

Key Change Episode 7: Opera & Activism – Part 1

SPEAKERS

Julie Mclsaac, Rena Roussin, Robyn Grant-Moran

Julie Mclsaac 00:00

Hi, everyone. Welcome to Key Change: A COC Podcast, where we explore everything about opera from a fresh perspective.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:23

Hi there and welcome to episode seven. Today we're going to be talking about opera and activism. To help us explore this more in depth, we're going to talk to an expert in the field, musicologist – and my friend – Rena Roussin. She's currently pursuing a doctorate at the University of Toronto. Her research examines activism in both opera and oratorio in the Age of Enlightenment, as well as art music performance in Canada, in the age of truth and reconciliation. She's also a member of the COC Circle of Artists.

Julie Mclsaac 00:55

Let's hear from Rena.

Robyn Grant-Moran 01:06

Hi, Rena. Thank you for joining us today.

Rena Roussin 01:09

Hi, Julie. Hi, Robyn. Thank you so much for having me!

Robyn Grant-Moran 01:13

We're really excited to talk to you about all your experience with the academic side of opera and how it can be applied practically. So, I'm wondering, was there a particularly impactful moment that informed your journey towards music and theatre?

Rena Roussin 01:31

Oh, my gosh. I can't really hone in on one moment. I can't remember a time when I didn't love music and theatre and how they allow us to tell stories. And I started singing, like, before I started speaking – I was mimicking songs on the radio. But classical music came later for me: I was about 16 or 17 before I really started getting into that particular piece. And I remember: I was actually on a high school theatre trip in Victoria [BC] and I was cutting through the Victoria Conservatory of Music to get to the Metro Studio [Theatre] next door for an improv tournament, and I was just, kind of, running through the practice rooms – I was running late – and I must have heard opera before then but it was my first time

ever hearing somebody sing it live. So here I am, running through this hallway, running late for a show and I just stopped in my tracks. It was just like, "What is that?" I just remember, like, my legs felt like they were going to give out and just thinking, "What is that? I want to do that. That's so cool!"

Robyn Grant-Moran 02:44

I have a similar memory when I was in first year [of] university studying saxophone when I was 18 and hearing the voice studio right next to the sax studio, and there's just nothing like hearing it that close – it's profound!

Julie McIsaac 03:01

I was just gonna say: I staged my first [The Marriage of] Figaro at the Victoria Conservatory of Music, so that was a very special place for me, too, in my journey towards opera!

Robyn Grant-Moran 03:10

So, I'm wondering, how and when did you merge your artistic and academic interests? What brought those things together?

Rena Roussin 03:18

Funnily enough, when I started college, I was actually a political science major and had no plans on studying music but I just was so interested by it and so in love with it that I was just like, "Well, I'll do a minor in music. Music's a wonderful thing, every culture has its own variation of it, so one day when I'm a diplomat, this will be useful!" And then I went into my first music history class as a music minor and the instructor – Dr. Susan Lewis at UVic [University of Victoria], back in Victoria – explained what musicology was. and I was just like, "Okay, if we get multiple lifetimes, this is it: this is what I'm doing." And clearly somewhere in the last 10 years I sped up that timeline but I think, for me – this is kind of a roundabout way of answering – but I was premature by three months as a baby. So my vocal cords grew around intubation, so I've always been a singer but I've always had a very different timbre – a timbre that doesn't really fit classical singing because of the nature of my vocal cords. So literally and figuratively, in some ways, because I came so late to classical music – and because it's tricky for me to sing classically – I had a voice that didn't really fit. I knew I wanted to be part of this academic musical community but I was a first-generation student, I didn't grow up listening to classical music, I had this voice people didn't really know what to do with, and it made me feel really alone and left out when I was first starting my journey in academia. But along the way, I had really wonderful teachers and mentors and friends who were, like, "Of course you belong here." Like, "Of course you have something to give; you should be a part of this community." So I think when I really started looking at opera and art music, I really started thinking, "Oh, there are other groups of people who have really been left out of this space and our narratives about it for ways that are much more toxic and much less okay than the reasons why I didn't necessarily feel like part of it. Arguing for the presence of other people who have been left out or excluded from our spaces really just felt like a natural step to me; it felt like what I should be doing because so many people tried to make me feel welcome, until a place that felt really foreign to me became a place where I really feel at home.

Robyn Grant-Moran 06:07

And that really aligns nicely when you talk about art music as activism.

Rena Roussin 06:14

I think when we talk about activism we tend, for understandable reasons, to think about the really obvious components of activism – whether that's marching at protests or writing our representatives. So when I talk about activism, I'm asking a word to do really powerful work and that I think of activism as being many different things: as being representation and who gets included or excluded from our spaces, and whose stories and whose narratives matter, who gets to be seen in our society, who has power. And when we think of activism that way, I think the arts absolutely have an immense role to play in it. And I think opera absolutely has a deeply important role to play in that, in part because there are some... I don't want to say toxic – toxic, I think, is too strong a word – but some really damaging aspects of opera's history that we need to address and find ways to move forward from. The impulse of activism isn't new – like, the term activism is something that evolved in the 1960s. So sometimes people look at me quite strangely when I'm talking about this art form from the 18th century as, "Yeah. of course it's activist," because that term didn't exist yet. But when I look at the history of opera, I look at a history of composers and librettists and performers who understood that there were issues of their day in the world that weren't being addressed, and they were using music as a way to address that, to try to push forward, to try to create, in whatever way, was appropriate or understandable in their time, a slightly better world.

Julie Mclsaac 08:08

Yeah. Well, Rena, with that, like, when we think back to the composers of old, of well known operas, we don't necessarily think of those people as subversive or progressive. But there certainly are plenty of examples. Could you share with us around that?

Rena Roussin 08:23

Yeah, absolutely. Robyn and I are friends – we even hang out sometimes – and one of our running gags almost is trying to find any opera in the operatic canon that doesn't have something that was subversive for its time...

Julie Mclsaac 08:42

...at the time, right!

Rena Roussin 08:43

Yeah. And I think that's an important thing to hold onto – like, of course, when we look at the history of the operatic canon, by any modern 21st century, if you go back to a work from 1780 or earlier, of course it's going to have issues from our knowledge. But when we try to engage with the work on its own terms in... For example, *The Marriage of Figaro* is one of my favorites, so it's never far from my mind. And when you think about this opera being written in an age when there was a really strict social class hierarchy and order and there's the aristocrats and there's their servants and, at the same time, this age when women were property, suddenly you get this opera by [Lorenzo] Da Ponte and [Wolfgang Amadeus] Mozart, thoughts about... like, women are running this show; they're driving the entire plot forwards and, really significantly, they're singing together and they're making a plan about how to blur these social dimensions. If we could even think about "*Sull'aria* [... *che soave zeffiretto*]" as an example because, of course, Mozart's not responsible for the text of the opera – Da Ponte wrote that – but we

can see Mozart also playing into this blurring of social divisions and of gendered hierarchies, and that you have these two women who are of very different social classes, who are suddenly singing together in the exact same style. You have the countess [Countess Almaviva] and her servant [Susanna] making music together in imitated lines that are identical and what that means in terms of blurring social hierarchy.

Julie Mclsaac 11:13

Rena, I find myself thinking about the staging of that scene, too, and the physical choices that you make in the sense of who is standing and who is sitting and, physically, are they on equal footing or are you choosing to show them in a certain way? Because, like you said, these are two women coming together to try to alter the outcome of a situation and their fate.

Rena Roussin 11:32

Yeah, well, and I think we forget, from our 21st century vantage points, like, music absolutely had stylistic patterns based on social classes in the 18th century. So when Susanna is singing in the same style as the Countess, that absolutely would have had sonic significance to that audience; they would have heard, "Oh, she's doing something different." Like, she's not singing the way she's supposed to and, to me, like, that's absolutely subversive; that's absolutely activist.

Robyn Grant-Moran 12:04

And, if I could just jump in for a moment – many of our listeners do probably know this – but the plays that Figaro was based on, the [Pierre] Beaumarchais plays, were banned. Even the choice to make this opera happen was subversive.

Rena Roussin 12:20

If you want to talk about how opera is activist, look at the history of operatic censorship: 90 per cent of the opera that we go listen to was composed usually 100 years ago or more, so I think we forget opera was always being written and commenting on the political issues of its days, of its timeframe. And when we see new opera today, as well, we hear that same commentary, so there's always been this history of opera engaging with the issues of its day. And some semblance of censorship of, "No, you can't talk about that!" And composers fighting sneaky ways to go like, "Oh, really! Want to bet?" But, also – I know this episode will air later – but today is Inauguration Day in the United States, so I imagine all three of us just got to watch President [Joe] Biden and Vice President [Kamala] Harris being sworn in a few hours ago and, really, the opera in my mind today – in part because of that – is Fidelio, [Ludwig Van] Beethoven's opera about political liberation, where a woman, Leonore, is at the center role as this heroic conqueror who overthrows political tyranny.

Julie Mclsaac 14:00

Is there anything in particular, Rena, around Fidelio that stands out to you?

Rena Roussin 14:04

For me, the Prisoners' Chorus [O welche Lust—"O what a joy"] is this really huge piece of the opera that's had this ongoing trajectory of activism both in its original conception, in its stagings, because it's this huge statement about political liberation and also about imprisonment and both of those impulses

at once. So you think about what that piece would have meant in the age of the French Revolution, when there's political prisoners imprisoned for fighting for this moment of liberation, and then the ways modern day opera companies, contemporary opera companies are engaging with this story and our ongoing stories about political turmoil or about political oppression. I know Manitoba Opera invited refugees in 2014 to come stand on stage during the Prisoners' Chorus, while they're singing about this profound moment of overthrowing tyranny and political freedom. Heartbeat Opera in New York City had a really beautiful initiative of welcoming... They had live-streamed footage from six different prison choirs, so actual prisoners were singing this piece with trained opera singers in a production that was about disproportionate black incarceration, where they've updated the plot to be Leah, instead of Leonore, is trying to free her black activist husband or partner. She's trying to free him from being wrongfully incarcerated for activism within the Black Lives Matter movement. So, taking this old story and finding a way to bring it into the current political moment, into Black Lives Matter – or, even for us today, sitting here, what would the Prisoners' Chorus mean on the day Joe Biden and Kamala Harris were inaugurated; what does it mean on a day when Madam Vice President is no longer a fictional character? It's looking at what we overthrew today, centuries long history that says women can't hold highest office. It's the story that we get to telling anew in all these different political ages, that always comes back to this goal of "What does it mean to be free? How do we further the cause of freedom?"

Julie McIsaac 17:05

With, you know, you mentioned Figaro, and you mentioned Fidelio, and then if we start moving through history and coming closer to our present day, what are your thoughts on how opera has continued to serve as a vessel for social commentary?

Rena Roussin 17:17

You have this simultaneous challenge and opportunity of interacting with these works that are almost historic documents of their time, but which can also be given new life into speaking to every period of time they interact with. So, Fidelio, for example: what did Fidelio mean 10 years after the French Revolution? What did Fidelio mean during the Second World War? What does Fidelio mean today, on the day of Biden and Harris's inauguration? There's always been this trajectory of new meanings found in old works, and the fact that so many of these themes can speak to different experiences in different time periods. When Fidelio premiered, it was entirely appropriate for a group of men to be writing a story about a woman sneaking into the heroic archetype, which I think is also one of the reasons I love that work so much – that's finally for once, instead of seeing a woman die at the end of an opera – or otherwise be punished for existing – for once, you get to see a woman being the heroic conqueror; she's the one held up at the end of the stage while everyone's singing about her achievements. And I think that's a work history has needed, unfortunately, until I would say, the late 20th century, at the start of the 21st century. Unfortunately, in some ways, even now opera has been something composed by European men. There's some beautiful work by those men and I don't want to throw that all out, but I think one of the beautiful things we've really seen happening in opera more and more is that more and more communities are coming into opera, and writing it, and telling their own stories. So, for example, it was completely appropriate in an age when women were property for [Jean-Nicolas] Bouilly and [Joseph] Sonnleithner and Beethoven to create an opera about women and about their empowerment. But in the 21st century, no, it's time for women to write operas about that story; it's time for indigenous

people and black people to tell us stories about their community through the sounds and the materials and the narratives that they choose to share with us.

Robyn Grant-Moran 19:54

I'm really curious to go back a little bit to the idea of dealing with this older work, with the canon, where we are dealing with a lot of... There are progressive ideas but there's so much racism, there's so much misogyny, and that was unfortunately part of the existence in the world in which it was created. And now you said we shouldn't just throw it all out, but do you have ideas on more ways to handle that in the 21st century? [Ways to] Handle those issues?

Rena Roussin 20:31

Yeah, they're so complicated. They're so complicated.

Robyn Grant-Moran 20:36

Solve opera right now! You have 20 minutes – go!

Rena Roussin 20:44

I think, so often when I tell people that I study opera as activism, I see communities and people who feel like – who love opera as I do and as much as I do – who feel like I'm wanting to fundamentally change opera or take something away from them, or foundationally get rid of or alter this piece of art that they really love, and I think that's a really intense misunderstanding of what the goal of opera as activism is: I don't want to take anything away from anyone; I want to bring, if anything, more opera in. I want us all to have more of this art form that we love. I want to be able to go see Carmen one night, and then see Ian Cusson's new opera, and then go see an adaptation of Toni Morrison's Blue the next night. I want the art form to get to expand but also, at the end of the day, I'm a historian and I feel like if we don't learn from our history – if we don't remember it and think about it and understand where we went wrong – we're doomed to keep making those mistakes. And I actually think opera is a really beautiful, valuable tool, in part as a historical document because it reminds us that we live in a world that has been misogynist, that has been deeply racist, that has caused very, very, very real harm to numerous communities. I think if we're going to lean into those issues, we shouldn't ignore them; we should be acknowledging that that's part of the human story – a heartbreaking part but one we need to acknowledge but, therefore, one we also need to think about if we're going to stage it, how do we stage it responsibly. I'm 125 per cent here for a fully historic staging of Le nozze di Figaro [English: The Marriage of Figaro], I'm here for the powdered wigs and stagings that lean into the hierarchies because we need to remember that those existed. I've also 125 per cent here for a staging that completely reimagines that piece. I remember once one of my students was like, "Has anyone ever set Figaro in the Clinton White House?" And I was like, "Oh, my god! We have to do this!"

Julie Mclsaac 23:27

Wow!

Rena Roussin 23:28

Yeah. So, yeah, I feel like there's a place to lean into how these stories have historically been harmful and just pretending it was never there – getting rid of it, never staging it again – I think, runs the risk of

ignoring very real realities of our history. But maybe the challenge of solving opera, I think, is finding ways to minimize the harm in its history – whether that's Orientalism or its really horrific history of sexually violent scenes – finding ways to minimize the harm of that without ignoring realities of that, while also leaning into moments of subversion and beauty and this ongoing history of trying to answer these huge questions of "What does it mean to be alive in the world? What does it mean to love? What does it mean to be free?"

Robyn Grant-Moran 24:32

I think this is a really good time to talk about your academic work specifically. Like, the work you're doing with unsettling art music, the project you're working on.

Rena Roussin 24:43

You mean the project *we're* working on?

Robyn Grant-Moran 24:45

Yes, sorry! I always... because it's your baby but I have been involved in that and I am so grateful and privileged to have that opportunity. Can you tell the audience more about that?

Rena Roussin 24:59

So, we have this group project that we've been working on – Robyn's right in that it is my baby: I conceptualized and designed the original impetus for the project – but it's really a project that belongs to Robyn, to Rebecca Cuddy, to Nicole Lavalee, to Marion Newman, to Olivia Shortt and also a little bit to me. But in the end, we all created...

Robyn Grant-Moran 25:25

We'll change the diapers on occasion!

Rena Roussin 25:29

At the end of the day, it's something we all are creating and writing together. When I first assigned it, I thought, "Oh, this will be a good journal article one day" – I still hope it will be, but what we're ultimately doing together is... I've done interviews with these five Indigenous performers, these five Indigenous women and it's important to me – like, this is a project about empowering and hearing and listening to the voices of Indigenous women. But really, what the project is trying to do is engage with the four questions that Senator Murray Sinclair once stated, "all indigenous people must ask in order to know who they are." So the four questions are: "Where do I come from?" "Where am I going?" "What is my purpose?" "Who am I?" And, in the project, we're really trying to take those questions and apply them to art music. So, from Indigenous perspectives, "Where does art music come from? What has it already done? In what ways have its histories and practices excluded or marginalized Indigenous people? In the 21st century, who does art music even belong to? Who is it for? Where is it going? What is it? What's its purpose? What community is can it serve?" So, together, we're asking these questions and it's partly ethnography, it's partly a history lesson about where the genre has been, it's partly a guide on the effort to include Indigenous people in art music, and how we can do that respectfully, in ways that allow both the historic European settler art music community and the Indigenous community that is involved in art music to all move forwards together in a good way. But it's just grown into this huge thing

that... I think, to all of us, it's become bigger than the journal article I wanted it to be. I think it's, hopefully, going to grow into a series of performances, into a book, into maybe something really tangible that we can give to artistic companies as a gift of "Here's this knowledge that we've all created together. Take it! Move it forward – it's yours now!" And, for me, the most important thing with this project is that it's leveraging the privilege I have as an academic and as someone who has some power as a graduate student – maybe not that much power but some in an academic setting – and it's giving it back to Indigenous communities, and finding ways to point out that Indigenous people and Indigenous performers are experts in what they do; they're the voices we need to be listening to in understanding what it's going to take to move our narratives of art music – and especially art music that's created in Canada – forward into better narratives that bring us together and allow us to tell new stories together.

Robyn Grant-Moran 28:50

One thing I'm really curious about is the distinction that you draw between "anti-colonial" and "decolonizing" in the work, because the language has evolved since we started working on this project and the the concept of "anti-colonial" feels really new and exciting because "decolonizing" was all the buzz when I was doing my undergrad. Can you talk a little bit more about that, please? I'd love to hear.

Rena Roussin 29:24

I also used the term "decolonization" until summer 2020. Yeah, this past summer, I learned that some Indigenous scholars and Indigenous peoples are actually quite uncomfortable with how we use the term decolonization and how it kind of gets casually tossed around as this trendy term in education and the arts, and is used in ways that are really meant to be, like, a metaphor or a synonym for efforts to be more equitable or inclusive of Indigenous people and content. Here, I'm directly stealing a quote from Eve Tuck and [K.] Wayne Yang, from their article, when I say, "Decolonization isn't a metaphor, it was never meant to be a metaphor of inclusion and equity; it's the process of creating a nation-to-nation relationship between Canada and Indigenous communities." Really, decolonization is the work of formal politics; I don't think opera is going to get us there, but what I do think opera, and art music, and all of the arts, and education can have a really a wonderful, beautiful, even profound role in playing is the goal of creating anti-colonial cultures. And, when I say anti-colonial, I'm directly borrowing on Ibram X. Kendi's concept of "anti-racist" because if our productions, and our companies, and our stagings of opera are working to acknowledge the art form's histories of racism and colonialism and then are moving forward into resisting and opposing racism and colonialism, we really begin to see opera investing in the school of activism and social change and moving against these histories of racism and colonialism that have interacted with it, in some ways, from its inception. In the efforts to be anti-colonial, we're going to make mistakes – it's completely unavoidable, mistakes will happen. And I think the beauty and the way forward in anti-colonialism is acknowledging "We made a mistake. Here's how we won't make that mistake again. Here's how we move forwards." And I think we've seen that even in the way the COC has interacted with Louis Riel and in so many other Indigenous initiatives that have been happening in Canadian opera. I'm really excited about Canadian opera right now. I think we're on our way, I have a lot of hope for it.

Robyn Grant-Moran 32:19

There's the Indigenous production of The Magic Flute with the Vancouver Opera, and there's Missing, Sweet Land, The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed – there's a lot of really great progressive work happening, and I'm wondering what your thoughts are on these and why do you think they work?

Rena Roussin 32:47

Oh, my gosh! I think they work because they acknowledge that there's never going to be one answer to these huge, complex questions of so many, very, in some ways... because these are all discussing really painful lived experiences in some way or another. I think Missing deals with missing and murdered Indigenous women; both Sweet Land and the Indigenous version of The Magic Flute in some way look at first contact between settlers on Turtle Island or North America and its Indigenous inhabitants; and The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed, it's not quite an opera, it's a choral piece that's sort of inspired by the genre of an oratorio that works as music theatre, and it sets the seven last words or textual communications of Kenneth Chamberlain [Sr.], Trayvon Martin, Amadou Diallo, Michael Brown [Jr.], Oscar Grant [III], John Crawford [III] and Eric Garner. And these are not easy pieces to sit with – I remember, with all of them, particularly Sweet Land, and The Seven Last Words and Missing. The Magic Flute somehow was a bit easier to sit with because it's The Magic Flute, but with these three newer pieces, I just... it's not an easy time, it's not supposed to be an easy time. And I think one of the reasons why opera is a particularly successful and even a powerful genre to use for these stories comes from the fact that no one goes to opera for the theatrical structure of its plots; we go to the opera to feel the emotions of a plot. And, I think, with these stories – because these are all things that are news headlines, whether it's about the impacts of colonization, or another Black man being shot for existing while Black, or another missing or murdered Indigenous woman – it's possible for these instances to just become news stories, not because we don't care but because we all have busy lives and we maybe pause for a minute and think, "Oh, how tragic!" but then we ultimately move on. And I think the challenge and also the glory of these pieces is that they don't let us off the hook: when I listen to The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed, I was inconsolable for about an hour afterwards because when these stories are removed from us, when we see them as something separate from us, they become statistics and headlines, and not something that impacts our lives. But I think when you really hear the human feeling behind these stories that music makes possible, it becomes impossible to look away; it becomes impossible to not care, it becomes impossible to not understand that these are people, and I don't think there's anything more activist than really understanding and acting on that and letting a piece of art leave you different than you were when you came in to hear it.

Julie McIsaac 36:36

Yeah, I was about to say I find myself thinking about, but actually more accurately, I find myself feeling a memory of a moment, being in the rehearsal hall of Missing (so, music by Brian Current, libretto by Marie Clements) and it's this moment where the young Indigenous woman and the young white woman are seeing each other, truly seeing and connecting, and now I'm thinking about Sull'aria and the way that Susanna and the Countess, and the way you describe their vocal lines, interacting and the parallel lines. So, in this case in Missing, the characters, they're singing these close, close, close intervals – like, their voices are so so close, almost touching in those seconds, right – and it's so compelling. And it's seeing each other and feeling each other's experience and being transformed by virtue of that. So, for the white character, Eva, after that moment she is transformed, she's different, she cannot continue and unsee what she has seen and unfeel what he has felt. And it strikes me that you're talking about

the irrevocability of something when we experience it in the hall once we turn it on to listen to or once we witness it, and how important that is but how it stays with you for so long afterward.

Rena Roussin 37:46

Yeah.

Julie Mclsaac 37:47

And I've only watched a little bit of Sweet Land – we'll link to it in the show notes...

Rena Roussin 37:50

Amazing!

Julie Mclsaac 37:51

...so people can find it – produced by The Industry in Los Angeles and, even just the first few scenes that I have watched thus far, they leave you with a question or they invite you or they almost compel you to think about "What would you do? What do you think about this that occurred?" They leave space: there's, like, that confrontation but it's a spacious confrontation. So, you've room to think and reflect on your own positioning to the story and to what's being told.

Rena Roussin 38:16

Yeah! Well and, also, I thought this was such a brilliant way of setting a story about colonization: the audiences don't have the same experience, there's two different versions. And in the link that we link to in this podcast, our listeners will be able to stream the video of both options if they want to. But what if you were to actually go to a performance of Sweet Land, one group would see one narrative and the other group would see a different one, and you're only together at the beginning and at the end of this story, and I think that's such an impossibly brutal, bitter, human, honest truth about no one is going to have the same story about colonization and what that's done to their experience of being human, of what it's done to politics, to culture, to the ways we live our lives. Yeah, just to actually make that a tangible artistic decision of "You won't get to experience the story the same way, and you won't necessarily be able to fully know what this other person experienced – you're going to have to ask questions about it." Like, if you and your friend go to the opera together, and you go to these different stories, I think it gets us asking questions, too, about, like, "Well, what did you experience? What did you feel? What was this like for you?" And I think these are the questions we need to be asking about really complicated questions like race, and identity, and colonization, and trying to come from a place of understanding "What have you experienced? What don't I know?"

Julie Mclsaac 40:06

Mm hmm. And not only are they on these different journeys in terms of which scenes they see in orders they see them in, but some of the things are staged in the round, so, even if you're there witnessing the same scene with some, you might be seeing it from a particular angle and someone seeing it from... So, therefore, you catch information or you miss information and again, like you said, there's a metaphor just linked into the way that you experienced the show that makes you think differently about perspective.

Rena Roussin 40:32

Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 40:34

One thing we haven't really touched on: we've been talking a lot about the traumas of colonization – and there are many, and we could talk for years on it – but we haven't talked about the celebratory side of activist opera.

Rena Roussin 40:50

Absolutely!

Robyn Grant-Moran 40:52

I mean, Shanawdithit, which was done by Tapestry [Opera] and that was [librettist] Yvette Nolan and... oh, my goodness, I'm so sorry... the composer is...

Julie Mclsaac 41:03

Burry, Dean Burry.

Robyn Grant-Moran 41:05

Yes, Dean Burry! Thank you! I'm sorry, Dean, your work is fabulous! It told a trauma but it told it from almost a celebratory lens, like, that people live on, that we're resilient despite everything. And then Two Odysseys with Pimootewin and Gállábártnit, where we're telling origin stories.

Rena Roussin 41:35

And that final moment in the Two Odysseys when the two protagonists, Melody Courage, walks on stage and there's lights on her dress and you don't understand why, and then these two characters become a constellation in the stars. And, for me, that was one of the most profound things I'd ever seen in opera in terms of just... We have always been here – this is something Indigenous people frequently say, "We have always been here. We have always been on this land in this part of the world." And when I looked at that, it just seemed like the most beautiful conclusion to an origin story in that we will always be here. And I think, yeah, you're absolutely right, Robyn, in that I think so often we talk about trauma narratives and Indigenous victimized. But, yeah, there's also so much space and an importance of leaning into the ways these stories talk about Indigenous agency and about the resilience of our cultures and that they're not going away, and we're still here and we still have stories to tell.

Julie Mclsaac 42:56

It was great to spend that time with Rena. I found it to be so joyful and moving and fascinating. And I also found that there was a connection with something that Ravi [Jain] shared with us, back in Episode Three, about encouraging us to see things anew. And I'm wondering about, you know, these works that are now in the canon that are historical references – we know them so well, we know where they're headed, we know what the ending is and who the characters are – but to encourage us to imagine that it's the first time, that it's 1780 and you've heard there's this really cool thing happening in this theatre, and you're showing up there with your pals, and you're experiencing it for the first time within the context of the societal norms and the gender constructs of the time and all of that. So, I think it's good

for us to remember that advice from Ravi and to take it into this as well as we consider how those works of the past were activist.

Robyn Grant-Moran 43:48

I keep thinking about what would it be like to see Figaro for the first time with the censorship issues, how much work had to be done to remove all the offensive bits.

Julie Mclsaac 44:06

And Verdi, as well, as an example of another composer who had to respond to that and had to change content because of censorship. Can you imagine, Robyn, if we heard that there was this really provocative thing happening down the street at the opera house, and then suddenly the censors clamp down and it was no longer happening? Or we knew that, when we saw it a week later, it was going to be changed from what the original intention was? Like, what would happen if that was if that was [inaudible]

Robyn Grant-Moran 44:30

...hear clanking, clanking, angry clanking on keyboards.

Julie Mclsaac 44:35

Better go wild.

Robyn Grant-Moran 44:37

It would be a buzz.

Julie Mclsaac 44:40

Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 44:42

Yeah, like, how were people responding in that time – like, what was life like when they heard this information? It's so difficult to imagine but that was their world, that was their norm.

Julie Mclsaac 44:57

Mm hmm. And then the Prisoners' Chorus that Rena mentioned from Fidelio: imagine being the first person to ever hear that and not knowing that that moment was going to come in the opera.

Robyn Grant-Moran 45:07

And then, like, to all of a sudden have a woman there singing in that context, when you've always ever seen heroic numbers sung by men, like...

Julie Mclsaac 45:20

Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 45:21

...that must have been mind-blowing!

Julie Mclsaac 45:23

I'm wondering, Robyn, for you: do you recall something that you've witnessed on the opera stage or that you've heard that really moved you to act, if we think about activism and what that means?

Robyn Grant-Moran 45:34

Well, short and cheesy answer is opera moves me to be my best person; it creates space to look at difficult subject matter in a safe way, you know? It's removed from everyday discourse and it is so heightened and so dramatized that it almost doesn't seem real.

Julie Mclsaac 45:57

Yeah. Well, it's interesting, because Beethoven's part of this conversation by virtue of Fidelio, and I don't know, in terms of his ability to hear and his loss of hearing, I don't know where Fidelio sits on that spectrum in terms of where he was at when he composed that. But just in general, to think that this is someone who continued to compose as he was losing his hearing and what he was able to compose despite those circumstances, you go, "Well, if that as possible, what am I capable of?" And I find myself thinking about that when you say it inspires you to be your best self, in that we see these people on stage – these singers, or if we think of circus artists, or athletes at the height of their abilities – and you go, "Okay, look at what they've been able to accomplish by virtue of the study, and the training, and the focus!" And it does sort of incite you to think about "What am i capable of? What influence can I exert if I work harder, or if I try more in my sphere of influence?" – whether that's artistic, whether that's public service, whether that's teachers in the classroom, who are doing amazing activist things every day?

Robyn Grant-Moran 47:01

And the notion that we have these people who have been studying something so specifically for so long, and that we can all come together and work in a coordinated fashion to make this larger than life thing happen really speaks to the potential and the best side of people...

Julie Mclsaac 47:29

Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 47:31

...which may or may not be activist in nature but I believe that activism is rooted in wanting the best and striving for the best. So, it's a great space for that.

Julie Mclsaac 47:50

Yeah, and challenging the status quo because if we accept the status quo, we're saying, "Everything's okay as it is..."

Robyn Grant-Moran 47:56

Yeah.

Julie Mclsaac 47:56

"Everything is perfect, we've achieved the best possible outcome." And we haven't...

Robyn Grant-Moran 48:00

Exactly.

Julie Mclsaac 48:01

Let's be honest: we have some work to do.

Robyn Grant-Moran 48:03

We always should be striving for the best.

Julie Mclsaac 48:06

And I think about it, too, sometimes when I reflect on why I like staging or why I like directing or creating things is because, for those two hours of those two-and-a-half hours, you get to explore the world as you dream it could be, or as you wish it were. Or you get to spend that time bringing people's attention to something that you feel is important or that you want them to spend some time feeling or contemplating. And then with the idea that if we can do it on stage for two hours, maybe that two hours becomes three hours in someone's life, or four hours, or five hours, or a day, a week that they're still thinking and living in that way or contemplating those things. And then eventually, it takes over!

Robyn Grant-Moran 48:44

I'm immediately reminded of our conversation with Cherie Dimaline when talking about speculative fiction and the prevalence of it with Indigenous authors, and how it's a space where you can explore life without the colonial gaze. And I mean, of course, in opera – in any art – that applies, like, it's space to explore life without something that's uncomfortable, "What would life look like if we all strive for our best selves, if government rule were different, if social norms were different?"

Julie Mclsaac 49:30

And if we all had the emotional experience of something – so rather than reading a headline in a newspaper or hearing about something that's happened when we receive it in an operatic context through an aria. I'm thinking about the mother's aria from *Missing*: she's silent in a lot of the early staging or you hear her keening, but it's in that moment of aria where she has that text and she's speaking about the birth of her daughter who is now gone, and she's expressing her grief but, also, what I think I find most impactful – it's on an emotional level, so it's hard to put words to it – is her love, and that reminds me of Cherie as well, who said, like, "The responsibility, what we're carrying is love," and with all that complexity – and that's the big thing right now is, "What is it like to carry that love in these times?"

Robyn Grant-Moran 50:22

So, speaking of love, that makes me wonder, dear audience listeners: what are your thoughts on activism and opera? What have you seen? What do you love what makes you strive to be a better person? These are things we want to know from you.

Julie Mclsaac 50:42

So either tag us on social @CanadianOpera, or email us at audiences@coc.ca. We certainly appreciate all the feedback that we've received so far and the reviews that you've left on Apple Podcasts, so keep those coming. But, as Robyn mentioned, as we get into these ideas, we'd love to hear how they're sitting with you and what responses you might have in relationship to them.

Robyn Grant-Moran 51:03

We recently received a message from COC subscriber Mary about Episode Five, with Cherie Dimaline and Ian Cusson, and we really want to share this with you.

Julie Mclsaac 51:14

Shall I read it out?

Robyn Grant-Moran 51:15

Yes, please.

Julie Mclsaac 51:17

"As a relative newcomer to opera, I haven't seen them all and have tended to avoid the newer creations. However, the artists you spoke to this time made me realize that the canon isn't and shouldn't be static; there is a responsibility to develop a canon that will go forward for future listeners. A repertoire is always of the past, and the bigger it is, the more we can draw from to illuminate the present."

Robyn Grant-Moran 51:39

Thanks, Mary!

Julie Mclsaac 51:41

We've had so much great feedback already from many of you and know you might have some burning questions about what you've heard on this podcast or about opera in general. So, we are dedicating a whole episode on March 30 to questions from you, our listeners.

Robyn Grant-Moran 51:54

To have your questions featured on the show, send us an email at audiences@coc.ca, tag us on social @CanadianOpera, or email us a voice memo – you can find instructions for that coc.ca/KeyChange.

Julie Mclsaac 52:11

And you can ask us anything. There is no question too weird, too obvious, or too complex.

Robyn Grant-Moran 52:17

And if we don't know the answer, we'll find someone who does.

Julie Mclsaac 52:20

We don't necessarily have all the answers, we're still learning all the time.

Robyn Grant-Moran 52:24

One thing I've always wondered about is wigs and shoes. With wigs: who makes them, who takes care of them? And shoes: how do you choose them? What's good for the stage?

Julie Mclsaac 52:34

Yeah, so many great questions! So, send those our way before March 5, and then hopefully we'll get to them in our episode on March 30. We couldn't squeeze into this episode everything from our interview with Rena but, if you're a COC subscriber, you can hear more.

Robyn Grant-Moran 52:49

So, make sure to watch for the link in your supporter newsletter.

Julie Mclsaac 52:52

And next time we'll be chatting with the disruptor/conductor Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser. Stay tuned.

Robyn Grant-Moran 52:59

See you next time. Be the first to find out about free events and concerts from the COC by signing up for our monthly eOpera newsletter at coc.ca/eOpera.

Julie Mclsaac 53:19

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 53:33

So to make sure you don't miss an episode, subscribe to Key Change wherever you get your podcasts.

Julie Mclsaac 53:40

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

Robyn Grant-Moran 53:46

To learn more about today's guests and see the show notes, please visit our website at coc.ca/KeyChange.