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# **Filumena and The Canadian Identity**

**A Research into the Essence of Canadian Opera**

**Alexandria Scout Parks**

**Final thesis for the Bmus-program**

**Icelandic Academy of the Arts**

**Music department**

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## Abstract

In this thesis I sought to identify the essence of Canadian opera and to explore how the opera *Filumena* exemplifies that essence. My goal was to first establish what is unique about Canadian opera. To do this, I started by looking into the history of opera composition and performance in Canada. By tracing these two interlocking histories, I was able to gather a sense of the major bodies of work within the Canadian opera repertoire. I was, as well, able to deeper understand the evolution, and at some points, stagnation of Canadian opera by examining major contributing factors within this history.

My next steps were to identify trends that arose within the history of opera composition in Canada. A closer look at many of the major works allowed me to see the similarities in terms of things such as subject matter. An important trend that I intend to explain further is the use of Canadian subject matter as the basis of the operas' narratives. This telling of Canadian stories is one aspect unique to Canadian opera. It began even with the early operas of Canada, flourished with operas commissioned during the centennial celebrations of 1967, and has continued on to the present day, including the subject of this thesis, *Filumena*.

To discover if the opera *Filumena* represented what it means to be a Canadian opera, and more importantly, the Canadian identity, I had the amazing opportunity to interview the opera's composer John Estacio. We spoke about many things, from the importance of telling Canadian stories on the opera stage, to the use of themes such as mixed heritage and the immigrant experience within the opera. In the pages below, through both mine and Mr. Estacio's words, I intend to illustrate the importance and the difficulties of telling Canadian stories in the opera world. I will also explore the use of the above mentioned themes, mixed heritage and the immigrant experience, and the way in which they lend themselves to the opera's Canadian identity.

With the research above, I discovered common elements, trends, and themes that led themselves to what can be called, the essence of Canadian opera. Through my interview with Mr. Estacio, I was able to understand important themes within and surrounding the opera. Together, these two streams of research have allowed me to better understand Canadian opera, and to examine *Filumena's* place, as, what I will argue, the quintessential Canadian opera.

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## **1. Introduction: Writing about Canada**

When it became time to choose a topic for my final thesis, I knew immediately that I wanted to write about something Canadian. The last three years of my education have taken place in the city of Reykjavík, which while wonderful, is a long long ways away from my home. No matter how wonderful a city or country is, when you are living abroad, a sense of isolation from your country and your culture is inevitable.

This sense of isolation was intensified, I felt, by the lack of connection to my home country in any of the work I was doing in my studies. Throughout my private voice education, and up until the end of the first year of my Bachelor, I had sung and performed classical repertoire from a myriad of different countries, Italy, Germany, Iceland, even Hungary, but had still never sung anything from the classical repertoire of my own country. I was altogether unaware of, if not the existence, then most definitely the contents of this Canadian classical music canon.

I cannot help but acknowledge the irony that my first personal introduction to the world of Canadian classical music, took place over four thousand kilometers away from Canada, in a university in Iceland. Some guest teachers had come from Toronto to teach us, and they had brought with them a list of Canadian music from which we could choose. I was amazed, and even ashamed to see that I did not recognize a single name of those Canadian composers. This was a point of revelation for me.

In my research for this thesis, I have discovered that I am not alone in this separation from Canadian classical music, and even more so, Canadian opera. In a PhD thesis from the University of British Columbia, entitled *A Canadian Opera Aria Anthology for Soprano*, author Stephanie Eiko Nakagawa begins with a sentiment as to the difficulties of becoming familiar with the operatic music of our own country.

“A problem that Canadian opera faces is that once works are premiered, they rarely receive any further performances. Singers must overcome numerous barriers to sing these works due to

limited score accessibility and lack of aria adaptations and recordings. Even if singers feel passionately about Canadian opera, such obstacles may impede their motivation to perform Canadian repertoire.”<sup>1</sup>

This realization of the lack of information about and access to Canadian works is exemplified and in part rectified by the article "Something to Sing About: A Preliminary List of Canadian Staged Dramatic Music Since 1867" by Mary I. Ingraham. This list of works served as a starting point for my research into the subject matter of Canadian operas. It also served as another source of examples of the accessibility barriers that face the body of works within the Canadian operatic canon.

The Canadian masterclass in Reykjavík, as well as these papers, opened my eyes to how little I knew about Canadian classical music. I had not even realized that my own Canadian identity was being so underrepresented within my own work. I racked my brain to try to remember any other time that I had experienced Canadian classical music, and I found only one. It was the 2017 revival of the opera *Filumena*, which I had watched in Calgary right before moving to Iceland.

With this opera in mind, I began my research into Canadian classical music, and more specifically Canadian opera. I was curious as to what is the nature of Canadian opera and in what ways it is a unique section of the world opera repertoire. In the below sections lie the results of this research. They show the history of opera in Canada, the elements that make it unique, and the aspects of the opera *Filumena* that allow it to hold the title of a Great Canadian Opera. Beyond the written words below, these sections represent my own reconnection with the music of my country.

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<sup>1</sup> Nakagawa, 2017

## 2. Opera In Canada

The history of opera in Canada can be divided into two parts, the history of its performance in Canada, and the history of original Canadian compositions. I have chosen to look at and write about these two aspects of the Canadian operatic history separately as they are not as closely interlinked as in some other operatic cultures. The gap between the composition and the performance of Canadian material began at the very beginning of the Canadian opera history as the earliest performed repertoire was British and other European works brought to Canada by American companies. Canadian operatic composition didn't hit its stride until around World War Two, and as a result, very little Canadian material has become standard in the operatic repertoire we perform today. In the sections below, I will present an overview of the histories of both opera performance and composition in Canada.

### 2.1 A Brief History of Opera Performance

Apart from an operatic attempt in 1606, it wasn't until 1783 that the first opera was performed in Canada. This first attempt was a performance of *Le Theatre de Neptune* on a collection of boats in the Bay of Fundy, Port Royal, as a welcome home celebration for a returning expedition. The performance included a series of dramatic poems with music interspersed. It wasn't until nearly two hundred years later that the first true piece of opera, *The Padlock*, by British composer Charles Didbin, was performed. This performance in Quebec City in 1783, became the first recorded instance of the Canadian opera scene<sup>2</sup>.

Over the next few years, more and more productions were staged. Travelling companies from the States had an easy way of travelling up through the great lakes into Eastern Canada, and accounted for most if not all of the operatic activity there, up until the mid to late 19th century. Canadians became familiar with truncated versions of the standard operatic repertoire at the time

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<sup>2</sup> Canadian Encyclopedia: Opera Performance

(Rossini, Donizetti, etc.). Travelling companies were often unable to stage full scale operas or travel with full orchestras so the truncation of works was necessary. As well, the Canadian theatres and stages where these companies performed were often not big enough to accommodate full scale opera productions. The building of the railway eventually brought opera to the Western coast of Canada, and by the beginning of the 20th century, most major cities had been visited by an opera company<sup>3</sup>.

From its earliest inception, the Canadian opera scene was dominated by American troupes and European operas. What is considered to be the first Canadian opera company was in fact an American company, The Holman Opera Company, that eventually settled in Toronto. The first truly Canadian opera companies such as The Montreal Opera Company, and its successor The National Opera Company, lasted only a few years each, the former becoming bankrupt and the later unable to continue after the beginning of World War One. Any further attempts at forming opera companies until after World War Two, were short lived, the only exception being the Opera Guild of Montreal which was founded in 1941 and staged 33 productions over 28 seasons. The Canadian Opera Company is by far the longest running and most substantial company in Canadian history. It was founded in 1950, and toured Canada and the U.S until the 1990s when it returned its effort to the Toronto stage alone. The COC remains today one of the forerunners in the operatic world of Canada<sup>4</sup>.

What is apparent to me in this short summary is the minor role of Canadians in this history and the more substantial role outside forces played in the introduction and the spreading of opera in Canada. The first performances of opera were brought to Canada from America. As well, the majority of the repertoire circulating at this time was brought over from the European opera masters. It took well into the 20th century for Canadian companies to become merely established, let alone successful. This delayed growth of the Canadian operatic community is mirrored in the opera compositions of the time and will be expanded upon below.

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<sup>3</sup> Canadian Encyclopedia: Opera Performance

<sup>4</sup> Canadian Encyclopedia Opera Performance

## 2.2 A Brief History of Opera Composition

The composer Louis-Joseph-Marie Quesnel (1746-1809) is considered to be the first operatic composer in not only Canada, but North America. He wrote two operas at the end of the 18th century. The opera *Colas et Colinette* (1788) was performed three times between 1790 and 1807 in Quebec. His second opera *Lucas et Cecile*, though scheduled to, was never performed.<sup>5</sup>

Despite Quesnel's operatic endeavours, the history of opera composition in Canada did not begin until well into the 19th century. Attempts at large scale opera composition in this century were not very successful so smaller scale works were more commonly written. A lack of permanent Canadian opera companies made it so that Canadian operas were rarely performed. For the most part it was amateur groups that would perform new Canadian material. The resources of these groups were limited, and as a result, new Canadian works that hoped to be performed needed to be on a smaller scale. As a result, operettas were more commonly composed and performed during this time period.<sup>6</sup>

After 1940, there began an increase of Canadian operas being written. Many pieces written at this time were not staged, and some to this day have yet to be performed in their entirety. For example, the three act opera *Soeur Beatrice* (1920), by Alfred La Liberté exists only with a piano score and only excerpts have been performed in concert.<sup>7</sup>

One of the driving forces behind this new increase in mid 20th century opera writing, was the Canadian Broadcasting Company, or the CBC. Most operas in the 1950s and the 1960s were commissioned by the company and were telecast or broadcast on the radio. Many of these operas were short one act works. The first successful, grand scale, Canadian opera, *Deirdre*, by James

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<sup>5</sup> Kallmann, 2013

<sup>6</sup> Canadian Encyclopedia: Opera Composition

<sup>7</sup> Canadian Encyclopedia: Opera Composition

Healy Wilan (1880-1968) was written for the CBC and was premiered by radio broadcast in 1946, before it's revision for a stage premiere in 1965.<sup>8</sup>

The Centenary in 1967 prompted a slew of new operas surrounding Canadian topics. In celebration of Canada and its stories, works were commissioned by the Canadian Broadcasting company and the Canadian Opera Company, that showcased these stories. The most significant of these centennial operas was the opera *Louis Riel* by Harry Somers (1925-1999) which told the true story of the late 19th century Metis rebellions.<sup>9</sup>

In the following decades, operas that were composed were relatively short works and were meant for small ensembles. Many consisted of only one act. Examples of the operas of this time are the series *Clara 91* by Gabriel Charpentier which consists of ten comic operas each no longer than 15 minutes, and Violet Archer's chamber opera *Sgnarelle* (1973), which runs under an hour in length. From the 1970s onward, a subgenre of opera written specifically for the entertainment or education of children emerged featuring works such as *The Selfish Giant* (1970) by Barry Cabana and Charles Wilson and Dean Burry's *The Hobbit* (2004).<sup>10</sup>

The 21st century Canadian opera world has continued to see smaller force works with only a handful of large scale operas being created. The list of larger scale operas includes works such as Ka Nin Chan's *The Iron Road* (2001) and the operatic subject of this thesis, John Estacio's *Filumena* (2007).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Canadian Encyclopedia: Opera Composition

<sup>9</sup> Canadian Encyclopedia: Opera Composition

<sup>10</sup> Canadian Encyclopedia: Opera Composition

<sup>11</sup> Canadian Encyclopedia: Opera Composition

### **3. The Essence of Canadian Opera**

To distill the essence of Canadian opera, I began to examine what this Canadian canon had to offer. Between the years 1867 and 2007, 376 Canadian operas were composed by at least 184 different composers.<sup>12</sup> In the past 13 years, a great number of operas have been added to that list. Considering the scope of this thesis, I was unable to analyse the contents of everyone of these operas. Instead I have selected 150 operas to provide a cross section of the Canadian operatic repertoire.

In selecting the operas, it was important to collect a variety of different works. One of the main challenges to selecting the operas was the availability of information surrounding them. Many of the early operas survive only in title. It is common that the scores are missing, or have survived only in parts. Often, the librettos have been lost as well, leaving mentions of them in old reviews and newspapers to be the only remaining traces.<sup>13</sup>

Of the surviving and accessible operas, I pulled selections from every time period in the Canadian opera history timeline. My jumping off point for selection was to include as many as possible of the accessible operas that were mentioned in the Canadian Encyclopedia history of opera as they were pieces that held more significance to the Canadian opera tradition. As well, I tried to represent works from both the anglophone, francophone, and even first nations communities of Canada. An attempt to include works of both female and male composers is present. In these ways, I selected a diverse spread of works through which to discover the essence of Canadian opera. In the below sections lie my findings. A complete list of the operas from which I have pulled this information is attached as Appendix A.

#### **3.1 Operatic Trends**

To establish if there are any trends in terms of subject matter in the body of Canadian opera works, I researched 150 operas. My main question within this research was whether or not there

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<sup>12</sup> Ingraham, 2008

<sup>13</sup> Canadian Encyclopedia: Opera Performance

existed a tendency to favour Canadian based stories, or stories that come directly from true Canadian events. This question arises from the fact that the operatic focus of this essay, *Filumena*, falls within this category, and the goal of this piece has been to examine how this opera compares to the bulk of Canadian operatic works. Out of these 150 operas, I found that 84 of them dealt with Canadian subject matter. This constitutes over half of the Canadian opera cross section, allowing it to be considered a major trend within Canadian opera.

My qualifications for falling under the category of Canadian subject matter were that these operas were either set in Canada, dealt with Canadian characters, were based around traditional Canadian stories or legends, or were dealing with figures or events from Canadian history. Many of these operas are merely set in Canada. Operas such as Maurice Blackburn's *Silent Measures* (1954-55) and James Rolfe's *Swoon* (2006) are comedies set across Canada following the affairs and incidents of people in love. They represent traditional farcical operatic stories, but now set in places such as Toronto instead of, say, Seville.

Other operas tell fictional stories specific to the Canadian identity. They involve questions of immigration, and identity. Many of them are set during difficult times in Canadian history. The opera *Refugees* (1979), by Ramond Pannell, tells the story of two Jewish families who emigrated to Canada between 1930-1975. Another opera that has its routes in WW2 is *Naomi's Road* (2005) by Ramona Luengen. This is a coming of age story of a young Japanese girl, growing up in one of the many internment camps that arose during WW2. These Canadian operas, as well as many others, including *Filumena*, deal with the issue of what makes up the Canadian identity. I intend to explore this smaller, yet recurring theme, later on in the thesis.

Operas based around Native American legends also fall under the Canadian subject matter category. *Seabird Island* (1977) by Derek Healey, and *Bones*(2001), by Sadia Bucks, are two such operas.

Besides the stories set in Canada or with Canadian characters, I began to notice another recurring element in these Canadian operas. Out of the 84 operas that I found to be dealing with Canadian subject matter, 37 of them, just under half, were based around true stories from the history of Canada. Some such as Oscar F. Telgmann's *Leo the Royal Cadet* (1889), and Alexina Louie's *Mulroney* (2011), are satires, with characters based on real Canadian political and military figures. The use of important Canadian figures also exists beyond satire. Many of our poets, writers, and even operatic composers have been immortalized in operas, biographical or otherwise. One such opera is *Le Pere des Amours* (1942) by Montreal composer, Eugene Lapierre. The piece tells the story of Joseph Quesnell, the man considered to be the first operatic composer in Canada. Another of Lapierre's works, *Le Vagabond de la gloire* (1947) tells the life story of Calixa Lavallee, another Canadian composer of operas, and the composer of our national anthem.

Historical events have also been the subject matter of some of these Canadian operas. The Metis rebellions of 1869 and 1885 have been used as subject matter for more than one Canadian opera, the most famous being Harry Somer's *Louis Riel* (1967). This opera is about the two rebellions and more importantly, the man who led them, Louis Riel. The piece was commissioned for the 1967 centennial celebrations. Another Canadian opera surrounding a historic event, is the opera I will focus on in the next section, *Filumena*. It tells the story of the last woman to be hung in Alberta.

Overall, from my findings, I have observed that there is a definite trend of using Canadian material for the subject matter of Canadian operas. As well, within that trend, there appears to be a subsection of operas based on true Canadian people or events. This trend has spanned throughout the entirety of Canadian opera composition history.

As a whole, Canadian opera composers arrived late to the game. Operatic traditions had already begun and evolved in many other countries. The use of Canadian subject matter was an uncharted territory. It has allowed Canadian composers to create an operatic repertoire of their

own. The significance of telling these Canadian stories is expanded upon below, in section 3.3. But first, a look into the unique linguistics of Canadian opera.

### 3.2 Questions of Language

Amongst these two themes, Canadian subject matter, and stories based on a truth element, I noticed another interesting aspect of Canadian operas. Though not necessarily a theme, there does appear to be a linguistic division between the operas within our canon. As a bilingual country, it follows that our operatic tradition should also reflect this bilingual nature. At the beginning of Canadian opera history, an operatic hub evolved in both the anglophone and francophone communities, Toronto and Montreal respectively.<sup>14</sup> This has allowed both of these operatic traditions to evolve simultaneously.

Though a division in terms of francophone or anglophone subject matter is not yet apparent, this lingual factor is still an interesting aspect of the Canadian opera canon. Canadian opera's identity is simultaneously anglophone and francophone, an element that is uniquely Canadian.

Beyond the anglophone francophone divide, we also find traces of other languages within these operas. As a multicultural nation, built upon and by immigrants, different languages and linguistic communities are present across Canada. This is also represented within some of the operas, especially operas dealing with questions of immigration and identity. Immigrant characters in Canadian operas, such as Ka Nin Chan's *Iron Road* (2000), and Estacio's *Filumena* (2003) speak not only English throughout the opera, but also their own mother tongues, a detail that parallels the linguistic lives of real Canadian immigrants.

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<sup>14</sup> Canadian Encyclopedia: Opera Performance

Another linguistic group represented within Canadian operas are the First Nations languages. Admittedly, there is a question of representation versus appropriation with the use of these languages, as many of these operas that use them, are written by composers outside of a First Nations identity. A prime example can be found in Sommer's *Louis Riel* (1967) where a Sioux character sings an aria with text made up of two different First Nations languages combined, neither of which are attributed to the Sioux people<sup>15</sup>. Nonetheless, there still exist operas with accurate portrayals of First Nations languages. Through the use of these languages, these operas represent not only another important Canadian identity, but also the interplay between different linguistic communities.

Paradoxically, another aspect that shapes the specific essence of Canadian opera, is its diversity. The presence of multiple different language communities, both between and within these operas, is a representation of the diverse Canadian identity on the Canadian operatic stage.

### **3.3 Telling Canadian Stories**

The use of Canadian stories, stories set in Canada, and stemming from our history, can be seen in even some of the earliest Canadian operas, but this trend truly found its stride with the 1967 Centennial Celebration. These centenary commissions allowed Canadian stories to flourish on the Canadian opera stages. At the request of our celebrating nation, our composers' eyes were turned and tuned to the wealth that Canadian subject matter had to offer. Works commissioned during this year fall under many of the above mentioned Canadian subject matter categories. Some used historic Canadian literature as their source material such as Raymond Pannell's *The Luck of Ginger Coffey*, and Kelsey Jones's *Sam Slick*. Some used historical events as a jumping off point, expanding upon them, and imagining narratives that might well have been such as Robert Turner's *The Brideship*. Others, like the above mentioned, *Louis Riel*, told true stories of historical figures and events. The use of Canadian historical material in operas has continued to this day with many composers still drawing from the stories of our past.

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<sup>15</sup> Ingraham, 2016

One prominent composer currently working with such subject matter is John Estacio. His first opera, *Filumena*, is based on the true story of the last woman to be hung in Alberta. Following in the same vein, his other three operas deal exclusively with Canadian material. His operas *Frobisher* (2006) and *Lillian Alling* (2010) both have real historical figures as their title characters and they depict modern day fictional narratives surrounding their legacies. *Ours* (2016), Estacio's most recent opera, tells the true story of a chaplain of the Newfoundland Regiment, Thomas Nangle, and the aftermaths of the battle of Beaumont Hamel in 1916.

In an interview I was able to conduct with Mr. Estacio, we spoke about this common theme of using Canadian material in his operas. When asked why he drew from Canadian history and stories, he replied "Well, because if we don't tell our stories, who will. We can't rely on Americans to tell Canadian stories, or the Germans or whoever. And that's fine, I mean, it's not to be expected. If they wanted to tell a Canadian story, that would be fine, but it doesn't happen." He later remarked, "I felt we needed to tell our stories. There are hidden gems in our history that need to be polished and shined up and put on stage."<sup>16</sup>

This journey from hidden gem to polished piece is not an easy one, which can account for some of the absence of Canadian stories being performed on our opera stages. This difficult journey is one of the main reasons for the lack of circulation and accessibility to Canadian operatic material. The uncovering of such stories is often the first barrier as Estacio puts it, "It's something that has escaped the consciousness of our modern day civilization, because they are just so many other things that we have to study. So not everyone knows these stories and the fact that these stories led to other things that we are now living with and facing today."<sup>17</sup> As well, Estacio spoke to the fact that opera companies are often more hesitant to stage works with unknown stories. They prefer the safety of operas that come from pre-existing material. Companies outside of Canada are also less likely to put up material that focuses on Canadian subject matter. This was something Estacio had in mind when beginning to write *Filumena*. "I

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<sup>16</sup> Interview March 4th, 2020

<sup>17</sup> Interview March 4th, 2020

felt, whether its a good idea or not, for the opera world, because it is kind of a suicide. Because when you're writing a Canadian opera, it's sort of like one more tick against you. An American company might say, 'Oh, that's a Canadian story, we're not interested'. To which my response is, well, Carmen is set in Seville, Do you care that it's set in Seville? Who has ever said, 'Oh we're not gonna do Carmen because it's set in Seville, or Tosca because it's set in Rome. We should only do Canadian or American stories.' But nonetheless, that prejudice is there."<sup>18</sup>

Despite these barriers, Estacio has been greatly successful in showcasing true Canadian stories. His next opera, which is currently in the works, will again be based on a true event that happened in Canada in 1946. Through these works, Estacio continues the noble task of Canadian composers, to bring our stories to the opera stage.

#### **4. Filumena's Place**

Having established the unique character of Canadian opera, my focus now shifts to a closer look at this thesis's main operatic topic. This section will explore the many ways in which Estacio's opera, *Filumena*, is an important piece, and an embodiment of the above explored essence of Canadian opera. Through its existence as a grand scale opera, in a smaller scale operatic world, it defies Canadian operatic practice norms. The opera embodies some of the major trends in Canadian operatic composition, such as using Canadian subject matter, and telling true Canadian stories. As well, this work is a representation of the Canadian identity with its use of a story flowing between languages and depicting what it means to be a Canadian immigrant. In these ways, *Filumena* holds its place as an essential Canadian opera.

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<sup>18</sup> Interview March 4th, 2020

## 4.1 The Composer

To begin this closer look at the opera *Filumena*, I will start first with a word towards the work's composer, John Estacio. His musical and compositional education took place at two Canadian universities, Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario, and The University of British Columbia. He has won numerous composition awards, and has served as a composer in residence with the Edmonton Symphony.<sup>19</sup> In conversation, Estacio spoke about some of his musical and operatic influences. Names off the top of his head included composers such as Debussy, Ravel, and Mahler. In terms of opera, the names included Puccini, Verdi, and a touch of Wagner. These influences as well as elements individually Estacio's, have come together to create the basis that is Estacio's musical language.

As he puts it, "Those are all sort of influences. And then I just sort of have started to develop my own syntax, my own language. Whether it's good or bad, I don't know, but it's a language I've sort of been working on and developing on. It continues to evolve."<sup>20</sup>

This musical language, as well as Estacio's use of the characters and the narrative in the creation of his operas' music, serve the basis of *Filumena's* operatic score.

## 4.1 Grand Scale Opera

The opera *Filumena* is an important piece in the Canadian opera repertoire. A trend leaning towards smaller scale works is evident in both the composition and performance histories above. As I have shown above, an early lack of established Canadian opera companies, smaller performance venues, and the common practice of only amateur groups staging Canadian works led to a musical climate unsuited for the cultivation of grand opera works. Even the large scale operas of Europe came to Canadians first, travelling and truncated. As well, a preference for the opera classics has made it uncommon for Canadian operas to be performed often, if at all, after

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<sup>19</sup> Canadian Music Centre

<sup>20</sup> Interview, March 4th 2020

their premieres. *Filumena* stands in defiance to these norms. It is one of the few grand scale operas that exists in our repertoire, and it has become the most produced Canadian opera, with five full productions and a number of excerpt performances across Canada.<sup>21</sup>

Existing as not only a grand scale work, but a successful grand scale work, in an operatic climate that has favoured the smaller, more economically practical works, *Filumena* represents the height of Canadian opera. It is a piece, unrestricted by the confines and barriers that have faced the operas that have come before it. Without barriers such as, a small venue, missing man power or a lesser budget, *Filumena* represents all that Canadian opera can be.

#### **4.2 A True Canadian Story**

Beyond the scale of this opera, lies the significance of its scope. As one of the 150 operas this thesis has looked at, *Filumena* stands with the works dealing with Canadian subject matter. The opera tells the true story of Florence Lassandro, the last woman to be hung in Alberta. This story comes from an important time in Canada's and Alberta's history. It was a time of heavy immigration to Alberta, most of which was made up of emigrating Italians. In the 1910s, it was also the time of Alberta's prohibition.<sup>22</sup>

In the opera, *Filumena* arrives in Canada, an Italian immigrant. She is married at a very young age to a fellow immigrant, much older than her, who renames her Florence in an attempt to assimilate to the new country. Through her husband and many people in the Italian community, she becomes caught up in the world of bootlegging, the illegal alcohol trade. A bootlegging trip with the main crime boss, Emilio Picariello goes terribly wrong, ending in the shooting and death of a Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer, one of the few crimes punishable by death, at that time.. It is unclear whether *Filumena* or Picariello shot the officer. Picariello's family pleads with *Filumena* to take the blame as she is a woman and it was uncommon for women to receive the death penalty at that time. She agrees, but soon changes her mind when it becomes clear that the

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<sup>21</sup> Nakagawa, 2017

<sup>22</sup> Smith, 2009

court intends to punish her to the full extent of the law. In the end, both Picariello and Filumena hang for the crime.<sup>23</sup>

This dramatization of the true story of Florence Lassandro, follows the history almost to a tee. Despite an added love affair, its details for the most part ring true. At the time of this case, there was a significant push to allow Filumena to take a life sentence instead, but the final decision was to hang her. The court wished her death to be a deterrence to other women who might be coerced into bootlegging with the promise they would get off easy if they were caught. Florence Lassandro was used as an example to the province and to the country and her hanging had long lasting consequences. Not long after the death, did the Alberta government begin to repeal prohibition. And, to this day, no other woman has been hung in Alberta.<sup>24</sup>

This exciting and important historic event has, as Mr. Estacio said, “ escaped the consciousness of our modern day civilization.” It is a story not many people know about, even though it has had far reaching and long lasting effects on the province and on the country. Estacio himself was unaware of this story before librettist John Murrel brought it to his attention. Through this opera, Estacio and Murrell have resurrected a lost treasure of Canadian history.

The opera *Filumena* portrays an important part of Canadian history, bringing it again to the country’s attention. It tells a true Canadian story, and as a result, embodies the essence of Canadian opera as explored above.

### **4.3 The Canadian Identity**

The opera *Filumena*’s stance as a quintessential Canadian opera is aided by the way in which the opera portrays essential elements of the Canadian identity. When Estacio began his search for his

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<sup>23</sup> Smith, 2009

<sup>24</sup> Smith, 2009

next opera's subject matter, he had a specific checklist in mind. This checklist included factors such as, the story being based on a true story, and for it to be a local, Canadian story.

Another element Estacio wanted to include was the idea that the story would revolve around immigrants. Canada has been a country of immigrants from the first French and British settlements. It is here that we find our multicultural and multilingual roots. The status as first, second or even third generation immigrants is shared amongst countless Canadians, including, not only myself, but also our composer in question, John Estacio. His parents emigrated to Canada from Portugal in the 60s. Estacio draws on this background to effectively portray the immigrant experience through the music and text of *Filumena*.

Musical elements are used throughout the opera to represent the Italian heritage of the characters. Instruments such as the mandolins and the accordion can be heard in the orchestra in moments when characters are talking about "the old world" or their Italian culture. The character Stefano's main aria, *Menza na strada*, is framed as an old Italian love song in the opera. Though the music is Estacio's, the text comes from an old Italian poem, giving it an element of authenticity. As well, an Italian style waltz, and a *tarentelle*, an Italian dance, as imagined by Estacio, appear within the opera. In contrast to these moments, when the characters talk about the new world they are in, or how they should be working to fit into their new lives, the music shifts to something new, something that is wholly Estacio's musical language.

The juxtaposition between these musical moments that represent either the character's Italian heritage, or the new Canadian world, can be felt throughout the opera. In our conversation, Estacio relayed to me his best example of the friction between these two elements. It comes in the second scene, when the bootleggers are sitting at the hotel, with a piano player in the background, playing an old Italian waltz, or at least Estacio's rendition of an old Italian waltz. Conceivably, the characters would have gotten an old piano roll from Italy. A conversation in Estacio's, non Italian musical language begins when Canadian Constable Lawson walks in. At this point, there exists this friction between the diegetic music of the piano, and the music that

exists as the language of the opera. Dramatically, it represents the friction between the Italian and the Canadian elements of the story.

Another way in which John Estacio and librettist John Murrel portray the immigrant experience, is through the use of both Italian and English throughout the opera. This was another important element to Estacio, as having grown up in an immigrant household, he knew the use of both languages would provide a more accurate representation of what being a new immigrant to Canada is like. When asked about it, Estacio said “That was a hard choice from the get go. I told John [Murrel], that’s what my house was like. My parents spoke Portuguese and I spoke English back to them, and we understood each other. It was something that I felt was real. If you were in an Italian house in turn of the century Blairmore, Alberta, where there were only a handful of Italians, you’re going to speak both languages. I wanted to make sure we did that to the opera.”<sup>25</sup> The use of English and Italian allows *Filumena* to not only accurately portray the immigrant experience in Canada, but also to reflect the multilingual nature of the Canadian identity.

Through both the music and the text, Estacio and Murrel have created a piece reflective of what it means to be Canadian. The opera captures scenes from the past, and the early struggles that made up the immigrant experience, struggles that are still relevant to this day. It is evocative of the multicultural and multilingual spirit of Canada, and shows some of the historic building blocks from which our Canadian identity is formed.

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<sup>25</sup> Interview, March 4th 2020

## 5. Conclusion

Through this thesis, I have asked the question, what is the essence of Canadian opera. Slowly, through researching the history of operatic composition and performance, as well as a large number of Canadian operas, I was able to get a sense of the Canadian operatic identity. This identity is fittingly as diverse as the people that make up Canada, and yet, there are still connecting threads that unify the operatic canon as a whole. The use of Canadian subject matter, and Canadian true stories is one of these unifying threads.

Since the beginning of our operatic composition history, composers have found inspiration in the lives and stories of Canadians. This tradition has carried on to the present times with composers such as John Estacio, drawing on the wealth of history Canada has to offer. The importance of Canadian opera composers choosing these stories lies in the fact, as Estacio says, if they don't, who will. Canadian composers have taken upon themselves the duty to tell our Canadian stories on the opera stage, as diverse as they are, and in doing so have created an operatic canon that is distinctly Canadian.

One of these distinctly Canadian operas is John Estacio's *Filumena*. This work is the focus of this thesis's second concern. Beyond discovering the essence of Canadian opera, I also aimed to establish *Filumena*'s role as a quintessentially Canadian opera. In the above section, I have outlined the many ways in which this opera maintains this role, such as its grand scale, and its use of true Canadian history for its subject matter. Through this opera, Estacio has captured the Canadian identity at a turbulent point in our history. The relevance of displaying not only the Canadian identity, but also the immigrant experience on a grand stage, has only grown since the opera's premiere in 2003. Estacio spoke about this growing relevance in our interview, saying

“When we remounted it in Calgary, I guess three years ago now, there were elements of the immigrant story that, in light of what was going on and is still going on politically, in North America and around the world, took on a huge new light. They were the exact same words, and the exact same music but it was fifteen, sixteen years later. I remember hearing a couple of gasps that we didn’t hear in 2003 when some of these lines were spoken. So I think the audience comes to this same piece with different eyes and a different experience.”<sup>26</sup>

The ability to tell such important and relevant stories has belonged to Canadian operatic composers throughout our history. The opera *Filumena* can be seen as a quintessential Canadian opera in many ways, but most importantly, at its heart, it embodies the essence of Canadian opera. It is an operatic portrayal of Canadian stories by Canadian composers for the Canadian people.

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<sup>26</sup> Interview, March 4th 2020

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## 7. Appendixes

### Appendix A

This appendix is a list of the Canadian operas that make up the cross section used in my thesis. The works have been ordered chronologically and then by the composers' last names. With each opera is its source(s).

Source Number	Composition Date	Composer	Title	Canadian	Non Fiction
1	1790	Quesnell, Joseph	Colas et Colinette		
2	1809	Quesnell, Joseph	Lucas et Cecile		
3	1870	Kerrison, Davenport	The Oreads		
4	1872	Lavalée, Calixa	Lou Lou		
5	1875	Mills, Fredrik	Marie of St. Brieux		
6	1879	Clapée, Arthur	Canada's Welcome: A Masque	X	
7	1879	Fuller, William H.	HMS Parliament	X	X
8	1880	Lavalée, Calixa	La Veuve (The Widow)		
9	1883	Gough, John W. B.	Bunthorne Abroad	X	
10	1883	Lavalée, Calixa	TIQ: Settled at Last		X
11	1884	Labelle, Jean Baptiste	La Conversion d'un Pécheur de la Nouvelle - France	X	

12	1884	Lucas, Clarence	Semiramis		
13	1884	Harrison, Susie Frances	Pipandor		
14	1885	Broughall, George	The 90th on Active Service	X	X
15	1886	Broughall, George	The Tricky Troubadour		
16	1886	Dixon, L.	Halifax to Saskatchewan: Our Boys in the Riel Rebellion	X	X
17	1886	Lavalée, Calixa	Le Jugement de Salomon		
18	1889	Lucas, Clarence	Puffee & Co., or, Hamlet Prince of Dry Goods	X	X
19	1889	Telgmann, Oscar	Leo the Royal Cadet	X	X

20	1895	Aldous, J. E. P.	Ptarmigan, or, A Canadian Carnival	X	
21	1896	Harriss, Charles A. E.	Torquil		
22	1902	Harvey, Roberta Geddes	Le Terre Bonne	X	
23	1911	Smith, Alphonse Lavalée	Gisele	X	
24	1912	Vézina, Joseph	Le Fetiche	X	

25	1924	Létourneau, Omer	Vive la Canadienne	X	
26	1929	Voyer, Julric	L'Intendant Bigot	X	
27	1938	O'Brien, Oscar	La Belle du Nord	X	
28	1942	Lapierre, Eugene	Le Père des Amours	X	X
29	1942	Willan, Healey	Transit Through Fire	X	
30	1943	Willan, Healey	Brébeuf	X	
31	1946	Willan, Healey	Deirdre		
32	1947	Lapierre, Eugene	Le Vagabond de la Gloire	X	X
33	1950	Morrison, Frank	Tzinquaw	X	
34	1952	Pentland, Barbara	The Lake	X	
35	1953	Jones, Trevor Morgan	The Broken Ring	X	X
36	1954-55	Blackburn, Maurice	Silent Measures	X	
37	1958	Beckwith, John	Night Blooming Cerus	X	
38	1960	Blackburn, Maurice	Pirouette	X	
39	1961	Vallerand, Jean	Le Magicien		
40	1963	Mcpeek, Ben	The Bargain		

41	1965	Beckwith, John	Shivaree	X	
42	1965	Schafer, R. Murray	Loving/Toi		
43	1967	Adaskin, Murray	Grant, Warden of the Plains	X	X
44	1967	Jones, Kelsey	Sam Slick	X	

45	1967	Major, Douglas	The Loyalists	X	X
46	1967	Pannell, Raymond	The Luck of Ginger Coffey	X	
47	1967	Somers, Harry	Louis Riel	X	X
48	1967	Turners, Robert	The Brideship	X	X
49	1968	Charpentier, Gabriel	An English Lesson	X	
50	1969	Charpentier, Gabriel	Orphée		
51	1969	Poyenter, Arthur	The Birth of our Lord		
52	1972	Dolins, Samuel	Drakkar	X	
53	1972	Wilson, Charles	The Summoning of Everyman		
54	1973	Pannell, Raymond	Exiles		
55	1973	Tibor Polgar	The Glove		
56	1973	Rea, John	The Prisoner's Play		
57	1973	Wilson,	Heloise and		

		Charles	Abelard		
58	1974	Burry, Dean	The Slaughter of the Innocents		
59	1975	Anhalt, Istvan	La Tourangelle	X	X
60	1975	Wilson, Charles	Kamourska	X	X
61	1976	McIntyre, Paul	The Little Red Hen		
62	1976	Ridout, Godfrey	The Lost Child		
63	1977	Healey, Derek	Seabird Island	X	
64	1977	Pannell, Raymond	Aberfan		

65	1977	Somers, Harry	Death of Enkidu		
66	1978	Pannell, Raymond	Souvenirs		
67	1978	Symonds, Norman	Episode at Big Quill	X	
68	1978	Wilson, Charles	Psycho Red		
69	1979	Pannell, Raymond	Refugees	X	
70	1980	Vivier, Claude	Kopernikus		
71	1981	Crawley, Clifford	Barnardo Boy	X	X
72	1982	Holman, Derek	Dr. Canon's Cure		
73	1983	Hannah, Ronald	Mademoiselle Fifi		
74	1983	Schafer, R. Murray	Ra		

75	1984	Doolittle, Quenten	Silver City	X	
76	1985	Levin, Gregory	Ghost Dance	X	
77	1986	Anhalt, Istvan	Winthrop	X	X
78	1986	Bottenburg, Wolfgang	Inook	X	
79	1987	Sullivan, Timothy	Tomorrow and Tomorrow		
80	1988	Beckwith, John	Crazy to Kill	X	
81	1988	Desilets, Richard	Zoé		
82	1988	Doolittle, Quentin	Boiler Room Suite	X	
83	1988	Hodkinson, Sydney	St. Carmen of the Main	X	
84	1988	Somers, Harry	A Midwinter Night's Dream	X	

85	1988	Somers, Harry	Serinette	X	
86	1989	Gougeon, Dennis	An Expensive Embarrassment		
87	1989	Koprowski, Peter Paul	Dulcitus: Demise of Innocence		
88	1990	Gagnon, Andre	Nelligan	X	X
89	1990	Raum, Elizabeth	Eos, The Dream of Nicholas Flood Davin	X	
90	1991	Somers, Harry	Mario and the Magician		
91	1991	Thibault, Alain	Ne blamez		

			jamais les bédouins		
92	1992	Gothan, Nic	Nigredo Hotel		
93	1993	Beckwith, John	Taptoo!	X	X
94	1993	Burry, Dean	Unto the Earth: Vignettes of a War	X	X
95	1993	Greer, John	The Snow Queen		
96	1993	Mather, Bruce	La Princesse Blanche		
97	1993	Rickard, Sylvia	Fletcher's Challenge	X	
98	1994	McIntyre, David	The Architect		
99	1995	Kulesha, Gary	Red Emma		X
100	1996	Anhalt, Istvan	Traces		X
101	1996	Crawley, Clifford	Angel Square	X	X
102	1996	Provost, Serge	Le vampire et la nymphomane		
103	1996	Rolfe, James	Beatrice Chancy	X	X
104	1997	Piché, Jean	Yo soy la desintegración		X

105	1998	Sharman, Rodney	Elsewherless	X	
106	1999	Peter, Randolph	The Golden Ass		
107	2000	Anhalt, Istvan	Millennial Mall		
108	2000	Applebaum, Louis	Erewhon		

109	2000	Chan, Ka Nin	Iron Road	X	X
110	2000	Greer, John	The Star Child		
111	2000	McIntyre, Paul	Thirteen Hands		
112	2001	Bell, Alan	Turtle Wakes	X	X
113	2001	Bucks, Sadia	Bones	X	
114	2001	Burry, Dean	The Brothers Grimm		
115	2001	Louie, Alexina	Toothpaste		
116	2001	Stokes, Tobin	The Vinedressers	X	X
117	2002	Louie, Alexina	The Scarlet Princess		
118	2002	Ryan, Jeffery	The Laurels		
119	2003	Estacio, John	Filumena	X	X
120	2003	Jackson, D.D.	Québecité	X	X
121	2003	Palmer, Juliet	Over the Japanese Sea		
122	2003	Burry, Dean	The Hobbit		

123	2004	Rolfe, James	Rosa		
124	2005	Luengen, Ramona	Naiomi's Road	X	
125	2005	Hatzis, Christos	Constantinople		
126	2005	Louie, Alexina	Burnt Toast	X	
127	2005	Sokolovic, Ana	The Midnight Court		
128	2006	Burry, Dean	The Vineland Traveller	X	
129	2006	Current, Brian	Airline Icarus		

130	2006	Estacio, John	Frobisher	X	X
131	2006	Rolfe, James	Swoon	X	
132	2007	Daniel, Omar	The Shadow		
133	2007	Davies, Victor	Transit of Venus		X
134	2007	Gilliand, Allan	Hannaraptor	X	
135	2007	Jackson, D.D	Trudeau: Long March/Shining Path	X	X
136	2007	Palmer, Juliet	Shelter		
137	2008	Hui, Melissa	Pimootewin	X	
138	2009	Rolfe, James	Ines	X	
139	2010	Estacio, John	Lillian Alling	X	X
140	2010	Dénommé-Welch , Spy	Giiwedin	X	

141	2011	Louie, Alexina	Mulroney	X	X
142	2011	MacDonald, Andrew paul	Mary's Wedding	X	X
143	2013	Ogborn, David	Opera on the Rocks		
144	2014	Weisensel, Neil	Stickboy	X	X
145	2015	Stokes, Tobin	Pauline	X	X
146	2016	Estacio, John	Ours	X	X
147	2016	Stokes, Tobin	Fallujah	X	
148	2017	Clements, Marie	Missing	X	X
149	2017	Stokes, Tobin	Rattenbury	X	X
150	2019	Burry, Dean	ShanawDithit	X	X

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## Appendix B

# An Interview with John Estacio

By Alexandria Scout Parks

March 4th, 2020

*Here inlies an unedited, transcription of my interview with John Estacio on March 4th, 2020. P (for Parks) represents myself, the interviewer speaking. E (for Estacio) represents the interviewee speaking. Beginning and closing unrelated chit chat has not been included for clarity.*

**P:** What drew you into the story of Florence Lassandro? I’ve read that this was a story that your librettist John Murrel already knew about and that he knew he wanted to make an opera of. Was this a story you already knew of?

**E:** No, I didn’t know anything about it. It was new to me. So, I didn’t know the story at all. It’s a pivotal piece of Albertan history and Canadian History. And before I met John, which was almost about twenty years ago last month, I think it was, where he told me about Filumena, I had a shopping list of what I wanted for the opera. I wanted it to be based on a true story if possible. I wanted it to be a Canadian story, a local story. I wanted it to involve immigrants if possible, because my parents, my family, are immigrants. They immigrated in the 60s. So I felt I wanted to tell some of these stories on the opera stage because we don’t have those sorts of

stories when it comes to Canadian opera. So when John was telling me this story, and I was mentally checking off in my mind all the boxes, because everything was fitting in my mind, sort of checking off the boxes, the shopping list. So it was all of that that drew me to the story. And the fact that there was an element of potential injustice towards the end of the story, because they couldn't find who exactly shot Constable Stephen Lawson. They were both found guilty and they were both executed so that seemed a little odd to me and it still does. But considering the climate and the time, the view towards immigrants, and Italians being new immigrants at the time, sorry, I may be answering some of your later questions. That Italians were sort of the new kids on the block and so they were the ones that were sort of pushed to the margins, and if something bad happened, they were the culprit. So it was that type of story that I felt was an important type of story to tell at the time.

**P:** Looking at some of the other operas you have written, it seems a bit of a theme I've noticed that they are featuring or surrounding ideas of real Canadian historical figures. And so I was wondering, is that an important thing for you tell Canadian stories or western Canadian stories. Why is that such an important thing to you?

**E:** Well, because if we don't tell our stories, who will. We can't rely on Americans to tell Canadian stories, or the Germans. You know. And that's fine, I mean, it's not to be expected. And if they wanted to tell a Canadian story, that would be fine, but it doesn't happen right. And I felt, whether its a good idea or not, for the opera world, because it is kind of suicide, because when you're writing a Canadian opera, it's sort of like one more tick against you. An American company might say, oh, that's an Canadian story, we're not interested. To which my response is, well, Carmen is set in Seville, Do you care that it's set in Seville? Who has ever said, oh we're not gonna do Carmen cause it's set in Seville, or Tosca cause its set in Rome. We should only do Canadian or American stories. But nonetheless, that prejudice is there. But I felt we need to tell our stories. There are hidden gems in our history that need to be polished and shined up and put on stage, whether it's a play or an opera or a motion picture. The opera that I'm working on right now, is also based on a Canadian historical drama, and truth, something that happened in 1946, and again, it's something that has escaped the consciousness of our modern day civilization, because they are just so many other things that we have to study. So not everyone knows these stories and the fact that these stories led to other things that we are now living with and facing today.

**P:** And would you say then, because some of these operas have been commissioned as well, Do you think that there is a growing desire to hear these Canadian stories amongst the opera listeners. Is there a growing space opening up in the repertoire for Canadian stories, or is it still a push to get these stories told

**E:** Umm, It's still a push. I think. I mean, if you want to get in to the show business of the art, opera companies tend to prefer, not all of them, but most of them, depends who's at the helm, they tend to prefer stories that people are already familiar with, whether it's a book, a successful

play, a motion picture. And there's nothing wrong with that. There's precedence throughout, I mentioned Tosca. Tosca was based on a very successful play that Puccini saw and he said, I want to turn this into an opera. And in fact many of his operas were plays or books, so there's nothing wrong with that. So opera companies prefer that. It's easier to market. It's easier to sell. It's easier to convince an audience to come in, saying hey, there's one less scary thing. This is a book that you all know. Come and see the opera. So when you're not doing that, when you're presenting an original piece, which all of my operas so far have been, they haven't been based on a previous piece or literature or something. It sort of makes things a little bit more daunting for an opera company to say alright, I'll do your piece. So you really have to rest on the laurels of the quality of the music and the quality of the story and hope that that convinces the gatekeepers of an opera company to open it up and say alright, come on in and we'll do your story, and we'll figure out how to get an audience

**P:** Was there something you think in the story of Filumena that made it translate so easily into an opera, that made it break through that barrier?

**E:** Well, I mean, I think that the story of a potentially innocent woman whose been wronged is, I mean there are lots of stories in the opera world right? It's sort of like there's like three stories in the opera world and that's number one. So I think that that was certainly high on the list of things that might attract people to the piece. Plus, it's an immigrant story. I think that has a lot of cache. And when we remounted it in Calgary, I guess three years ago now, there were elements of the immigrant story that in light of what was going on and is still going on politically, in North America and around the world, it took on a huge new light. They were the exact same words, and the exact same music but it was fifteen, sixteen year later. I remember hearing a couple of gasps that we didn't hear in 2003 when some of these lines were spoken. So I think the audience comes to this same piece with different eyes and a different experience

**P:** It has a different relevance

**E:** Exactly.

**P:** I'm gonna go a little bit more over into the specifics of the opera now. I'm going to be writing about the role of mixed heritage in the opera, and mixed heritage being the Italian and the Canadian influences in it. So I'm going to write, hopefully, a bit about that in the narrative and Filumena's idea of identity and what not with the Italian side of her, and her new Canadian side. But I thought I wanted to talk to you about, were there specific things that you wanted to do musically to represent these specific forces in the opera, the Italian and the Canadian? Were there moments that you wanted to make sound more distinctly Italian or Canadian, and in what way did you choose to represent these forces, what techniques, quotation, implanting. Or of course, I could be grasping at straws, and you decided to leave the issues of the mixed heritage to the narrative side of the piece.

**E:** Well, of course, yes, there's a bit of that to answer that last part of that question. There is a little bit that, but I also hedged my bets. I don't know if you've seen it.

**P:** Yes, yes I have.

**E:** You saw it in Calgary?

**P:** Yes I saw it in Calgary.

**E:** So ya, there are elements of the Italian heritage and that was by choice. The opening wedding scene is a tarentelle which is a fun Italian dance. Stefano's big aria that he sings, those were actually words from an old Italian poem that John Murrell dug up. There are instruments in the orchestra, there's the accordion, there's mandolin that sort of pop up and break through every now and then when people are talking about the old world and their Italian culture. Usually associated with Picariello and with Charlie. But then, there is also this element of we are in a new country, and we need to learn English. And at that point, the music sort of rids itself of any of those Italian flavours, and becomes a sort of contemporary language that is based on tonality and is my own language. But there is that friction and I guess one of the best examples is, I don't know if you have the score, or are just going from memory, but there is a scene, the 2nd scene of the opera, where they're in the hotel and a police constable walks in and the player piano starts up. And the player is an Italian waltz that I invented, but it was meant to have that characteristic. That folkish old world sound to it. Conceivably they got some sort of piano roll from Italy, I don't know how they would have done that! But anyways, that's playing meanwhile, you have a Canadian law enforcement agent, inside the house, and so there was friction there between an Italian Waltz and between the sort of diegetic music (the piano) and then, the other music, the story telling, music that is the language of the opera.

**P:** So that was also something I was thinking of, how the *Menza Na Strada*, Steve's aria was one that specifically stuck out of me as Italian, and I was wondering, because those moments of Italian influence are now obvious, was there something that, you say it's your musical language, would you say there is something you would define as specifically Canadian within that musical language, or is it more generally contemporary?

**E:** Ya, I wouldn't, I don't know. This is not going to help your thesis, you might have to go elsewhere, you know. I know we're you getting it. But when I write music, I don't necessarily think that this is a Canadian voice, or that this is a Canadian language. I leave that for musical theorists to discuss. But, you know, for me, it's just that this is my language. I think that in today's world there's a lot of different musical languages being spoken in Canada. There's different composers that gravitate to different styles and to different approaches to music. Would somebody in Oslo who had never heard of me and didn't know my name, if they picked up the opera and listened to it, would they say, oh this is a Canadian opera? I don't know, they might say it's a North American opera. I think it has some more of that North American language because the Brits and the Europeans don't write in the same way.

**P:** And, I suppose that that's something almost quintessentially Canadian the diversity of what is exactly Canadian. It makes it so hard to pinpoint something that defines us. But sort of in that same vein, Where do you draw your musical language from, in terms of inspiration, other composers. What defines your musical style? Which is a much more broad question.

**E:** Ya, that's a composerly question. I have my favorite composers that I am always drawn to, Debussy, Ravel, Mahler. In terms of opera, Puccini, Verdi, all the guys, Bizet. All the big composers of opera that I've been attracted to and interested in. Wagner, not so much, but a little bit of Wagner. These are all sort of influences on my languages. And there are, of course, modern day influences too, John Adams, John Colliano, whose music I have always admired. As well as other Canadian who I've bumped into, who I've worked with, or who have taught me. Those are all sort of influences. And then I just sort of have started to develop my own syntax, my own language, whether it's good or bad, I don't know, but it's a language I've sort of been working on and developing on and it continues to evolve. And a lot of it, with opera anyways, for me, is dictated by the story, and the characters, by the feel of the piece. But, I often wonder if a composer like Seriafo, if she got a copy of the libretto, what her opera would sound like. It would sound like her language, but with those characters. All of my operas have been set in North America and I feel like I need to be true to that voice and to that character as I see it. Another composer might feel differently and have a different approach, but I can only do me.

**P:** To go back to more specifics in the opera. This is an interesting piece, because the libretto in part with the story is in English and Italian. And I was wondering if there were any challenges working with that as the composer, working with switching between the languages, or if you found more opportunities and more gems arising from that?

**E:** There were a few little tricks that I had to just sort of appreciate. I'm not an Italian speaker. I speak Portuguese, but the stress of the syllables was sometimes different than I thought. I was sometimes approaching the Italian with a North American immigrant Portuguese boy approach. And John Murrell who spoke Italian and new Italian very well, would often correct me and say you've emphasized the wrong syllable on this. And then, when you get into the *Menza Na Strada*, which has more of a dialect to it, a southern dialect. That was totally wrong. It was even wrong for some Italian speakers. The syllables were falling on different vowels. So I had to be conscious of that so it makes sense, so you're not putting the wrong emphasis on the wrong syllable which can easily happen. So that was my paramount goal. With the slipping into Italian, it's kind of fun, because you know, there's a lot of vowels. There's a reason why Italian opera is so gorgeous. There's vowels everywhere! I mean, you've got German and English, where you get a vowel, and it's a parade, you know when you do get a vowel. So it was fun to get to set the Italian from that point of view as well. I knew it was going to sound good.

**P:** Was that something you knew you wanted to do from the start then when you started working on the opera, to have both English and Italian in it?

**E:** Yes, that was a hard choice from the get go. Because, I told John, that's what my house was like. My parents spoke Portuguese and I spoke English back to them, and we understood each other. And as they got older, they learned English much better, their vocabulary was fantastic towards the end of their lives. My vocabulary never really improved ! But it was something that I felt was real. If you were in an Italian house in turn of the century Blairmore Alberta, where there were only a handful of Italians, you're going to speak both languages. So I wanted to make sure we did that to the opera.

**P:** To be authentic to the immigrant experience I suppose.

**E:** Exactly