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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

THEATRICAL COMMUNICATION IN HARRY SOMERS' OPERA LOUIS RIEL

BY

ANDREW M. ZINCK

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF MUSIC IN MUSICOLOGY.

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Harry Somers
158 Douglas Drive
Toronto, Ontario M4W 2B7
Mon., Sept. 3 /90

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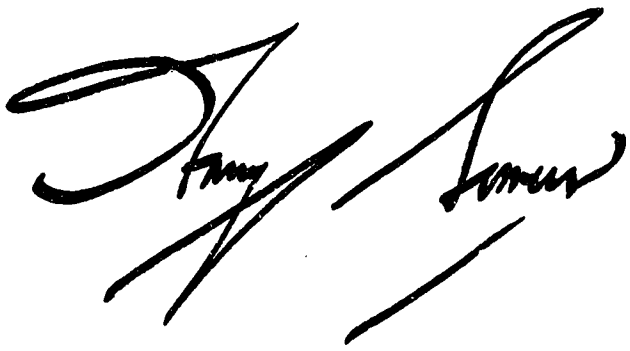

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Harry Somers' opera Louis Riel, both the written work and various performance aspects, as manifested in the CBC television production of the opera (produced in 1969). An initial analysis of the opera, based on the score and libretto, demonstrates how the various musical structures reinforce the drama of Louis Riel. As a supplement to this analysis, other aspects are pointed out that are not directly revealed by the score or libretto, but are brought to the foreground through the scenic enactment of the written work.

A second, more detailed analysis draws upon precepts of dramatic theory and demonstrates that supplemental information exists in a performance text. The CBC television production of Louis Riel is analyzed as a theatrical communication which, through the interaction of various message systems, generates signs that realize inherent meanings in the score and libretto, some of which are not fully expressible in words. Examination of three key scenes of the televised opera focuses on the creation of one particular sign, that which indicates faith and spirituality. Following the analysis, the relation of the faith-spirituality sign to the overall meaning of the opera is considered.

The two analyses demonstrate that the written and performed opera considered together can provide a more complete understanding of Louis Riel than is possible with an approach restricted to the score and libretto by facilitating an awareness of how the intrinsic meanings of the music and poetry (some of which are not explicitly manifested in written form) are revealed.

Because television adds an extra dimension to the analysis and criticism of opera, some of the aesthetic consequences of moving opera from the stage to the screen are considered. Changes made to Louis Riel for its transition to television are also discussed.

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CHAPTER ONE

Aim of the Paper

One of the most common ways musicians approach musical drama is to look at the score and libretto to see how specific aspects of the drama are reflected in the music and the poetry. This approach is probably best exemplified by Joseph Kerman's Opera as Drama. Indeed, Kerman has demonstrated the importance of music's direct involvement in the drama of opera. The approach focuses on the stable, written portion of opera. The score and libretto provide an objective constant that can be analyzed and compared with the scores and libretti of other operas. Specific productions are not considered in the formation of critical or aesthetic judgements because of their transient nature.

It is certainly true that performances of a work are linked to and constrained by the written text; many essential aspects of a performance are dictated by the score and libretto. It is also the case, however, that a particular performance brings to the fore particular meanings that are inherent in the work but perhaps only weakly expressed in words. Furthermore, another realization may emphasize or bring out other aspects. The purpose of this paper is to argue that, because of the

additional information found in the translation of the written work into a physical presentation, a more comprehensive understanding of the work can be achieved by combining a traditional analysis of the written work with the study of stage realizations.

This paper examines Harry Somers' opera Louis Riel, both the written work and various performance aspects, as manifested in the CBC television production of the opera (produced in 1969). The first chapter places the work in an historical context by providing a brief history of the attitudes toward opera from its birth in the late sixteenth century to the twentieth century. Limitations of the existing analyses of Louis Riel are discussed and a more comprehensive approach to the work is presented, drawing upon precepts of dramatic theory, specifically a theory of theatrical communication.

The second chapter provides an initial analysis of Louis Riel as an example of the traditional approach that is found in many discussions on operas. It shows how the various musical structures found in the written score support and reinforce the drama of Louis Riel. Description of additional information that is not directly revealed by the score or libretto, but is brought to the foreground through the scenic enactment of the written work, supplements the analysis.

The third chapter contains a more detailed analysis, focusing first on how the written portion of Louis Riel forms the basis of a theatrical sign representing faith and spirituality--an important aspect of the opera. This sign is realized through its presentation on the stage. While the CBC television production of Louis Riel provides the basis for reference, descriptions of the original performance in 1967 and the 1975 revival in Washington are also used. Examination of three key scenes of the televised opera reveals the sign's supporting structure, a network of smaller signs created through the interaction of the fixed portion of the work (the music and text) with the more variable aspects (stage action, sets, costumes, lighting, and other theatrical message systems). The generated signs reveal meanings inherent in the written work, some verbally explicit and others inexpressible through words alone. Following the analysis, the relation of the faith-spirituality sign to the overall meaning of the opera is considered.

Because television adds an extra dimension to the analysis and criticism of opera, some of the aesthetic consequences of moving opera from the stage to the screen are discussed in chapter four, along with changes made to Louis Riel for its transition to television.

Introduction: A brief history of attitudes toward opera

Although many varieties of opera have existed in the past four centuries, two fundamental types can be distinguished: that in which music is the most important component, and that in which the music and the other elements are more or less equal. Only in the very earliest operas was music definitely subordinate to the other features, but it was soon found that the appeal of these operas was limited and that a fuller participation of music was essential.[1]

The Florentine Camerata, an organization of scholars, poets, and musicians, led by Count Giovanni Bardi di Vernio in Florence, is often credited with having developed the idea of opera, although the Camerata was only one of a number of similar academies which discussed aspects of drama, music, and aesthetics.[2] One of the main interests of the Camerata was the relationship of music to poetry. Its members wanted to reform the polyphonic music of the day by removing its complexity and obscurity, allowing a more direct communication through the music. In essence, the Camerata wanted music that would underline

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[1] Donald J. Grout, with Hermine Weigel Williams, A Short History of Opera, third edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988),7.

[2]See Ruth Katz, Divining the Powers of Music: Aesthetic Theory and the Origins of Opera, Aesthetics in Music No.3 (New York: Pendragon Press, 1985),49.

the meaning of the text, rather than simply please the ear. They believed that the best way to accomplish that was to revive what they understood to be the ancient Greek monodic practice of setting words to music with (in Giulio Caccini's words) "such power to move the affect of the soul."[3] Although the solo aria and madrigal occupied the greater part of the Camerata's attention, their experiments also led to a variety of attempts to set dramatic texts to music in what they understood to be the manner of the Greeks.[4]

In its "war against counterpoint," the Camerata appealed for authority to the ancient Greeks. Although actual ancient Greek music was unknown to them, they were convinced of one basic idea, namely that "the secret of Greek music lay in the perfect union of words and melody, a union to be achieved by making the former dominate over the latter."[5]

From this, three further principles followed. First, the text must be understood. To this end only a solo voice

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[3]Giulio Caccini, Le nuove musiche, edited by H. Wiley Hitchcock, Recent Researches in the Music of the Baroque Era (Madison, Wisconsin: A-R Editions, 1970), 9:45. Hitchcock points out that in this instance "soul" (anima) is meant to indicate the intellectual faculties of the mind.

[4]Katz, Divining the Powers of Music,57.

[5]Grout, A Short History of Opera,41.

with the simplest possible accompaniment was deemed acceptable. This reflected the Camerata's desire to revive what was felt to be the authentic Greek style of presentation.

Second, the words must be sung with a "natural" declamation as in speech. Jacopo Peri's foreword to his L'Euridice (first performed in 1600) included the following:

> I judged that the ancient Greeks and Romans (who, in the opinion of many, sang their tragedies throughout in representing them upon the stage) had used a harmony surpassing that of ordinary speech but falling so far below the melody of song as to take an intermediate form.... For this reason, discarding every other manner of singing hitherto heard, I devoted myself wholly to seeking out the kind of imitation necessary for these poems. And I considered that the kind of speech that the ancients assigned to singing...could in part be hastened and made to take an intermediate course, lying between the slow and suspended movements of song and the swift rapid movements of speech...[6]

The third principle was the importance of interpreting the feeling of the whole text rather than just depicting individual graphic details. This was evidently directed against the abuses of "madrigalisms," or word-painting. The members of the Camerata believed

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[6]Jacopo Peri, Forward to L'Euridice, in Oliver Strunk, Source Readings in Music History (New York: W.W. Norton, 1950),374.

that the melody should imitate and intensify the intonations and accents proper to the emotional state of the person speaking. Galilei wrote in his Dialogo della musica antica e della moderna (1581):

> When the ancient musician sang any poem whatever, he first considered very diligently the character of the person speaking: his age, his sex, with whom he was dealing, and the effect he sought to produce by this mean[s].[7]

The resulting dramatic recitative, stile rappresentativo, successfully embodied the monodic ideal but also created its own problems. In the operas of Peri and Caccini, the music faithfully adhered to the text at every point. Occasionally a solo was given musical form by using the same bass line for two or more strophes and by adding choral ritornellos, but the prevailing impression was that of rhapsodic freedom. As soon as the novelty of stile rappresentativo wore off, its limitations were discovered. While melody had been freed from a polyphonic web, composers could no longer rely on the use of inner voices and contrasting textures to manipulate dramatic tension. The severe reduction of resources resulted in weak characterizations, a limited range of emotions, a lack of clear, consistent musical style and form, and a sense of

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[7]Vincenzo Galilei, Dialogo della musica antica e della moderna, in Oliver Strunk, Source Readings in Music History, 319.

monotony caused by the solo style. One contemporary theorist, G.B. Doni, suggested in his Compendio del trattato de' generi de' modi della musica (1635) that the plentiful use of arias and choruses would relieve the tedium of the recitative. He even argued that the ideal dramatic work was one in which music alternated with spoken dialogue.[8]

The freeing of the solo voice by the monodic style planted the seeds of a more ornate singing style. Caccini, in his collection of monodic songs, Le nuove musiche (1602)[9], did not reject florid melody completely. He allowed for melismas as long as they were kept in their "proper" place.[10]

The search for greater expressiveness and contrast spurred composers (especially the Venetians) in a new

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[8]Grout, A Short History of Opera,55-56. Substantial portions of Doni's Compendio del trattato (which was never published) are quoted in Angelo Solerti, ed., Le origini del melodramma: Testimonianze dei contemporanei (Turin: Bocca, 1903).

[9]The title page reads 1601, and the dedication is dated 1 February 1601. However, because the printing was delayed until June--Caccini incuded a note to that effect--and because the Florentine Calender (in use at that time) began on 25 March, the correct date is actually 1602. See H. Wiley Hitchcock's footnote in Caccini, Le nuove musiche,43; also see the discussion in Robert Donington, The Rise of Opera (London: Faber and Faber, 1981),327.

[10]See Giulio Caccini, Le nuove musiche, in Oliver Strunk, Source Readings in Music History,377-92.

direction, away from the ideals of the Camerata. They began to write more graceful melodies that expressed the general spirit of the text rather than its details. They also tried to provide a unified sense of musical form and style by using more arias and choruses, which eventually replaced recitative as the main expressive mode. As a result, the invention of the Florentines was reduced to a "mere thread connecting the episodes of a grand production."[11] In trying to recreate something old, the Camerata actually created something new, which in turn became capable of development.

> They wanted music not simply to "delight the ears," and as a result, the idea of beautiful singing emerged. They wanted to revive classic forms of "musical rhetoric," and opera was the result. They wanted to restore the "powers of music" by disciplining music, and music took centre-stage in the lyric theatre instead.[12]

Musical form acquired more importance and, throughout the latter half of the seventeenth century, the two styles of aria and recitative became more sharply differentiated while composers concentrated musical interest increasingly on the aria. As opera seria matured, variety of form gave way to the almost absolute dominance of the da capo aria, which itself entailed the primacy of the virtuoso

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[11]Katz, Divining the Powers of Music,133.

[12]Ibid.,184.

vocalist. This led to the often-discussed abuses by the eighteenth-century opera singers, which were condemned in Benedetto Marcello's Il teatro alla moda (1720)[13] in which a lively account of eighteenth-century opera is presented in the form of ironic advice to everyone connected with opera. He advises that the composer "should speed up or slow down the tempo of the arias according to every whim of the singer and he should swallow all their impertinences, remembering that his own honor, esteem, and future are at their mercy."[14] He also advises the singer:

> When he gets around to singing his aria he should think of one thing only, and that is to take all the time he wants for the cadenza, filling it with passage work and with fashionable ornaments as he sees fit. The conductor, during all this, will rest his hands by taking them off the keyboard; he will also decide to take some snuff and wait patiently until the singer has decided to come to an end. Before embarking on the final trill the singer should take several deep breaths. He should then execute the trill fortissimo from the very beginning rather than employing the messa di voce, and he should seek out for this trill the highest note he can reach.[15]

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[13]A complete translation by R.G. Pauly can be found in Musical Quarterly 34 (1948):371-403 and 35 (1949):85-105. Portions are published in Strunk, Source Readings in Music History, 518-31. See also R.G. Pauly, "Benedetto Marcello's Satire on Early 18th Century Opera," Musical Quarterly 34 (1948):222-44.

[14]Marcello, Il teatro alla moda, The Musical Quarterly 34:384.

[15]Ibid.,390.

The dedication to Gluck's Alceste (1769) provides similar (although less satirical) complaints almost fifty years later:

> When I undertook to write the music for Alceste, I resolved to divest it entirely of all those abuses, introduced into it either by the mistaken vanity of singers or by the too great complaisance of composers, which have so long disfigured Italian opera and made of the most splendid and most beautiful spectacles the most ridiculous and wearisome. I have striven to restrict music to its true office of serving poetry by means of expression and by following the situations of the story, without interrupting the action or stifling it with a useless superfluity of ornaments; and I believed that it should do this in the same way as telling colors affect a correct and well-ordered drawing; by a well-assorted contrast of light and shade, which serves to animate the figures without altering their contours. Thus I did not wish to arrest an actor in the greatest heat of dialogue in order to wait for a tiresome ritornello, nor to hold him up in the middle of a word on a vowel favorable to his voice, nor to make display of the agility of his fine voice in some long-drawn passage, nor to wait while the orchestra gives him time to recover his breath for a cadenza.[16]

In the nineteenth century, Wagner attempted his own reform of the "undramatic" elements in opera with his principle of the Gesamtkunstwerk, the idea that every aspect of a work must contribute directly to the dramatic

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[16]C.W. von Gluck, Dedication to Alceste, in Oliver Strunk, Source Readings in Music History, 673-74. Although signed by Gluck, the dedication was in fact written by Calzibigi, his librettist. See Alfred Einstein, Gluck, translated from the German by Eric Blom (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1964), 98.

purpose in a synthesis of the arts. The main thesis of Opera and Drama (1851) was that music was properly a "medium of expression" and drama the "purpose of expression."[17] This does not mean, though, that the music must be subordinate to the text; both are functions of the drama, as are the other arts (dance, architecture, painting). By drama, Wagner meant primarily the stage action, "the drama that moves before our very eyes, the visible counterpart of Music, where word and speech belong no longer to the poet's thought, but solely to the action."[18]

Wagner considered a drama to be fulfilled in the "realization" on the stage of the poetic intention found in the heart of a work. In his 1872 essay entitled "On Actors and Singers," he wrote:

> Taken strictly, the artistic share in theatrical representations must simply be ascribed to the performers, whereas the author of the piece has no more to do with the "art" itself than insofar as he planned his poem with a thorough calculation of the effect it is to produce when acted.[19]

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[17]Richard Wagner, Opera and Drama, translated from the German by Edward Evans Sr. (London: William Reeves, [n.d.]),1:27.

[18]Idem, "Beethoven," in W.A. Ellis, ed., Richard Wagner's Prose Works (New York: Broude Brothers, 1966),5:112.

[19]Idem, "On Actors and Singers," in W.A. Ellis, ed., Richard Wagner's Prose Works,5:160.

In other words, the combined written text of the words and music does not amount to a self-sufficient, complete creation; only in its realization on the stage is a musical drama complete. The history of a work's productions, then, is actually the continuing history of the work itself, in various transformations.[20]

For Wagner, while the external action of the drama existed in the words and gestures on the stage, the inner action lay in the music. This led to his placing of the orchestra at the centre of his plan. His Leitmotiv treatment allowed musical motives to go beyond simple labels to become associated with recurring ideas in the drama; as the ideas changed through the course of the drama, so too did the associated motives, thus connecting the music with the drama.[21] And because the inner action (unlike the outer action) was continuous, so too was Wagner's music.[22]

Paradoxically, while professing that the drama was the ultimate goal, Wagner's insistence on the supremacy of music's expressive power often led to an apparent reversal

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[20]Carl Dahlhaus, Richard Wagner's Music Dramas, translated from the German by Mary Whitall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979),157.

[21]Grout, A Short History of Opera,475-76.

[22]Ibid.,472.

of roles, with music seeming to be the actual focus, dictating the character of the drama.

In 1898, Adolphe Appia published La Musique et la Mise en Scène, which addressed the problems of scenic design in music dramas. Appia felt that understanding how the text and music combined would provide clues to their scenic interpretation. Appia illustrated the practicality of his theories by providing detailed descriptions of a possible staging for Tristan und Isolde and the Ring cycle, complete with sketches of the stage settings and lighting effects. Appia demonstrated an awareness and understanding of the important role scenic design plays in the expression of drama, in both spoken theatre and opera,[23] and although his writings were not widely read during his lifetime, his aesthetic theories eventually became the basis for much of modern stage design.[24]

In the twentieth century, the relationship between music and the other arts in opera can be often be

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[23]Lee Simonson, "The Ideas of Adolphe Appia," in Eric Bentley, ed., The Theory of the Modern Stage (Reading, England: Cox and Wyman, 1968),30. Unfortunately, this understanding seems to have taken a long time to enter mainstream thought. However, Stanley Sadie, ed., History of Opera (London: Macmillan, 1989) provides an historical view of stage design (with numerous illustrations and photographs) along with its traditional discussions of the music and texts. In this unique work, an attempt is made to convey something of the changing nature of the operatic experience over its four-hundred year history.

[24]Ibid.,28.

described as "separate but equal."[25] While Wagner's influence is still felt, his belief in the necessity of a synthesis of the arts is by no means universally accepted. Wagner assumed that the intensity of a work's dramatic effect is directly related to the number of perceptions that flood the senses and mind of the spectator at any given moment. A parallelism in the action, the music, the text, and the other components unite in a stronger impact.[26] However, in the 1930's, this was disproved when Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill successfully used the opposite approach. They posed the idea of a musical theatre in which text, music, "gestics," and scenery mutually undercut and "alienate" each other, thus making what is ordinary appear very striking.[27]

The twentieth century has also seen the steady rise of the opera director as someone who exercises overall control of the dramatic aspects of an opera performance. This is partially because of the diverse experiments of the current era, but can be traced back to the symbolic

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[25]See Ulrich Weisstein, ed., The Essence of Opera (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1964).

[26]Jindřich Honzl, "Dynamics of the Sign in the Theatre," in Ladislaw Matejka and Irwin Titunik, eds. Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1976),88.

[27]Carl Dahlhaus, Esthetics of Music, translated by William W. Austin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982),68.

richness of Wagner's music dramas and their susceptibility to a wide range of interpretations. Before Wagner and the Gesamtkunstwerk, it had generally been assumed that an opera needed no unified interpretation--that is, it could be left mostly to the singers, perhaps with a little advice from an impresario, a stage manager, or a conductor. There was no great need for an overall vision of a director. However, in the aftermath of Wagner, the committed director often attempts to look below the surface of a work, "to consider something more than what the composer and librettist seem to be saying."[28]

> [The director] may try to discern sub- or unconscious elements in the music or the text, or in an earlier historical or literary source for the work, and use them as a basis for his decisions about the action or the characterization. He may aim to see the opera in terms of the psychology, as he understands it, of one or more of its characters. He may move its action from the period in which it was originally set, usually to a later period (often to the time when its music was composed, or to the present, or to the time of some particularly suggestive social or political situation), so as to lend new meanings to it. He may introduce deliberate clashes of style--a Brechtian "alienation" device--to emphasize some aspect of the work or to identify a character with a current archetype...[29]

As contemporary operas explore novel instrumental and vocal techniques, utilize a variety of musical languages

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[28]Sadie, ed., History of Opera,261.

[29]Ibid.,261-62.

and dramatic approaches, and add new elements (such as film) to the genre, the relationships among the various elements of opera are continually redefined.

Harry Somers' Louis Riel

Redefinition of the relationships among the components of opera is evident in Harry Somers' opera Louis Riel. Somers combines traditional and non-traditional elements in the work. Diverse musical styles, a multilingual libretto, screen projections, electronic and taped sounds, and speakers placed around the theatre are some of the aspects he integrates within a traditional operatic framework.

Commissioned by Floyd Chalmers for Canada's centennial celebrations in 1967, the opera deals with the fight of the Métis leader, Louis Riel, against the expansion of Canada (see Appendix I for historical background). The story covers a period from 1869, when Riel established his provisional government at Fort Garry, to his execution in 1885. Although the main character can certainly be seen as a very romantic figure, Somers deliberately avoids the nineteenth-century romantic style. Instead he employs a diverse set of styles, ranging from diatonic folk material to lean, atonal writing. This

diversity extends to the use of many levels of vocal declamation (from regular speech to fully sung line) and a multilingual text.

Many non-traditional elements are used in Louis Riel. In two places, the orchestra is supplemented by electronic sounds and taped voices. Screen projections also form an important part of the opera, providing historical and plot details as well as depicting a major battle. Although the singing is essentially continuous, the orchestral accompaniment is not; the most important aria-soliloquies are mostly unaccompanied.

As one of the most significant operatic achievements in Canada, Louis Riel has enjoyed two revivals (1968 and 1975) as well as a television presentation. However, little has been done to analyze the work in detail. Brian Cherney's biography of Somers[30] includes a chapter on Louis Riel which concentrates on describing the various musical styles used in the work and some of the dramatic aspects reflected in the score. Cherney also includes in an appendix a plot synopsis that indicates the general musical characteristics of each scene. However, he readily admits that his analysis is by no means a detailed account

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[30]Brian Cherney, Harry Somers (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975).

of the musical and dramatic structure of Somers' opera.[31] Francis Smith's "An Analysis of Selected Works by Harry Somers"[32] briefly discusses Somers' vocal and orchestral styles and his use of serialism, but her purpose is simply to place Louis Riel in the larger context of the development of Somers' compositional techniques. Lillian Buckler's "The Use of Folk Music in Harry Somers' Opera Louis Riel"[33] does provide a thorough examination of how Somers integrates many sources of folk material into the drama, but does not consider other aspects. All of these analyses are text-based and as such do not deal with performance aspects. An extensive analysis that encompasses the entire work, considering actual (or even possible) realizations on the stage, is lacking; however, it is precisely this kind of comprehensive approach that may provide extra insight into Louis Riel and which is attempted in the present study. The details of the methodology to be used are explained after the traditional perspective of opera and the consequences of theatrical communication theories have been considered.

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[31]Ibid.,131.

[32]Francis Smith, "An Analysis of Selected Works by Harry Somers," unpublished M.Mus Thesis (University of Western Ontario, 1973).

[33]Lillian Buckler, "The Use of Folk Music in Harry Somers' Opera Louis Riel," unpublished M.Mus. thesis (University of Alberta, 1984).

The traditional perspective on opera and new developments in theatre research

One of the most influential recent works in the study of opera has been Joseph Kerman's Opera as Drama,[34] which follows the Wagnerian tradition of viewing music as a means of expression towards the dramatic goal.[35] His work exemplifies the traditional musician's approach to opera today, examining the dynamic relationship of music and drama through the score and libretto. These two elements are treated as the fundamental constant of an operatic work, and those aspects that are more fluid, such as those that are encountered in performance, are not dealt with. However, the field of operatic criticism has now been supplemented by the developments in theatre research, notably the study of theatrical communication, which has attempted to explain exactly how meaning is generated when the written work is realized on the stage and what the

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[34]Joseph Kerman, Opera as Drama, second edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

[35]Note also Peter Kivy's Osmin's Rage: Philosophical Thoughts on Opera, Drama and Text (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988). Kivy provides a different view of the relationship between music and drama in opera by arguing that drama can be seen as a means of expression that contributes to a musical aim (especially in Handelian opera seria). Both Kivy and Kerman base their aesthetic judgements of various works on the written text alone. However, it should be noted that Kivy also discusses the relationship of the psychology of emotions and musical structure.

nature of the relationship is between the written and performed work.

Joseph Kerman: Opera as Drama

Joseph Kerman's Opera as Drama has strongly influenced operatic criticism since its publication in 1956. His approach centres on the view that opera is properly a form of drama in which "music is the essential artistic medium..., the medium that bears the ultimate responsibility for articulating drama."[36] The argument he so forcefully reiterates throughout his book and develops in his analyses is that in opera the dramatist is the composer.

> What counts is not narrative, situation, symbol, metaphor, and so on, as set forth in the libretto, but the way all that is interpreted by a master mind. That mind writes the music.... A work of art in which music fails to exert the central articulating function should be called by some name other than opera.[37]

In his definition of drama, Kerman emphasizes that it involves more than just presenting action; it must also reveal how the characters respond both outwardly and inwardly to the action.[38] To explain how this is

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[36]Kerman, Opera as Drama,214.

[37]Ibid.,xiii.

[38]Ibid.,xiv;212.

achieved, Kerman compares opera to Shakespeare's plays. In both, drama is articulated mainly by an "imaginative medium." In poetic drama that medium is poetry; in opera it is music. In a spoken drama, poetry supplies certain meanings to the drama that cannot be presented in any other way. The physical and psychological relationships of characters, their emotions and their responses to actions and events are defined primarily by the specific properties of the poetic verse. The dramatic form is also articulated by the poetry in conjunction with the plot structure. In opera, a similar responsibility is placed on music.[39]

Kerman shows a distinct preference for the operas of Verdi and Mozart, most notably Otello, The Marriage of Figaro, and The Magic Flute. Certain operas by Gluck, Berg, Wagner, Debussy, and Britten are also deemed to have some "special incandescence."[40] In determining which operas are "better" than others, Kerman distinguishes between flaw and falsity in art. In his analyses, he discusses "dramatic faults" which, although they represent a failure of one kind, do not (in Kerman's view) detract significantly from their successes, both technical and emotional. Falsity, on the other hand, is equated with

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[39]Ibid.,6;9.

[40]Ibid.,140.

sentimentalism, theatrical stunts, and musical insensitivity to the action. The worst offenders in this area are (according to Kerman) Puccini and Strauss.

> In the deepest sense the operas of Strauss and Puccini are undramatic, for their imaginative realm is a realm of emotional cant. They are unable to match any action, however promising, with anything but the empty form of drama. And the form is always there. Alarmingly precise, alarmingly false.[41]

In contrast to Puccini's operas, Kerman praises Debussy's Pelléas et Mélisande for succeeding even with what he feels is essentially undramatic material: Fate and the absurdity of action. Also, in contradiction to the principles espoused by Kerman, the primary dramatic articulation in Debussy's opera is literary rather than musical. In spite of these problems, the opera is a strong work of art because Debussy's dramatic method matches Maeterlinck's; both rely on impressionism, and by using his greatest strength, mood painting, Debussy preserves and even deepens Maeterlinck's guiding dramatic conception.[42]

Wozzeck is also an opera that Kerman considers to have great value despite what he sees as its dramatic faults. In Wozzeck, Berg dissociates speech so far from

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[41]Ibid.,213.

[42]Ibid.,146.

the orchestral background that he courts the danger of letting the music act only as a comment on the action instead of forming an integral part of the action. "The orchestra is projected out into the audience instead of up onto the stage."[43] Wozzeck deals with paranoia, a subject Kerman feels is as problematic as that of Pelléas. He argues that Wozzeck is a dramatic "nonentity" with no will. However, he concedes that Berg successfully provides an original kind of "musical action," consisting of a large, recurring rhythm from tension to relaxation that is felt between many of the scenes and the orchestral interludes that follow them. The force of this rhythm intensifies, reaching a climax at the end of the opera. This parallels the series of horrors experienced on stage that build up to a final release of tension in Wozzeck's death. On the large scale, then, music effectively fortifies and deepens the dramatic effect of the opera.[44]

In the first edition of Opera as Drama, Kerman made no attempt at a systematic presentation of music's role in operatic dramaturgy, relying instead on examinations of how music works dramatically in particular situations. However, in an epilogue to the second edition, entitled "On Operatic Criticism," he outlines a general

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[43]Ibid.,182.

[44]Ibid.,187.

methodology. He discusses three principal means by which music can contribute to drama: character; action; and, mood.[45] The first is probably the most frequently discussed. From "cardboard" characters outlined by the libretto's words and plot, music can create the illusion of "real people" by providing each with a private, distinct emotional life. An excellent example of this is found in Benjamin Britten's Peter Grimes. With a series of increasingly articulate musical numbers throughout the opera, Britten gradually constructs a picture of Grimes' inner life, one that sharply contrasts with his external appearance. When Grimes finally loses his mind, "his song dissolves into a random, unformed mélange of motivic reminiscence--and then, with a devastating effect, into silence. Music stops completely as he is led into the boat and rows silently out to sea."[46]

In addition to this positive characterization, a negative possibility also exists. Music can suggest subtle ambiguities in a character that may be central to the dramatic purpose. However, poorly handled, music can also make a character unbelievable. Kerman cites Wagner's treatment of Eva in Die Meistersinger as an example of misused musical characterization. In the first two acts,

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[45]See Ibid.,215-226.

[46]Ibid.,216.

Eva is depicted consistently as a warm, cheery, charming coquette. However, in Act III, this is forgotten as Eva offers herself to Sachs "in a torrent of Wagner's superheated symphonic fustian."[47]

The second means available is music's ability to qualify individual actions, both external and internal (psychological). In the second-act finale of Mozart's The Marriage of Figaro, Figaro is confronted with Cherubino's official papers and as he fumbles for a reply, the orchestral passage emphasizes how time feels for a man put on the spot: "like a set of slow, maddeningly regular modulations downward by thirds."[48] An action or event can also be experienced in terms of a previous one by the recurrence of musical strands in an opera. Kerman describes how Britten's The Turn of the Screw relies heavily on musical recapitulation (especially at the end of the opera):

> By singing Miles's "Malo" song, the Governess accepts and understands his tragedy and hers ("What have we done, between us?"). Her seventeen measures of music--boy-soprano music sung for the first time by a lyric soprano--encapsulate the entire action.[49]

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[47]Ibid.,218.

[48]Ibid.,220.

[49]Ibid.,221.

Music can also nullify or trivialize an action if its response to the action is inadequate.[50] Kerman argues that in both Handelian opera and in a great deal of post-Wagnerian opera, the musical style lacks a meaningful scale of dramatic distinctions, the former struggling (unsuccessfully, Kerman feels) to become dramatic, the latter barely discriminating between "the tremendously dramatic, the stupendously dramatic, and the merely earth-shakingly dramatic."[51]

Music's third contribution is the establishment of a particular mood, world, or field "in which certain types of thought, feeling, and action are possible (or at least plausible)."[52] This is a much more pervasive influence, for we may respond not so much to individual moments in an opera as to the musical "atmosphere." Wagner's music dramas create a very particular framework for action, thought, and feeling, marked by a unique underlying experience of time. As various Leitmotivs recur and transform, previous events are continuously reinterpreted, resulting in an ambiguous, relative sense of time. "Time is experienced as a field rather than a series; no moment in time is truly distinct, for every moment exists in

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[50]Ibid.,219-223.

[51]Ibid.,222.

[52]Ibid.,215.

terms of the past while it stands ready for reinterpretation in terms of the future."[53]

Poorly handled, music can also "demolish" a world. Kerman provides the example of Gounod's Faust: "Goethe's play has given us an adjective, 'Faustian,' but the world in which the Faustian spirit strives is entirely dissipated by Gounod's pastel timidities."[54]

The original edition of Opera as Drama was received with both extreme praise and criticism. The review in Music Library Association Notes aptly describes the level of opera criticism that seemed prevalent when the book was released:

> This seems like a tonic after the hopeless, uninformed, undistinguished outpourings of present day "opera lovers," so called "commentators" and "experts," all equally stricken by a disease which might be called synoptitis, and all equally indiscriminate in their artistic tastes and judgments. ...let us give an enthusiastic welcome to a book on opera that critically evaluates at all; nowadays this fact itself constitutes news.[55]

This was echoed by The Musical Times:

> This is an important and valuable book, in that it attempts to establish certain principles of

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[53]Ibid.,225.

[54]Ibid.,226.

[55]Frederic Cohen, Music Library Association Notes 16 (December 1958):53-54.

> opera as an art-form--an aspect that has been too little considered in most historical studies of the subject.[56]

Arthur Hutchings' review in Tempo declared that it included "more common and uncommon sense about opera than anything written in English since Grout's Short History."[57] However, even this praise is tempered by an "unwillingness to share his [Kerman's] moral severity."[58]

Other reviewers shared this ambivalence:

> Its impact has struck sparks from the most flinty-hearted critics and severely dented...a number of innocently held opinions.... The trouble is, of course, that his attitude is absurdly inhuman in considering the art which many of us regard as able to deal most fully and richly with the human situation.[59]

Even the high praise of The Musical Times was accompanied by equally strong criticism: "Mr. Kerman's merits as an aesthetic philosopher are offset by a puritanical hatred of everything that does not conform to the principles he propounds."[60]

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[56]Dyneley Hussey, The Musical Times 99 (December 1958):660.

[57]Arthur Hutchings, Tempo 47 (Spring 1958):12.

[58]Ibid.:14.

[59]John Warrack, Music and Letters 39 (July 1958):289-90.

[60]Hussey, The Musical Times 99 (December 1958):661.

Kerman replied to his critics (thirty years later!) in 1988 with the publication of the second, revised edition. In its preface, he admits to the excited polemic of the original book, and although partially defending it, he explains that many of his hasty judgements about composers, operas, scenes, and specific musical numbers were deleted in response to the changing climate of criticism, "which is so much more hospitable to interpretation than evaluation."[61]

Theatrical communication

The traditional operatic analyst considers the written work as the sole basis for aesthetic and critical judgements. The fixed nature of the score and libretto make them tangible objects that form a core, a constant that can be analyzed and compared with the written portions of other operas. Performances, on the other hand, are transient in nature, and therefore are generally not considered part of the work's core. However, investigations in theatre research have revealed the importance of performances in understanding a stage work in its entirety. The interaction of auditory and visual messages created by any performance results in a richer experience

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[61]Kerman, Opera as Drama, x.

than the score and libretto alone provide; more information is contained in a performance text than the written work. Even though performances vary, each is linked inextricably to the written work in various ways. Conversely, the written work alone does not contain the entire meaning of the opera; its physical realization reveals sub- or unconscious textual elements, conveys meanings that are inexpressible in words, and strengthens and elaborates upon other meanings found in the written work.

Although research in spoken theatre generally has not dealt with opera, numerous recent studies can certainly be applied to the genre.[62] In many of these studies, the consideration of performance is essential because meaning generated in the theatre is generally not simply textual material, but is a complex of visual, aural, and textual information which can only be experienced in performance.[63] This harkens back to Wagner's emphasis on the

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[62]See Keir Elam, Semiotics of Theatre and Drama (New York: Methuen, 1980); Patrice Pavis, Languages of the Stage (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982); Tadeusz Kowzan, Littérature et spectacle (The Hague: Mouton, 1975); Manfred Pfister, The Theory and Analysis of Drama, translated from the German by John Halliday (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Also note the collection of essays in Ladislaw Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik, eds., Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1976).

[63]Lauren Friesen, "Theatre and Religion," in The Conrad Grebel Review 7 (Winter 1989):21.

realization of the "poetic idea." However, Wagner's discussions were mainly philosophical and aesthetic in nature and were complicated by his particular views on the "evolution" of the arts. Except for some broad statements regarding gesture, Wagner did not attempt to indicate how the realization of the poetic idea is actually achieved through the interaction of the various "arts." Nor did he explain how a particular realization adds to or qualifies the original poetic intention. The study of theatrical communication goes far beyond Wagner in that it attempts to find out exactly how the realization process works. Most studies in theatrical communication deal with one or more of the following: analysis of the relationship between the written work and its performance: the specific meanings generated by the various code systems in the theatre and their interaction; and, the performer-audience relationship.

One fundamental idea found in many of the approaches used in theatre research is that all the details that make up reality on the stage--the playwright's (librettist's) text, the composer's score, the acting and singing of the performers, the stage lighting and sets--stand for other things. In other words, dramatic performance (and, by

extension, opera) is a set of signs.[64] Jan Mukařovský defines the sign as "a reality perceivable by sense perception that has a relationship with another reality which the first reality is meant to evoke."[65] Put simply, a sign is something which stands for something else and which refers to it. An art work considered as a sign has three main aspects: (1) a perceivable signifier (the created artifact); (2) an internalized signification (the aesthetic object); and, (3) a relationship to that which is signified.

The artifact itself (for example, a theatrical performance) functions merely as an external signifier for the aesthetic object, which has its roots in the collective consciousness of a community. This central core of meaning is then added to and coloured by the subjective perceptions of individuals.[66]

The relationship between the work of art and the thing signified does not have to be direct; it can be indirect or metaphoric. However, the relationship always refers to the total context of social phenomena. If a

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[64]Jindřich Honzl, "Dynamics of the Sign in the Theatre", in Matejka and Titunik, eds., Semiotics of Art,74.

[65]Jan Mukařovský, "Art as Semiotic Fact," in Matejka and Titunik, eds., Semiotics of Art,5.

[66]Ibid.,4.

society's understanding or perception of a work's subject matter changes, then the perceived "meaning" of the artistic sign may change considerably.[67]

Here, it may help to differentiate between "drama" and "theatre." While "drama" refers to the mode of fiction designed for stage representation and constructed according to particular conventions, "theatre" is commonly understood as those phenomena associated with the performer-audience transmission--the production and communication of meaning in the performance itself. The two are not mutually exclusive; they simply demarcate two different levels of the work for purposes of analysis.[68]

The two texts of an opera

A play or an opera can be seen as having two "texts": a written text (dramatic text), composed for the theatre; and the performance text (an actual staged production), produced in the theatre. The two texts differ greatly in their degree of variability. The written text is normally fixed and thus remains historically more or less stable, but the scenic component of the stage enactment is

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[67]Ibid.,5-6. Frits Noske also emphasizes the importance of this relationship--what he calls the "pragmatic dimension of semiosis"--in his book, The Signifier and the Signified: Studies in the Operas of Mozart and Verdi (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977).

[68]Elam, Semiotics of Theatre and Drama, 2-3.

extremely variable.[69] The stage enactment itself may also be divided into stable and variable components. First, there are performance elements which are either explicitly demanded or clearly implied by the written text. Second, there are extra elements added by the production which are always created because the very physical presence of the multimedial performance text will always add to the information presented in the written text.[70]

The relationship between the two texts is "a complex of reciprocal constraints constituting a powerful inter-textuality"[71] in which each constrains the other in various ways. Because the structure of the written text exists before the other components are created, it limits the performance by determining what is said, the structure of the action, and (in varying degrees) such aspects as movement and settings.[72] The performance also places constraints on the written text. The "incompleteness" of the written text (both in the sense that it does not specify all aspects, and in the sense that until it is realized on stage it is not finished) suggests that it is

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[69]Pfister, The Theory and Analysis of Drama,7.

[70]Ibid.

[71]Elam, Semiotics of THeatre and Drama,209.

[72]For a further discussion, see Jiří Veltruský, "Dramatic Text as a Component of Theatre," in Matejka and Titunik, eds., Semiotics of Art,94-117.

radically conditioned by its performability. Also, the vision of a possible realized performance--its stage potential--almost always motivates the written text. The performance, in realizing the written text, involves the generation of meanings that may add to, enhance, make more specific or more general the meanings inherent in the written text.[73]

The realization of the written text results in the creation of a large theatrical sign, or macro-sign, whose meaning resides in its total effect.[74] A closer examination of this sign reveals a multi-levelled network of smaller signs belonging to radically different message systems.[75] These include language, paralanguage (verbal pitch, loudness, tempo, timbre, and non-verbal sounds that show the speaker's state, intentions, and attitudes), kinesics (movements, gestures, postures), proxemics (the use of space and spatial relationships), costumes, make-up, sets and props, lighting, and music. Unfortunately,

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[73]Elam, Semiotics of Theatre and Drama,208-209.

[74]Ibid.,7. Pfister uses the term, "supersign." Both are related in a general way to Susanne Langer's concept of the art work as essentially a large "symbol" with the power to communicate the forms of human emotional experience. See Susanne Langer, Feeling and Form (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1953).

[75]Ibid.,44.

little has been written about the internal laws governing most of the theatrical systems.[76]

In opera, music assumes a major role in the generation of signs and thus significantly complicates the traditional classification of message systems. In opera, music assumes many paralinguistic functions (defining the emotional states and intentions of characters) as well as matching the functions of many other code systems (for example, lighting can be used to define a location--so can music; costumes can define the social status of a character--so can music).

The nature of theatrical communication

A dramatic work (including opera) can be viewed as a theatrical communication from the author to the audience. However, in the fluid environment that exists on the stage, the communication process cannot be described simply as the simple transmission of a single message from a source to a destination.

> Theatrical meaning, just like any other aesthetic meaning, should not be viewed as a relatively fixed constant and unchanging entity. It cannot be interpreted as "information" in the sense in which the theory of information has defined it--i.e. encoded in theatrical signs by actor/stage manager and, as such, merely decoded by the spectator. It is rather the outcome of a

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[76]Ibid.,51.

> complex process by which both intersubjective and subjective factors as constitutive parts are brought together and should therefore be understood as highly heterogeneous, instable [unstable], and changing.[77]

The numerous components involved in the performance of any stage work complicate the concept of theatrical meaning. At each point in the process of realizing an opera on stage, the addition and combination of extra elements (which create more signs) increase the number of potential messages. One can identify as the initial source of theatrical information the librettist and the composer, who together create the written musical and dramatic text. Another source is the director, whose decisions and instructions determine to a great extent what takes place on the stage. Additional sources include the set designer, lighting designer, costume designer, stage manager, technicians and the actor-singers themselves; they all function as decision-makers, initiative-takers and sources of ideas.[78] The theatrical meaning created by a performance is the result of a complex process in which latent meanings in the written text are reinforced while

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[77]E. Fischer-Lichte: "The Theatrical Code. An Approach to the Problem," in Ernest W.B. Hess-Lüttich and others, eds., Multimedial Communication (Tübingen: Günter Narr Verlag, 1982),46.

[78]Elam, Semiotics of Theatre and Drama,37.

new meanings are added from the diverse perceptions of the material the various participants may have.

The stage work is created with the necessary consideration for an audience, so that the work might establish an understanding between them and the creators.[79] The audience interprets the complex of message systems--the words, music, gestures, scenic continuum, and other aspects--as an integrated text, and this interpretation (as a collective understanding of what the opera is about) is conditioned by the audience's familiarity with the theatrical and dramatic codes being used ("theatrical competence"),[80] and the general cultural and ideological background of that audience.[81] This is the work's relationship to its social context. A change in the social context may result in a change in the work's perceived meaning. In addition, each individual will bring to the work his or her own life experiences, which will colour his or her own particular understanding of the work.

> It is the spectator who must make sense of the performance for himself, a fact that is disguised by the apparent passivity of the

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[79]Jan Mukařovský, "The Essence of the Visual Arts," in Matejka and Titunik, eds. Semiotics of Art,236.

[80]Ibid.,38.

[81]Ibid.,52

> audience. However judicious or aberrant the spectator's decodification the final responsibility for the meaning and coherence of what he constructs, is his.[82]

The audience has a major role, then, in determining the particular quality of the theatrical sign that is received.

Describing the theatrical sign

The theatrical sign cannot be described completely and accurately in words. Jan Mukařovský states:

> The understanding that the artistic sign establishes among people does not pertain to things, even when they are represented in the work, but to a certain attitude toward things, a certain attitude on the part of man toward an entire reality that surrounds him, not only to that reality which is directly represented in the given case. The work does not, however, communicate this attitude--hence the intrinsic artistic "content" of the work is also inexpressible in words--but evokes it directly in the perceiver. We call this attitude the "meaning" of the work only because it is rendered in the work objectively by its organization and it is therefore accessible to everyone and is always repeatable.[83]

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[82]Elam, Semiotics of Theatre and Drama, 95.

[83]Jan Mukařovský, "The Essence of the Visual Arts," in Matejka and Titunik, eds., Semiotics of Art, 237.

As Michael Polanyi has said in The Tacit Dimension: "we can know more than we can tell."[84] Put another way, there are things of which we can have knowledge and an understanding that cannot be expressed accurately in words. Susanne Langer further articulates this by explaining that art is non-discursive symbolism, while language is discursive symbolism.[85] Thus, a verbal description does not reveal the total meaning of a sign. Despite the limitations of language, however, description can provide a meaningful way of conveying an understanding of the art experience.

Performance texts and operatic analysis

The importance of considering performance texts as part of operatic analysis is demonstrated by the fact that the performed work contains more information than the written text, the performance being the primary form in which the work is generally experienced. While the written portion generally forms the most important part of the

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[84]Michael Polanyi, The Tacit Dimension (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1966),4.

[85]Susanne Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, third edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960),93. Chapter four (79-102) is concerned solely with a discussion of discursive and presentational forms.

work, the fixed core from which a primary understanding is gained, the diverse physical presentations that can be generated from this core contain additions, extensions, transpositions, and elaborations of the signs found in the written text. The gestures and movements of an actor or singer often bring out meanings inherent in the written text that are inexpressible in purely written form. Some of these include the emphasis of particular words, ironical meanings, and meanings derived primarily from a larger context (for example, when a specific character is addressed but not explicitly indicated).[86] In addition to these localised examples, additional meanings on a larger scale may be created through new associations, and meanings inherent in the text (but taken for granted) may be overtly displayed and focused upon in a particular interpretation of the work. While the theatrical sign lies unfulfilled in the written text alone, the performance completes it by exploring the written work's potential. By considering both parts, a fuller understanding of an opera can be gained.

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[86]Veltruský, "Dramatic Text as Component of Theatre," in Matejka and Titunik, eds., Semiotics of Art, 102.

Methodology

The initial analysis of Harry Somers' opera Louis Riel in the following chapter provides an example of the type with which most musicians are familiar. Using Joseph Kerman's guidelines espoused in Opera as Drama, the analysis focuses on the unchanging written entity, examining how the music of Louis Riel reinforces the dramatic structures of the libretto. In addition, performance aspects from the television production of Louis Riel will also be described in order to indicate that other information exists, information that is not immediately apparent by looking at the score and libretto alone. Although these other aspects are transient--a different production might create an entirely different physical realization--the additional information found in the performance text is important because it completes the communication begun by the musical and poetic text. The signs generated in a performance flesh out and add shading to the signs found in the score and the libretto, generating "meanings that may add to, enhance, make more specific, or more general the meanings inherent in the written text,"[87] some of which are inexpressible in purely written form.

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[87]Elam, Semiotics of Theatre and Drama,208-209.

A second, more detailed analysis, drawn from the perspective of theatrical communication, follows in the third chapter. It describes how the written portion of Louis Riel provides the basis for the creation of a theatrical sign that represents various aspects of the power of faith and spirituality, and how this sign is constructed from numerous smaller signs in both the written and performance text.

CHAPTER TWO

This analysis of Louis Riel attempts to reveal how music articulates the guiding dramatic concept, and how it defines and qualifies characters, moods, and actions. At the same time, it demonstrates that potential meanings dormant in the written text are brought to the foreground through physical enactment. The written portion of Louis Riel, which forms the fundamental core of the work, is examined below. In addition, some of the visual aspects from the television production of the opera that create additional meaning are also discussed.

Music articulating the guiding dramatic concept

Kerman stresses that the effective articulation of the guiding dramatic concept is essential in an opera score. It is generally conceded that this condition is fulfilled in Louis Riel. The following discussion explains how some of the fundamental dramatic structures of the libretto are articulated and supported by the music.

The libretto is dominated by a clash of opposites, including French against English, White against Native, Church against State, and East against West (among others). Embodied in the main character, Louis Riel, is

the very "dissonance at the root of the Canadian temperament."[88] In addition, Riel also represents certain universal aspects of the human condition:

> He is an immensely colourful personification of some of the great liturgical themes of mankind. One is that of the idealist driven mad by continued betrayal by ruthless realists in whom he mistakenly trusts. Another is that of the thinker paralysed by his thinking, the Hamlet syndrome. Another is that of the half-breed, the schizophrenic outsider who belongs to no people. Still another is that of the leader of a small nation standing in the way of "progress": is he hero or fool? And what of the madman unjustly hung?
>
> All of these themes are timeless, as is the theme of revolution, which was Riel's way of life. But they are also very much of our time. They are both Canadian and universal.[89]

Louis Riel is essentially an ironic tragedy. The protagonist, Riel, is pitted against his nemesis, Macdonald, and is defeated by the obsession which drives him toward madness and through betrayals by those around him (a plot synopsis is provided in Appendix II). The two main characters never actually meet in a direct confrontation. Instead, a conflict of ideas occurs: the romantic (Riel) versus the pragmatist (Macdonald). The irony centres on two main events. In Act I, scene ii, Thomas

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[88]R. Murray Schafer, The Public of the Music Theatre--Louis Riel: A Case Study, UE Report 26702, edited by Kurt Blaukopf (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1972),18.

[89]Mavor Moore, "Louis Riel: The Theme is Timeless," Opera Canada 8 (September 1967):44.

Scott is tried by the Métis and sentenced to death. In the following scene, Riel justifies Scott's execution by stating: "I cannot let one foolish man stand in the way of a whole nation!" He must then face the consequences. After Riel's forces are defeated at Batoche, Riel is put on trial for treason, and in the opera's final scene (Act III, scene vii) Macdonald uses Riel's own argument to refuse him a reprieve from his execution. The irony in the drama extends to the element of Time. Both Riel and Macdonald fight for Time, but while Riel constantly tries to get something done before something else can prevent it happening, Macdonald tries to prevent things from happening in the hope that Time will cure the problem.[90] This places the two on a collision course toward a battle in which only one of them can survive.

Riel's "journey" through the opera can be viewed as two parallel cycles of rise and fall. The first covers Acts I and II and tracks Riel's rise to power and initial conflict with Ottawa. His fall is marked by betrayal and results in his exile in Montana. The second cycle is shorter (covering Act III) but much greater in magnitude. In the Church Scene, we see Riel's apotheosis; after the

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[90] "The Making of an Opera," condensed transcript of a CBC radio interview with Herman Geiger-Torel, Harry Somers, and Mavor Moore, Musicanada 4 (September 1967):12.

battle, his subsequent fall from such a dizzying height culminates in his death.

Moore's libretto involves three different languages, reflecting the linguistic diversity of the various cultural groups involved in the story: English, French, and Cree.[91] Each character converses in his or her own tongue, and the frequent juxtaposition of these different languages forms a significant element of the drama.

Somers translates the numerous contrasting themes, settings, languages and tensions of the libretto into a score in which diversity of style becomes an important factor. Four different musical styles characterize the work and each is used to define characters, heighten the dramatic intensity of the events, and provide an authentic atmosphere for the scenes. Somers describes them as "folk material," "abstract, atonal orchestral writing," "straight diatonic writing," and "electronically-produced

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[91]For the French portions of the libretto, Mavor Moore collaborated with the Montreal playwright Jacques Languirand. According to Moore, Languirand did more than just convert Moore's "bad French" into "good French." As he recollects, "Being a Francophone Canadian, he had deep ideas about the subject which were enormously useful." This was mentioned in an interview by William Littler with Harry Somers and Mavor Moore, broadcast on CBC Afternoon at the Opera, 19 October 1985 (tape no. 1995, in the possession of the Canadian Music Centre). A fourth language, Latin, is also used--in the Church Scene, when Father André conducts a mass.

sounds."[92] These styles are rarely treated as separate entities by Somers; instead, he regularly superimposes and juxtaposes them, creating many layers to heighten the dramatic impact.

In addition to the larger stylistic diversity, Somers also uses many levels of vocal presentation--ranging from speech to fully sung line--to delineate the characters and their emotional states. This technique has its precedent in Somers' earlier operatic work, The Fool, written in 1953. In that chamber opera, Somers' characteristic diversity of styles threatened the unity of such a short work. However, in Louis Riel, diversity becomes a strength. A meaningful stylistic continuum is provided, and, as Kerman remarks about Berg's Wozzeck, "the powerful flux of style makes for his essential illusion."[93] In Louis Riel, Somers avoids lyricism for its own sake. Instead, the music is "like a stream that keeps the dramatic flow going."[94] For conversations, Somers employs a style that is at times like recitative and at others more like arioso. Only when dramatic tension lessens (that

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[92]Harry Somers, "Louis Riel: The Score," Opera Canada 8 (September 1967):46.

[93]Kerman, Opera as Drama,184.

[94]Somers, in an interview by William Littler with the composer and librettist (Canadian Music Centre tape no. 1996).

is, in the two Indian dances and in Riel's and Marguerite's solos) does he allow the music to "sing out."

The development of the drama is accompanied by the transformations of various Leitmotivs. The opera begins with an improvised tympani and tom-tom duet, immediately creating a sense of impending doom.[95] This nervous, almost violent percussive motif extends to the other percussion instruments at high points in the drama.

Following the percussion introduction, a taped tenor solo[96] occurs (Example 2.1). Although it is based on "The Marching Song," composed by Alexander Hunt Murray (a retired Hudson's Bay officer) for soldiers who marched on Fort Garry in 1870,[97] Somers imbues the tune with a new quality: that of a native Indian melody. The result forms a basic motif associated with Riel's fate as it moves through the whole work, transformed in subtle ways as it reappears at important points. For example, in the interlude following Act I, scene i--the scene in which Scott triggers the conflict by attacking the Métis--a version of the theme appears in an intense violin melody,

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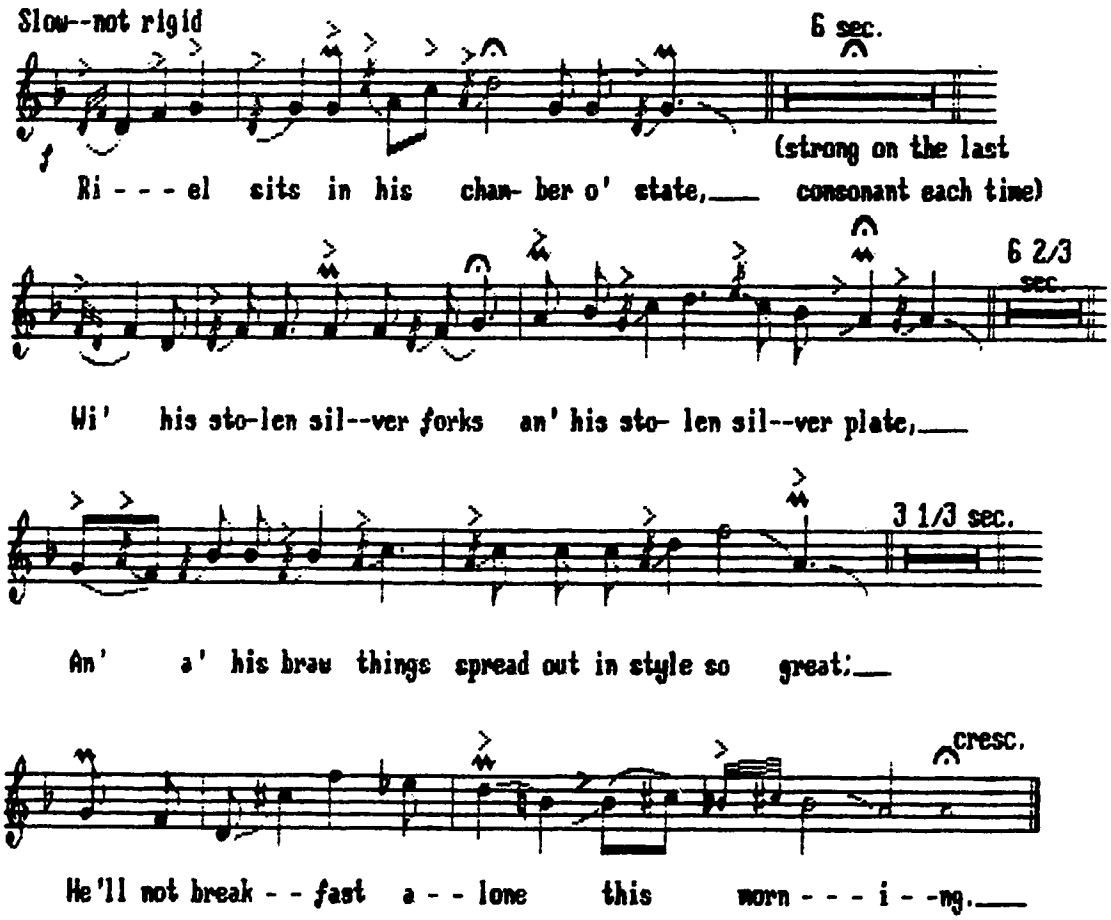
[95]The first is between I,i and I,ii; the second is between I,ii and I,iii.

[96]Originally sung and prerecorded by Somers himself.

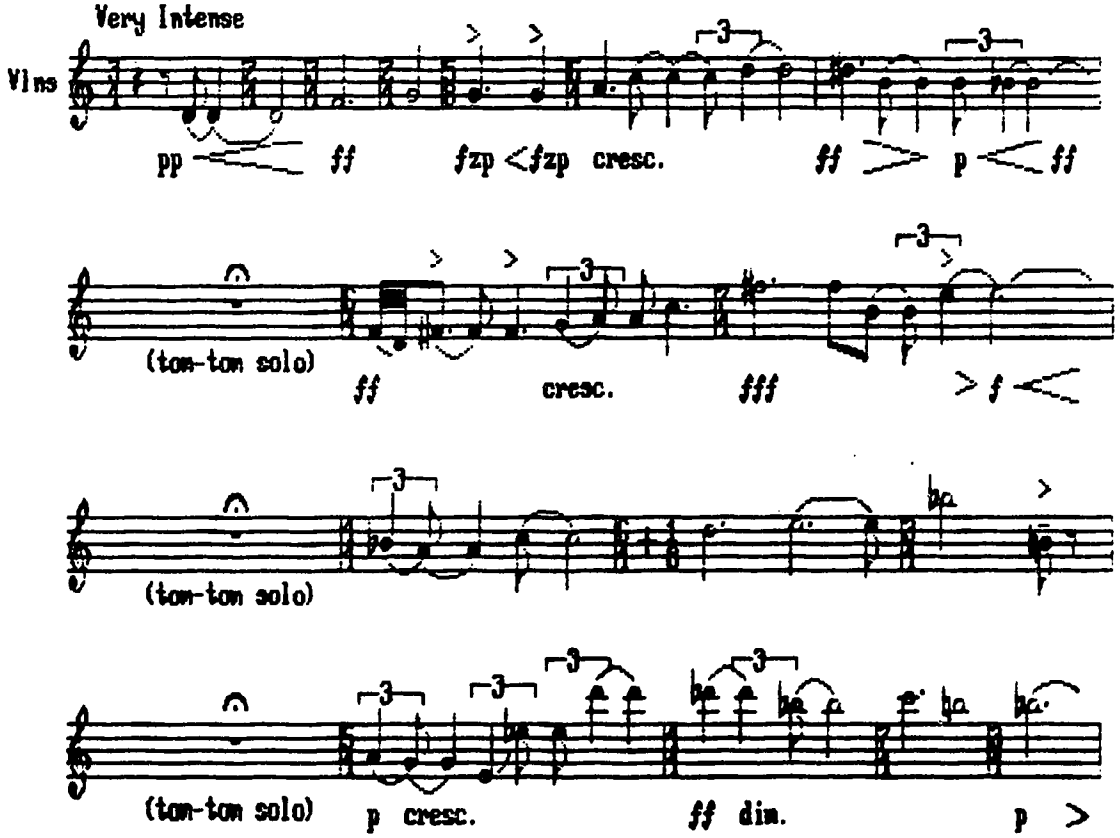
[97]See Buckler, "The Use of Folk Music," 34.



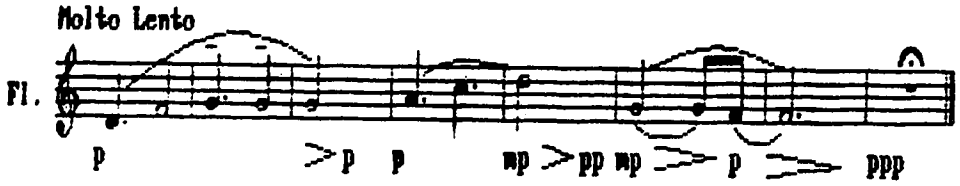
Example 2.1

broken up by more of the improvised tom-tom solos mentioned earlier (Example 2.2). In Act II, scene vi, as Riel is being tricked into leaving Fort Garry, the entire tune is surreptitiously sounded by the flute and oboe, and is later echoed in the first violins as Riel finds himself

betrayed. After his execution in the final scene, one last appearance of the theme occurs in a poignant solo flute melody (Example 2.3).



Example 2.2



Example 2.3

The initial minor third of "The Marching Song" forms the basis of a related poignant flute solo which recurs at transitional points, just before or after a point of high tension (Example 2.4).[98] It quickly becomes identified with Riel and his lonely position as the misunderstood leader of his people. The initial minor third also makes occasional prominent appearances in Riel's vocal line.

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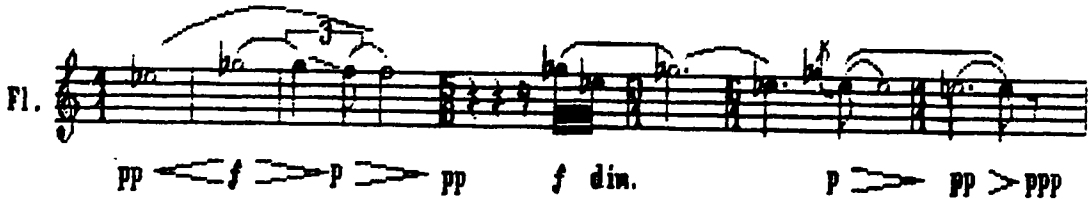
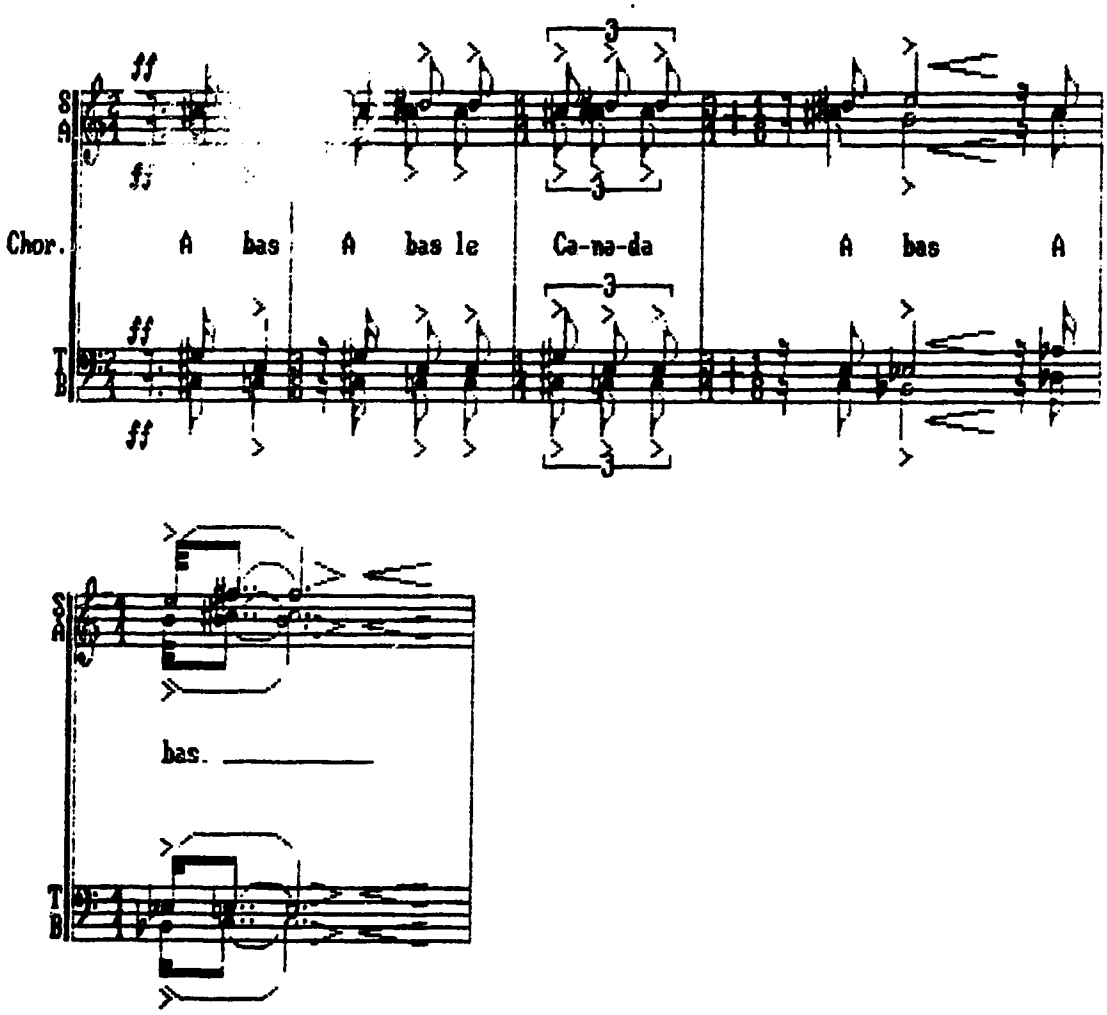
[98]See I,ii; the opening of I,iv; and the end of III,iii.

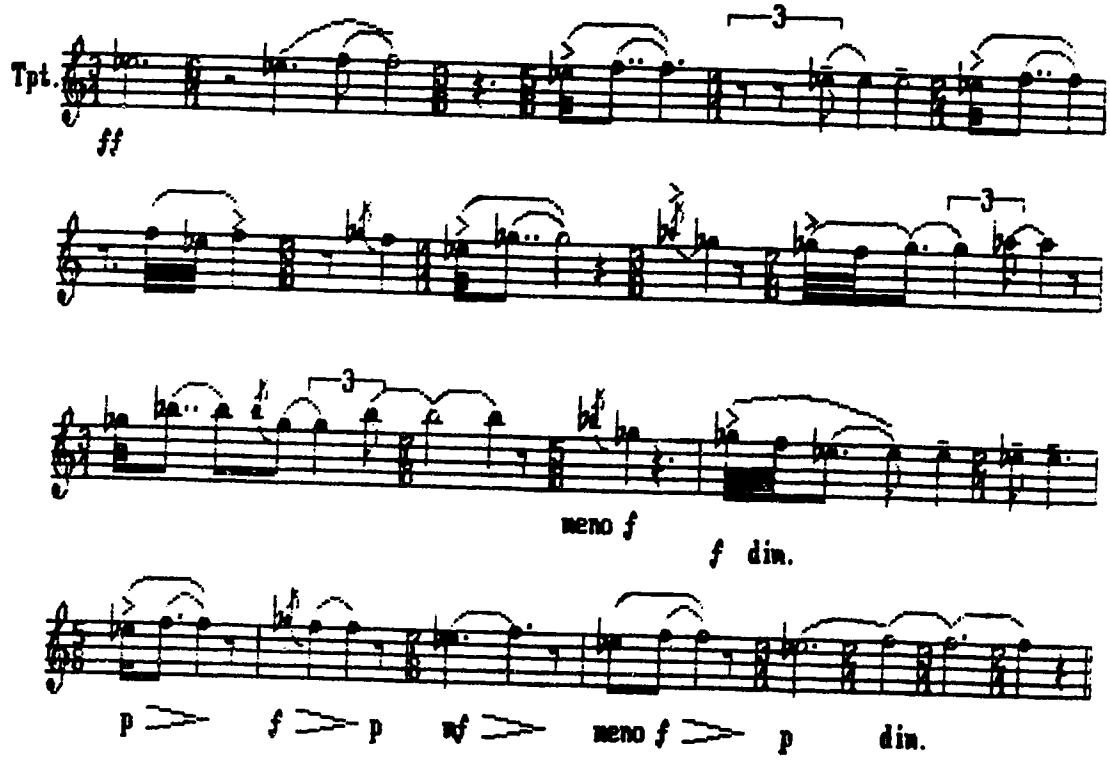


Example 2.4

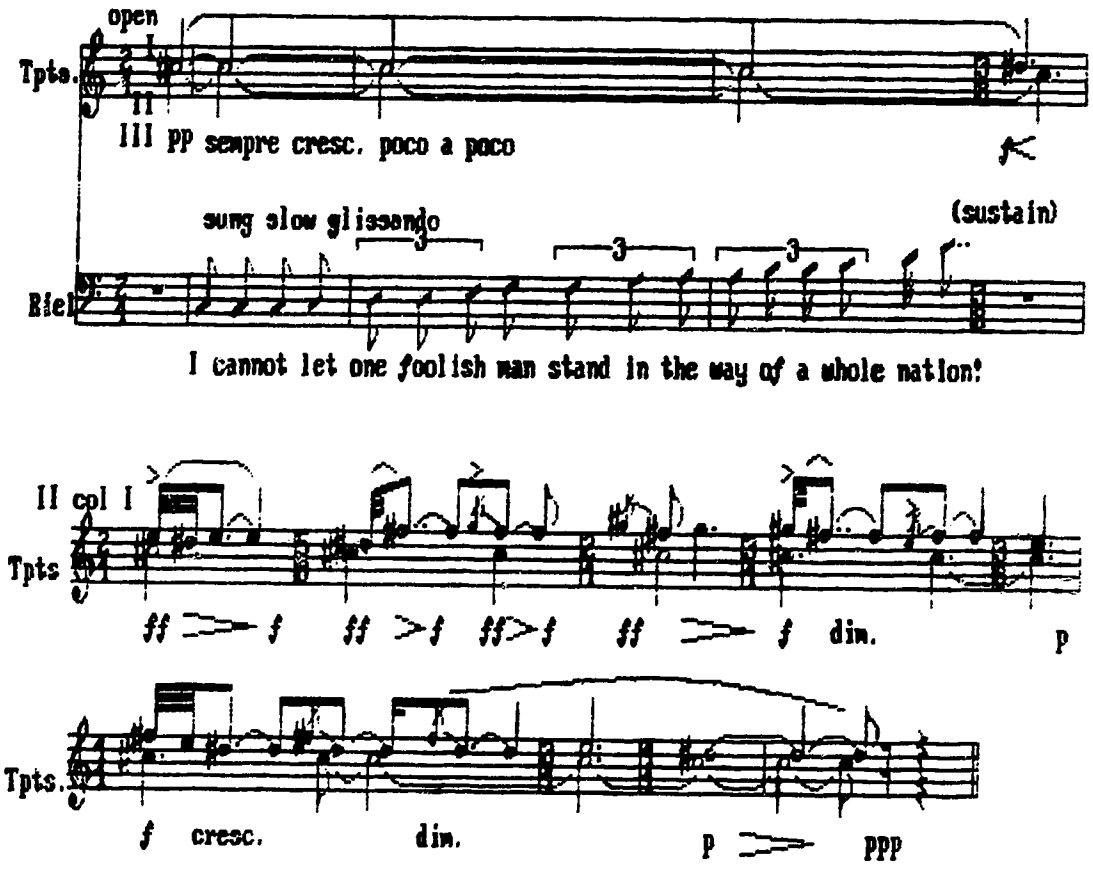
Another important Leitmotiv associated with Riel and the Métis struggle first occurs in the opening scene, when the Métis declare: "A bas le Canada d'Ottawa" (Example 2.5). This melody is loosely related to the opening tenor solo ("The Marching Song"). When Thomas Scott attacks the Métis, the orchestra elaborates on the theme, generating a long, arching trumpet melody (Example 2.6) that leads into the first interlude (discussed earlier). Later, just before Scott's execution, when Riel states, "I cannot let one foolish man stand in the way of a whole nation!" the theme returns in an ominous trumpet fanfare that reminds us of the dangerous route Riel is following (Example 2.7).



Example 2.5



Example 2.6

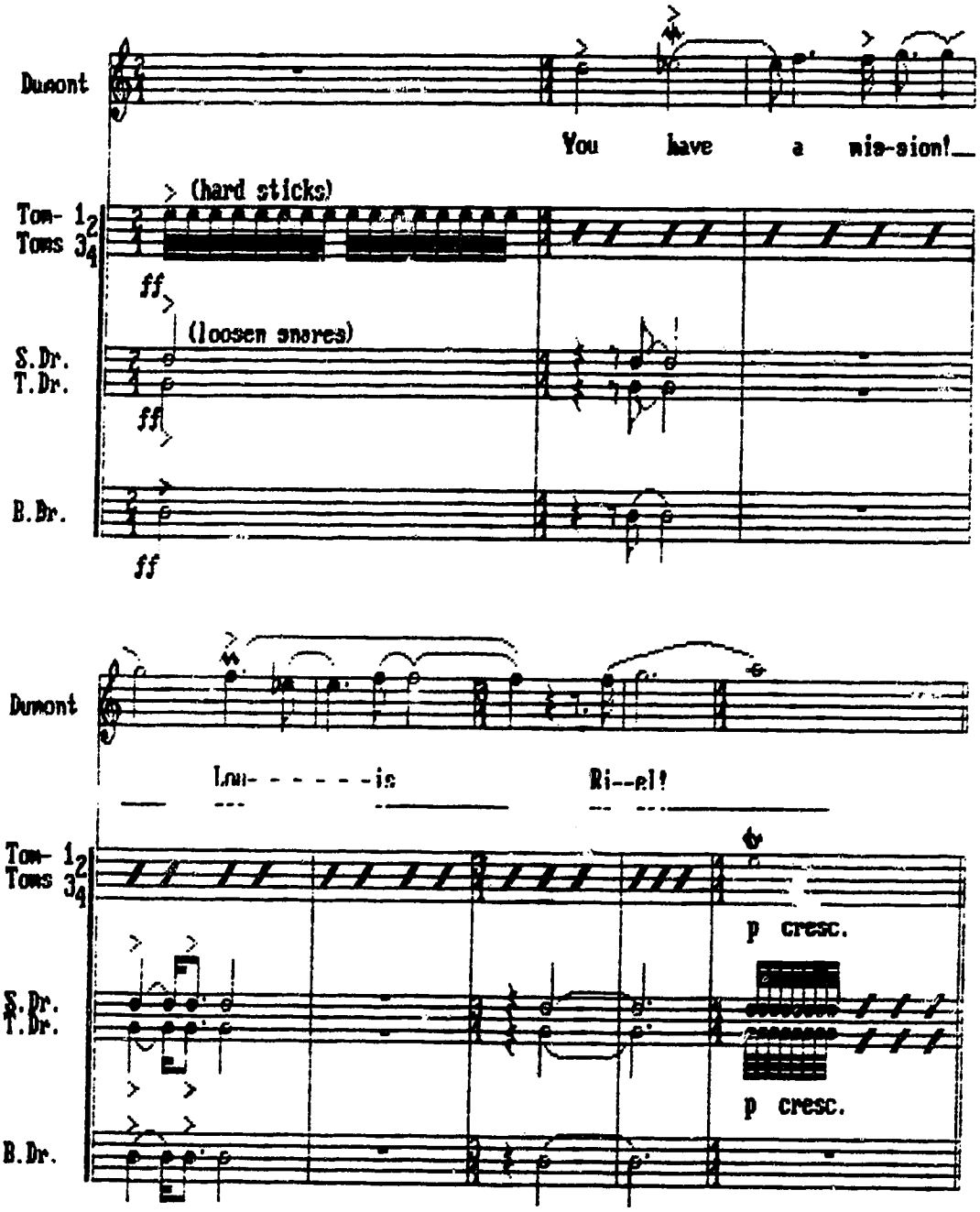


Example 2.7

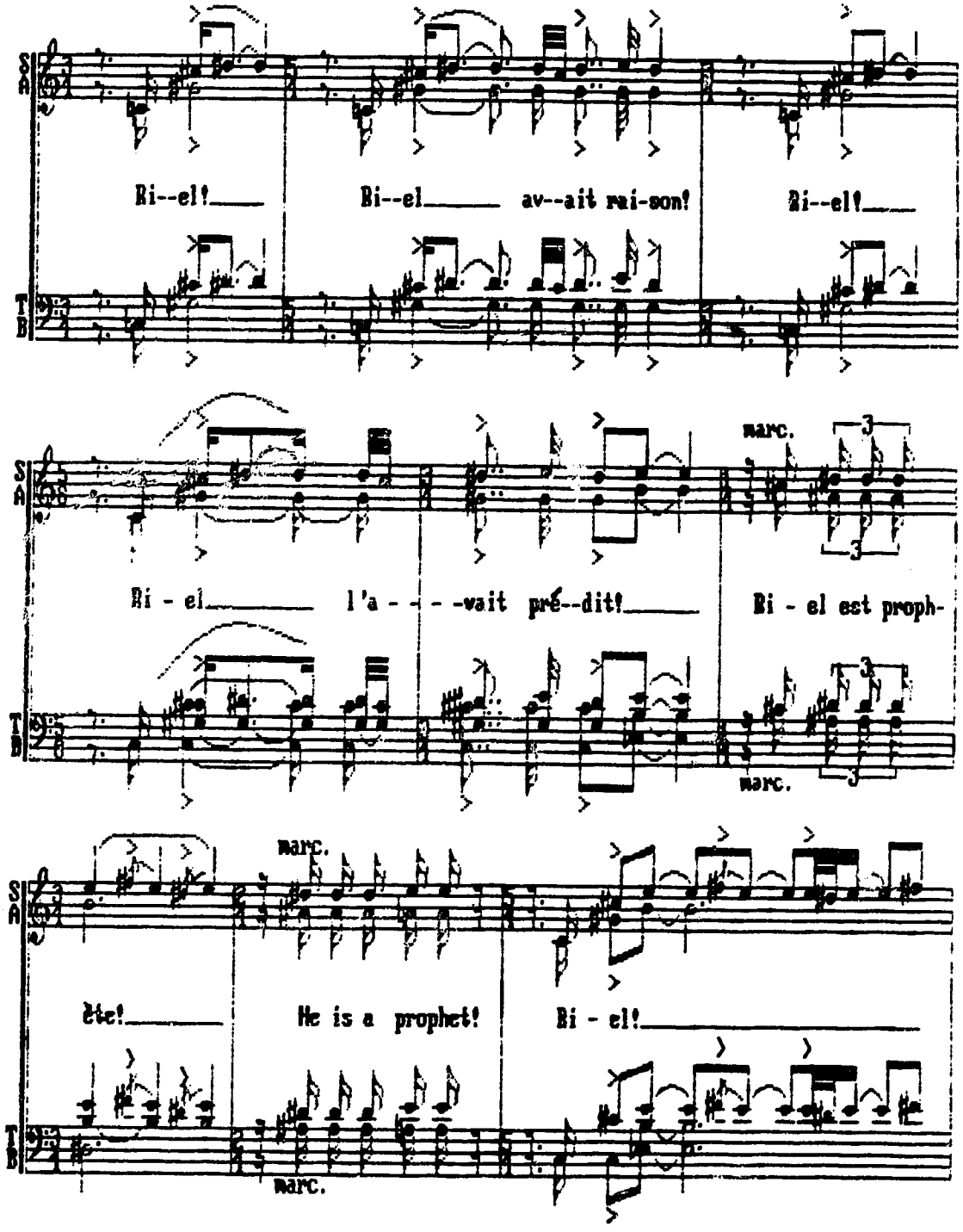
At the turning point of the drama (III,i), the theme assumes a tragic character. Dumont, Isbister, and Chief Poundmaker arrive at Riel's home in Montana and beg him to return to Canada to fight another rebellion. At the same time, Marguerite implores him to stay. With a long

mournful melody, Riel reiterates (amidst their highly rhythmic protests) that, although he cares, he cannot go with them. Each side repeats its argument in a long crescendo, with the deputation singing with increasingly desperate rhythmic insistency, and Marguerite and Riel singing higher and higher. Suddenly, they all stop. Then, accompanied by the ominous drums that opened the opera, Dumont declares, "You have a mission, Louis Riel!" (Example 2.8) with a melody harkening back to the initial Métis "war declaration" at the opening of the opera. Riel, torn between his family and his "mission," makes the fateful decision to return to Canada, and from this moment on we see Riel rushing headlong to his death.

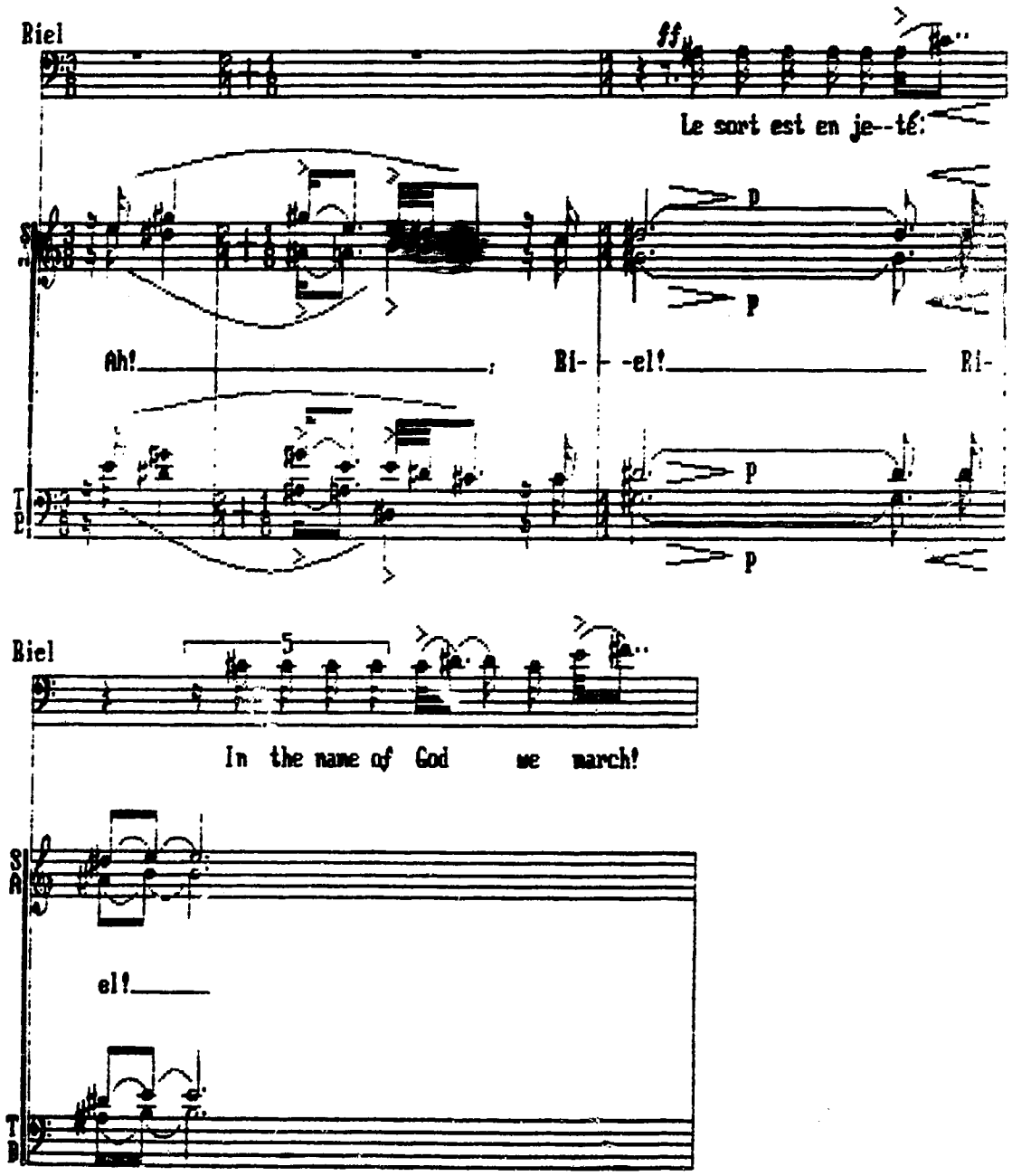
The force of Riel's mission is reaffirmed in Act III, scene iii (the Church Scene), when his vision of an approaching army coming from the east comes true. The chorus sings praises to him, calling him a prophet in another transformation of the theme, now with the quality of a battle hymn (Example 2.9). At the opera's climax, when Riel is finally hanged, an echo of that "hymn" is sung in a taped chorus, perhaps symbolizing the unity of the Métis and their grief at the loss of their leader.


Dumont
You have a mis-sion!
(hard sticks)
Ton- 1 2
Toms 3 4
ff
(loosen snares)
S.Dr.
T.Dr.
ff
B.Dr.
ff
Dumont
Lou- - - - - - is
Ri--el!
Ton- 1 2
Toms 3 4
p cresc.
S.Dr.
T.Dr.
p cresc.
B.Dr.

Example 2.8


S
A
T
B
Ri--el!
Ri--el
av--ait rai-son!
Ri--el!
marc.
Ri - el
l'a - - - -vait pré--dit!
Ri - el est proph-
marc.
marc.
ète!
He is a prophet!
Ri - el!
marc.

Example 2.9



Example 2.9 (continued)

The various musical styles and the imaginative use of Leitmotivs contribute a great deal to the articulation of the overall dramatic concept of Louis Riel. This is supplemented by the creative use of scenic design, costumes, and lighting. These visual aspects play a major role in determining the overall import of the work; they add to the fundamental base of the work various meanings that emphasize and interpret the material in the written portion in a particular light. The dramatic concept of the work is then fully expressed through its performances, each one a unique auditory and visual experience for the audience.

Murray Laufer, the designer for the original production, describes his set design for Louis Riel:

> I would describe the scenery as super-realistic but also very stylized. The clue to the style came to me when I was looking through the "Family of Man" photography book and saw a photograph of a wheatfield which conveyed a spirit of complete loneliness and isolation. Glued on to this photo was another photo of a little woman. Somehow, the effect was of the very essence of prairie life in the United States. I think Marie [Day] and I must have gone through every library and all the archives across Canada for the historic photographs that form a good part of the scenery--a photo of Fort Garry or of a Métis sitting in front of his tent. This latter, for example, would be mounted on a texture of prairie grass. The scenery is not just a background but combines photographs with people and architectural elements. To illustrate this point--in the first scene of the opera, at the Manitoba-Minnesota border, the collages are of winter prairie grasses, the odd

> tree, a built piece (the barricade) plus photo blow-ups of winter wheat, Queen Anne's lace, etc., and of prairie grasses projected on to a large piece of material which is made transparent. The effect you achieve when Macdougall [McDougall] and company enters is that they are entering the photograph--they move through it, appear in front of it, and through the photo blow-ups, end up at the barricade. The other collages are a combination of historical pictures plus textural backgrounds. As in the scene at Fort Garry where the front wall is battered down by Wolseley's troops, I've used a huge blow-up of a stone texture, to give the feeling of a wall, with an actual photo inset of Fort Garry plus a "built portion" of a stone wall.[99]

Facial gesture, body movement, and the spatial relationships among the characters on the stage form another part of the performance text and play a major role in determining how each moment is perceived. As with other performance aspects, limits are placed on the physical enactment by the libretto and the music. Conversely, a particular physical realization often emphasizes meanings in the written work that cannot be fully expressed in words alone. For example, in Act III, scene i, the struggle between Marguerite and the deputation is magnified by the physical relationships on the stage. In

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[99]Murray Laufer, in an interview printed in the accompanying notes to the sound recording of a live performance of Louis Riel at the Kennedy Centre for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., 23 October 1975, Victor Feldbrill, cond., National Arts Centre Orchestra (Toronto: Centrediscs, 1985), three LP's: CMC 2485, 2585, and 2685.

the CBC-TV production, the confrontation focuses on the kitchen table; Riel sits while Isbister, Dumont, and Poundmaker stand in a row to his left, and Marguerite stands to his right, thereby balancing the opposing forces for the present time. While the deputation pleads, Isbister bends over to sing directly to Riel's face, but Riel refuses to look at him. Instead he looks from side to side, the inner turmoil evident on his face. Eventually, Riel stands up and crosses to stage left, still looking away from them. Dumont then moves downstage slightly, between Riel and Marguerite. This is a significant change in the struggle; Marguerite is now "cut off" from her husband and he can no longer hear her. Dumont steps toward Riel and tells him that he has a mission. Marguerite quickly raises her hands to her mouth in trepidation, knowing she cannot control the course of events now. Riel slowly turns and crosses to his wife. He puts his hand on her shoulder as he softly sings, "Yes, I have a mission." Marguerite desperately reaches for Riel and begs him to stay, but he pulls away and heads for the door. Before he exits, he takes one final glance back to Marguerite, who does not see him now; she is already mourning his loss in solitude. The stage action, combined with the music and text, emphasizes the seriousness of the decision that Riel

makes and provides us with a fuller understanding of this crucial moment.

Music defining character

One of the most important musical resources in opera is the ability to define and give life to characters. In Louis Riel, two main character types are highlighted through the use of different types of voice delivery. Riel, the romantic, always sings. Macdonald, on the other hand, is a pragmatist and sings only occasionally, preferring a rather satirical form of heightened speech--a parlando kind of presentation.[100] The use of different types of vocal delivery extends to other characters. Thomas Scott and O'Donaghue, the Fenian Irishman (both realists--in opposite camps) communicate in regular speech. Riel's mother, Julie, and his sister, Sara, both sing a kind of arioso, reflecting their highly emotional natures.

Marguerite, Riel's Cree wife, appears in only one scene (the opening of Act III), but her musical characterization in her one aria, "Kuyas," is extremely vivid. Her vocal line is characterized by descending seconds, occasional glissandi, nervous rhythms, and strongly accented grace notes (Example 2.10). A sparse

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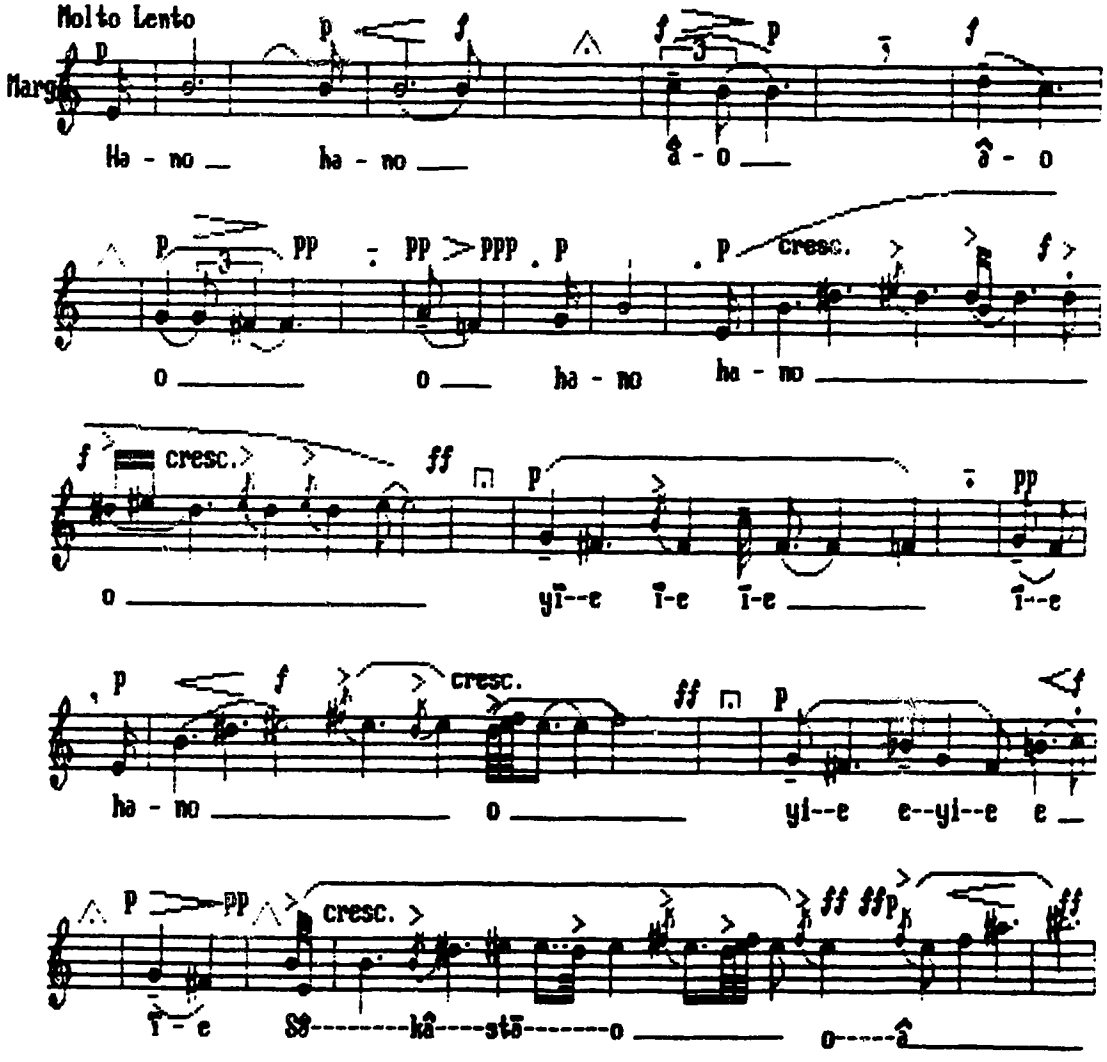
[100] "The Making of an Opera":6.

accompaniment is provided by flute, sleigh bells, tom-tom and tenor and bass drums.



Example 2.10

The significance of Marguerite's aria in Louis Riel is comparable to that of Florestan's one aria ("In des Lebens Frühlingstage") in Beethoven's Fidelio. Kerman mentions this aria as an excellent example of music giving life to a character "even though he [Florestan] has nothing to do and little to think all through the opera."[101] He explains:

> Since Florestan does not act, drama in Fidelio has to come from the way his feeling relates not to his own action but to someone else's. The improbable comic-strip manipulations of Leonore to release her husband, which would attract little interest in themselves, assume interest and seriousness in view of the insight into Florestan's being afforded his one aria. Placed simply but surely at the start of the last act, and informed by Beethoven's profound sense of form, "In des Lebens Frühlingstage" gives us the sentient man directly.... Hearing Florestan, we can at last believe in Leonore's quest.[102]

Marguerite's aria is sung both as a lullaby for her baby and as a lament, foreshadowing the passing of her people and their chief, Riel.[103] Although she does not appear in later scenes, her influence is strongly felt throughout the entire third act. This is especially true of the Church Scene and Riel's Trial, where Riel's vocal line is infected with motives and ornaments from "Kuyas."

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[101]Kerman, Opera as Drama, 216.

[102]Ibid.

[103]Buckler, "The Use of Folk Music," 48.

Her aria adds to our understanding of Louis Riel's actions in the third act and contributes greater depth and pathos to the ensuing tragic events.

Although music is a potent tool for character definition in an opera, it is certainly not the only factor that informs the audience about the nature of the personages on the stage. Gestures also serve as direct indicators of character. The television production reveals John A. Macdonald moving in an overtly demonstrative way, relaxed, flowing, rarely hurried, demonstrating his command and power of office; also, he is often seen indulging in a drink of alcohol (pointing out his drinking problem!). The more passionate Riel generally uses quicker movements, and is prone to extremes of gesticulation, from shaking his fists over his head to falling, exhausted, to the ground.

Costumes also provide a direct or indirect clue to character types. Characters from Ottawa wear tailored suits and fancy dresses while the Métis wear furs, leather, and other rugged clothing. In addition, the Métis wear their traditional ceintures fléchées (red sashes). In addition to existing as a practical necessity, a costume communicates information about a character's social group and the type of life he or she leads. Riel, who was born a Métis but was educated in Montréal, is situated half-way

between the Métis and the European Canadians. In the television production, his odd social position is pointed out by his jacket, vest, and bow tie (all showing a European influence), combined with a Métis ceinture fléchée.[104]

Although Marguerite's musical characterization is strong and immediately accessible, the pathos of the situation presented in "Kuyas" is indicated through music combined with action, without which the aria would probably seem rather long and the dramatic situation less powerful. The significance of "Kuyas" resides not only in the music and the poetry, but also in the stage action that accompanies the aria. Marguerite appears only in this scene, and if the strong bond between Riel and his wife is not immediately established, her "presence" in later scenes is lost. In the CBC-TV production, Riel has just received a letter from Bishop Bourget in Montreal and opens it while Marguerite sings her aria. His actions indicate that the letter contains something that troubles him greatly. He reads it slowly, looks at his wife and child, then walks to the door and looks outside. He reads

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[104]Many of the costume designs for the television version were the same or similar to those of the original stage production. See "47 Designs by Marie Day for 'Louis Riel'" (Canadian Opera Company, 1967), a collection of 47 slides in the possession of the Metro Reference Library, Toronto.

the letter again, then closes his eyes in contemplation. He reaches for his Bible and flips through its pages. His expression hardens and he closes it, gripping the book tightly. He then looks longingly at Marguerite and reads the letter a third time. Finally, he walks over to her and softly kisses her head as she finishes her solo. Marguerite asks Riel what is in the letter and, while the "Kuyas" melody is played by a solo flute, he reads to her:

> Que votre foi devienne de plus en plus forte
> Afin de ne jamais faiblit devant la difficulté.
> Vous avez une mission que vous devez accomplit
> Jusqu'au bout.
>
> [May your faith grow stronger
> So that you may never weaken in the face of
> adversity.
> You have a mission which you must complete
> To the end.][105]

The significance of Riel's behaviour during Marguerite's aria immediately becomes apparent. He has a critical decision to make: to stay with his family or to return and fulfil his "mission." Here, stage action--in addition to the music--forms a theatrical communication that demonstrates the relationship between the characters and adds significantly to our comprehension of Riel's situation.

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[105]My translation.

Music defining mood and atmosphere

Kerman points out that we may respond not so much to individual moments in an opera as to a "total drenching of the action by music of a particular sort."[106] Through his diverse musical styles, Somers provides a distinct musical atmosphere for the East and West, effectively contrasting the centres of power in the drama. For the scenes set in the West, Somers uses what he terms the "abstract, atonal" writing, a style similar to his orchestral works of the 1960's: strongly dissonant (dominated by major seventh and minor ninth intervals), combining nervous rhythmic figures with sustained single pitches or large clusters with strong dynamic changes.[107] Somers uses it for "dramatic intensity and to create a platform of orchestral sound on top of which the singing is entirely apart."[108] Melded to this orchestral style is the rhythmic and melodic quality associated with "Kuyas," permeating the scenes set in the West.

Two raucous Indian dances and songs that introduce Act II, scene vi, add to the picture of the rugged life of the Métis. The first is actually a composition by Somers in the style of Native American folk music. The second,

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[106]Kerman, Opera as Drama,223.

[107]Cherney, Harry Somers,133.

[108]Somers, "Louis Riel: The Score":46.

The Buffalo Hunt, is based on the song by Pierre Falcon (written circa 1825).[109] Somers alters the harmonic and rhythmic context of the original song to create a driving, primitive feeling in the dance.

As a contrast to the primitive West, Somers scores the sophisticated, political scenes in Ottawa in a busier and lighter style.

> I saw the Macdonald scenes actually as a kind of Vaudeville and a kind of dance--the political dance, which is a little bit more sophisticated... the maneuvering, the wheeling-dealing.... So the whole character of the music changes here abruptly and certain motifs, themes, tunes appear which become identified with Macdonald throughout the whole work. And when I want a little bit of cynicism, I bring in one of these tunes, vary it, or twist it.... I have a prelude of music [opening Act II] which is what I call "Sir John A. a little high" music, and it takes various themes of the previous [scene] and weaves them until they get quite intoxicated and then collapse (which is his entrance).[110]

Although the music in the Ottawa scenes does not adhere to a tonal centre or framework, Somers achieves a certain charm and wit through discreet tonal

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[109]Buckler, "The Use of Folk Music," 50.

[110]Somers, sound recording of a CBC-FM radio broadcast (15 October 1967) of a performance by the Canadian Opera Company (Victor Feldbrill, cond., in the collection of the Canadian Music Centre (Tape No. 505)).

approach.

While music is definitely a superb tool for creating moods and atmosphere, one cannot ignore the importance that the set and lighting have on the creation of the "world" in which the action takes place. Both create a sense of a specific time, place, and mood. In the television production, the interior set used for the Ottawa scenes immediately defines the locale (the Prime Minister's office) and the upper-class aura, with the fine furniture, large, blown-up black-and-white photographs of impressive architecture, and the red-white-and-blue design of the Union Jack appearing prominently on the walls and floor. The less-colourful sets for Fort Garry communicate a more rugged atmosphere: the rough-hewn wood that forms the fragmented walls and the few pieces of furniture create a feeling of primitiveness compared to the polished appearance of Ottawa.

Lighting also works in a powerful way to create mood and define the dramatic space. The specific lighting applied to a scene conditions the audience's response to it. In addition to pointing out the time of day and other general facts, the lighting designer can play on the audience's associations of darkness to create a sinister

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[111]Cherney, Harry Somers, 138.

can create a lighter mood (as in some of the Ottawa scenes). Unusual colours and non-traditional lighting patterns can generate an "other-worldly" atmosphere, useful when a dreamlike or similarly unreal state needs to be presented. While the overall lighting used in the television version of Louis Riel is generally realistic, the fade out of all light on Riel at the end of the opera is a strong symbolic device that indicates his death.

Music articulating events

Kerman indicates that music can be used to qualify an action or an event and underline the dramatic idea presented. One event or action can also be experienced in terms of another by recurring musical phrases or motives, thus enhancing the dramatic structure.[112]

The Railway Scene (II,iv) opens with the crowd singing a rousing patriotic tune in what Somers labels as "Central Ontario Gothic" hymn-tune style, accompanied (very poorly) by an on-stage band. When Schultz rants before the crowd, trying to whip up sympathy for the Canadian party in Red River, the band plays a very syrupy, sentimental Victorian tune (Example 2.11). The effect, though, is far from sentimental; Somers uses it to

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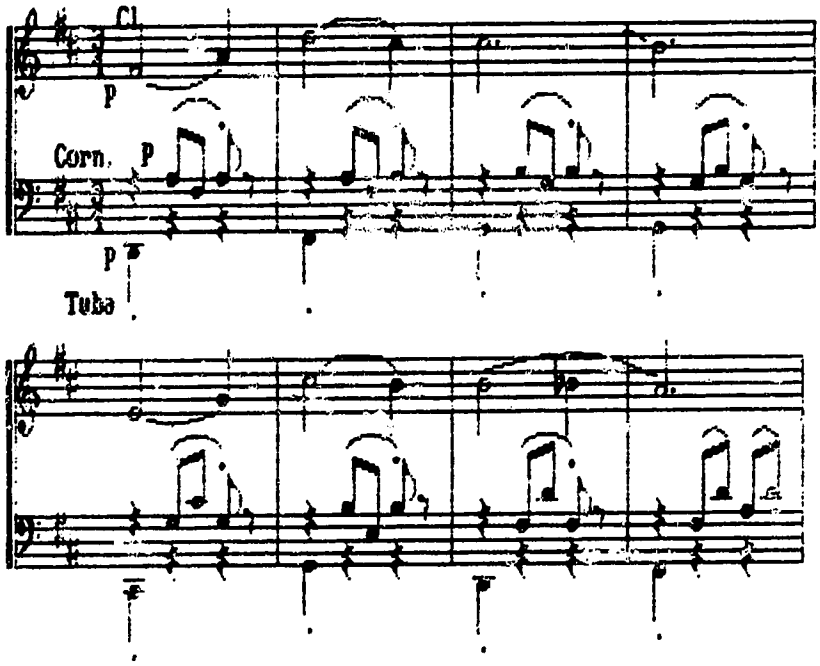
[112]Kerman, Opera as Drama,220.

underline the sinister undercurrents which lie beneath the surface humour, for banal associations are being used to arouse mass patriotism.[113] Somers gets his point across by using a style familiar to the audience.



Example 2.11

The scene closes with the chorus singing a rousing version of a popular tune, "We'll Hang Him Up the River" (Example 2.12). This quickly assumes a sinister tone in

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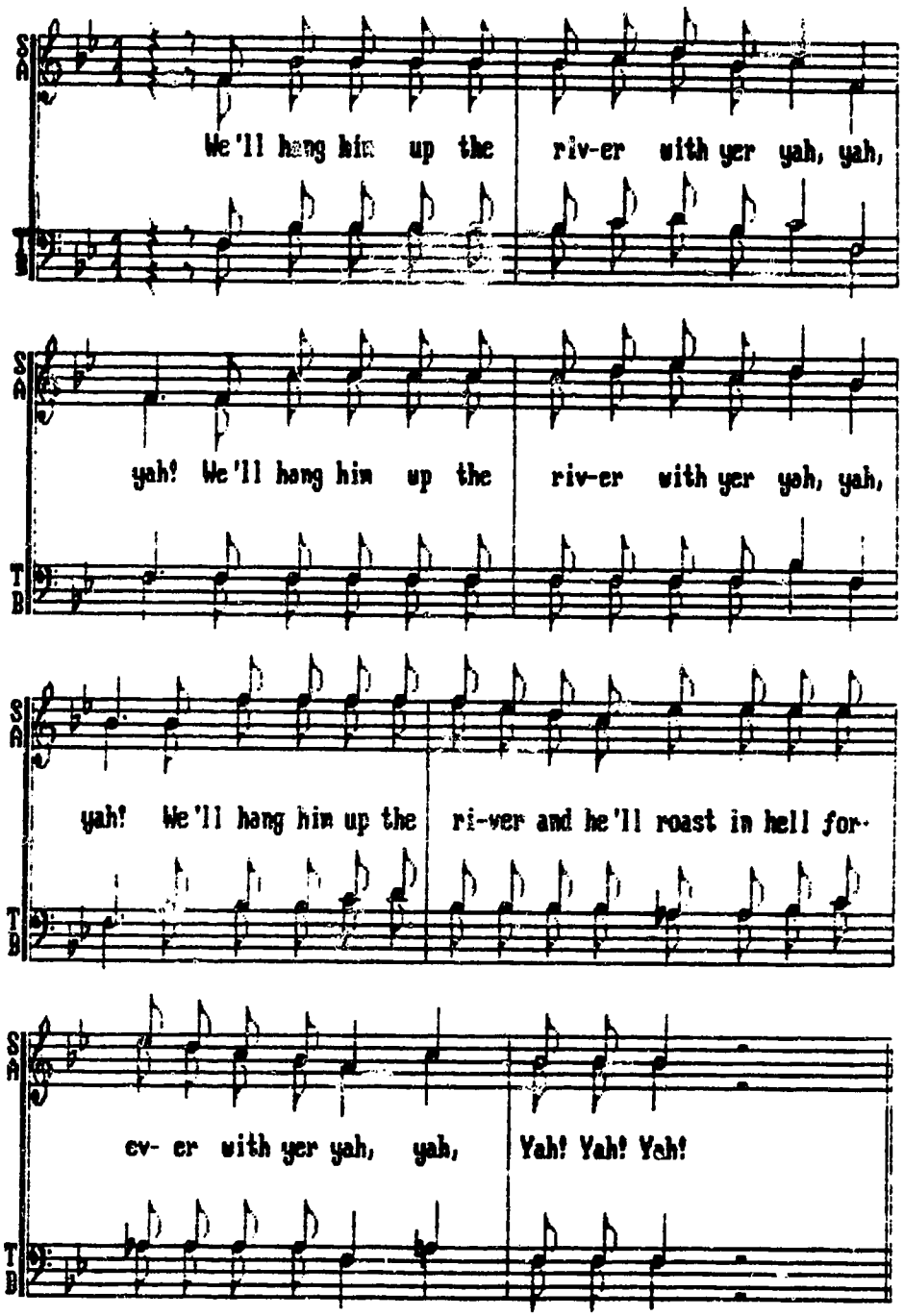
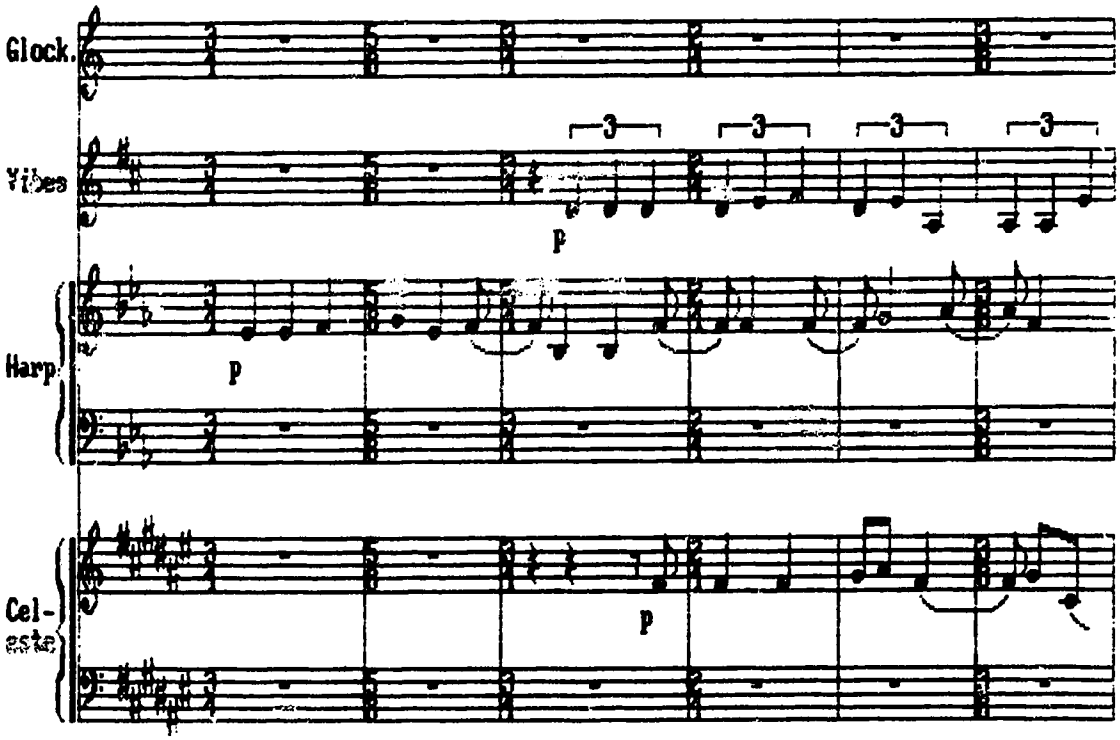
[113]Somers, in Littler interview.

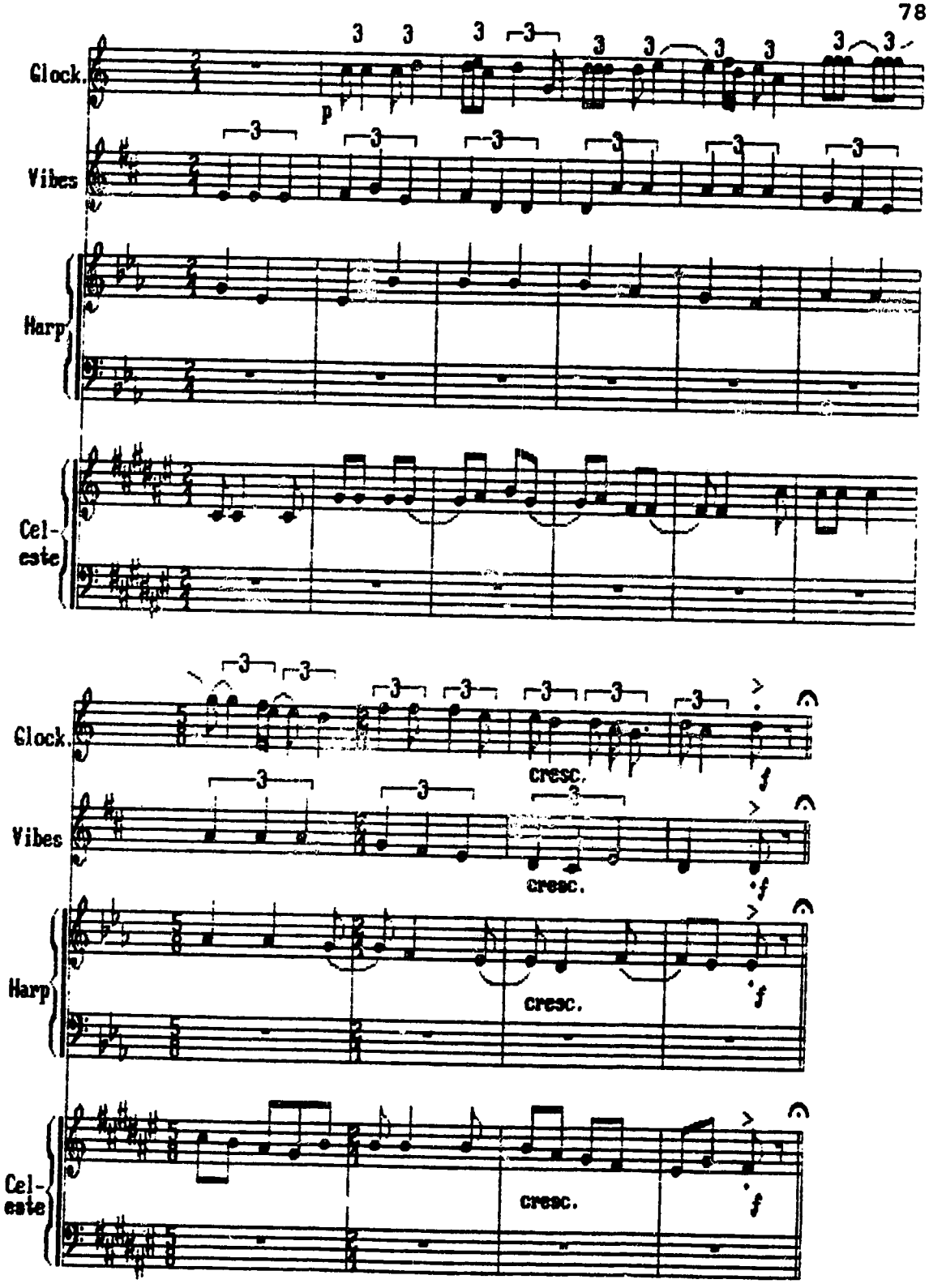

S
A
T
B
We'll hang him up the riv-er with yer yah, yah,
yah! We'll hang him up the riv-er with yer yah, yah,
yah! We'll hang him up the ri-ver and he'll roast in hell for-
ev- er with yer yah, yah, Yah! Yah! Yah!

Example 2.12

the following scene in Ottawa as the nature of Macdonald's political machinations becomes evident. While Macdonald attempts to assuage Taché's fears about the army being sent out West, a mocking, distorted canon of "We'll Hang Him Up the River" is played by the harp, celeste, vibraphone, and glockenspiel (Example 2.13). Throughout

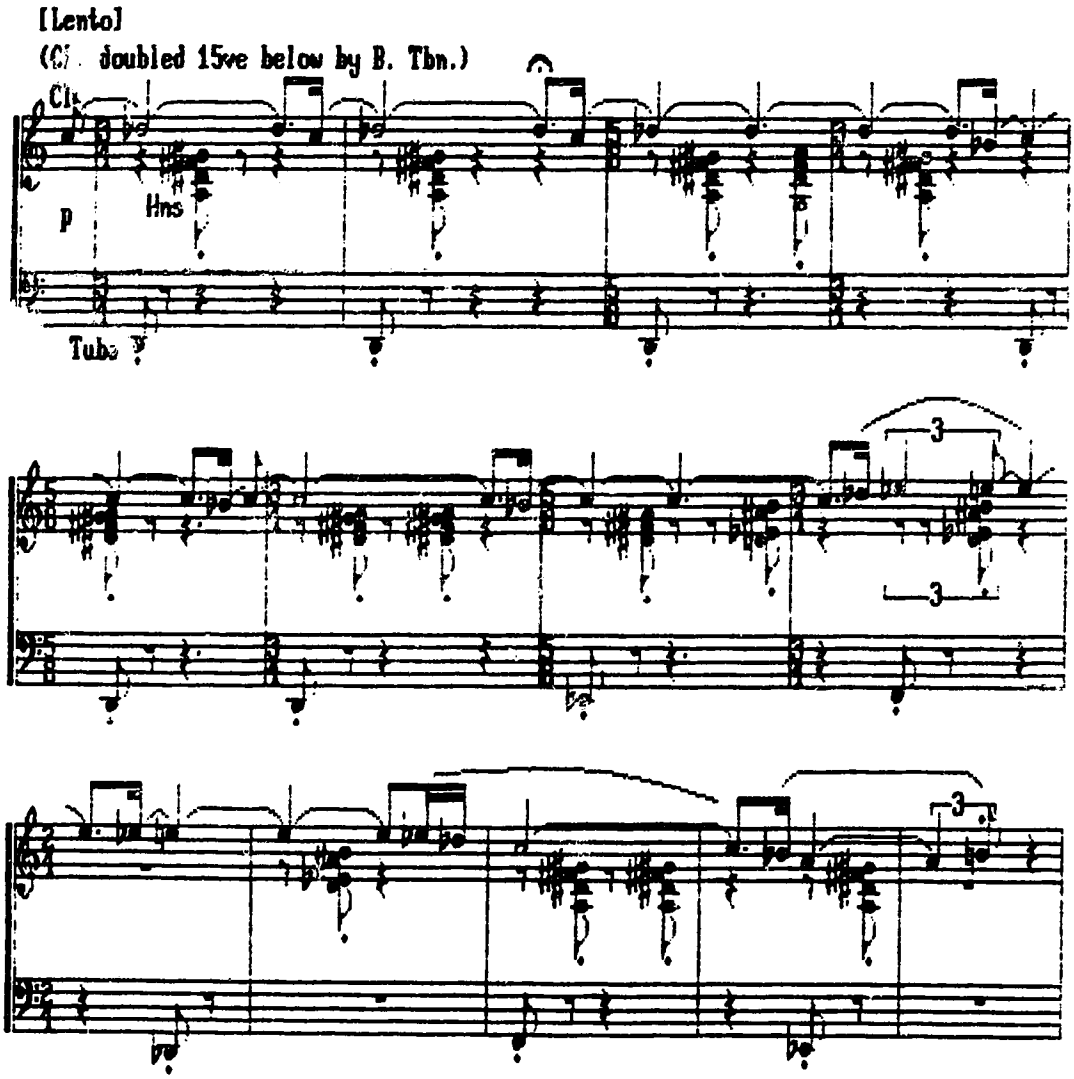


Example 2.13



Example 2.13 (continued)

the scene, a new theme with a brooding quality gathers shape and provides an ironic comment when Macdonald announces reassuringly that "the Colonel's job is to protect all citizens of whatever hue" (Example 2.14).



Example 2.14

Later, in Act III, scene ii, this theme returns as Macdonald betrays Taché by mobilizing the militia. In the final scene of the opera, the theme--now the dominant strand in the musical texture--acquires both a sinister and tragic quality as Taché and Lemieux (Riel's lawyer) plead with Macdonald to delay Riel's execution, thus reinforcing musically the sense of irony underlining the whole opera.[114]

Riel's soliloquy at the end of the first act is an excellent example of Somers' sensitivity to psychological action. In a "nightmarish"[115] version of Psalm 18, Somers is able to build tension solely through the musical structure of a single, intense vocal line, unaccompanied except for a few violin notes (Example 2.15). He sings more and more passionately and deliriously, and as he does so, recitative is transformed into florid melismas. The structure mirrors the tension in the text, an expression of Riel's mental anguish as his vision comes alive.

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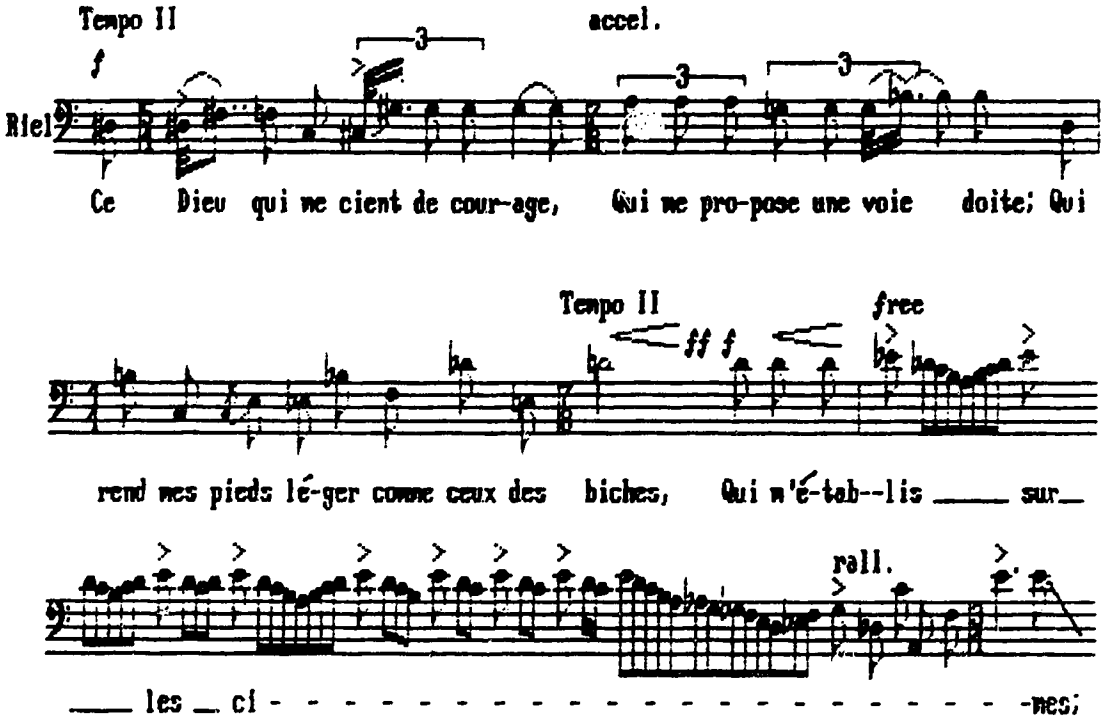
[114]In addition to the flute solo commonly used to close the opera, Somers provides an alternate--that cynical theme of betrayal--which shifts the emphasis of the ending from Louis Riel to Macdonald.

[115]Mavor Moore's term.



Example 2.15

Originally, Somers had also planned to add electronic sounds to Riel's vision. He wanted the apparition to

> occur in his mind first and then gradually, as he sings the Song of David, I want the sound almost imperceptibly to begin to vibrate around [the audience]...so that finally, at the very climax,...the whole hall will be permeated with sound. Then a sudden cut will focus the whole attention back on the stage.[116]

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[116]Somers, "Louis Riel: The Score":46.

However, he eventually decided to let the vocal line and the audience's imagination create the desired effect.

As with the previous categories, events are articulated not just by the music (although it is a powerful force), but also by the specific nature of the actors' movements, the particular lighting techniques applied, and even the set. In Riel's soliloquy that ends the first act, the particular movements and gestures that Riel--or, more precisely, Bernard Turgeon, the singer portraying the character of Riel--uses in the television production are heightened by effective lighting. He begins his solo sitting at a table at centre stage, the only area that is lit. He sinks to his knees, and as he sings his Psalm, he shifts across the shadow-filled floor, gesticulating forcefully to emphasize the ends of his phrases. As Riel sings more passionately, he stands up, swaying and staggering as if out of control. Finally his vision overcomes him and he collapses once more on the floor. His mother enters to his cries, and Louis, on his hands and knees points out toward the audience, saying "Je l'ai vu!" He sinks back in his mother's arms as the lights dim, focusing on him. His mother asks him what he saw and he replies, with glazed eyes, "Je suis David!" This visual presentation, combined with Riel's intense vocal line, presents a powerful image of Riel's vision and the force

it exerts upon him. An imaginative staging (a combination of many changeable factors) inspired by the score and libretto (both fixed portions of the opera) deepens the emotional intensity of the event.

The battle interlude in which Riel's forces are defeated by the Canadians provides another example of a performance text bringing out ideas and feelings in the written text. The battle itself is not staged. Instead, an orchestral interlude with a taped chorus and electronic sounds suggests the feeling of the conflict.[117] The music builds to a tremendous climax, then "cracks and falls apart."[118] The sounds and voices emanate from a number of speakers placed around the theatre, creating a surrealistic effect. Again, the full effect is not conveyed by the music alone. The visual presentation plays a key role in relating the events and intensifying the emotional impact. Murray Laufer describes the technique used for the stage production:

> For the battle scene I've used a kind of television technique--a front projection of a grassy field with flowers, since the battle took place in summer, on which there are black and white photos of the battle of Batoche. Behind, there will be three additional screens lit up to show other scenes or a different aspect of the battle

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[117]Somers foreshadows the battle by using the same music in the opera's introduction.

[118]Somers, "Louis Riel: The Score":46.

> and to depict various incidents during the battle. All is cued and punctuated by the music: an Indian in torment, someone lying dead on the field or Middleton on a horse.[119]

The interaction of the orchestral music, the screen projections, and the spatial placement of the electronic sounds vividly describe how Riel's small force and the aspirations of the Métis people are defeated by the Canadians.

Summary

The traditional approach to analyzing opera, based on the score and the libretto, provides essential information about the fundamental core of the opera being analyzed. One can demonstrate how music articulates the guiding dramatic concept of the work and how it defines characters, moods, and individual events--this kind of direct musical involvement is essential in any good opera. In Louis Riel, the libretto's contrasting themes, settings, moods, and tensions are echoed in the score through diverse musical styles. The two main character types--the romantic and the realist--are highlighted through different types of vocal delivery. Riel's Cree

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[119]Laufer, in accompanying notes to the recording of the Washington performance.

wife, in particular, is vividly characterized by native melodies, rhythms, and timbres in her aria, "Kuyas." Specific events in the drama are musically articulated through such devices as direct mirroring of the emotion in the text (Riel's soliloquy at the end of Act I) and musical comments on the action (the Railway Scene).

In addition to what can be learned from the written work, supplemental information is provided in a performance text; the score and the libretto do not contain all the information. Investigation of one or more stage realizations, combined with the traditional analysis of the written work, can provide significant insights into how intrinsic meanings dormant in the text are revealed.

The following chapter describes how the score and libretto of Louis Riel provide the basis for the creation of a theatrical sign in a performance, supported by numerous smaller signs in the written and performance texts. The interaction of the various theatrical message systems is examined at three important dramatic points in the opera in order to demonstrate how the theatrical sign's supporting structure is created.

CHAPTER THREE

While providing essential information about the relationship of the music to the drama, a text-based analysis of Louis Riel does not consider the additional information that is communicated when the opera is realized on stage. The creative use of lighting and set design, the movements of the actors on the stage, and their physical relationships all interact with the score and libretto to create a realization of the written work that enriches its meaning in a single theatrical macro-sign whose meaning resides in its total effect. The complex nature of the communication process in the theatre and the variability of the numerous performance aspects ensure that this sign has a multivalent character. However, because of the inherent intertextuality of the written and performance texts, the range of possible stage realizations is limited by what the written portion allows. Mavor Moore's libretto contains a number of themes that can form a part of the macro-sign created by Louis Riel (see Chapter 2). Many of the themes describe confrontations (English against French, or White against Native, for example); others relate to the character of Riel (the Hamlet syndrome and the idealist driven mad by

betrayals by realists); still others describe more universal concepts.

For this analysis, one such theme, the power of faith and spirituality, is investigated. First, the analysis explains how the written work provides the basis for the creation of this particular sign. This is followed by an examination of the convergence of various message systems at three key points in the opera in order to show how the sign of faith and spirituality arises from an interactive structure of smaller signs.

The theatrical sign of faith and spirituality.

The theatrical sign of faith and spirituality in Louis Riel is broadly expressed through the presentation of the main character, both in the dramatic and theatrical contexts. Riel symbolizes individual faith and spirituality, made evident by the "journey" he makes through the opera. The first act presents a picture of a deeply religious man. This is most vividly shown in Act I, scene iv, when he has a vision while singing his own version of Psalm 18. The force of this vision develops in the second act, when a conflict erupts between Riel's faith and the Catholic Church. Despite the protests of Julie and Sara, Riel refuses to stop Scott's execution. Act III presents the flowering of Riel's religious

strength. In the Church Scene, Riel usurps the power of the local Catholic priest to promote his holy mission of leading his people into battle against the Canadians. When he is defeated and tried for treason, his mother, Julie, provides him with the spiritual strength to continue. In a brief recess during the court proceedings (III,v), she assures him that God has not abandoned him. By the time Riel finally faces his own execution, he has rejoined the Church and is reconciled with God.

The drama creates a parallel between Riel and Christ: Riel follows a holy mission and generates a fanatical following; he is eventually tried and put to death; and at the climax of Louis Riel, the spirit of Riel transcends his death to continue in the souls of the Métis people.

The strong sign generated by the character of Riel is supported by many other subsidiary religious signs. A number of prominent characters directly represent the Catholic Church: Taché, André, and Moulin are all priests, while Julie and Sarah are nuns. Crosses appear throughout the work, from personal crosses, worn or carried, to a large crucifix at the altar in the Church Scene. Riel's Bible and Julie's rosary also form conspicuous visual religious signs.

Supporting signs

The sign of faith and spirituality becomes extremely important in three crucial scenes--the Church Scene, Riel's Trial Scene,[120] and Riel's Execution. These scenes symbolize Riel's apotheosis, his fall, and his eventual death. Additional signs are created in these scenes that relate to Riel's spirituality and that of his wife, expressed in "Kuyas" at the beginning of the third act. In the Church Scene, spirituality is shown as a potent motivating force; in the Trial Scene, faith and spirituality are seen as a comforting force amidst adversity; in the Execution Scene, spirituality is presented as a transcendent power. The following analysis explores the way in which the concurrent articulations of music, text, and specific visual factors generate the above-mentioned signs in those three scenes. For each scene, the function of music and text are discussed, followed by an examination of the visual aspects. The main reference for the analysis is the CBC television production of Louis Riel.

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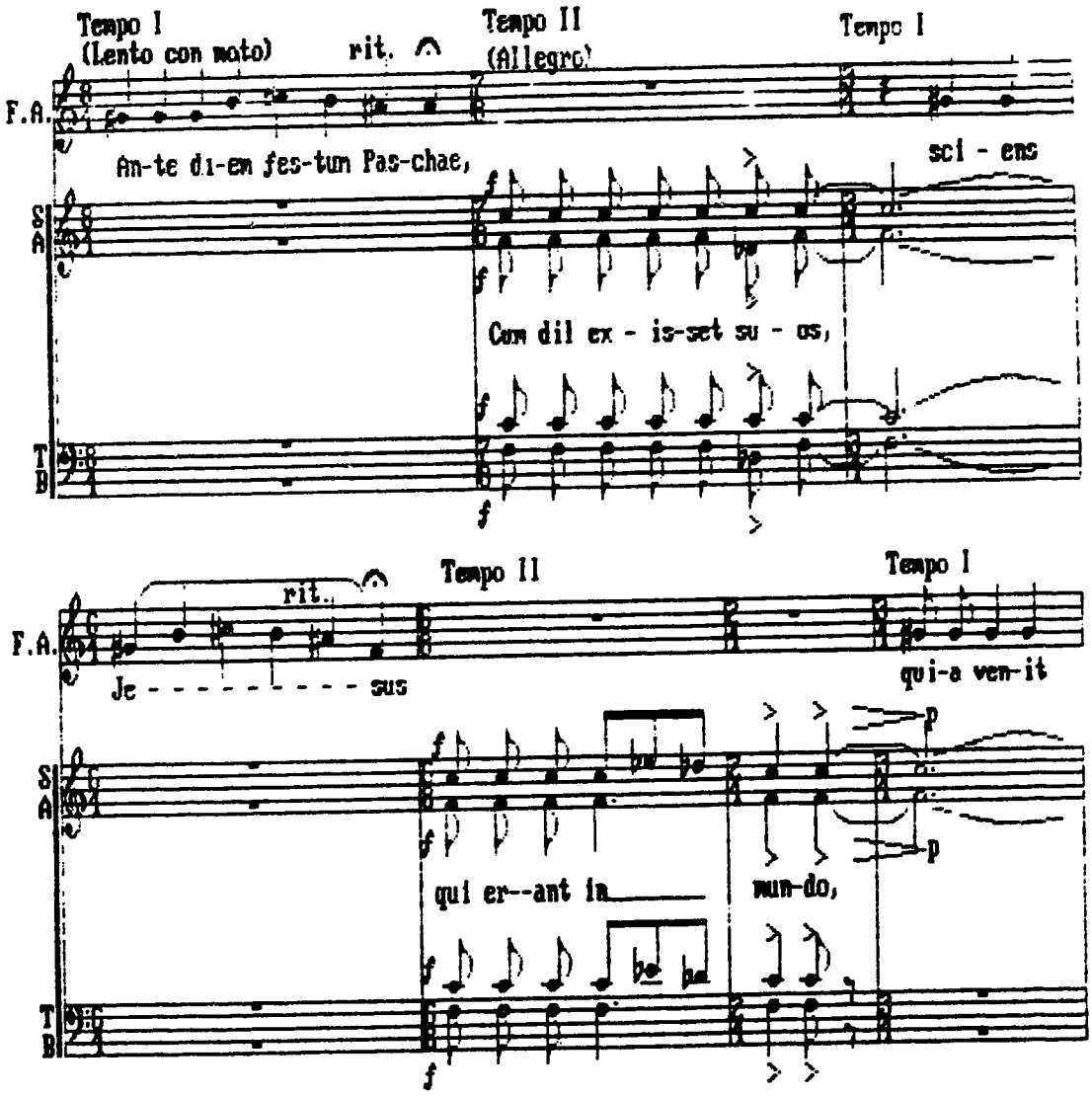
[120]What is conveniently termed the Trial Scene is actually three scenes (III,iv-vi). The trial is broken into two parts, separated by a brief scene in Riel's cell.

The Church Scene

The Church Scene represents the height of the second "cycle" of rise-fall in Riel's journey through the opera: the Apotheosis of the Prophet. He wrests control from the Church and, when a vision of his comes true, he is declared a prophet by his people.

Music and text

The music at the opening of the Church Scene directly communicates the religious setting. Father André and his congregation are celebrating Maundy Thursday mass and are singing responsively a Latin text (Example 3.1). During the service, Wandering Spirit, war chief of the Crees, enters and approaches menacingly with his armed Indian braves. The religious atmosphere dissipates as Father André is unable to continue the service. The choral texture created by the congregation is replaced by the lean instrumental texture found in the opening confrontational scene of the opera: nervous chromatic fluttering motives by the piccolo with loose rhythmic interpolations by various drums and cymbals (Example 3.2). With this music Riel enters the church, confronts Father André, and challenges his authority.


Tempo I
(Lento con moto)
rit.
Tempo II
(Allegro)
Tempo I
F.A.
An-te di-em fes-tum Pas-chae,
sci - ens
S
A
Cum dil ex - is-set su - os,
T
B
rit.
Tempo II
Tempo I
F.A.
Je - - - - - - - - - - sus
qui-a ven-it
S
A
qui er--ant in mun-do,
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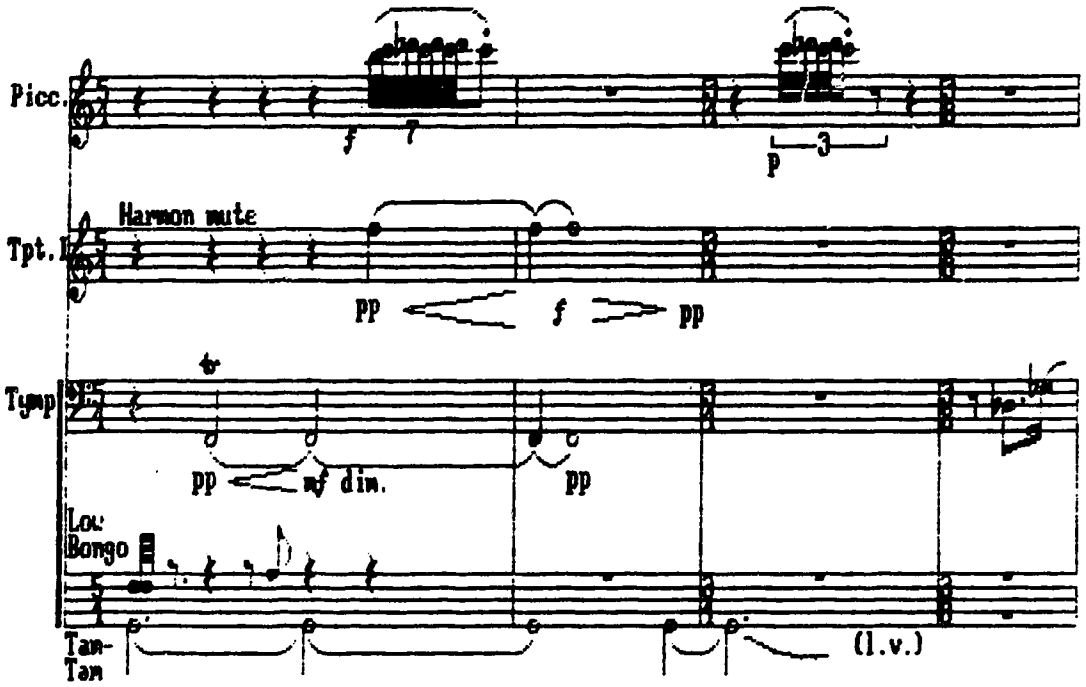
B

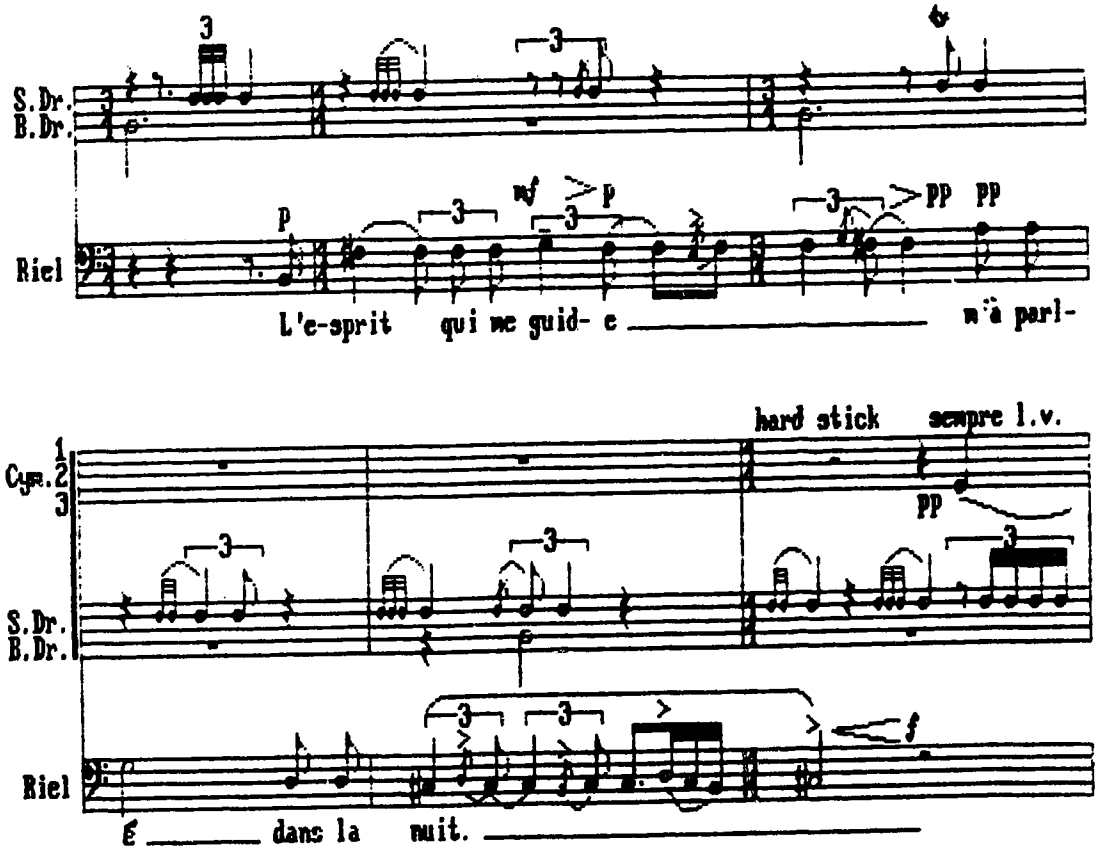
Example 3.1



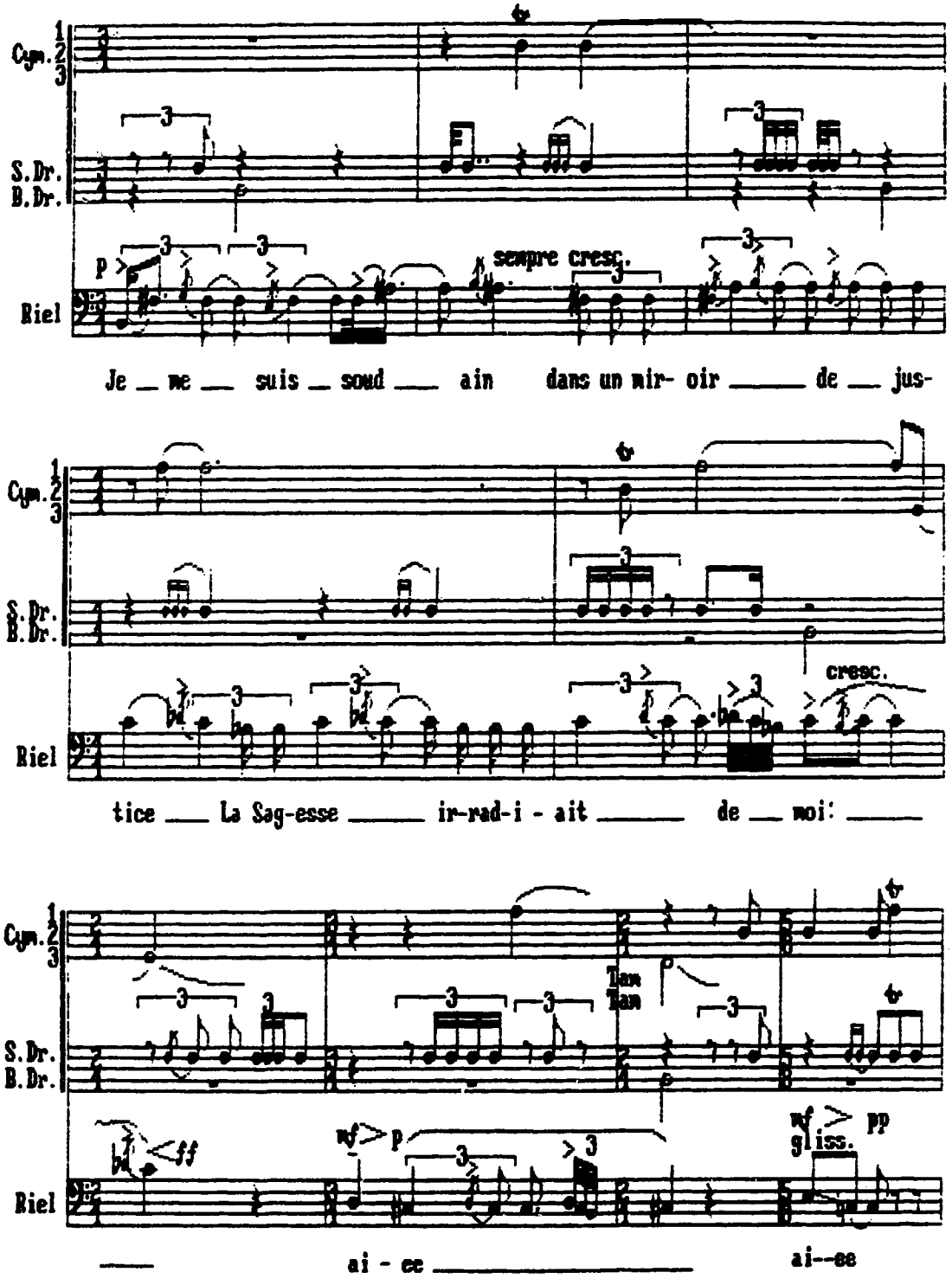
Example 3.2

Riel eventually steps to the pulpit and addresses the congregation. In the ensuing solo, a sign indicating Riel's spiritual power and strength is presented. Riel tells the congregation of a vision of an army ("dark geese") coming from the East. As Riel sings, a reminder of Marguerite's deep spirituality becomes strongly evident. Riel's arioso takes the form of four "verses" that derive their melodic material directly from "Kuyas" (Example 3.3). Riel uses the first section of "Kuyas" as a basis

for elaboration and ornamentation. Between each verse is a short bridge consisting of the vocable, "Ai-ee," also from Marguerite's aria.



Example 3.3



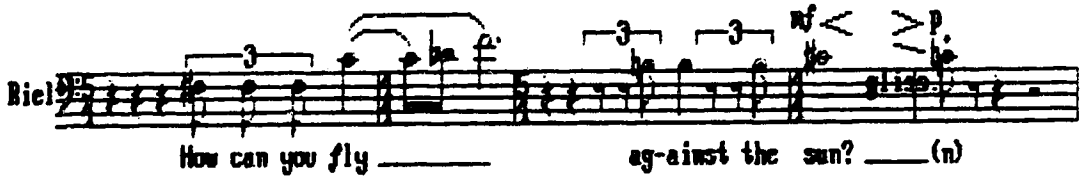
Example 3.3 (continued)

During the first verse of the aria, Riel is accompanied sparsely by a snare drum, a bass drum, and cymbals. However, as he begins the second verse, nervous, chromatic scale-like motives appear, first in the oboe, then the celeste, clarinet, viola and other instruments, increasing the density and volume of the accompaniment. This communicates Riel's growing religious fervour and the resulting trance-like state of the congregation. Riel's vocal line grows more intense and florid and the instrumental texture thickens and becomes dominated by the winding chromatic motives as Riel's arioso captivates his audience.

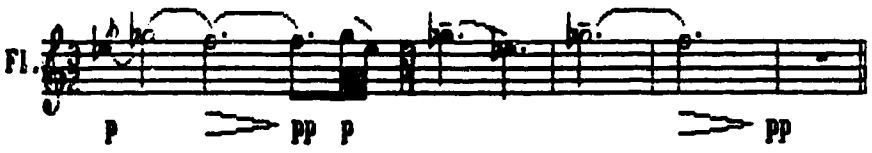
When Riel's vision comes true, the congregation sees him as a real prophet worthy to be followed. They loudly sing his praises in a tremendous outburst of the "Riel Chorus" theme, supported by the brass and punctuated forcefully by the cymbals and tympani.

Only at the end of the scene does Riel reveal any self-doubt: "Maybe those dark geese, they were half breeds./ How can you fly against the sun?" The final word, "sun," is sung on the mournful falling minor second prevalent in "Kuyas" (Example 3.4). This is followed by the quiet flute solo that has become associated with Riel from the first scene of the opera (Example 3.5). The

effect is one of dark foreboding; he realizes that he may have misunderstood his vision.



Example 3.4



Example 3.5

Visual aspects

Although the music presents strong signs by itself, the visual aspects of the Church Scene are equally strong; the set, costumes, movements, and gestures combine with the music to create powerful signifiers of religion and the struggle that results in Riel's ascent to power.

The religious atmosphere of this scene is immediately indicated by the setting itself: the interior of a country church[121]. The fragmented set is dominated by huge angled beams representing the sloped roof of the small church. A crucifix stands atop the altar (stage right) covered with a white cloth. Numerous large, cut-out crosses, are interspersed with clouds, and sunburst patterns on backdrops, providing additional strong religious indicators.

The altar and pulpit are set higher than the pew area, and this division of levels becomes symbolic of the power struggle that occurs in the scene between Riel and Father André. The central signifier of power in this conflict is the crucifix on the altar. At the beginning of the scene, it is clearly in the possession of Father André (and, by extension, the Catholic Church). Father André's higher position on the stage is another indicator of his control: he begins the scene at the altar, above Riel.

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[121]The libretto indicates that this represents the Catholic Church in Frog Lake, Saskatchewan.

During the scene, Riel challenges the Church's authority and steps up to the altar; he is now at the same height as Father André. By the end of the scene, Riel has thrown the priest down among the congregation while he remains above them all at the altar. He then takes the crucifix from its sacred position, boldly assuming the priest's power.

Costumes provide an additional sign of the conflict in the Church Scene: Father André wears a white frock, while Riel wears a dark suit. The contrast of light and dark heightens the contrast of spiritual purity with the apparently darker forces motivating Riel.

Movement and gesture function as strong signs of spiritual force and its motivating power. During Riel's "vision solo," the congregation becomes mesmerized and starts to sway slowly from side to side. Riel appears to enter a trance himself. His eyes start to roll and he sways as well. At the climax of his solo, Riel finally collapses on the pulpit. Isbister immediately bursts in and tells Riel that an army from the East is indeed coming. The congregation rises in amazement with arms outstretched to Riel as they sing the "Riel Chorus" theme (see Example 2.9). Meanwhile, Riel turns and walks slowly to the uncovered crucifix at the altar, with his arms outstretched above his head. Almost painfully, he places his hands upon the crucifix and removes it from its sacred

spot. As a consummation of his power, he then holds the crucifix, which symbolizes the holy authority he has taken from the Church, firmly in front of him, and says to his people: "Le sort en est jeté:/ In the name of God we march!"

As the congregation files out of the church, another detail of the Riel-Christ parallel becomes apparent as he raises doubts about his vision. Seemingly unaware of the praises given him, Riel kneels before the altar, clutching the crucifix to his breast. The lights dim, leaving only a small spot on him as he reveals his uncertainty ("How can you fly against the sun?"). The lights then fade slowly on the silent, contemplative Métis leader. This is Riel's own private Gethsemane.

Riel's Trial

Riel's Trial Scene, immediately following the battle interlude, symbolizes the Fall of the Prophet. Riel is charged with treason in a very irregular trial whose outcome appears inevitable: the crowd wants blood and the court is willing to provide it. The only solace for Riel is his spiritual strength. Drawing upon his faith and that of his mother, Julie, he is eventually able to face his destiny with courage.

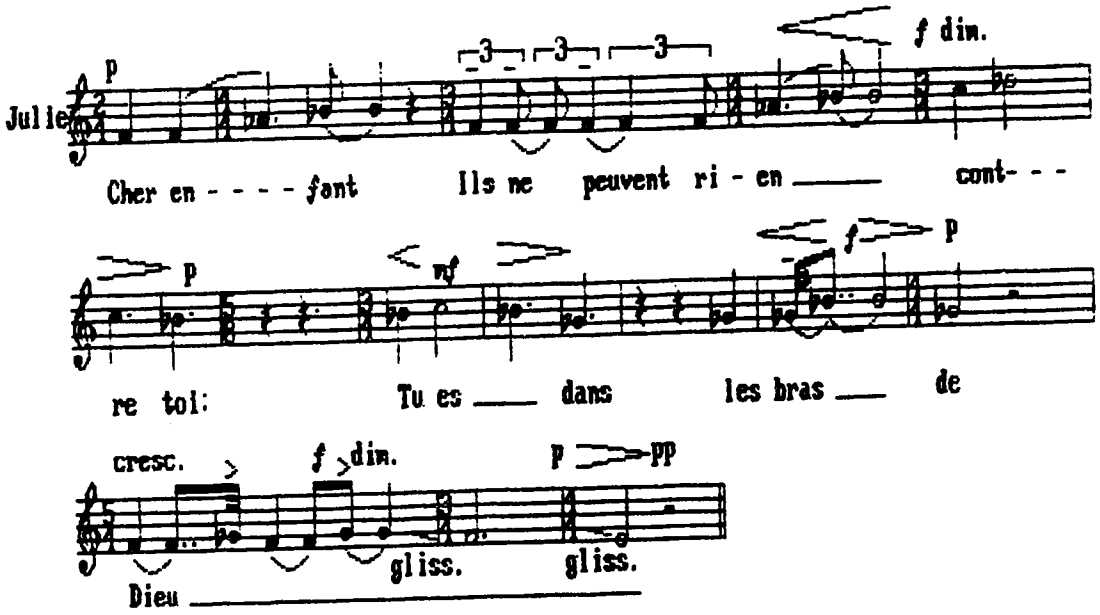
Music and text

The music accompanying the first half of the trial presents Riel stripped of his power and in the middle of a confusing series of events that he cannot comprehend. The trial is conducted completely in rhythmic speech, detached and unemotional. The only instances of singing occur when Riel repeatedly attempts to raise objections during the proceedings. Each time he is silenced by the judge. His ability to sway his listeners with his singing has left him; he is no longer in control of events.

The grotesque, dreamlike nature of the events is heightened by the behaviour of the chorus and the agitated, disorderly rhythms of the orchestra, emphasized by the prominent use of snare drum, xylophone, and vibraphone. The bloodthirsty crowd interrupts the proceedings with laughter and torment Riel with rhythmic chants, such as "Traitor!", "Hang him! Hang him!", and "Death! Death! Death!"

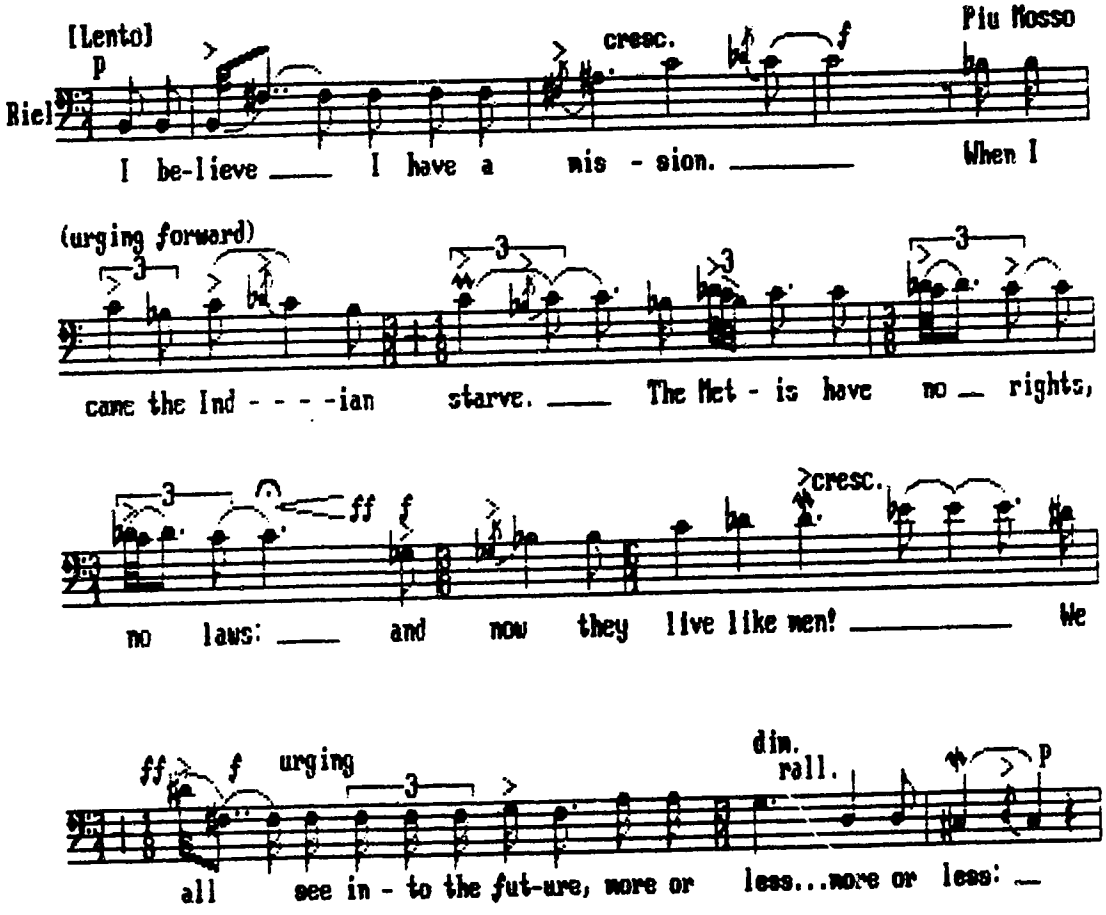
The court takes a recess and in the brief scene in Riel's jail cell (III,v), Riel's mother tries to console her son and pleads with him to return to the Church and ask forgiveness for his sins. The spiritual fortitude that Julie provides is evident in her vocal line, which combines some of the motives from "Kuyas" with a melody associated with Riel, that of the opening tenor solo

(Example 3.6). In strong contrast to the music in the courtroom, their calm dialogue is highly lyrical, with an equally lyrical instrumental accompaniment. The effect signifies an image of spirituality as comforter.



Example 3.6

The second half of the trial consists of Riel's defence, in which the spiritual strength given to Riel by his mother is made evident. The orchestral instruments fall silent as Riel opens with a quiet prayer. Riel sings his entire arioso unaccompanied. "Kuyas" again provides his basic musical material (Example 3.7). It is as if Riel has looked inward and has found that, although he is separated from his beloved wife, her deep Indian spirituality is within him. As he describes his situation, the emotions presented in Marguerite's aria increase the pathos of Riel's plea. Marguerite's story of the passing of the great chief is finally coming true, but Riel appears able to accept his fate now. Riel sings his defence directly and fervently, and ends quietly, with resignation, placing his fate in God's hands with a final "Kuyas-like" semitone ornament on his last note (Example 3.8).


[Lento]
p
Riel
cresc.
f
Più Mosso
I be-lieve — I have a vis - sion. —
When I
(urging forward)
came the Ind - - - -ian starve. — The Met - is have no — rights,
ff
f
cresc.
no laws: — and now they live like men! —
We
ff
f
urging
din.
rall.
p
all see in - to the fut-ure, more or less...more or less: —

Example 3.7

Example 3.8

Visual aspects

The set and lighting used in the Trial Scene create a mood of foreboding that contribute to the sign that indicates the Fall of the Prophet. This is a much darker scene than the Church Scene; everyone is dressed in dark colours and the cyclorama is left unlit. The lack of a backdrop accentuates the eerie and almost unreal quality of the scene; the few elements of the set--seats, desks, witness box--indicate a courtroom, but it is surrounded by blackness. During the scene in Riel's cell, the lights on the courtroom fade out, revealing skeleton-like silhouettes of many gallows and scaffolding behind the tableau of the courtroom. This striking visual effect foreshadows the coming death of Riel.

Riel's subordinate position in the Trial Scene is emphasized by his physical placement on the stage. In the Church Scene, when he was at the height of his power, he stood higher than everyone else on stage; now a prisoner, he is relegated to a much lower position, surrounded on three sides by the chorus, sitting above him on steep risers.

The actions of the chorus indicate further Riel's weak position. Not only are insults hurled at him throughout the proceedings, but individuals stand up and shake their fists at him in rage. Riel responds simply with a silent look of incomprehension; he does not control events now. Although the crowd sits silently for Riel's defence, with grim faces fixed on him, their fury is unleashed at the end of the scene. They leave their seats to circle Riel and sing a violent reprise of "We'll Hang Him Up the River," shaking their fists menacingly in his face. The theatrical sign showing the Prophet's Fall before the angry mob presents another parallel with Christ.

The significance of the brief scene in Riel's jail cell is heightened by the physical presentation of the character of Riel. When the court announces the recess, a disconsolate, defeated Riel is led out of the courtroom, head down and shoulders slumped. That his mother provides

him with strength becomes apparent when he is called back to the courtroom. He faces the crowd with a peaceful visage and a straight posture. When he makes his defence, the religious fervour of his vision in the Church Scene is replaced with a quiet serenity. The wild gesticulations previously characteristic of Riel are no longer present. Violent emotionalism appears to have been replaced with calm acceptance and quiet inner strength.

Riel's Execution

The final scene of Louis Riel contains the climax of the drama, the Death of the Prophet. Here, music interacts with the visual presentation to form strong signs that indicate that Riel's deep spirituality has its source in a transcendent power.

Music and text

In the Execution Scene, the music creates a feeling of growing tension, inevitability and doom, as it announces the coming death of Riel. A loud, funereal introduction laden with brass and heavy percussion opens the scene. Macdonald's "Betrayal Theme" appears fortissimo in the strings, but when Taché and Lemieux appeal to Macdonald to postpone the hanging, the orchestral

accompaniment hushes. In a subdued accompaniment to the dialogue, the "Betrayal Theme" is developed by the woodwinds and strings. The chromatic melodies wind their way higher and higher, louder and louder, with increasingly agitated percussion interjections. This agitation is echoed by Taché and Lemieux as they become more desperate, with their melodies reaching higher and becoming strained. Macdonald refuses to budge, and, using Riel's own words for his defence, states firmly: "I cannot let one foolish man stand in the way of a whole nation!" At this point, the full force of the orchestra is unleashed. The "Betrayal Theme" is sounded by the flute, oboe, and trombones, while a variation of the "Riel Chorus" (on tape) is loudly proclaimed by the chorus. All this is accompanied by great strokes of a gong (also on tape).

The music ends abruptly and the scene quickly switches back to Ottawa for a dénouement consisting of a single line. Schultz looks at his watch and finally speaks: "The God damn son of a bitch is dead." Significantly, this line is neither sung nor accompanied by the orchestra. The voice of music is silenced; the realists appear to have won the immediate battle. Throughout the opera, passionate melody has been associated with Riel's passion and spirituality, so the

absence of melody at this point emphasizes the finality of Riel's death.

A lone flute returns to mourn, playing a variant of the opening tenor solo (see Example 2.3). It summarizes the events of the third act (and, indeed, the whole opera) through the accumulated associations that have become attached to its melody and timbre. These range from Marguerite's aria foreshadowing Riel's defeat, to Julie's quiet spiritual strength, to Riel's fate itself, announced at the opera's beginning.

Visual aspects

The visual presentation of the final scene creates powerful signs that show Riel's death and the transcendent power of his spirit. The staging/filming method presents the events in Ottawa and at Riel's execution at the same time. Superimposed on the Ottawa scene is an oversized image of Riel, from the waist up. As the hour of his death nears, the Ottawa scene fades out, leaving just the image of Riel's face in front of a cloud-filled backdrop. The "Riel Chorus" is sung while the light on Riel's face slowly dims, revealing only his silhouette. His death is not actually shown; rather, the creative use of light and the disappearance of Riel's face symbolize his death. The

full effect of the climax is not simply musical, but a powerful combination of musical and visual events.

The end of the opera is not completely tragic. Riel's calm appearance at his execution indicates that he has reconciled his soul with God. An additional sign indicates that the spirit of Riel actually transcends his death. The taped "Riel Chorus" presents a choral melody without the corresponding physical presence of singers, and this absence of singing bodies creates an effect of "heavenly voices" calling to Riel. The idea that Riel's spirit is no longer confined to himself, but has been freed, to live on in the Métis (and Canadian) people, is emphasized by a concluding statement that appears on the screen: "Louis Riel's battle is not yet over. Those who share his thirst for social justice should preserve his memory in their minds and hearts."[122] While in one sense Riel's death in the opera is final, it is also a beginning, a giving of his spirit and responsibility to others.

Considering the essential message of the work

Louis Riel was commissioned in 1967 for Canada's centennial celebrations. It was fitting to have as the subject of a centennial opera a man who had played an

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[122]Quoted from former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau.

instrumental part in the forming of the country. Riel was presented as a sympathetic character,[123] a charismatic rebel against oppression and a man with whom Canadian audiences of the day could identify. The audiences did, however, have a problem accepting John A. Macdonald's portrayal as an almost farcical alcoholic. As Mavor Moore pointed out, "People weren't willing at that time [1967] to see the Father of the Nation as that kind of sophisticated, drinking man."[124]

Throughout his life, Riel was an enormously ambiguous figure.[125] Was he a hero of the nation and wrongly condemned to death, or was he a traitor, an unstable man who led "a suicidal crusade for a doomed cause?"[126] This question has remained unanswered and the opera leaves room for convincing interpretations either way.

Regardless of how Riel is presented, the constant factors of the opera's meaning are the opposing tensions that form some of the dissonances basic to the Canadian identity: English-French, Native-White, Church-State,

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[123]Schafer, The Public of the Music Theatre,18.

[124]Moore, in Littler interview.

[125]See, for instance, Thomas Flanagan, Riel and the Rebellion: 1885 Reconsidered (Saskatoon, Saskatchewan: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1983); Hartwell Bowsfield, ed., Louis Riel: Selected Readings (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., 1988).

[126]Schafer, The Public of the Music Theatre,18.

Colonialism-Independence, Civilization-Wilderness.[127] In addition to these typically Canadian themes, other aspects of the work are more universal, such as the charismatic leader of a small group of people fighting off the world for what he believes is right.[128] Mavor Moore describes the reception of the opera at the Kennedy Center in Washington:

> [W]e were all worried...that the Americans wouldn't understand it. They had no trouble with it whatever.... It was, for them, simply a human situation. And so that became an important aspect in terms of the international understanding of this Canadian work.[129]

Louis Riel is directed at the political and social problems of Canada, "problems for which solutions have become no simpler with the passage of time."[130] Indeed, if Louis Riel were to be staged today, many parallels could be drawn between the events of the 1880's and contemporary Canadian political issues (for example, constitutional wranglings, Federal-Provincial relations, Native demands, and the tenuous relationship between Quebec and the rest of Canada); likewise, strong

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[127]Ibid.

[128]Moore, in Littler interview.

[129]Ibid.

[130]George A. Proctor, Canadian Music in the Twentieth Century (Toronto: University of Toronto Press,1980),151.

comparisons with the political figures of Riel's day and the present political personalities could be made.

The theatrical sign of faith and spirituality identified in the above analysis is not simply an accretion to the work found only in a particular performance. It functions as an important part of the overall meaning of the work, due to the prevalence of many smaller supporting signs that have their basis in the written work: religious characters; the setting of the Church Scene; Riel's confrontation with Father André; and, Riel's visions. The sign as presented in the written work has many other potential aspects (for example, spirituality as a falsehood) that can be emphasized in the performance. It is even possible to minimize the importance of this particular sign in favour of some other signs. However, the sign itself cannot be completely erased without drastically altering the written text.

Summary

Consideration of both the written and performance texts of Louis Riel reveals how inherent meanings in the score and the libretto are realized through the creation of a large theatrical sign, and how additional meanings are presented. These additional meanings are not simply

adjuncts to the original work, but have their roots in overt and concealed signs intrinsic to the written work.

The analysis in this chapter focused on one of the signs integral to the meaning of Louis Riel, the power of faith and spirituality. The score and the libretto provide the foundation for this sign through the character of Riel and his drama, and by numerous religious signs presented throughout the work. The CBC-TV production of Louis Riel presents a particular realization that strengthens the religious aspect. In the Church Scene, Riel's Trial Scene and Riel's Execution, signs representing the Apotheosis, Fall, and Death of the Prophet are created, and within this framework, the sign of faith and spirituality is shown as a motivating force, comforter, and transcendent power.

These signs are not just musical phenomena, nor are they simply a product of the visual presentation. They are generated through the interaction of the music, the text, and all the other pertinent message systems that exist in the theatre. The score and the libretto provide the fundamental inspiration for each realization of the opera. These in turn add information to the written work by emphasizing certain signs and relationships between them. Consideration of both the written and performed opera allows for a fuller understanding of the meanings inherent

in the music and poetry, some of which are not explicitly manifested in written form but become apparent in the stage enactment.

Because the primary reference used in the above analysis is a television adaptation (the CBC production of Louis Riel forms the most complete "account" of the opera), certain changes had to be made to the stage production to facilitate the transfer to the film medium. These are discussed in the following chapter, along with some of the aesthetic consequences of moving opera from the opera house to film and television.

CHAPTER FOUR

Opera in the theatre and opera on television

Although there are many similarities between experiencing opera in the theatre and experiencing it on television, important differences must also be taken into account. While watching a live stage presentation might be considered a direct experience of the drama, film adds a mediating influence to the audience's perception. The two have different emphases, and the manner in which the audience receives the work is radically different.

Unlike the theatre, in which the audience perceives the events on the stage from a constant distance and perspective, television (film) subjects this perspective to considerable variation as a result of the shifting camera positions and focus. The way a scene is perceived is further affected by the cutting and editing of the film or videotape, and by the use of fade-ins and fade-outs.[131] In this way the cameras fulfil a narrative function as a mediating communication system.

> The film audience, like the readers of a narrative text, is not confronted directly with the material presented, as is the audience in the theatre, but indirectly, via the selective,

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[131]Pfister, The Theory and Analysis of Drama,24.

> accentuating and structuring medium of the camera or narrator.[132]

When a stage work is filmed, the spatial grandeur of the stage is often sacrificed for the details of the performers' actions. The use of close-ups is criticized by some because they show things that are not meant to be experienced at close range, such as the facial contortions of a singer or the details of the orchestra.[133] However, used with discretion, the camera can take advantage of this ability to show many subtleties unavailable in the theatre.

Another major difference resides in the respective emphasis of the two experiences. In opera this tends to be musical, but the common treatment of television is primarily visual. When opera is transferred to the screen, the image becomes paramount[134] and the emphasis shifts from the ear to the eye. Important meanings in the music can at times be overshadowed by the visual imagery.

Experiencing an opera in a theatre is a social experience, shared, to an extent, with the other audience members. In the theatre, three important effects of the

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[132]Ibid.,24-25.

[133]See Henry Pleasants, Opera in Crisis: Tradition, Present, Future (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989),44-45.

[134]J. Merrill Knapp, The Magic of Opera (New York: Da Capo Press,1989),351.

communication among audience members contribute to an overall homogeneity of response: stimulation, confirmation, and integration. If a strong reaction (for example, laughter) occurs in one part of the audience, a similar reaction is often stimulated in others. Confirmation refers to audience members finding their own responses reinforced by others. Integration is the phenomenon in which "the single audience member is encouraged, by consequence, to surrender his individual function in favour of the larger unit of which he is part."[135]

In contrast to this, the television experience is usually more private than social. Except in certain educational contexts, television shows are viewed in much smaller groups and often by individuals. Consequently, the effects of stimulation, confirmation, and integration found in the theatre are much weaker for television viewers.

The rich environment associated with a live opera performance is filled with stimuli which are meant to capture and hold the audience's attention for a long period of time. The darkened auditorium, the stage spectacle, and the all-encompassing sound of the orchestra and the singers combine to produce a potentially

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[135]Elam, Semiotics of Theatre and Drama, 96-97.

captivating effect. This environment cannot be duplicated at home with a television set. The theatre auditorium is created for the purpose of focusing one's attention on an event; this is not so with one's house. Numerous distractions and interruptions are prevalent in the home that divert attention from the opera production. Even if these were eliminated, watching television is not the same as watching a live performance. The vibrancy of collective human creativity is replaced by a product that is compiled from various "takes." The larger-than-life quality of live opera is replaced by the reductive nature of the television set. The rich acoustic experience in a large theatre is often lost by the average home sound system. Essentially, what occurs with television is a general dilution of the overall effect.

While many operas do have a greater impact in the theatre, television does compensate through its greater intimacy and realism, and by the freedom afforded the camera. Therefore, it is not inconceivable that some operatic works could benefit from the television medium.

Approaches to filming opera

Generally, two main approaches to filming opera exist. The first consists of a stage (or studio) production simply recorded on film. The second is a film

adaptation of the opera. The former is the more "traditional" of the two approaches. Often the work is performed in an actual theatre, although many operas are also filmed in studios. With this method of filming, the general effect is one that attempts to show how a theatre audience might see the opera. The changing camera positions and angles, and the use of close-ups can be rationalized as representing the changing focus of the audience, while at the same time emphasizing important signs in the dramatic text.

The second approach is to create a film version of the opera, taking advantage of the medium's flexibility. Freed from the constraints of simply recording the events on the stage, a film adaptation can create realities impossible to duplicate in the theatre. It can also produce extremely powerful visual signs that reinforce particular meanings inherent in the written work in ways impossible on the stage.

In Max Ophuls' film of Smetana's The Bartered Bride (1932), a visual montage creates significant images that are emphasized through the use of the camera.

> Comedy is about the reassuring cycle of nature, and Ophuls illustrates this truth with a series of circular images. His plot begins when Wenzel's carriage loses a wheel; this begets a series of visual puns, connecting the wheel of fortune on which Marie wins a prize pig, the Ferris wheel, the floral circlet on the pole

> decorating the arena, and the wedding ring Hans presents to Marie.... The characters themselves rotate.... The camera tracks them in 360-degree loops...[136]

Although Ingmar Bergman's film of Die Zauberflöte (1973) shows a stage production, the camera sees beyond the performance on the stage; it looks back into the wings, following the performers on- and offstage and at times even focuses on the audience.

> Bergman's concern is the way Mozart's opera expands beyond the stage to encompass--and to be reenacted by--us all. One of the young Moors peers through a hole in a painted flat at the public assembled out front. The camera follows his gaze; it's always doing exactly the thing which the theater forbids--paying more attention to the audience than to the actors onstage. Thus, during the overture, Bergman studies the faces of the audience, which are excerpted from the global family of man: Swedish, Latin, African, Chinese, Indian, young and old, all of them innocently bright with hope. This conclave has been assembled by music, whose harmony... should prompt men everywhere to throw away their swords. Thanks to the camera, [Mozart's] music pervades the park outside the theater, where the sun is setting as the overture begins, and echoes as far as the homelands of those pilgrims who have convened to hear it.[137]

Bergman takes advantage of the unique abilities of the camera to enhance certain meanings of Mozart's work in ways impossible on a stage.

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[136]Peter Conrad, A Song of Love and Death: The Meaning of Opera (New York: Poseidon Press, 1987),266.

[137]Ibid.,271-72.

Adapting Louis Riel for television

The filming method used for the television production of Louis Riel is primarily that of a stage performance recorded on film, with few special effects, except for close-ups and shifting camera perspectives. However, some aspects of the second technique are evident. Headlines shown between scenes appear directly on the screen instead of functioning as part of the set. During the opera's introduction, images are flashed on the screen, representing some of the social and political conflicts that have erupted throughout Canada's history. Through a montage technique, the television production immediately places Riel's story in the context of the long line of confrontations dealing with minority rights in Canada.

Some introductory text, presented partly as a voice-over and partly as on-screen text is added to the beginning of the work:

> Ah, Canada! Said our fifteenth Prime Minister in the city of the trial, Regina, Saskatchewan, in October, 1968: "We must never forget that, in the long run, a democracy is judged by the way the majority treats the minority. Louis Riel's battle is not yet won." But not long ago, with an almost invisible nod from Sir John A. Macdonald, this was also said by Pierre Elliot Trudeau: "If a minority uses violence to black-mail the majority, our government, and no government of Canada, can back down in the face of such a threat."

Presented with an image of Trudeau next to that of Macdonald, an obvious parallel is created that further suggests the universal nature of the story of Louis Riel.

The move from opera house to television required changes in the staging of Louis Riel. The original stage presentation had been quite stylized, but the requirements of television in the 1960's dictated that it would have to be more realistic. The designer, Murray Laufer, attempted to retain the stylized, "super-realistic" effects of the stage version, but certain changes had to be made.

> For the stage version I'd used photo blow-ups, fragmented sets, painted backgrounds, slide projections, and although I strove for the same feeling for the telecast, TV's light levels made it difficult to use projections. For TV I used more complete sets.[138]

The more confined environment of the television studio also affected the staging method used. Without an expansive stage on which to work, the performers' movements had to be reduced considerably.[139]

A major change in the staging of the Execution Scene should be noted. The libretto indicates that the stage is divided into two areas for the final scene: on one side is a street on Parliament Hill, Ottawa; the other side is a

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[138]Schafer, The Public of the Music Theatre, 23.

[139]Ibid.

large open area filled only by a shadowy gallows on a platform. In the background, near the gallows, Father André is preparing Riel for his death. This provides a counterpoint to the scene in Ottawa. Riel and Macdonald never meet, but in this final scene, the two exist side by side on the same stage, their two separate "worlds" ironically juxtaposed for one last moment. In the television version, only the Ottawa scene is shown, with an image of Riel superimposed. While sacrificing the effect of simultaneous events, the television technique does directly juxtapose (albeit in a very different way) the protagonist and his nemesis.

The stage version also makes Riel's death more explicit. The libretto indicates that a noose is placed about Riel's neck. During the "Riel Chorus," Father André and Riel recite the Lord's Prayer, and on the words, "Deliver us from evil," a blackout of the gallows occurs. Although the television does not show these details, the use of fading light to indicate Riel's death is a common factor.

One final change deals with the emphasis at the end of the opera. The televised version ends with Taché alone on the stage with tear-filled eyes, contemplating his part in the events of the drama. In contrast, the libretto indicates that John A. Macdonald is to be the final

inhabitant of the stage, left alone to consider the consequences of his decision.

The representation of most of the characters remained the same in the television production as they were in the stage version, and many of the actors that played the major roles were retained. However, Franz Kraemer, the producer of the television production, mentioned that one major character was altered: Sir John A. Macdonald was made to appear less farcical.[140] This was partly in response to the refusal by audiences of the 1967 productions to accept the original presentation of the character.

Louis Riel was broadcast in its entirety without a break. Although some minor cuts were made for timing purposes, most of these involved musical bridges between the scenes. The result was a smoother transition from scene to scene.

Moving Louis Riel from the stage to the screen changes the way the work is perceived. The extensive use of camera close-ups and selective focus emphasizes particular visual signs; the high profile of faith and spirituality through the work is one result. However, the fundamental core of the opera--the written portion--is not changed significantly (only the short introductory text

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[140]Ibid.,23.

was added for the television version). The essential message is not altered; the taped production, like a live performance, emphasizes and extends certain inherent meanings, while leaving others in the background. The written portion determines the basic structure of both realizations, and thus constrains them both (although to different degrees). For this reason, the television production of Louis Riel can be considered a valid reference for studying performance aspects as long as the essential differences between stage and television are understood.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

The two analyses of Louis Riel reveal two different types of information about the work. The analysis in chapter two, based on the score and libretto, provides essential knowledge about how music functions within the music drama. Somers regularly juxtaposes and superimposes diverse musical styles and various levels of vocal production--from speech to fully sung line. This creates many layers that heighten the dramatic impact of events, define the characters, and create an authentic atmosphere for the scenes. On a larger scale the diversity echoes the contrasting themes and tensions in the libretto. The second analysis, presented in chapter three, demonstrates that, in addition to the meanings provided by the score and the libretto, supplemental information exists in a performance text. The television production of Louis Riel forms a theatrical communication which, through the interaction of various message systems (such as music, text, stage action, lighting, sets, and costumes), generates signs that realize inherent meanings in the score and libretto. In the Church Scene, Riel's Trial and Riel's Execution, a sign indicating faith and spirituality is manifested through an interactive structure of smaller

signs. It is first shown as a motivating force, then as a comforter, and finally as a transcendent power. Its overt presentation in the televised version of the opera is not simply an accretion that has no basis in the original work. Rather, because of the intertextuality of the written and performance texts, this sign is strongly rooted in the explicit and implicit meanings found in the libretto and score, thus forming an essential part of the overall meaning of the opera. The televised version simply provides numerous visual indicators that emphasize the religious nature of the sign.

Because of the smaller scale associated with the television medium and the spatial freedom afforded the camera, the CBC-TV production of Louis Riel provides an experience that differs from a live stage presentation of the same work. However, the essential meaning of the opera is not changed. The television performance is still constrained by the written work and, as such, realizes meanings inherent in the libretto and the music.

Combining a traditional approach to operatic analysis with the perspective of theatrical communication provides a fuller understanding of Louis Riel than would be possible by studying the music and poetry alone. Consideration of both the written and performed opera facilitates an awareness of how the intrinsic meanings of

the music and poetry are revealed, and because some of these meanings are not explicitly manifested in written form, a combined approach can provide greater insight into the full import of the work.

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APPENDIX I

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Louis Riel was born in 1844 in St. Boniface (in present-day Manitoba) to a Métis chief and a French-Canadian woman. He was educated at a Montreal seminary and remained extremely religious throughout his life. His education, his fiery personality, and his fluency in both French and Cree, made him the natural leader of the Métis in their struggle for self-determination.

In 1868 Canada was negotiating a deal to purchase Rupert's Land and the North-West Territory (originally granted to the Hudson's Bay Company by the British). The settlers of the area--British, French, Irish, Indian, Métis, and others--were not consulted and were not going to be compensated for their land, nor were they going to be given any citizenship rights. When government surveyors were sent out to mark off plots of land even before the deal was completed, the settlers, under the leadership of Riel, set up their own provisional government, claiming allegiance to the Queen alone.

Although Ottawa recognized this act as legal under the Law of Nations, Sir John A. Macdonald appointed a governor, William McDougall, and told him to wait just south of the border of the territory for the expected

proclamation that would give Canada power over the lands. In 1869, the impatient McDougall attempted to enter the territory with a forged proclamation. Two rebellions soon followed, both led by Riel: the Red River Uprising of 1869-70 and the North West Rebellion of 1884-85. Riel's forces were soundly defeated at Batoche in 1885, and although Riel was an American citizen by then, he was tried and hanged for treason.

APPENDIX II

PLOT SYNOPSIS

ACT I

SCENE I: (south of Fort Garry, 1869) Governor McDougall is prevented from entering Canada by a band of Métis. Thomas Scott attacks the Métis and is arrested.

SCENE II: (Fort Garry) Riel's provisional government has taken over Fort Garry. Riel frees Scott.

SCENE III: (the Prime Minister's office, Ottawa) John A. Macdonald meets with Bishop Taché, the intermediary for the rebels, and assures him of an amnesty for his people.

SCENE IV: (the house of Riel's mother) Riel envisions himself as David reincarnated and divinely called to lead his people.

ACT II

SCENE I: (the P.M.'s office) Taché and Macdonald agree on the terms by which Manitoba will enter Confederation. Macdonald promises an amnesty, but privately decides not to grant it because of an upcoming election.

SCENE II: (Fort Garry) Thomas Scott is arrested again, tried for treason, and sentenced to death.

SCENE III: (Fort Garry) Riel's sister and mother plead for Riel to spare Scott's life. He refuses and Scott is executed before a firing squad.

SCENE IV: (a Toronto railway station) Two leaders of a nationalist party arouse a local crowd with forged relics of Scott, now a martyr.

SCENE V: (the P.M.'s office) The questionable legality of Scott's execution has split Macdonald's cabinet. Colonel Wolseley advises marching on Fort Garry but is warned of Quebec's apprehensions. Macdonald suggests sending a peace-keeping force until the new governor arrives and Riel resigns.

SCENE VI: (Fort Garry) A scout informs Riel of a plan to lynch him. Riel flees and the army takes over the town.

ACT III

SCENE I: (Riel's house in Sun River, Montana, 1880) A delegation from Saskatchewan convinces Riel to return to lead a rebellion there.

SCENE II: (the P.M.'s office) Macdonald tells Taché to inform the rebels that whoever takes up arms will be refused the sacrament. Unknown to Taché, Macdonald orders the army to be mobilized.

SCENE III: (a church in Frog Lake, Saskatchewan, 1885) Father André's mass is interrupted by a band of

Indians. Riel arrives and, accusing the priest of working with the enemy, takes possession of the church. When he foretells the arrival of an army from the east, the people believe that Riel is a prophet.

SCENE IV: (the courtroom in Regina) The Métis have been defeated in battle and Riel is tried for treason. Riel's lawyer, Lemieux, tries to prove him not guilty by reason of insanity; the Crown expects to prove that he is sane and therefore guilty.

SCENE V: (Riel's cell) A despondent Riel receives a reassuring visit from his mother.

SCENE VI: (the courtroom) Riel assumes his own defence and eloquently pleads for his acquittal. The prosecution declines to make a final statement because Riel has so lucidly made their case.

SCENE VII: (a street in Ottawa) Taché and Lemieux plead for Macdonald to delay Riel's death sentence. Meanwhile Riel is hanged in Regina.