

# Common Voices

The Cultural Legacy of Cantonese  
and Italian Opera in Vancouver

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# Common Voices: The Cultural Legacy of Cantonese and Italian Opera in Vancouver

## *An Exhibition at the Italian Cultural Centre in honour of Asian and Italian Heritage Months*

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## **Introduction to the Art, Performance and Immigration Project**

In 2015 the Italian Cultural Centre participated in a European Union Project entitled *Performigrations* which brought attention to the important place that the ritual, performance and music serve in the life of immigrant communities. This was a collaborative project bringing together an extensive team of researchers and performance artists from seven cities worldwide: Klagenfurt, Austria; Athens, Greece; Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver, Canada; Lisbon, Portugal. Each participating organization was asked to mount a cultural event focusing on the immigrant experience in their city. It was clear that music and performance were viewed as a significant means through which an immigrant people could alleviate isolation and anxiety caused by cultural and familial dislocation. The project concluded in Vancouver on September 13, 2015 with an *Immigration Stories* event.<sup>1</sup> This afternoon of spoken word recitations, dance and musical performance from artists spanning the globe (Africa, the Philippines, Jamaica, Japan, and Latin America) articulated diverse immigrant experiences. Yet there remained a commonality across all cultural and performance genres. For each immigrant performer, and audience member, the combination of language, ritualistic movements, and voice were seen as necessary forms of human expression. It also became the foundation from which they could psychologically prepare to embrace the culture of the new country.<sup>2</sup>

**Dr. Angela Clarke,**  
*Curator*



Performigrations Exhibition, European Union Project, Italian Cultural Centre Vancouver August 25, 2015.

## **Common Voices: The Cultural Legacy of Italian and Cantonese Opera in Vancouver**

The success of the *Performigrations*' project, and its grand finale event, *Immigration Stories*, has brought clarity for the Italian Cultural Centre on the importance of performance, ritual, and music in lives of immigrants. For it is these artistic genres which can readily be transported from the old country offering an important continuity as immigrants embark on acclimatizing to the life in the new. To further its explorations into the subject of performance, music, and ritual *Il Centro*, in co-operation with the Museum of Migration, specialists in Cantonese and Italian Opera, and with the support of Heritage Canada has embarked on this current project: *Common Voices: The Cultural Legacy of Cantonese and Italian Opera in Vancouver* as a second installment to 2015's *Performigrations* project. This exhibition, spanning Asian and Italian heritage months in May and June, 2017, celebrates how both Cantonese and Italian opera affirm and transmit ritual and cultural identity. While the two operatic forms developed separately in Italy and China they possess commonalities in their widespread influence over the cultural life of Vancouver. First, both performance genres have been powerful and constant cultural forces in Vancouver spanning the lengthy period of this city's history beginning from immigration in the late 1800s (c. 1885) until the present day. Second, these genres thrived during the first half of the 20<sup>TH</sup> century in Vancouver as a result of professional traveling troupes from China and Italy moving their performers and accoutrements along the West Coast by railway and ship. Vancouver became an important artistic hub along this route and was a common stop for touring opera companies. These performance genres also relied on patrons to heavily invest in traveling performers. These investments, while ensuring that the Chinese labourers could remain connected with their language and culture of origin through music, also brought profits for the investors due to their popularity. Next, both opera genres in Vancouver remained healthy and vibrant artistic mediums through the efforts of amateur performers who maintained these opera genres as ubiquitous and powerful forces in life of their communities.



Fourth, Chinese and Italian opera are still sung in their original language, it is as integral to the cultural expression of early Italian and Chinese settlers as it is to recent immigrants. Therefore, while translations may be provided during performances, the original language remains the primary mode of conveying the plot lines and the artistic message.<sup>3</sup> The language of performance can thus supersede the importance of the plotlines themselves. Fifth, both art forms can be enjoyed in full length formats or they can be broken down into short arias or songs. In the fast paced 21<sup>ST</sup> Century, these specific songs isolated for concerts are generally the most popular and recognizable among audience members.

Sixth, opera performers of both genres build careers as interpreters of specific songs, becoming specialists in certain modes of performance. With repeated listening, audience members forge deep attachment to songs, and even to the voices of certain performers, which over their lifetimes, becomes a profoundly unifying experience.

## Commonality and Difference

Physical transformations of the performers through elaborate costuming and makeup are fundamental components to both Chinese and Italian opera. The story lines in both genres are often fantastical, involving mythical scenarios where the singers can be elevated to the status of gods, goddesses, heroes and royalty within the confines of the stage. For Italian opera, this focus on gods and heroes, arises from its origins in the Renaissance (1400–1650). Italian opera was devised as a revival of the Greco-Roman tradition of epic poetry where plays and spoken word performances were chanted and sung at festivals in honour of Dionysus, the god of wine and theatre.<sup>4</sup>

For Cantonese opera in China there is an unbroken theatrical tradition originating from temple festivals thousands of years ago. These festivals honoured the patron deity of Cantonese opera Wa Kwong Sifu and two lesser deities. This ritual continues today in contemporary Vancouver where the operas are mounted for the entertainment and pleasure of these deities. The mortal spectators of Cantonese operas are present during performances but while the plays are being enacted, they are transformed into participants in a ritualistic event held in honour of the divine.<sup>5</sup>



A Performance of Greek and Roman Poetry.  
The lyrics were spoken or sung to a lyre. Fresco from  
Herculaneum, c. AD 79.



Offerings to the Deities before performances at the Jin Wah Sing Opera  
Company, 1991.

## Opera Genres: Cantonese Opera and Ritual

It is the presence and continued significance of ancient rituals which separates Cantonese opera from Italian opera. As stated, the origins of Italian opera began in the Renaissance as a revival of Greco-Roman tradition of theatre festivals in honour of Dionysus. During these celebrations epic poetry and tragic plays were recited and sung. The heightened emotion of these plot lines served as an outlet for the audience enabling them to purge themselves of emotional extremes through their reactions to the dramatic events unfolding on stage.<sup>6</sup>

Religious ritual was also an important component to this tradition in the age of antiquity. However, with the advent of Christianity these festivals came to an end. While Italian opera, formulated in the Renaissance, was an attempt to revive the tradition of Greco-Roman theatre and epic poetry, the ancient ritual elements were lost as they were not relevant to a society based on the ethos of 16<sup>TH</sup> Christian humanism.<sup>7</sup> However, for Cantonese opera the rituals remain a constant presence. In this regard they retain the depth and resonance of significance over centuries whether these operas are performed during temple festivals in China or as gestures of supplication to the deities prior to the commencement of a performance in contemporary Vancouver. To this day Cantonese opera performances are viewed as extended rituals conducted as an act of deference to the deities. The stage during the performance is seen as a liminal space on view for both mortal and immortal audiences who observe the ritual acts of the performers before them.

The actors, while traditionally of a low cultural status, are also viewed as priests; conduits of the divine. This union of deity and mortal, which co-exists during performances, is facilitated through the enactment of important rituals, by the actors who consecrate the stage prior to performances. The sacred status of the stage, as well as that of the actors, remains throughout the performance until its conclusion at which time the divinities are ritualistically thanked and the stage is cleared of its sacred essence.<sup>8</sup> Rituals of transformation and consecration do not exist in Italian opera as the stage is not viewed as a sacrosanct space.



In the temple of General Kwan the actor Li Hsueh-fang officiates as a young couple exchange gifts before him. (Digital Archive of Chinese Theater in California), c. 1920–1929.





## **The Music of Migration: Italian Opera in Vancouver c. 1890–1950**

In Vancouver there were three distinct waves of immigration from Italy: the first during the late 1800s; the second in the 1920s; and finally post war in the 1950s.<sup>9</sup> Therefore immigration occurred in clusters creating distinct patterns of settlement based on one's region of origin. Italian settlement patterns in Canada resulted from new immigrants following one's *pisani* or country men. This self-identification based on regionalism was a direct result of the newness of Italian unification. Since Italy did not reach a state of unification until 1871 the first two waves of Italian immigration (1890s and 1920s) preserved the identity of the early immigrants who associated themselves with their town and region of origin, not as citizens of the country of Italy as a whole.

This propensity toward regionalism is retained in Vancouver's Italian community even today where there remain a large number of social clubs (36) associated with *Il Centro*. Twenty-two of these organizations consist of people who self-identify based on their familial region of origin, such as: Calabrese, Giulia-Dalmatia, Basilicata, Molise, Abruzzese.<sup>10</sup> In post-1950 many Italian Immigrants came to Vancouver from Southern Italy, prior to 1950 the largest group of Italian immigrants originated from the region of Venice (Friuli, Vicenza, Veneto, Treviso and Venice). Opera, with its origins in Venice, was one of the significant art forms enjoyed by these early immigrants in the pre-World War II period.



Italian Community Banquet. Hastings Auditorium, Vancouver BC, c. 1940.

## ***Opera Breve: A Brief History of Italian Opera***

Historically, opera was developed in Venice. While the art form was an attempt to reconstruct epic poetry, it was the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice which became the popular theme of the earliest operas in the late 16<sup>TH</sup> and early 17<sup>TH</sup> centuries. Orpheus was the son of Apollo the sun god. He was famous for his ability to play music, in particular, the Greek hand-held harp known as the lyre. The story of Orpheus and his sojourn to the land of the dead (the underworld) in search of his deceased wife was repeatedly recounted in the earliest operas. While there were many versions of this myth recounted by numerous composers at the initial inception of opera, the one staged by Claudio Monteverdi in 1607 is considered the moment when opera had officially arrived as a genre.<sup>11</sup> Prior to this staging most performances of opera were characterized as *intermedi* or short entertainments performed at the marriages and celebrations in the courts of the Northern Italian aristocrats. Opera in its original stages was clearly created for the pleasure of the nobility.<sup>12</sup>

## ***Opera Immigrati: Opera and Italian Immigrant Society in Vancouver***

While Italian opera owes its origins to high aristocratic culture and still retains its association with elite society to its present day, the genre has always maintained a significant cultural role in the lives of Italian immigrants in Vancouver. Certain arias such as “O Solo Mio” have reached such a degree of cultural popularity that they are sung interchangeably with traditional Italian folk songs. Of the people in the Italian community interviewed for this project such as Leonard Tenisci, Anna Terrana, Artura Cusinato and Massimo Cusano, a picture emerges of the important role opera has played in the social and cultural lives of immigrant families in Vancouver’s Italian community.<sup>13</sup> Since opera was important for the first generation Italian Immigrants, opera provided the musical backdrop to many community and family events over the past century. This *everpresence* has ensured that the third generation has been continually exposed

to the art form, becoming a formative influence over their cultural outlook. Within the context of the Italian family environment, opera was not a rarified art form, but rather, like folk music, it was perceived as an artistic genre that was fundamentally Italian and it has remained a significant presence in both private family and community events. Among Italian immigrant families opera was most present in the home through recordings of opera stars from albums purchased in Italy and transported to Canada at the time of immigration. These recordings, often placed in a safe and treasured place in the home, were brought out during periods of leisure at the end of a work day or on Sunday evenings. Recordings of the opera greats such as Mario Lanza and Enrico Caruso were significant voices in the background of domestic events.<sup>14</sup> However, opera consistently has had a presence during Italian social functions such as: banquets, dinners and celebrations. Additionally, there were occasions when Italian community opera singers, whether professional or amateur, were present at cultural events to sing popular arias as a demonstration of their continued connectedness with their traditional Italian identity. As Massimo Cusano, a member of the Italian youth choir in the 1990s noted, opera and Italian folk music was often sung side by side during community events, and in choral performances, each representing their important place in the cultural celebrations of the Italian community.<sup>15</sup> Cusano's insights are a reflection of fairly recent history in Vancouver's Italian social milieu. The interned Italian Canadian men (1940–1942) during World War II provides an historical perspective on the function of opera in the Vancouver Italian community. It is through their story that the significance of performance and opera can be viewed as a means to maintain community connectedness and identity during periods of extreme cultural dislocation and duress. It also demonstrates how both the high and low cultures, of Italian folk music and Italian opera, found their place intermixed and intermingled in the immigrant experience.

## ***Opera Verisimo: The Music of Italian Internment***

In 1940, when Britain and its subjects declared war on Italy, 44 men from Vancouver were detained in the work camp of Kananaskis, Alberta. Later in the year they were transported to another camp in Ontario in the region of Petawawa. Leonard Tenisci, the son of Fioravanti Tenisci, described the experiences of his father, an internment camp inmate, during an oral interview held at the Italian Cultural Centre in February of 2017. His father was the Director of the Italian Men's Choir in the internment camp and in that capacity he was in charge of organizing concerts and vocal performances. The repertoire of the choir was a mixture of religious and folk music as well as Italian opera arias. Becoming one of the most important recreational activities at Petawawa during the three years the men were interned (1940–42) the 100-man choir gained a reputation and traveled throughout the towns in the environs of Petawawa staging choral performances. The members of the chorus remained under arrest while they were transported to the performance venues. The trucks carrying these performers were heavily guarded by the military. The Italian inmates were dressed in denim uniforms featuring a



Woodburning of interment camp at Kananaskis by Frederico Ghislieri.

red bull's eye on the back, ensuring their visibility if they escaped. Despite their status as prisoners of war these performances were in demand among civilian communities in rural Ontario.<sup>16</sup>

While there are no eyewitness accounts of his specific performances, it is known that there was an opera singer among the 44 Italian inmates from Vancouver. In fact, oral reports from other Italian internees name Piero Orsatti as being among them and in these interviews he is referred to as the “singer.” Piero Orsatti, was an opera singer and vocal coach residing in Vancouver at the outbreak of the war. Orsatti was born in Tuscany, and moved to Florence to obtain his opera training. In 1914 he made his operatic debut at the Teatro del Verme in Milan. In the 1920s he left Italy to join an opera troupe which toured throughout North America. In 1929 due to health reasons, he stepped away from the touring company and moved to Vancouver where he became a vocal coach with the Vancouver Vocal School. He was also a celebrated performer in the city and sang routinely during Italian community events, especially connected with the Italian Consulate. He was released from Petawawa at the end of 1941 and he returned to Vancouver where he resumed teaching and performing at Italian events.<sup>17</sup>



Piero Orsatti, “The Singer” (1886–1961)

The stories of Fiorvaranti Tenisci and Piero Orsatti convey the degree to which opera and musical performance were an important means through which Italian immigrant men dealt with discrimination and the isolation from their families. Through choral performances they maintained their identity, and cultural connections, in a period of duress, solidifying a distinctly Italian identity with other Italian camp members.

## ***Opera Seria: Italian Opera in Vancouver, Becoming a Cultural Hub***

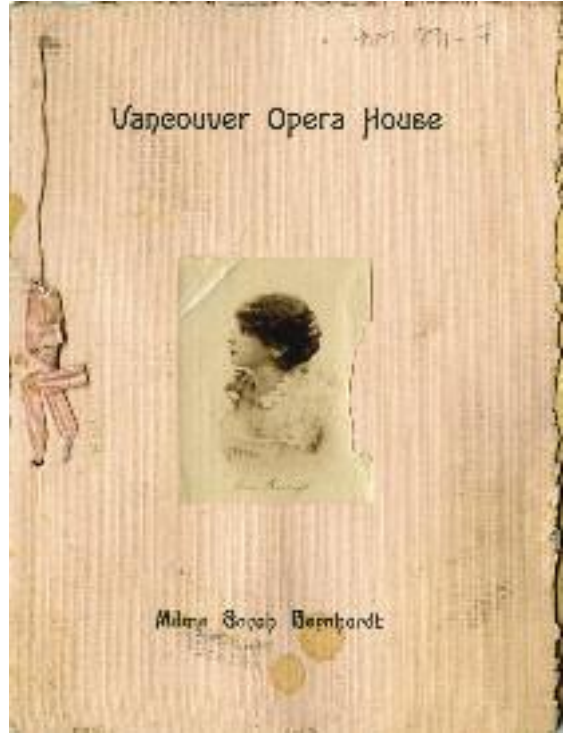
**Sarah Bernhardt, *La Tosca***

The positioning of Vancouver as a port city, and its location as a major hub on the Canadian Pacific Railway, has ensured that throughout its history the city has continually attracted high calibre traveling performers. Opera stars of significant stature in the opera world have routinely made their way to Vancouver. Starting on September 22, 1891 with Sarah Bernhardt's appearance in the play version of *La Tosca*, opera has had a consistent place in the cultural history of Vancouver. While Sarah Bernhardt's version of *La Tosca* was a staged play and not a full opera this performance had a lasting impact on the history of opera in Vancouver for two reasons. First, this staging of *La Tosca* with Bernhardt in its lead was part of a theatrical tour which had been in Rome two years before in 1889. It was this version of the play which had been seen by the Italian opera composer Giacomo Puccini and led him to write the opera which premiered ten years later. Additionally, it was in anticipation of Bernhardt's tour of *La Tosca* that Vancouver's first opera house was built in 1891. Therefore, while Bernhardt's version of *La Tosca* was not an opera, her interpretation of the role had a deep influence on the development of opera both in Europe and Vancouver. The opera house built for this performance was located adjacent to the CPR railway





Image of Sarah Bernhardt in *La Tosca*, 1887



Program of *La Tosca* in Vancouver, 1891

station and Hotel Vancouver. Traveling opera troupes, and all other visitors coming to Vancouver by railway, could easily reach the theatre. The convenience of the railway, as well as the proximity of accommodation and the theatre itself ensured that Vancouver was an important hub in the itinerary of traveling performers.<sup>18</sup>



Vancouver's First Opera House, 765 Granville Street



## Opera Stagione: Traveling Opera Companies

Beginning in 1913 until 1957 traveling opera troupes visited the city annually. The most famous of which was the San Carlo Opera Company. This troupe was located in New York and was under the direction of the Italian-American impresario Fortune Gallo. During its thirty years of touring, the San Carlo troupe performed most of the famous Italian operas such as *La Traviata*, *Rigoletto*, *Aida*, and Vancouver's most popular opera, *La Boheme*. These performances were readily attended by members of the Italian community as described by Nellie Cavell as a teenager in the 1930s. It is interesting to note from Cavell's story that by the 1930s there were other theatres built to accommodate these performances, revealing the growing popularity of opera.<sup>19</sup>

"I remember the San Carlo Opera coming often to town (the Strand Theatre and the Lyric) I took my sister Armida, to the matinee performance of *La Boheme*. Well, you know how sad that opera is. It was the scene where Mimi was dying and I heard this sobbing. I turned to see Armida, with tears rolling down her face, and I had to persuade her that Mimi was not really dying and she would soon get up and start bowing... I will never forget that. My father often took me to the opera and I was always so surprised and pleased when I bumped into so many friends there."<sup>20</sup>

*Nellie Cavell, New Westminster, October, 2012*



San Carlo Opera Program from 1920, featuring a performance of *Aida*.

This oral interview with Nellie Cavell reveals that not only did she attend the performances of the San Carlo Opera Company but many of her friends in the Italian community were in attendance as well.

## Opera Pasticcio: Opera and the Changing Culture of Vancouver 1950–Present



Barry Glass, Vancouver Photographer in New York, c. 1953

The 1950s and 1960s were pivotal decades in the cultural life of Vancouver with regard to operatic performance. In 1957 the San Carlo Opera Company folded but in 1958 the first music festivals which included opera, ballet and symphonic performances began in this city.<sup>21</sup> This festival was organized by a cultural committee of some of Vancouver's biggest benefactors such as the Koerner family.<sup>22</sup> These festivals brought to Vancouver high quality performers and directors such as Joan Sutherland and Tyrone Guthrie, laying the foundation for the beginnings of the Vancouver Opera company. This seminal period of performance history in Vancouver was documented in photographs by Barry Glass (27 August, 1933–25 June, 1968).

Glass was an amateur photographer, but he holds a significant place in the history of performance in Vancouver. Although he worked at City



Joan Sutherland, 1962 Vancouver Opera, Photo by Barry Glass

Hall in the Department of Town Planning, he was a regular attendee at cultural events in Vancouver. He became Vancouver's unofficial cultural photographer, developing a reputation for excellent spontaneous photographs. In this capacity he was granted unlimited access to performances and cultural events. The photographic archive he created carefully documents the thriving performance history and celebrity culture existing in Vancouver throughout the 1950s and 1960s. As Barbara Alexander said of her father's photographic legacy:

“My Father, Barry, was born in Lynn Valley, North Vancouver in 1934. After graduating from Britannia High School, his love of the visual arts led him to the Vancouver School of Art (later to become Emily Carr University of Art and Design) and he dabbled in photography while drawing, painting and sketching. He was an enormous fan of all genres of music and theatre. His love of things visual led him to snapping pictures at concerts and later, after refining his ability to take shots quickly and in low light situations, he would send his best work to the artist to be returned with an autograph or for them to use in their publicity. His talent for being tactful and unobtrusive led to a fascinating hobby...”

Barry Glass' work with the Vancouver Festival, the Vancouver Opera Association, The Vancouver Symphony and Holiday Theatre resulted in photos being published in *Musical America*, *The New York Times* and *Opera Canada*. His photos were used on four record album covers, *Renata Tebaldi Duets*, *Joan Sutherland as Norma*, *Dietrich in London* and *Featuring Marilyn Horne*.<sup>23</sup>

Glass died at the young age of 35 in 1968. While not a professional photographer, he left behind an extensive collection of photographs which have become iconic in the world of opera history. His photos of Joan Sutherland during her performances in Vancouver in the early 1960s have been placed on album covers and publicity. Most famous and recognizable are his majestic photos of Joan Sutherland dressed in the orange velvet robe she wore for her performance of *Norma* with the Vancouver Opera in 1963, currently on display in the Il Museo Gallery.



Italian Community Banquet. Hastings Auditorium, Vancouver BC, c. 1940.

## ***Primo Uomini a Vancouver: Italian Opera Stars and the Italian Community***

The genre of opera has been one of the significant means through which the Italian community in Vancouver has retained its cultural connection with Italy. This continuity has largely been unbroken since the beginnings of immigration. The community newspapers such as *L'Italia Del Canada* (1919), *Eco d'Italia* (1936–1940) and the *Marco Polo* (1956–Present) have recounted visits from famous Italian opera stars and recorded details of the receptions and banquets which have been held in their honour. At the Italian Cultural Centre itself, and the Silver Slipper Hall, its precursor in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as within the offices of the Italian consulate, opera has had a place in the cultural events in the Italian community. Whether it was a lunch held in the honour of Alessandro Bonci in 1911<sup>24</sup>; or a reception for Luciano Pavarotti, who visited the Italian Cultural Centre in 2006,<sup>25</sup> a year before his death; or a visit by the opera conductor Mario Bernardi,<sup>26</sup> the Italian community in Vancouver has continued to find a way to remain connected with Italian opera. In addition to hosting celebrations for opera stars members of the Italian community have sung in Italian language choirs where opera was performed alongside Italian folk music. Or, as in the case of Massimo Cusano, some have refined their voice performance talents to the degree that they were able to perform in the Vancouver opera chorus. Cusano, as an opera performer and third generation Italian Canadian, has reflected on the manner the opulent arrangements, theatricality, elaborate costuming and plotline drama innately reflect Italian cultural identity, and the character of its people and traditions.<sup>27</sup>

However, for mainstream Vancouver society there has been a need to make opera fit into the contemporary context and the artistic milieu arising from it. This is most visibly evident in the manner in which opera is advertised. Opera posters since 1983 have been an important means to promote the upcoming opera season. They have been ubiquitously located on the sides of buses, in bus shelters, throughout print media in Vancouver. Within the Il Museo gallery in this exhibition there is a selection of opera posters

produced between the years of 1987 to 2012. These posters focus specifically on the Vancouver Opera's stagings of *La Boheme*. This opera has been the most popular opera in the City of Vancouver with eleven productions since 1960, six of them produced posters. The five performances, which took place before 1987 produced only smaller formatted playbills.<sup>28</sup>

## ***Opera Oppure: Alternate Ways of Seeing Opera in Vancouver***

A display of the six posters for a single opera spanning a 25-year history (1987–2012) reveals that there have been constant and not so subtle shifts in the manner in which a single opera has been advertised over the expanse of a quarter century. These changes in aesthetics and conceptualization were based on contemporary cultural attitudes and aesthetic preferences at the time of their creation. In the early 1980s there was a move away from the traditionalism of opera and its dramatic plots. Therefore, the posters were created without any references to characterization and story line. In essence, the posters focused on the popular graphics and design trends of the time which centred on bright flashes of boxy colour, textures and geometric shapes. Next, the popularity of impressionist painters in the late 1980s and the spiking sales in the art market for the works of Van Gogh and Monet, has left an indelible mark on the opera posters produced between 1987 until the early 2000s.<sup>29</sup> Between 2004 until 2016 opera posters were closely associated with art movements. In previous seasons the Vancouver opera chose emerging artists to create a particular aesthetic concept for the entire repertoire of a single opera season.<sup>30</sup> Finally, in 2017 with the expense of printing and the wide spread fluency in the use of social media, the necessity for opera posters has been eliminated. Instead information for the opera season has been disseminated by eblast, email, facebook, twitter and mailed brochures.<sup>31</sup>

No longer do postage rates dictate the size and shape of posters, all opera images are created for impact on the computer screen.<sup>32</sup> Powerful scenes from the operas are generally photographed and they become the image by which the opera is promoted and advertised. In fact, current operas and their media campaigns are presented as the antithesis to the aesthetic traditions of the past. It is most marked in this season's staging of *Macbeth*. Mounted for the Push Festival, and with the sponsorship of the Italian Cultural Centre, the opera company Third World Bunfight has taken the opera, and the Shakespearean story on which it is based, into a dramatically modern direction. This staging has removed the location of Macbeth away from Scotland and placed it within the geographic boundaries of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Hence, the plotline focuses on the contemporary political realities associated with military dictatorships, North American industrialism



*Macbeth*, Third World Bunfight, General and Lady Macbeth, 2017.



and exploitation of resources. The ensuing political instability shaped by colonialism forms the backdrop of the dramatic plotline and give context to the unlimited opportunism of Lady and General Macbeth.

The libretto, written by the Belgian writer Fabrizio Cassol is based on Verdi's original opera but is reshaped and recast to focus on the ruthlessness of dictatorships in the third world, and the political instability arising from them. In the promotion and advertising for this opera the images of Lady and General Macbeth are featured. While they are equally as ambitious and morally corrupt as their original counterparts, it is their cultural diversity and placement in the post-colonial culture of Africa, not Europe, which re-energizes the story giving it a new level of significance and cultural relevance. Such stagings remind us that, while opera has its origins in Europe, the art form can be removed from its intended cultural paradigm. Taken out of its original context, it can reinvent itself to create something that represents a universal human experience outside the limitations of geography and cultural stereotypes.<sup>33</sup>

### ***Opera Finale: The State of Italian Opera in Vancouver***

The staging of Macbeth in 2017 represents the desire to make opera an art form that is relevant to contemporary cultural politics. The Italian Cultural Centre was a sponsor of this production. In this capacity Il Centro supported the notion that, while opera is a genre with an Italian origin, the art form conveys experiences which are not bound by ethnicity; nor geography. Rather, opera possesses the capacity to express all human experiences, not just those born of European ancestry. As noted by Massimo Cusano, third generation Italian Canadian, there is something fundamentally Italian about opera in its dramatic storytelling. Yet at the same time, as the experiences of the Internees at the POW camp in Petawawa reveal, the ritual of performance, for both the singer and audience member, has the ability to bridge time, class, location and even, ethnicity. In essence, performance possesses a capacity to elevate the human spirit in times of isolation and despair. While the location, context and costuming of the operas may change, this does not affect the impact that the ritual of performance possesses to elevate cultural identity, remind participants of their innate significance and validate human experience. This will also be seen through the story of Cantonese opera in Vancouver c. 1885 to 2017.

### ***The Tableau of Dignity: Cantonese Opera at the Golden Jubilee Festival Parade 1936***

Jean Kares' article "Performance, Adaptation and Identity" describes a seminal moment in the history of Cantonese opera in Vancouver.<sup>34</sup> Her sensitive interpretation of this event offers significant insights. She vividly describes a float created by the Chinese community using Cantonese opera costumes and props on display for the Golden Jubilee parade of 1936. Through her analysis Kares' reveals that while the float had a tremendous visual impact, it was a façade or a construct created to counter many popularly held stereotypes about the Chinese community. Kares' research eloquently describes specific aspects of the float and the women who rode upon it: their costuming, makeup and comportment, focusing on their impressive opulence and their otherworldly elegance. She added that through this demonstration of sophistication the Chinese community sought to refashion and reframe itself in the eyes of the British subjects and citizens of Vancouver. The intention of this Golden Jubilee float was to subvert and invert the established social order. For the brief moments that the float maintained its procession through the





Chinese Benevolent Association float in the Vancouver Golden Jubilee Parade, 1936

streets, the underprivileged Chinese immigrant women riding upon it, were transformed into dazzling and elegant figures. This carefully fabricated illusion of opulence was created by artifice: makeup, costume, props. In reality the women atop the float came from the ostracized community of Vancouver's Chinatown. Moving out of their impoverished confines, in the environs of Pender, Columbia streets and the residential district of Strathcona, and adorning themselves with this careful and deliberately created image, these marginalized women, were transformed into nobles, deities and glamorous ladies on a scale of mythological proportions. Kares refers to the few fleeting moments in which the float proceeded through the streets of Vancouver, as "liminal" ones. Before the eyes of the spectators along the parade route the women riding atop the float, were transformed into magical visions, otherworldly spectres of surreal beauty.

However, Kares reveals that the effects of this display were part of a deliberate illusion. The female actors on the float were almost certainly were not professional performers.<sup>35</sup> Kares notes, that by 1936 professional Cantonese Opera troupes were no longer came to Vancouver due to the expense of the bond which enabled actors to enter the country. Chinese immigration bans and the excessive head taxes required for those who desired to emigrate from China, prevented them from touring with any regularity. As well, the costumes worn by the women on the float, while elaborate and opulent, were old, having been abandoned by traveling troupes of Cantonese opera actors' decades earlier.<sup>36</sup> These long dispersed performers either intermarried within the existing Chinese community in Vancouver, or no longer performed due to troupe bankruptcy. The story of the float, and its carefully constructed fantasy, demonstrated a long-held and deep desire on the part of the Chinese community to place before the British subjects, and other Vancouver citizens of European descent, a different image than the one that prevailed at the time. The new impression they created sought to legitimize their presence in Canada. The popularly held notion of the Chinese community, not only kept them isolated in Chinatown but also barred them entirely from becoming Canadian citizens. Those that were allowed into Canada, temporarily, were educated professionals: doctors, lawyers, business men, scholars and students, men required to work on

the railway. Travelling actors, such as Cantonese opera performers were also allowed, into the country for brief periods but not without the requirement of an expensive bond and a set date at which they were required to exit the country. The float, with its opulence and elegance, states Kares, was an attempt to convince the city dwellers of European descent that the image of the Chinese community they maintained was an incorrect one. Rather, the message imparted by the float was that it was not the poverty of the Chinese men which defined them, but instead their elegance and sophistication, as exemplified by the women.

## Opera and Exclusion: Chinese Immigration Laws in Canada

This display of splendor and opulence of the women enthroned on the float, on view for the British Subjects lining the parade route, was a show of quiet dignity. This vision was a stark contrast to the challenges the Chinese community had faced in the 80 years since they had first immigrated to Canada. In particular, of all the peoples of the world who had immigrated to Canada it was the Chinese specifically who were singled out and excluded from entering this country. British subjects and the commonwealth nations especially, enjoyed the favoritism of an open door policy; for the Chinese this door was closed to them entirely.<sup>37</sup>

The first Chinese immigrants came to Canada in 1858 with the gold rush. This first wave did not immigrate to Canada directly from China but instead came first to San Francisco after stories reached China of a gold rush in the United States. The first wave of immigrants came from the Southern province of Guangdong, a primarily Cantonese speaking region of China, which was experiencing extreme poverty. Initially these young men had immigrated to California in search of fortune, and many failed to find it. They



were often left without the means to return home. It was easier to travel north to British Columbia when rumors spread of a new gold rush there. Since success in the gold rush was meager, in 1881, with the initiation of construction of the CPR railway many of the Chinese men sought employment on it.<sup>38</sup> There were two Vancouver Chinese men, Yip Sang and Chang Toy, who managed to become successful selling food and supplies to both prospectors and employees of the railway. They were also labour contractors for the CPR. These two men became the first patrons of Cantonese opera in Vancouver.

While the gold rush lured many Chinese men to British Columbia, and the railway actively pursued them as labourers, the Dominion Government of Canada made it clear that they did not want these men to bring their wives and families to Canada with them. When the railway was completed, laws were enacted which made it difficult for them to remain and create permanent ties in this country.



Group portrait of Chinese railroad workers. Undated.

On November 7, 1885 the last spike of the railway was driven into the ground and during the same year the Canadian government issued a head tax to discourage settlement of Chinese immigrants in Canada. This tax was steep for the impoverished Chinese and it continued to escalate over the years further emphasizing the Government of Canada's discouragement of Chinese immigration: in 1885, the head tax was \$10.00 per person; in 1895 it is \$50; in 1901 it was \$100 and by 1903 it was \$500.<sup>39</sup> It was clear from these fees that the Chinese hoping to come to Canada either had to be independently wealthy or seek the support of a benefactor. Those few who remained suffered extreme isolation and poverty.

For those who came to Vancouver, in search of subsistence and survival, the story is a sad one. Barred from bringing family to Vancouver, and desiring to send a substantial part of their small incomes back to family members in China, poverty and isolation took its toll on the men. It was only in the region of Chinatown between Pender and Columbia streets, and within the Strathcona district, that the remaining Chinese men were able to negotiate an intricate support system, apart from the rest of Vancouver, which could accommodate their basic needs for survival.

Separated by language, and marginalized through racism, the world of Chinatown became a haven for Chinese men who flocked to Pender and Columbia at the conclusion of their seasonal labour. Of the few Chinese investors who made their fortunes providing supplies of food to the men in Chinatown, they sought to elevate the morale of these single men by supporting cultural events such as performances of Cantonese opera.



Yip Sang

Wang Choy and Yip Sang paid the substantial bond, as well as the food and lodging, to bring traveling Cantonese opera troupes from San Francisco, Seattle and Honolulu to Vancouver for performances.



Kwok Fung Lin Troupe in 1923 wearing costumes similar to those in the Museum of Anthropology collection.

## Women and Cantonese Opera

In Nancy Rao’s article “The Public Face of Chinatown,” she discusses the importance of female Cantonese opera performers to the culture and social life of Chinatown c. 1910–1940.<sup>40</sup> While this article focused on San Francisco, much of the research contained in it, and Rao’s conclusions, are applicable to the Vancouver experience. Many of the Cantonese opera performers were members of traveling companies which performed in Vancouver as well. Certainly being part of a traveling troupe, with no fixed location, and removed from familial attachments, ensured that the troupes’ female members remained aloof and unattached to the cultural norms of China. Additionally they possessed a significant amount of allure since their theatrical skills, and feminine presence, were in great demand. As women they were a compelling draw to the single, unattached, and impoverished Chinese men populating the Chinatowns. It was these men who were the greatest supporters of traveling Cantonese Opera troupes. In China performers were considered to exist on the lowest rung of the social ladder, despite their perception as conduits of the divine. Of the people on this social ladder female performers were the lowest. Women were actively discouraged from participating in the theatre in China until 1920.<sup>41</sup> However, by 1910 women were performing in North America where it was considered not only acceptable, but desirable, and profitable, since men came to these performances in large numbers.<sup>42</sup> It was the allure of the female performers which brought such large male dominated audiences to Cantonese opera prior to World War II.



Tzu-yu-Hua member of an all-female troupe which performed at the Crescent Theater in San Francisco, c. 1920–29,





Playbill of Female Cantonese Performers, c. 1930.



Dancing women entertain a court official in garden setting, staged at the Great Star Theatre, c. 1920-29.

Images of female Cantonese opera performers, became the central component to the advertising and indeed allure of the Cantonese opera performances in North America.

Not only were there all-female touring troupes but the posters and photos singled out the female performers, and elevated them to celebrity status, in print ads and playbills.

Because of the ever increasing attention that the female performers received, the images depicted of them moved away from traditional modes of female representation, but instead became move consistent with





Women in bathing suits and warriors confronting kneeling women in a scene at the Great China Theatre, c. 1930–39,

the aesthetics of North American cinema. The photos of female opera performers reveal a confluence of tradition with contemporary glamour. In black and white photos female performers are depicted as embodiments of the Flapper girl bravura with Marcelle waved and bobbed hair, screen starlet dark lipstick and dramatic black eyeliner.

In many publicity photos women performers abandoned the heavy layered costumes, and instead dressed in contemporary, fashionable dress revealing their arms, and legs. Some photos even depict the female performers wearing bathing suits like the North American pin-up glamour girls. However, despite the changing appearance of the actresses, the backdrop of the traditional Cantonese opera set designs and props remained, to provide cultural context.<sup>43</sup>

Such was the demand for female performers, as April Liu notes, that women were able to forge a place and identity in the political and social landscape of Chinatown through their unique placement as performers.<sup>44</sup> Once again the word “liminal” can be applied to their roles since the power and demand of the female presence on the stage gave Chinese women performers an unparalleled power. In essence, their unique role as performers, and as itinerants, with no fixed attachments to location and family, translated into a special social positioning, exempting them from having to uphold traditional social roles. However, during World War II c. 1940–46 performers from China were not allowed into North America, but their presence and cultural impact, continued to reverberate through the power of performance on screen and through recordings.<sup>45</sup>

## The Insular World of Chinatown

Within the insular world of Chinatown Cantonese opera was one of the most significant expressions of culture and entertainment. However, despite its popularity, within that district, the realm of Cantonese opera was largely unknown to the rest of Vancouver. Chinatown and its active cultural life was entirely separate from the world of the British subjects living in different, more affluent regions of the city. To those that ventured into Chinatown for brief periods, there was an incomprehensible mysteriousness surrounding it. There was also some suspicion. Victoria Yip, noted that growing up in the city of Victoria, the sphere of Cantonese opera performance was somewhat closed even to Chinese women who desired to attend performances as audience members, c. 1900.

She, however, listened to Cantonese opera recordings in her household while she conducted mundane chores such as laundry and ironing. She noted that when she married and moved to Vancouver, in the 1930s there were less restriction on women attending the operas.<sup>46</sup> For those women who did attend, admittance to the operas required a different entrance and the seating arrangements were set apart from the men.<sup>47</sup>



Illustration from *The Pacific Tourist*, a Chinatown performance and audience, 1876, c. 1900–1930.



The women's gallery in a San Francisco Chinese opera theatre in the 1800s.

Major Mathews, Vancouver's first city archivist, in 1948 recalled his experience attending a Cantonese opera performance in Chinatown c. 1898.<sup>48</sup> He described the occupants of the theatre as drab, existing in a gloomy environment wafting with smoke. He expressed his amazement that this world was not governed by western rules of social etiquette. Rather, he noted that the men in attendance entered and exited the theatre without any concern for the disruption it created. He also considered the music and plot to be incomprehensible. In his estimation there was no compelling attraction to the art form as the overwhelming poverty, absence of colour, and the language barriers made it an uncomfortable experience. Certainly the manner in which Cantonese opera was advertised emphasized its insularity and did not attempt to draw non-Chinese audiences to the performances. In fact, advertising was restricted to Chinese language newspapers, posters and flyers. The notices were written only in Chinese. In the 1920s with the growing number of female performers, and their allure to Chinese male audiences, photos of attractive and vibrant female performers were added to these print advertisements. This continued until World War II after which Cantonese opera receded from the Vancouver cultural landscape, touring groups became less frequent, and the art form was kept alive by associations and teachers who emigrated from China. The art form was revived by immigrants who came in large numbers in the 1980s–1990s with many performances every year.





The Jin Wah Sing Musical Association headquarters on Columbia Street in Chinatown.

## Looking Back: Contemporary Cantonese Opera in Vancouver 1970–1990

In 1973 while writing a book on the Chinese experience in Canada, Graham Johnson interviewed members of the longest running Cantonese opera association in Vancouver's Chinatown, the Jin Wah Sing Musical Association.

During these interviews Dr. Johnson was informed that there was a collection of antique Cantonese opera costumes, props and accessories which had been left behind by performing troupes over fifty years before. These costumes had been maintained in pristine storage in the basement of the Chinese Freemasons building and the Ho Ho Restaurant. These costumes had been used by numerous Cantonese opera companies over the span of thirty years (1910–1940). The design and details of these costumes encompassed a range of aesthetic changes and fashions thereby revealing significant shifts in the history of Cantonese opera performance. This discovery brought to light antiquated costuming of such rarity, that few comparable items have been located in North America and none of this age in Hong Kong and China. Their destruction was due to war, revolution and the harsh climate. As noted by Elizabeth Johnson historic costumes worn by those in the lower ranks of society are the most difficult to locate and preserve.<sup>50</sup> These costumes are fated to be repurposed, reconstructed, resold and ultimately made threadbare from constant circulation. The Jin Wah Sing costume find gave scholars rare insight into the construction, design, symbology and fashion history of Cantonese opera costumes of the past. As well, many of the costumes were identical to those worn by the women and men presiding over the 1936 Golden Jubilee

float and props.<sup>51</sup> It is believed that these were the very costumes worn to create the illusions of opulence during that parade. The Jin Wah Sing had made plans to sell the costumes in a local sale to raise money for newer ones. The Museum of Anthropology bought the first installment of costumes with donations from Chinese supporters. Almost twenty years later, in 1991, the Jin Wah Sing donated the an additional 200 pieces of this collection in preparation for a large traveling exhibition on Cantonese opera in Vancouver entitled: *A Rare Flower: A Century of Cantonese Opera in Canada*, curated by Elizabeth Johnson and Rosa Ho.<sup>52</sup> In 2012 the Jin Wah Sing donated the remainder of their historic collection to the Museum of Anthropology.

The acquisition of Jin Wah Sing's opera costumes by the Museum of Anthropology made it the largest antique opera collections in the world. For many within the Cantonese opera community the interest in the costumes, which they perceived to be an antiquated and out of date assemblage of items, was a surprising one. The costumes, in terms of contemporary performance, were considered unwearable since they were no longer consistent with modern modes of performance. Cantonese opera in Vancouver had always been an enclosed community with little interest or participation from those outside Chinatown. Few performers in the Jin Wah Sing community could remember the original context in which these costumes were worn since, by 1991, they had not been used for over 50 years. However, as the Curator of the *Rare Flower* exhibition Elizabeth Johnson, noted, the cultural value of this collection was immense, and the opportunity to study them in depth was a curator's dream since it bridged Chinese and local Vancouver culture. In 1992, 200 pieces of this costume collection traveled to six venues throughout Canada as part of an extensive exhibition. The display captured the history of Cantonese opera performance in Vancouver and highlighted the degree to which this artistic genre had evolved in the span of 90 years. These costumes were veritable relics of the professional traveling performance troupes of the past. This was in dramatic contrast to the Cantonese opera community in Vancouver at the time. In 1991 Cantonese Opera was kept alive by amateur performers. There were few traveling troupes performing in Vancouver anymore. Rather it is through the efforts of deeply committed amateurs, especially women, that the tradition of Cantonese opera continued to have a meaningful place in the cultural life of Vancouver.



## ***Flower Princesses: Carriers of a Tradition, Women Performers of Cantonese Opera***

In her article “Can You Hear Me, the Female Voice in Cantonese Opera,” Daphne Lei has noted that in the San Francisco Bay area “it is the traditionally voiceless women who have taken on a man’s job to transmit the art, to help strengthen the community and most significantly, to project the female voice.”<sup>53</sup>

These sentiments can be similarly applied to the Cantonese opera performing community in Vancouver. Since the 1980s, Cantonese opera has largely been kept alive by the efforts of female performers residing in Vancouver and in the environs of Richmond.

Ruth Huber, a female interpreter of male scholar roles, has noted that thirty years ago, many husbands in Chinese families were required to return to Hong Kong periodically for business.<sup>54</sup> In order to remain connected to a larger community, and gain a social outlet, many women joined Cantonese opera societies, becoming interpreters of this rigorous performance discipline. Cantonese opera naturally accommodated this influx of female performers since, as has been noted earlier, Cantonese opera has maintained a long tradition, especially since 1910, of accepting, and even welcoming women, as performers of male roles.<sup>55</sup> Most operas focus on fairytale themes with stories of princesses and young maidens as well as a plethora of romantic love stories; themes common to female-centred popular literature. While in the 1920s and 1930s the advertising and publicity for Cantonese opera focused on images of women to draw largely male audiences into the theatre, the reverse is true in contemporary Cantonese opera in Vancouver, where women form the largest audiences. As opera performers and audience members, Cantonese Opera has



Ruth Orr Huber (Left) and Winnie Poon, “The Beauty Returns the Military Garment.”  
Jin Wah Sing Musical Association, Vancouver 1991.

given many women an opportunity to connect with their cultural heritage while residing in Vancouver. It has offered them a significant cultural outlet as their husbands travel on business and their children grow to adulthood. Therefore, it is through the efforts and dedication of women as performers and audience members that Cantonese opera remains vital and alive.



Rosa Cheung, Vancouver Cantonese Opera, Princess Cheung Ping, April 15, 2016.



## Conclusion

The stories of Cantonese and Italian opera in Vancouver, while arising independently, share a common history. As performance genres, employing voice, movement and ancient story lines, they have both maintained a significant place in Vancouver's cultural history. While Italian opera in Vancouver is largely supported by non-Italian patrons, and in this regard has experienced a more pervasive popularity among the general public than Cantonese opera, both have fulfilled specific cultural niches. Neither have been elevated to the status of a fixture in the mainstream of Vancouver's popular culture. Both remain an "acquired taste" requiring some knowledge of the art form before they are entirely accessible. However, these art forms have become ubiquitous expressions of cultural identity in the lives of Italian and Chinese community members over the last century being performed regularly at cultural events. They have even been made more pervasive through recordings owned privately by family members. Often the performers of these genres maintain a celebrity status for members of these communities and certain singers and voices, as well as certain songs, have the capacity to unite communities emotionally and experientially when they are performed. Finally, opera performance has maintained its deepest significance as an emotional outlet in times of isolation becoming a language of resistance, a cultural fortress, and a sacrosanct ritual during periods of turmoil and upheaval.

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Tony Mazzega, *La Valigia*, Red Cedar Suitcase. A symbol of the immigrant at the Italian Cultural Centre.

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