Key Change Episode 5: Visions for the Future Transcription

Hosts: Robyn Grant-Moran, Julie McIsaac
Guests: Cherie Dimaline, Ian Cusson

Julie McIsaac 00:00
Welcome to Key Change. The COC's new podcast exploring everything about opera from a fresh perspective.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:23
We're your hosts, Robyn Grant-Moran

Julie McIsaac 00:26
and Julie McIsaac. And today, we'll be glimpsing into opera's future and the process of creation in general. So because so many of the works that we attend at the opera tend to be from the past, thinking about how operas are created isn't necessarily something that's at the forefront of our minds or the forefront of conversations. So we're really excited to give some insight into that and how it fits into the arc of attending opera and creating opera.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:53
Yeah, I really like this to close our first season, because it's just a beginning. We're not really ending at all…

Julie McIsaac 01:02
… where the end is just a new beginning.

Robyn Grant-Moran 01:04
Exactly. I'm a massive fan of our first guest. Any sci-fi readers out there might be familiar with this name, Cherie Dimaline. She's a best-selling writer, she's from the Georgian Bay Métis community, and she's written over five books for teens and adults. Her novel, *The Marrow Thieves*, has won numerous awards, including the Governor General's Award and was a CBC Canada Reads finalist.

Julie McIsaac 01:38
Cherie has really beautiful ways about talking about opera that are really connected to our physical bodies, our physiology, our teeth, our bones, our rib cage, so we're really looking forward to sharing this with you. And we'll also be hearing from composer Ian Cusson, the COC's Composer-in-Residence and recently appointed Co-Director of Opera at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity. You may have heard Ian's recent composition of "Dodo, mon tout petit," commissioned by the COC and the National Arts Centre to replace the "Kuyas" aria from

Louis Riel, and he's also working on a new opera for young audiences at the COC called *Fantasma*. We'll hear more about that later. A little tidbit too, it just so happens that myself and Ian and Cherie are all from the same hometown.

Robyn Grant-Moran 02:20
And it's a cool Métis episode too.

Julie McIsaac 02:25
Welcome to -- say it again Robyn, what did you call it -- the cool Métis episode?

Robyn Grant-Moran 02:34
Yes, it is the cool Métis episode. But anyway, let's first hear from Cherie. Hi, Cherie, thanks for joining us today.

Cherie Dimaline 02:58
Thanks for having me, Robyn.

Robyn Grant-Moran 03:00
It seems there's a boom in speculative and futuristic science fiction in Indigenous media right now. Why do you think that is?

Cherie Dimaline 03:10
You know, there's something about… well, I know exactly what it is, I know what this something is. So there is this thing that happens when you write speculative fiction or when your work is categorized as speculative fiction, and that is that you're given more freedom. And in particular, you have readers that come to the page who are more open, they're willing to journey further and farther with you. And this really suits, I think, a lot of the storytelling tradition that a lot of Indigenous writers and storytellers come from, that we've grown up with, where, you know, there's an understanding of time as, you know, circular as there's other entities in the world, besides the ones that are sort of corporeal in a way that we see everyday. And so being under that umbrella of futurism and speculative fiction allows us to play within that space with a little more freedom. And I think also, well, you know, we want to talk about the future, we want to talk about the future as much as we want to talk about the past because both move in a way that inform who we are, and where we are, which is an important conversation that we always have. My community is a Métis community; we're on Anishnaabe land traditionally. And, you know, when we look at Anishnaabe traditions, one of the things that we have to do when we're making decisions or speaking or telling stories, is to think about the, you know, time both in both directions. So you reach seven generations into the past, to pull out the teachings and the understandings and everything that's been left on the trail for you. You pick those up, and then you look seven generations into the future and you think about the impact of your words and your teachings and your stories and your decisions, and you pull those back. So it really is this work of weaving threads from both directions into the centre place, which is where we are now. We are also present with our work so we can speak to the fact, you know, so *Empire of Wild* is about a creature, a trickster person from my community, from where Julie's from, that is, you

know, sort of been called different things. He's a monster I've heard in the media, and that's fine. People have different words to describe him. To us he's very real. He is this sort of, as people say, like a monster sort of creature, but he's really from us and for us. And so he, when I was growing up, was lived and sort of, you know, tricked people at that place where our community turned into the town, because it was dangerous for us, as Indigenous girls to go into the town. So that's where he was, he was warning. So these are very real stories. This is, you know, my life. This is… these came from my grandmother, it came from her grandmother, my grandfather's family. So the fact that it is given different names doesn't bother me, as long as I have an opportunity to say, that's great that, you know, this is the context you're holding him in, here's his actual biography, here's who he is.

Julie McIsaac 06:26
But in this space that gets opened up, by virtue of the speculative nature, by virtue of the futurism, what is there in there, I'm curious about what can then be explored in terms of relationships, but Indigenous relations to the Canadian state?

Cherie Dimaline 06:41
Oh, everything. So here's the beautiful thing about writing in this space. If I choose, as a woman, as an Indigenous person, as you know a member of a community that's considered marginalized, or has experienced oppression, I can choose in that moment to leave that weight behind, I don't need to address it. To me, it's one of the last decolonized spaces left. So we can move in those spaces. And this is why I also love telling queer stories in that space. Because first of all, we belong everywhere. But also you can leave that oppression behind, if you choose; for a moment you can literally feel that burden lift off your shoulders, and you can move in that space as your own beautiful entity. And then if you choose, you can take it head on, you can make that oppression or colonization the centre point of the story. Because it allows you the opportunity to build new defenses and new weapons in that space.

Julie McIsaac 07:46
In terms of those futures that we need, like you said, and the weapons that emerged through your works in terms of what the characters draw on, or what they rely upon to get to get through and to succeed on their journeys, can you speak to us about what narratives may be being shaped by virtue of those ideas that you're offering?

Cherie Dimaline 08:03
Empire of Wild was a book that was written when I was incredibly homesick. And I was living, let's see, at the time I was in Vancouver, and I was having a conversation with my mother. And I was saying, "You know, I just don't -- I just don't feel good and I can't figure it out. I don't know what you call this." And she said, "I know exactly what it is. And when you're ready, I'll let you know what it is." And when I was making a decision about where I was going to go next, I said, "You know what, what is that Mom? Like, what, where, what do I need to do?" And she said, "You are homesick. You worked so hard to get out of this, this small place. And everywhere you went all you did was write about it. It's time to come home." And so I did, I came home but *Empire of Wild* is a story that came out of homesick, but it came out of also a homesickness for

this feeling, for this narrative that I wanted to surround not just myself, but you know, especially my daughters, and that is: anytime that I opened a magazine or a newspaper, I turned on TV and I heard about Indigenous women, it was Indigenous women as victims, it was Indigenous women as statistics, as an acronym. It was Indigenous women in a colonial context, so what had happened to us, not the ways in which we were acting, but the ways in which we were acted upon. And I really, really wanted to, for just a moment, lift that weight. I address it, it's fully addressed, that the heaviest weight that Indigenous women carry is not colonialism, it's love. It's the fact that we are still here, we are still telling stories, many women carry their language and traditions. And we are a fast growing demographic. We are still creating families. We are still having babies, which means we still have hope. We still understand that our babies will have a place in the future and we are going to fight for that and so I wanted to have a narrative of that heaviest weight, which is that love of beauty through it all, in all its forms, you know, none of these characters are perfect. You know, being in that space allowed me to really do that thing, that lens shift; everything I write is from obviously, you know, from my own point of view. I don't know what it's like, you know -- Lee Maracle, who's a very profound Stó:lō and Métis writer, teacher, just Elder; she always says, our responsibility as writers now is we need to, we need to walk through the dark places, there's a lot of dark hallways, we always have to leave a door open or a window open, especially for our young people. They need to know that even as we walk through darkness, there is always a way out.

Julie McIsaac 10:50
So Cherie, we're curious: what kind of relationship have you had to opera? What has been your experience with opera and then that you're working on something right now? So we'd love to hear about that, too.

Cherie Dimaline 11:01
Oh, I was super excited. Okay, so first of all, and I'm sure this is the answer you get all the time: I saw my first opera when I was in grade eight. It was a school trip that took us to the Skydome and we saw *Aida*.

Julie McIsaac 11:16
Okay

Cherie Dimaline 11:17
And it was the first time I realized that I had a uterus. But it was the first time that something hit me in my body that made me realize that there were spaces that had potential beyond what I understood. Opera to me, opera music, opera voices, carve out the space: it's something that you don't listen to with your ears, right? It's a sound that manifests under your ribs. And so it's a different kind of experience. I guess it's like this: so for every job there are -- there's a tool -- for every you know, for every type of food we eat there's -- our teeth have different responsibilities, different -- they're different tools. And for me, opera feels like an incisor tooth. It feels like the exact thing that we need to tear open new space. It comes at this pitch and this depth; it doesn't open a door, it opens a hatch in the floor that allows you to then start descending to a new depth. And so it was never surprising to me that opera productions and attending the opera is

very formal, right? It's not a casual thing. You plan it, you buy your tickets ahead of time, you dress up. I went to an opera a couple years ago -- I wore like a fascinator with like this very *Beetlejuice* sort of veil and felt fabulous. But part of that, you know, being prepared for going to it as an event is because it is very specific, deep work. And it's not something that I step into lightly. I only listen to opera when I'm ready to deep dive. I did listen to opera when I was writing *Empire of Wild*; I think *Madama Butterfly* was huge in there. Because it carves out this space that you must then confront. Because it's all around you. It's sort of dropping you into the middle of the lake. And it demands of you work. You know for me opera's always been fascinating. I go when I can, I'll be there when it reopens. And, and so not too long ago, a couple of weeks ago, I was sitting with my agent and going through, you know, different emails that have come in and requests. And he mentioned that there was a, you know, an email, someone is affiliated with the Canadian Opera Company. And so I was like, "What's that about? I want to hear about that!" So he forwarded the email. And it was Ian Cusson, who's the Composer-in-Residence, explaining that he was from, you know, from this territory, from the Georgian Bay. And that he was interested in looking at making *Empire of Wild* into an opera production. And so I immediately was like, I need to talk to this guy, first of all, $10 he's related to me. If he's a halfbreed from my community, that's my cousin. So we got on a Zoom and yes, so I won $10 because he is my cousin. But we talked about it, we talked about the space where, you know, *Empire of Wild* occupies those deep spaces. It, you know, the woods are, you know, shaped like a rib cage. And there are pitches and depths in there that I tried to capture and words that I don't think can go all the way... there's something very different about sound outside of the construct of a word, right? Words are like Lego, they're very blocky -- you put them together to build an image. With something like opera, it's more fluid, right? And fluidity is movement. So where words can stay still, song and music allows you the opportunity to move through the experience. And *Empire of Wild* is all about movement: back home, forward, inwards, outwards. And so I was very excited. And I really believe -- and I said this to him -- I said, "You have to take it, I'll do whatever, you know, however you want me to be involved. Because you are the person, this is your project, like you're from here, we are -- you're related to my grandmother, my grandmother, this is her story that I'm telling. You are the person that can take this forward." And I think it's interesting because, you know, people are sort of surprised, and you guys won't be surprised, but people are sort of surprised when, like, Indigeneity and Indigenous stories sort of creep into other realms that are considered Western or colonial, right? But here's the thing, art that's considered colonized, or out of the machine of colonization, are still gifts. Every culture has the capacity for gifting. And there's, you know, so for example, Métis people, Robyn in the Red River, I have distant ancestors from the Red River… so one of the things that we did, so Métis people are known for our flower beadwork, where the, you know, my grandmother Maria Campbell talks about this all the time, writes about it, tells stories about you know, we are the flower beadwork, people, that is what we're known for. But those designs came, you know, 100 years ago, when, you know, the voyageurs and the, whoever the hell was coming over, came over and they brought to trade, they had brought items to trade with the Indigenous community. And so they brought beautiful fabric into the Métis settlement on the Red River. And it had these beautiful flower patterns on it. And, ah, the women loved them, they'd never seen fabric like this before. So they traded and took them all. So they were like sold out at the trading post. So the next time they went back to Europe, they doubled the order, they're like, "More because we can get so

much for this, like they love these patterns, they love this fabric." They brought the fabric back and not one bolt sold. And they couldn't figure out why -- they were so popular. And it's because the women used those fabrics as a pattern for their beadwork. So they took that gift and they Indigenized it into beadwork. So they no longer needed, you know, that fabric because they had the patterns, and they incorporated it into our clothing and our understanding of how we tell the stories of our family through those designs. So I think, you know, when you take something, especially something like opera, which I don't think is any surprise that you know, Indigenous stories are moving into, because what you have really is human expression and this instinctual sound, the embodied sound. And then you have the sound from the orchestra, which is coming one step removed to the instruments, and I think it's all a triumph, because what you see is, you know, I don't, I've never heard of anyone going to the opera and saying like, wow, like the orchestra was amazing. I don't really remember any of the singers. I don't remember any of the performers. That part is not memorable! Right? You remember both! And most likely you talk about those voices. And I'll say this, you know, I have a very good friend, Richard Van Camp, who's a Dogrib Dene writer, just a beautiful storyteller, but he taught me once how to call the northern lights to you, because that's from his territory. And he said, you know you take your nails and your fingers, and you rub them together [makes the sound]. And it creates a sound that calls the northern lights to you. And then you commune with them. And then when you're done, you send them home.[makes the sound again] And I was teaching someone that sound and she said, "Wow, this is --" and she was really blown away. And I said, "Oh, it's you know, it's really interesting. It's, you know, the stars are so powerful." And she said, "No, I'm so amazed that my own body can make that sound." And there's something so special and unique about a specific sound that can come from your body. Which of course is opera! How could that possibly -- how do your lungs and your throat and your heart hold all that sound? So there's something magical about that, right? We have such great capacity. And as Indigenous people, those are the spaces that we occupy,

Robyn Grant-Moran 20:11
Often in opera, new work takes a backseat to legacy rap. And that's something that we're trying to change. But literature, that doesn't happen. You don't have publishers publishing the canon and at the expense of new work. Um, so, with so many voices being published every day in literature, I'm wondering what you think about the importance of supporting new works, and particularly the stories of new or underrepresented voices?

Cherie Dimaline 20:50
Whoooo! I wish we had an hour -- I got lots of stuff to say. So okay, so let's be succinct Cherie. Okay, I understand people, there was actually just something on Twitter the other day, where a YA [Young Adult] author jumped to the defense of classics, classic works of literature; There was a lot of negative reactions when *The Marrow Thieves* started replacing *To Kill a Mockingbird* in Canadian high schools on the English curriculum. And there's a few things that that brings up: one, that we're still considering the audience for art for literature, for opera, for theatre, as white. Because if you looked at it from any other perspective, you would see how harmful some of that work is. Yes, this isn't -- and this is the argument that we're often, you know, sort of countered with, you know, well, it's -- this can't be like, you know, George Orwell's

1984, where we just rewrite the past and forget things. No, you're right. We can't rewrite the past, or we would, and we can't forget it, because we live in a society that is the result of those works. So here's the thing: I was on a call with Janet Rogers, who's an incredible Mohawk spoken-word poet, publisher, writer, and my cousin Waubgeshig Rice, who's an author who wrote *Moon of the Crusted Snow*. And she said, “How important is it to you when you are carrying the stories from your communities forward? Because the stories that you're writing today then become a part of our tradition tomorrow?” That was a really heavy weight. And I was like, well, leave it to a Mohawk woman to just lay it on you. Like, here's the reality kids, you're creating tradition. Because tradition, of course, is not history. It's not stagnant, it's a very living, breathing, moving thing. But it reminded me of this: that culture doesn't necessarily create art, it creates some art, right? Some art is a reflection of culture. Profound works that are innovative and groundbreaking, create culture, right? It's not the other way around. So what we need to consider is this, there is a place for, you know, older operas and older books. And that is within a context, they belong within a context. And because art has the responsibility to create culture, then we need to have space, real supportive, vibrant space, so that we can evolve, so that we can create that future that we need, like Joshua Whitehead was talking about. We cannot - if we exist in a vacuum, where our art is only a reflection on the current culture, then we will never grow, we will never -- in fact, we won't exist, we will -- when something stops moving and growing, beating and breathing, it stops living. So to have a living culture, therefore, our art needs to create that culture. So it is a matter of grave importance to humanity globally that we have new voices supported, otherwise we are just slowly sinking into a shallow grave. And it doesn't need to be that way. So when I've talked to a lot of Indigenous kids, when I say, “I create work where you are the heroes, you are the centre of this story. You are who we need,” that is not political. That is not me trying to make people feel good. That is the absolute truth, exactly how I understand it. We have teachings from the lodge that talk about the fact that we are at the end of the seventh fire -- there are seven fires in our life in the lifetime of humanity -- we are at the end of the seventh fire, we're there. But there is a moment, there is an opportunity where an eight fire can be lit and it will be lit by the young people, these new voices. So it is of the utmost importance and and a big responsibility but often also one of those gifts.

Robyn Grant-Moran 24:57
It was so great to hear Cherie speak about the importance of contemporary stories and opera.

Julie McIsaac 25:02
Yeah. And it's very exciting to think about how stories from non-urban landscapes can inform contemporary opera practice. So what are those stories? And what are those communities in those more rural settings? And what stories do they have to tell? What artists are we going to hear from next that are going to completely shift the way we view ourselves? Speaking of which, here is a great artist who I know has already shifted my perception of many aspects of opera creation, Ian Cusson.

Robyn Grant-Moran 25:37
Good morning, Ian. And thanks for joining us today.

Ian Cusson 25:40
Thanks so much for having me.

Robyn Grant-Moran 25:42
Many listeners might immediately imagine composers like Mozart, Verdi, Puccini, when they think of opera. Tell us, how has the job of composer changed since much of the standard canon was written?

Ian Cusson 25:56
Well, I think in some ways that the job is still very similar. I mean, the expectation is that, you know, a composer is going to write a score that is to be sung and performed possibly with orchestra. And the goal of creating dramatic stage music, if you will, is the same. I think what's changed really is the world in some ways, I mean, we're a world that is far more connected, we can access anything, just by by virtue of the internet, we have the opportunity to hear sounds that composers, you know, 200 years ago, 300 years ago, or even 100 years ago, may not have heard as readily. So we're a more connected world. And I think the other big change is, you know, we have this incredible access to media. So we can, we take in, you know, the Twitter and the Facebook and various social media and, and various films that are available to us. And all of that is so at our fingertips. So I guess, you know, the thought of what the composer of opera in 2020 has to do is, is write work that is compelling for the brave new worlds in which we live.

Robyn Grant-Moran 27:21
So do you have a personal composition philosophy?

Ian Cusson 27:25
You know, everything that I write, I try to approach from a dramatic lens. So if I'm writing a work, well, if I'm writing opera, that makes a lot of sense, and it's very much connected to that. But even if I'm writing a purely instrumental work, like a piece for orchestra or a piece for piano or small ensemble, I always will create a kind of narrative framework for that work. It's very similar to how I sort of approach people as well. So you know, we all have the experience of meeting somebody that we don't necessarily get along with, or that kind of rubs us the wrong way. When I have those kind of encounters in my life, I always try to create some kind of backdrop, some kind of narrative that helps me understand the person, even if it's just my own creation, and I don't know their exact story. And so I do that in my life, but then I also do that in my compositional life, where I'll wonder at the sound worlds, I'll wonder at the the the landscape of the space, I'll wonder at what the story is, and almost try to build this narrative arc through a piece of music. So I'm always looking for the drama in a work.

Julie McIsaac 28:37
As you're saying this Ian, I'm finding myself thinking about *Fantasma*, which is one of your latest opera projects. So a COC commission, an opera for young audiences that you're composing with librettist Colleen Murphy, and I've been working with you as dramaturg and eventual stage director of that production. And of course, it was meant to premiere earlier this month, but it has

been postponed to a future season because of the pandemic. And I'd love for you to speak to the listeners a little bit about your creation process for that.

Ian Cusson 29:03
Oh, this project was really interesting because the commission came as a work for young audiences. And so not only was it an operatic work, it had a series of parameters, if you will, it had a specific length that it had to be, it couldn't be longer than 50 minutes. And it also had a very clear audience in mind. So these were going to be young people, maybe their first experience coming into the opera world and hearing an opera. And so we were, even from the first moments of discussing what kind of project we might have, we were playing within the framework of those, you know, of that set of requirements. And the process was wonderful because Colleen Murphy, the librettist, really invited me into the process of creating a story. You know, I think some people think you know, making an opera is the librettist sitting in a room either writing a story completely, writing all the text and then printing it out and mailing it off to the composer who then spends, you know, a bunch of months writing music. Well, the process was not that at all. We had many, many conversations, wondering about the sound world and the theatrical world of this opera. And then we spent a lot of time just talking about life and talking about emotions and talking about people and wondering at who these characters were. So it was a collaborative building process. And I would say that even extended into the writing of the music; Colleen had a very active role. As I wrote music, I would show pieces to her, she would ask me questions, we talked about things like pacing, is that moving too quickly through that idea? Or is that clear enough? And so we both were involved at every stage of each other's process.

Julie McIsaac 30:59
I'm wondering, Ian, what would you suggest to audience members, like you said, some people might be coming to *Fantasma* for the very first time never having attended an opera or never having seen a new opera, for example? What would you say to folks who are coming to a newly composed opera for the first time? What type of advice might you offer them?

Ian Cusson 31:17
I think anytime we go to see something that is familiar... for example, a well-played opera that we know all of the tunes to, there's a sense of maybe it feeling safe or familiar, just by virtue of its familiarity. And we don't get that with new work, necessarily. And also, I would say, new work can sound very, like many different things. Some new work may sound like traditional, familiar, older work, and sometimes it sounds quite challenging to the ear. So you're hearing sounds that may be completely new that you've never heard before. So I think, yeah, maintaining that open disposition is really important in new work. I think of just going to see a Mozart opera, and you know there are many great Mozart operas that have rich character worlds, but a fairly familiar sound world; it's one that is well-balanced, and well-proportioned and elegant. And even when it gets dark, it's very familiar to the ear. And that's not always the case, with new opera. Sometimes you can hear one new opera written today, say, by myself versus by another composer, and hear two completely different things. So maintaining that openness of the ear…it will really serve a person while going to hear new opera.

Robyn Grant-Moran 32:43
There's often a lot of discussion from creators in underrepresented communities, that they feel - whether fairly or unfairly - pressure or responsibility to represent their communities in a way that their counterparts of a more privileged group might not. As a Métis composer, is that something you can relate to?

Ian Cusson 33:07
Absolutely. And I think I would say part of it is of my own doing and, and part of it is maybe an external pressure that I feel. It's interesting, as even as I think about what our external pressures and what our internal pressures, sometimes the ones that I think are external, are really just coming from inside of me. Certainly, I would say, I feel a responsibility when I'm telling a story that is from within my community that I am representing that community well. I also know that not I nor anyone else from within my community has the final voice or the final word on that experience. So I do try to sort of calm myself down if I'm getting worried about representation that I am one voice among hopefully many, and I hope more and more will be say creating opera. But I want to be one voice and try to be true to that voice and true to that experience. But you're right. I mean, often when I'm approached and asked to write an opera for a company, they usually have a very particular idea of what that story that I would explore would be. And often...they are often asking for stories that are specific to my cultural experience as an Indigenous person. And that's not always the story that I want to tell at a given moment, or I might think is the best story to tell, in that moment. So that pressure certainly is there. But I really do believe that we have had such a lack of representation of Indigenous stories in opera, especially in mainstream opera or in larger companies and on main stages, that I would love to see, and have places of relation, and so almost start building - if you will - the canon of interesting, exciting Indigenous stories on the stage. And those stories, I hope that they will be very diverse. I hope we will have stories that are funny and stories that are adventure and stories that show resilience and stories that do touch on some of the harder more traumatic elements and experiences. Just like we have diversity in more white storytelling, I hope we have the same in our own stories that we represent on the stage. So yeah, I do feel pressure. And I think a lot of that pressure is just self-imposed. But I also feel a lot of embrace and acceptance from both within Indigenous communities and also from within the general opera opera world to begin hearing and seeing our stories. And I feel, even though if I have a have a an opera company saying “We want you to write this opera,” I find that usually within a conversation or two, if that's not the opera that I feel like I should be writing or that I want to be writing at this time, I can usually move the dial and and encourage them to see a different way into to a particular story.

Julie McIsaac 36:21
What you're saying a little bit earlier, Ian, about funny stories, stories of adventure stories of resilience is making me think about our conversation with Cherie Dimaline. And she shared some exciting news with us about something that you're working on together: an opera adaptation of her novel ‘Empire of Wild.’ And our understanding is that this has been made

possible by a seed commission from the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, and we would love for you to tell us more about this collaboration and your role at Banff as well.

Ian Cusson 36:48
So first of all, Cherie is an incredible writer. She's incredible for a lot of reasons. But she's telling really empowered, fresh stories from an Indigenous perspective. She's also an inherently dramatic writer, she just understands drama. And you can see how... when I read her novels, I can see them on a stage or in front of me; they play out in my mind so clearly. And when I first came across her writing, I thought, “Oh, my goodness, here in this work will be some wonderful, dramatic writing [that] I think could be a great opera. And so the funniest thing is that Cherie and I literally come from the same community, we're related through marriage. We're like distant cousins of one another. When I read it, I felt like I was reading my family. I was reading the land that my feet had trod as a kid. My grandparents’ land is right in the heart of where this story takes place. And so it feels like it's absolutely in my bones and to be able to embark on an operatic telling of this story is just incredible. Banff, the Banff Centre...their program ‘Opera in the 21st Century’ is a really special program that's been running for many, many years. In fact, it began in the late 40s, under a different name, and this year -

Julie McIsaac 38:10
I’m sorry, I didn’t realize that - that is tremendous. I didn’t know it had that long standing tradition.

Ian Cusson 38:14
Yeah! It's a long standing program. And, just in recent years, it's really taken on the moniker ‘Opera in the 21st Century’, under Joel Ivany’s directing. And he has really fashioned a program that allows participants and faculty that are invited in to look at where, where opera is going, what is opera doing now, as opposed to just thinking about old, historic canonical opera. And this year, in particular, with the pandemic resetting so many of our experiences, he used the opportunity to invite in two additional co-directors, co.artistic directors. There's the Black soprano, Karen Slack, from the United States, and myself as a composer. And so we have joined him in fashioning a program that really looks and puts specific light on Black experience in opera and Indigenous experience in opera. And so we're looking at it from all kinds of angles. But one of the great things is... there was this, like you said, seed commission money to begin exploration work on this opera *Empire of Wild* and so Cherie will come in as librettist on the project. And we'll develop a couple of scenes from this opera. And we're really, really excited about that.

Julie McIsaac 39:33
Thank you. And to all our listeners, if this is intriguing to you, then we encourage you to keep your ear out, keep your eyes out for it. And it's certainly something that I can't wait to see... the fruits of your collaboration with Cherie. It's so exciting, Ian.

Ian Cusson 39:46

One funny thing I'll say is that I have been thinking a lot, as we think about Indigenous opera. There was this movement about 100 years ago of Italian opera, the *verismo* movement of showing real life people on the stage and showing not just the kings and queens or Greek mythology of yore, but showing human beings who are in these heightened, emotionally tense experiences, where there's this incredible dramatic tension at its core. And so I feel like, you know, one thing I'd love to see is this, maybe what I'd call an Indigenous *verismo* tradition. And I think this opera can be maybe one [of] hopefully many real life stories. Joan, the main character in this opera, works in her family's construction company. So she's, you know, during the day, she's roofing houses and building cottages. But she goes on an incredible adventure of discovery, where she has to really save both her husband and her community in some ways from the grips of this menacing figure. So... it's gonna be a great story.

Julie McIsaac 41:03
Do you have any recommendations for Indigenous or non-Indigenous artists and creators that we should be looking out for in the next few years, that we should be keeping our ears and eyes attuned for?

Ian Cusson 41:15
I had the chance to spend some time with a group Indigenous classical music or Western art music creators in Banff, a couple years ago, and there were so many interesting sounds and approaches that were coming out of that space. Well, I mean, one composer that we hear that has had a growing career is Chris Dirksen, who writes really interesting pedal-looped cello work and choral work, and is doing some really interesting things that are community-based as well. We have work by Melody McKiver, I know Melody had done this really interesting take on Stravinsky's Rite of Spring that was set in a parking lot and had this kind of remix to the Rite of Spring. So... reconsidering, again, old work. Another really exciting composer in that group was Sonny Da-Rider. And his work is really, really fascinating. It's this kind of post-minimalist, evocative chamber music and piano music. And he's a fantastic pianist as well. And yeah, there's so many voices, there's so many interesting takes. And the cool thing is that when you hear Indigenous classical musicians, you don't really just hear one sound, you're hearing a diversity of sounds. And so to try to almost pin down what Indigenous classical music sounds like, is impossible. We're pulling in threads from everything, threads from our own cultural roots that are outside of European tradition, and then also pulling bits and pieces that we love and have learned from the western classical tradition.

Julie McIsaac 43:03
Given that we've had to delay the premiere of *Fantasma* and now looking ahead to that happening in a future season, what do you most look forward to in terms of that work, finally encountering its young audience?

Ian Cusson 43:14
I'm looking forward to seeing how the young people that come to see it, engage with the work. This is always the biggest question when you're making a new work: how will it be received? You can plan and you can put in place all of the pieces that you think will make for a great work,

and you really have no idea how it will land until you have that first audience in, which is such a frightening thing, and it's such a wonderful thing. And I cannot wait to have a group of young people engaging with this work and seeing the places where they find resonance. And then seeing the places where maybe they'll have questions - and that will only happen with people in a room. But you know, I have to say that the other great thing about having some additional time and having the premiere postponed by a year or so is that it's given us time to just pause with the score instead of having to run to the finish line or run into production. We've been able to let the score sit and come back to it and ask really thoughtful questions. And so it's just created a bit more space around the work that I think has only made and will only make the work a stronger one when it comes before an audience.

Julie McIsaac 44:37
It's always fascinating to talk to Ian. Even though we work together, often we don't always have the chance to go into depth on subjects like this.

Robyn Grant-Moran 44:45
It's so fascinating to hear about how he approaches new work.

Julie McIsaac 44:51
Yeah and how it feels like it's not that he has one approach to new work either, he's constantly reexamining and questioning. What did I do last time? What did I like about that? What might I do next time? And what are these? The Next Generation? The next up-and-comers? What kind of conversations do they want to have about the ways in which we create and perform? And then he's letting that inform his practice.

Robyn Grant-Moran 45:11
And the inclusion of nods to the past... within all of that.

Julie McIsaac 45:17
Yeah…

Robyn Grant-Moran 45:19
Sure, he was talking about the seven generations before, and the seven generations to come. And how you can really hear that embodied in Ian's work in a way that I think is really special and unique.

Julie McIsaac 45:34
That's really beautiful thinking of these threads that are being pulled forward into the present. So that we're like keeping them in the tapestry of the artistic work that we're creating, and making sure that they get carried forward into the future. And yeah, the generations that Cherie spoke of and, and what that must mean, in terms of responsibility, in a sense of, you know, I think we're so excited for all the success that Cherie has had. But I also recognize with that, the pressure, the responsibility that she must feel in terms of representing those seven generations that have come before her and honoring them in her present work.

Robyn Grant-Moran 46:09
Mm hmm. And then to think...it's not a way that is necessarily commonly thought about if you are not part of an Indigenous community. Like we don't tend to think about what impact will my actions have seven generations from now? How will this shape the world? Is it for the better? Is it going to help? We think more immediate gratification.

Julie McIsaac 46:30
But there are people who find themselves in circumstances where everything that they do is being looked at by their community and by their family members and looked at very intently.

Robyn Grant-Moran 46:48
I really liked what Ian said about it being somewhat self-imposed. You don't speak for all European descendants - like that is not your burden. You speak for Julie, and somewhat to your profession. And somewhat to where you come from, but you're not thinking, "Oh, how am I representing my European ancestry?"

Julie McIsaac 47:12
Right. I don't have all the people of Norway and Ireland and Scotland and France looking at me to be like, "Julie, be careful." Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 47:20
And there is an element of… I know, I'm mindful of it, like, oh, when I say things… how am I representing the Métis community? How am I representing, you know, my local council that I sit on, and the citizenry in the immediate city, but then Métis beyond that? "Oh, you're the indigenous person. You're the Métis person? What's your take on this?" Well, my take is Robyn's take, that happens to be informed by a lot of things, and also has to be mindful of other people. But does it really have to? Like, outside of just basic respect and decency and care? I don't know. But I really, I really liked him bringing that up. And it really got me thinking about a lot.

Julie McIsaac 48:24
Yeah, something else is that we talked with Ian about *Fantasma*, which is an Opera for Young Audiences. And we talked with Cherie about her novels such as 'The Marrow Thieves', which was intended for a young audience but has found an audience way beyond that, in terms of people of all ages reading that book.

Robyn Grant-Moran 48:40
Mm hmm.

Julie McIsaac 48:40
And what I like... what I hope in our conversation is that though we're bringing attention to the importance of work for young audiences, we're not treating it as anything less than work that we create for adult audiences, because it is my belief that there's nothing lesser about it.

Robyn Grant-Moran 48:57
Well, yeah, I mean, young people, it sounds cliche, but they're the future. They're the next generation of adults. Like, what we put out for them should be as valuable and as carefully considered as what we put out for adults.

Julie McIsaac 49:04
By virtue of what we're putting on the stage, what are we telling them? Are we telling them opera must look like this? Are we telling them, opera can be the story that happens in your backyard? Opera can be what your grandmother told you. Opera can be your vision for the future.

Robyn Grant-Moran 49:28
And there's this sort of stereotype about opera being for an older audience. And maybe that's just because the canon's old. Like they were contemporary stories when they were originally created. But 100 years later, 200 years later, they're no longer contemporary, even though the stories in them are still relevant to our lives. It's not in that contemporary setting, so young people can't necessarily see themselves connected to that story. When I go to the bookstore, I don't go and exclusively leaf through Dickens and the other classics, and then with a small section of contemporary books. It's not like 10% contemporary books, and then everything else is a reprint of a classic.

Julie McIsaac 50:24
Yeah, it's true, because in order for something to become a beloved classic, it needs to have been new, someone needs to have taken a risk to say, you know, what we're gonna do, we're gonna do this opera and hasn't been done before. But it's going to be on the subject, and this composer is going to write it, the librettist is going to do this. So it has to be new before it can become beloved. So we have to be brave enough to let it be new, so that it can then come out into the world and then become whatever it will become in our hearts and minds and memories next.

Robyn Grant-Moran 50:50
Mm hmm. And I can appreciate that it's much easier to write a new book than it is to create a new opera.

Julie McIsaac
Certainly cheaper, I think.

Robyn Grant-Moran
This skill set involved and the number of people that go into generating new opera, it's a much bigger, more involved process.

Julie McIsaac 51:16

The other thing is - and we also don't mean to disparage older audiences either. Older audiences are, in a way, the lifeblood of opera companies right now, in terms of support - the philanthropic support and the enthusiasm and the love of the art form that sustains a lot of our activity. But it's really exciting to think, like you said, Robyn, if we go into a bookstore or go on Netflix, and there's such a great variety of stuff to choose from, and so much of it is new, and so much of it is offering us something we've not seen before, it's just absolutely tantalizing to think about that.

Robyn Grant-Moran 51:52
I feel like we need a little bit of a better balance. Because both are very important - to have the canon to have the classics, to have that knowledge and that understanding and that love. But also, where's it going? Is opera just to be a museum piece? Like, I sure hope not!

Julie McIsaac 52:10
I'm totally with you. And by virtue of chatting with Cherie today - and we were fans of her work, so we were so excited to have that opportunity to chat with her. What I didn't expect was everything that she brought to the table in terms of talking about opera, and the impact she thinks that opera has. And so now I find myself thinking about those cross-disciplinary collaborations. So by virtue of bringing in artists who are perceived to come from different disciplines and different fields of practice, and inviting them into opera creation, and making these collisions happen - between Ian, for example, who's already created opera, and Cherie, who will be working on her first opera. Like it's so exciting to think what's going to happen between those two forces of energy coming together.

Robyn Grant-Moran 52:50
Yeah, I've really liked how she also brought it into an almost ceremonial context. How you know, you dress up for the opera. I mean, I don't. I try and look nice, and I'm bathed. But if it's going to be three hours, four hours, I'm going to be comfy, as well. But there is that tendency - people like to dress up, they put on their opera best. And they, you know, you go, you're seen, and you see people, and it's a social event. And so you, you have this, "Okay, so tonight, we're going to the opera, we're going to dress this way we're going to do this thing, we're going to go to this auditorium, we're going to hear these musicians who are going to work together to create this thing." So the idea that one opera works, it's transcendent. Like one thing, she talked about that incisor that it gets so deep, it can, you know, you can just like cut right in, on a level that maybe other art forms can't reach in that way.

Julie McIsaac 54:00
Yeah, the incisor. And it's almost like once something hasn't been expressed through opera, in the sense of that classical voice, that embodied power of expressing that message in that way. It becomes irrevocable. When you experience that story, that message, captured in that way, you can't deny its existence, you have to acknowledge that that truth exists.

Robyn Grant-Moran 54:23

You empathize differently, with that specificity with that power. You know, it allows you to fully embody that emotional experience, just sitting in the audience. Because it's not just hitting you on an emotional level, or just a visceral level or just a visual level. It's everything all at once. So it transports you very differently.

Julie McIsaac 54:54
Mm hmm.

Robyn Grant-Moran 54:55
And that that power is just unreal.

Julie McIsaac 54:58
And I'm thinking about how lucky we are that we're getting we're of this generation in this time, where new works are being created, that we will have the opportunity to witness and to participate in. But we also get to have conversations with their creators alongside that. And I recall how Cherie pointed out that, yes, people label her work with words like speculative fiction and other genre things. And they describe her work in a way that maybe doesn't quite align with the way that she perceived it or meant it to be. But she's here to have that conversation with them. She can interact, dialogue, and the dynamism that can result.

Robyn Grant-Moran 55:32
And I often think about, like, what would Mozart say about how he's remembered? Like, is it reflective of who he was? In that time? Maybe, maybe not.

Julie McIsaac 55:44
Yeah, well, we had this fascinating conversation with Michael Levine on our previous episode, Episode Four, about this moment in Parsifal that became the central impetus for their whole design. And it was like...

Robyn Grant-Moran 56:08
...But we could do more.

Julie McIsaac 56:10
Yeah, I'm feeling so grateful, thinking back to what she shared about being around the table with her aunties and her grandmothers, and everything that she learned or absorbed by virtue of being around them. And you and I referencing how Ian is pulling in things from previously in the canon to be a part of his work. And Cherie is calling on stories of her ancestors and thinking seven generations ahead. And you and I are referencing Michael Levine and what he shared with us on our last episode, so, like it, we're all around this table together. Nations backwards generations forwards.

Robyn Grant-Moran 56:43
And we're all influenced by I think a lot more. Like there's the myth, the self-made man myth that we're so married to, that our history is only you know, it's there. But is it that important? Well,

yeah, it actually is really important. We are complete products of seven plus generations before us.

Julie McIsaac 57:05
Yeah. And something Ian says a lot. And Ian is brilliant. And he's very humble about it. He's so quick to credit everyone else who's in the room. I know he said this to the members of the Ensemble Studio who've been part of workshopping *Fantasma* that he is so ready to express his gratitude to them for how they are informing the creation of the work and the characters and the voices. So he is always the first to say that it's a collective effort. And, and all of those of you listening, you're part of that collective effort, that collective conversation, too.

Robyn Grant-Moran 57:45
Thank you so much for joining us for this journey through the past, present, and future of opera. We'll be back with a new season starting on January 19, with all new topics that might help you look at opera a little differently.

Julie McIsaac 57:58
Yeah, we'd love to know what you think. Whether it's questions or feedback on our first season or ideas you might have for future episodes, either tag us on social at Canadian Opera, or email us at audiences@coc.ca. We've received some messages by email already and we saw some reviews on Apple podcasts. Thank you so much. We really love hearing from our audience.

Robyn Grant-Moran 58:20
And remember, if you're a COC subscriber or member, you have access to exclusive bonus content and extended interviews.

Julie McIsaac 58:29
Bye everyone. Stay safe, stay hopeful, and we'll see you next time.

Robyn Grant-Moran 58:33
See you in 2021. Be the first to find out about free events and concerts from the CFC by signing up for our monthly eOpera newsletter@coc.ca/eopera.

Julie McIsaac 58:49
Thank you to all of our supporters for making Key Change possible. This week, we want to especially thank every COC member, subscriber and donor for coming on this journey with us as we explore new ways to share opera’s unique power.

Robyn Grant-Moran 59:03
So to make sure you don't miss an episode, subscribe to Key Change wherever you get your podcasts.

Julie McIsaac 59:10

Key Change is produced by the Canadian Opera Company and hosted by Robyn Grant-Moran and Julie McIsaac.

Robyn Grant-Moran 59:16
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