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DIALOGUE ON USE OF INDIGENOUS SONGS IN CANADIAN COMPOSITIONS HOSTED BY COC

Toronto – On April 19, 2017, the Canadian Opera Company is hosting a meeting at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, organized by **Dr. Dylan Robinson of Queen’s University**, to discuss First Nations song protocol and the use of Indigenous songs in Canadian compositions, such as Harry Somers’ *Louis Riel*.

Those who have been invited to the April 19 gathering are members of the Nisga’a, Métis and other First Nations arts and music communities, members of the 2017 *Louis Riel* production, representatives from the Canadian Opera Company, National Arts Centre, Canadian Music Centre, and Canada Council for the Arts, as well as advisors and executors to the estates of *Louis Riel*’s composer Harry Somers and librettist Mavor Moore.

“One intention of the gathering is to begin the process of developing policy related to Indigenous protocol for new music involving Indigenous participants, and music that misuses Indigenous song,” says **Dr. Dylan Robinson, Assistant Professor and Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Arts**. “This work of creative repatriation is essential in the ongoing process of reconciliation.”

The score of Somers’ *Louis Riel* includes the “Kuyas” aria, which opens Act III and is sung in Cree by the artist in the role of Marguerite Riel, Louis Riel’s wife. The music for the “Kuyas” aria was based on a Nisga’a mourning song called “Song of Skateen” that was recorded by Marius Barbeau and transcribed by Sir Ernest MacMillan on the Nass River in 1927.

“The COC is in a unique position to use its presentation of *Louis Riel* to discuss the issues arising from a longer history of colonialization and appropriation,” says **COC General Director Alexander Neef**. “These are complicated issues and we hope it leads to a future that takes into consideration the aesthetic, spiritual, cultural and educational ways forward.”

The “Song of Skateen” is one of hundreds of First Nations songs collected by ethnographers during the early 20th century, shared with the understanding that it was to keep them safe for future generations. Many agreed to have their songs recorded believing that the Indian Act’s censorship of performing their songs and dances would result in their eventual loss, unaware that these materials may one day be used in contemporary compositions without their consent. The “Song of Skateen”, a Nisga’a mourning song, was used by Harry Somers without knowledge of Nisga’a protocol that dictates that such songs must only be sung at the appropriate times, and only by those who hold the hereditary rights to sing such songs. To sing mourning songs in other contexts is a legal offence for Nisga’a people and can also have negative spiritual impacts upon the lives of singers and listeners.

“Given that this particular song was made available through ethnographic recording/transcription currently held within a museum collection, it is also our hope that we may think about new possibilities and creative projects for music organizations to support the work of reconnecting Indigenous songs with Indigenous artists,” adds **Robinson**.

With respect to both the Nisga’a and Métis peoples and in recognition of how the songs of one nation are not the same as another’s, the COC and NAC co-production of *Louis Riel* acknowledges the current holder of the hereditary rights to this song: Sim’oogit Sgat’iin, hereditary chief Isaac Gonu, Gisk’ansnaat (Grizzly Bear Clan), Gitlaxt’aamiks, B.C.

In recognition of the Nisga'a people and to correct the attribution of "Song of Skateen," the COC's opening night performance of *Louis Riel* on April 20 will begin with an oratory and musical address from Goothl Ts'imilx Mike Dangeli and Wal'aks Keane Tait of the Nisga'a First Nation with the Git Hayetsk and Kwhlii Gibaygum Nisga'a Dancers, two internationally renowned dance groups from Vancouver, B.C.

The purpose of the April 19 consultation event is not to reach a conclusive decision, but to open a dialogue between relevant parties and organizations that will clarify these issues in the future.

About Dylan Robinson

Professor Dylan Robinson is a scholar of Stó:lō descent who holds the Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Arts at Queen's University, located on the traditional lands of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples. His research has been supported by national and international fellowships at the Faculty of Music at the University of Toronto, in the Canadian Studies Program at the University of California Berkeley, the Indigeneity in the Contemporary World project at Royal Holloway University of London, and a Banting Postdoctoral fellowship in the First Nations Studies Program at the University of British Columbia. His most recent book, the edited collection *Arts of Engagement* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016) examines the role that the arts and Indigenous cultural practices played in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the Indian Residential Schools. His forthcoming book, *Hungry Listening*, focuses on collaboration between Indigenous performers, composers and artists and classical music ensembles.

About the Canadian Opera Company

Based in Toronto, the Canadian Opera Company is the largest producer of opera in Canada and one of the largest in North America. The COC enjoys a loyal audience support-base and one of the highest attendance and subscription rates in North America. Under its leadership team of General Director Alexander Neef and Music Director Johannes Debus, the COC is increasingly capturing the opera world's attention. The COC maintains its international reputation for artistic excellence and creative innovation by creating new productions within its diverse repertoire, collaborating with leading opera companies and festivals, and attracting the world's foremost Canadian and international artists. The COC performs in its own opera house, the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, hailed internationally as one of the finest in the world. Designed by Diamond Schmitt Architects, the Four Seasons Centre opened in 2006. For more information on the COC, visit coc.ca.

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