Louis Riel: Replacing the “Kuyas”

In 1967, Mavor Moore and Harry Somers had been commissioned by the Canadian Opera Company to write an opera for Canada’s Centennial. They chose Louis Riel as a subject, and created a piece that has been consistently hailed as a work of international stature.

In 2015, the Canadian Opera Company, eventually joined by the National Arts Centre and Opera Quebec, asked the estates of Mavor Moore and Harry Somers for rights to mount the opera in 2017 as part of Canada’s sesquicentennial celebration.

In the spring of 2017, as preparation for the new production was underway, music professor Dylan Robinson approached the Canadian Opera Company, to let them know that a piece of music in the opera, (popularly known as the “Kuyas”), was actually taken from a Nisga’a song, which Harry Somers had viewed in a recording done by Marius Barbeau early in the 20th century. Specifically, the song belongs to the House of Sgat’iin, is to be sung only by the head of the House, and marks, among other things, the spiritual and legal passing along of inheritance. Singing of the song by others, in other contexts, is an egregious breach, harmful to the singers, to the audience, to the House of Sgat’iin.

As a result, Professor Robinson organised a meeting, (hosted by and with support from the COC), with a broad spectrum of concerned parties. Led by representatives of the Nisga’a; G̱oothl Ts’imilx Mike Dangeli, (Nisga’a, Leader of the Git Hayetsk Dancers), Wal’aks Keane Tait (Nisga’a, Leader of the Kwhlii Gibaygum Nisga’a Dancers) and Sm Łoodm ‘Nüüsm Dr. Mique’l Dangeli (Tsimshian, Leader of the Git Hayetsk Dancers); and including other indigenous individuals and groups, as well as the estates of Harry Somers and Mavor Moore. It was at that meeting that the full nature and importance of the music became clear to the estates, and it was immediately recognised that something had to be done.

There was no time to address this issue before the 2017 presentations of the opera, but in the subsequent months, Professor Robinson spearheaded contact with the Nisga’a Lisims government, and they made an official request to remove the song.

Demonstrating a passionate commitment to resolve the problem, the COC Artistic Director, Alexander Neef, offered the physical and financial resources of the COC, with support from the National Arts Centre, to commission replacement music. In 2019, Ian Cusson, the composer-in-residence at the COC, and himself Metis, was commissioned to create music to replace the “Kuyas”. At the same time, in looking through past documents, it was discovered that Moore’s original words for that section of the opera had not, in fact, been used. According to Moore, Somers was having trouble setting them, time was getting tight, and Somers asked if they could use the “Kuyas”, a piece he had set independently, prior to the opera, and plug it in. The replacement, then, (now known as “Dodo, mon tout petit”), can be seen at least partially as returning to the creators’ original intent.

The Estates of Harry Somers and Mavor Moore wish to profoundly thank everyone that contributed to this process, but in particular Dylan Robinson for bringing the information to light, and Alexander Neef and Ian Cusson, for their extraordinary support. As an example of how to navigate the complex landscape of addressing similar issues, it’s hoped that others will learn and benefit from this experience. “Dodo” was birthed out of an urgent desire to make things right, while honouring the original creators’ intent, and we believe it has succeeded magnificently.

Sincerely,

The estates of Harry Somers and Mavor Moore