as well as a comprehensive and insightful introduction by Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, the book then offers sections on George Elliott Clarke and James Rolfe's *Beatrice Chancy* (1998), Royce Vavrek and David T. Little's *Dog Days* (2012), Marie Clements and Brian Current's *Missing* (2017), Ann-Marie MacDonald and Nic Gotham's *Nigredo Hotel* (1992), Robert Chafe and John Estacio's *Ours* (2016), Anna Chatterton and Gareth Williams's *Rocking Horse Winner* (2016), and Julie Salverson and Juliet Palmer's *Shelter* (2012). Each section contains the complete libretto followed by contributions from several members of each creative team, who offer insight on each opera's inception, creative process, and prominent themes. The book concludes with a series of brief bios of the creators featured in the book.

The leap of faith required on the part of contemporary creators of opera, and the fortuitous series of events that seem to have occurred in order to facilitate the creative collaborations necessary for each opera's inception, has not been extensively explored in a contemporary context, and certainly not in Canada. It is refreshing, for example, to read George Elliott Clarke, librettist for *Beatrice Chancy*, write of his memories penning songs in his childhood bedroom, looking to Bob Dylan,



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Charles Beaudelaire, Dylan Thomas, and LeRoi Jones, for inspiration. Julie Salverson and Wayne Strongman describe the multi-year evolution of the Salverson-Palmer collaboration for *Shelter*. And Brian Current tells of the “blind” audition process he underwent to be commissioned as composer for *Missing*. While each opera is presented along with some of the transcendent themes, features, and complex readings that make them the impressive works of art they are, the book also seems to suggest the very real possibility for curious and creative writers to find their way to opera. It should also be noted that the libretto and descriptions of each work’s inception are more accessible than each opera’s score might be for those looking for a “way in” to contemporary opera.

Reading through the various libretti in the collection is enough to convince one of the value and relevance of contemporary opera in North America. Creators answer questions like “why are [the characters] singing?” (Gareth Williams) and “Where do words and music come from?” (Juliet Palmer). The answers to these questions are not only fascinating from a theoretical perspective but are also crucial to understanding how this art form makes sense for creators and audiences today. These pieces are contemporary and reflective of their time and place. Royce Vavrek writes that *Dog Days* “was undeniably contemporary in every way, requiring an honesty and directness in the language, and it had characters that spoke like me and my family” (69). The flexibility of form and focus of the chamber opera genre are partly to thank for this, as Linda and Michael Hutcheon write: “Their relatively smaller scale also makes chamber operas quicker to create and produce, and thus more rapidly responsive to issues of the day” (2). Hearing from those involved in the creation of these pieces affirms the work that contemporary opera can do vis-à-vis some of our biggest social challenges in contemporary Canada. Marie Clements, for example, writes about her impetus to write the libretto for *Missing*: “I’ve decided I will continue to write about [missing and murdered Indigenous women] until I don’t have to” (139). While keeping Dylan Robinson’s caution around “feeling reconciliation” front of mind, we can perhaps also hold up the potential for music theatre to bring about positive change on issues of Indigenous sovereignty, awareness of contemporary political issues, and building awareness of our past history.²

Editor and writer Julie Salverson describes the impetus for the collection beautifully and hopes that the book will demonstrate that opera has a place for writers, though many aren’t aware of its possibilities. As many writers featured here, including Salverson herself, discovered through their participation in various composer-librettist workshops in Canada (those at the Banff Centre, and at Tapestry Opera in Toronto, for example), opera can be nothing short of *transformed* through the contributions of fresh, creative literary voices. While the operatic artistic process, but also opera scholarship, has often relegated the libretto to a static form that exists somehow prior to the creative process that begins with the composer, here it is given the prominence it deserves. Indeed, perhaps the volume’s greatest contribution is its inherent positioning of the work of the librettist at

² See Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2020).

the heart of the operatic endeavour. Further, it demonstrates that these are works of literature, deserving of study in the way that spoken plays are. Since most of these works are recent ones (all but two were written in the past ten years), this is the first, and for most, only place they can be accessed.

The tensions between text and music in opera have been explored from various perspectives by scholars such as Linda Hutcheon and Herbert Lindenberger, among many others.³ And yet, the art of contemporary operatic creation, as it is told in these pages, seems to be one of organicism, of give-and-take in the messiest and most beautiful sense. *Rocking Horse Winner* composer Gareth Williams admits that the process of creating the opera in collaboration with librettist Anna Chatterton reveals the tightly knit nature of text and music in opera and the intense relationship between the two. He writes, “All the initial ideas [for the opera], the eureka moments, the discussions and dead ends, the drafts and decisions—they are all buried within the stitching of the work, and it would require some unpicking to clearly see the path taken. [...] For the process to work, and for the finished piece to blossom, composer and librettist have to trust one another, to be on the same wavelength” (325). *Shelter* reminds us of something else: that to develop new opera, “Chemistry isn’t enough. You need form, elegance, physics, to lease this fire, this hidden energy” (366). One can only hope that Salverson will find the energy to bring us another collection like this. Opera libretti—indeed, the collaborative enterprise of new opera in Canada—deserves more of the inspired attention it has been given in this collection.

³ See Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, “Prima La Musica, Poi Le Parole? Operatic Challenges to Word-Music Relations,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 79, no. 3 (2010): 869–880; Herbert Lindenberger, *Situating Opera: Period, Genre, Reception* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).