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## **CANADIAN OPERA COMPANY'S 2017 REVIVAL OF *LOUIS RIEL* FEATURES VOICES NOT HEARD BEFORE**

### ***A Uniquely Canadian Contribution to Opera Revisited for the 21st Century***

**Toronto** – *Louis Riel*, composed by Harry Somers with libretto by Mavor Moore, is a uniquely Canadian contribution to the opera world. First performed in 1967 and last performed by the COC in 1975, *Louis Riel* returns to the stage in 2017 in a new co-production between the COC and **National Arts Centre** (NAC) that works to revise the opera's colonial biases and bring forward its inherent strengths and power. *Louis Riel* runs for seven performances by the COC on **April 20, 23, 26, 29, May 2, 5, 13, 2017** at Toronto's Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts before making its way to Ottawa to be presented by the NAC on June 15 and 17, 2017.

Somers' *Louis Riel* is the epic presentation of an intensely contentious moment in Canada's political history dramatizing the story of the Métis leader, Louis Riel, and Canada's westward expansion, while also being a landmark work in the canon of Canadian opera. At its 1967 world premiere, the *Globe and Mail* announced that with *Louis Riel* “[Canadian opera took] its first gigantic step forward,” *Time* magazine declared it an “undeniably masterful score,” and *Opernwelt* deemed the libretto “a masterpiece of dramatic concentration.” Its subsequent revival in 1975 at Washington's Kennedy Center was met with the pronouncement of being “one of the most imaginative and powerful scores to have been written in this century” (*Washington Star*).

“Even 50 years after its creation, *Louis Riel* still hits us with its bold and commanding vision. Somers and Moore created a unique, powerful and daring statement that makes the piece rank amongst the most important and interesting works of music theatre of the last century,” says **COC Music Director Johannes Debus**, who conducts the COC Orchestra when *Louis Riel* is presented in Toronto.

In reviving the opera for 2017, the COC/NAC co-production confronts the traditions and demands of an art form that make *Louis Riel* a dynamic and compelling opera and its collision with the voice, culture and representation of indigeneity. This production uses historical research and multiple community perspectives to expose the lines between truth and mythology and co-existing perspectives of settler and indigenous stances as Riel's story is told and retold.

“The challenges are many and well worth the undertaking. We're looking at this opera from a more inclusive perspective,” says *Louis Riel* director **Peter Hinton**. “We're not changing the intentions of the piece, but revisions are being made that honour the virtuosic complexity of the music, while allowing for the introduction of voices that have not been heard before.”

“We have an opportunity here to give the performance history of *Louis Riel* a new point of reference,” adds **Debus**. “We want to make sure that this striking piece of music theatre is done right to see its importance and continued relevance.”

*Louis Riel* distinguishes itself from other operas with its musical diversity. In addition to incorporating original folk music and traditional melody lines, Somers wrote in an abstract atonal orchestral style which heightens the dramatic intensity and sets the orchestra entirely apart from the singing. Electronic music also comes into play, creating at times an auditory surrealism that mirrors the distortion and confusion of events unfolding in the narrative.

*Louis Riel* demands singers to demonstrate a range of vocal techniques and dramatic intonation, sometimes in harmony with the orchestra and sometimes in conflict, and other times delivering gripping musical lines with the voice completely laid bare to scrutiny and unsupported by the orchestra. An orchestra of 67 musicians, including strings, woodwinds, brass, piano, and large percussion ensemble requiring six players, accompanies the cast and chorus.

Unique to the score of *Louis Riel* is 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 words for “Kuyas” were selected by Somers from *Cree Grammar* by Rev. H. E. Hivers and the *English-Cree Primer and Vocabulary* by Rev. F. G. Stevens, as well as from a story told by Coming Day to Leonard Bloomfield on the Sweetgrass Reserve in Saskatchewan. The composer was further assisted in ascertaining pronunciation and feeling for the language by Mrs. Lou Waller of Cree descent from Alberta, to whom Somers dedicated the “Kuyas” aria. 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’s 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.**

For the 2017 production, *Louis Riel* will continue to be sung in English, French and Cree, however, it will now feature a new translation of the Cree and include spoken dialogue in Michif, the official language of the Métis that would have been spoken in the 19th century, in select scenes between Métis characters. The new Cree translation is by Manitoba-born actor and writer **Billy Merasty**, who is of Cree descent, and the Métis dialogue is translated by **Norman Fleury**, a Métis elder, Michif language expert and translator, professor, and historian. The 2017 production of *Louis Riel* will also feature English, French, Cree and Michif SURTITLES™.

The role of the chorus in *Louis Riel* has also been redesigned. The original opera called for a single large chorus to act and sing a variety of groups and assemblies in the narrative. For the 2017 revival, there will be two choruses performing in contrast to the historical figures represented by the principal cast, representing the modern dynamic of debate and protest that continue of this history, both in the houses of parliament and on the land.

The **COC Chorus** takes on the role of the **Parliamentary Chorus** and represents a group of settler and immigrant men and women. The **Parliamentary Chorus** sings and is seen but does not participate in the physical action of the narrative, only commenting and debating on what should take place. They serve as a modern-day Greek Chorus while also representing the functions of Members of Parliament who legislate and validate the struggles of all Canadians in Ottawa. Additional members of the COC Chorus will be members of the Métis Nation.

A group of Indigenous men and women will be cast as the physical chorus known as the **Land Assembly**. On stage throughout the opera, the **Land Assembly** is a silent chorus in protest, and stands for the people for whom the opera has not provided a voice. The **Land Assembly** shift and transform in response to the actions on stage and are a constant, physical representation of the Indigenous men and women who are directly affected by the outcomes, victories and losses of Riel. The players in the **Land Assembly** will be announced at a later date as part of the COC’s complete casting release for *Louis Riel*.

New characters have been introduced to bring Indigenous voices into the opera as well as present a more informed history of the Métis and Indigenous peoples in Riel’s history. The previously unattributed opening vocal line is now delivered by a character known as **The Folksinger**, to be sung by a contemporary Métis singer. The role of **The Activist**, to be played by a Métis actor, will deliver the Land Acknowledgement as the opera unfolds, setting the tone for interpreting the action playing out on stage. The artists in these roles will be announced at a later date as part of the COC’s complete casting release for *Louis Riel*.

The 2017 production of *Louis Riel* is made possible through the financial support of individuals, corporations and charitable foundations and trusts. The COC gratefully acknowledges its underwriters: **The Catherine and Maxwell Meighen Foundation, Philip Deck and Kimberley Bozak, Asper Foundation, and The Max Clarkson Family Foundation in honour of Harry Somers**; with additional support from **Mark and Gail Appel, Margaret**

**Harriett Cameron, Catherine Fauquier, Sally Holton, Michiel Horn and Cornelia Schuh, Michael and Linda Hutcheon, The Michael and Sonja Koerner Charitable Foundation, Peter Levitt and Mai Why, John D. McKellar, Trina McQueen, Roger D. Moore, Sue Mortimer, Dr. Shirley C. Neuman, Tim and Frances Price, Dr. Joseph So, Philip Somerville, Françoise Sutton, Dr. John Stanley and Dr. Helmut Reichenbächer, The Stratton Trust, and John Wright and Chung-Wai Chow.** *Louis Riel* has also been made possible by generous donors to the National Arts Centre Foundation, who believe in investing in Canadian creators, including **Kimberley Bozak and Philip Deck, Earlaine Collins and TD Bank Group.**

*Louis Riel* was the first opera written by a Canadian to be presented by the COC, and the COC is the only professional opera company to date to have ever performed it. Somers and Moore were commissioned in 1966 by the Floyd S. Chalmers Foundation to write an opera to commemorate the centennial of Canada, and it was subsequently performed by the COC in 1967 and 1975.

The NAC presents *Louis Riel* on June 15 and 17, 2017 as part of its Canada Scene festival in Ottawa. For more information on the NAC's performances of this production of *Louis Riel*, please visit [www.nac-cna.ca](http://www.nac-cna.ca).

### **TICKET INFORMATION**

Single tickets for *Louis Riel* range from **\$35 – \$235** and box seats, when available, are **\$350**. Tickets are now on sale, available online at [coc.ca](http://coc.ca), by calling **416-363-8231**, or in person at the **Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts Box Office** (145 Queen St. W.). For more information on **specially priced tickets** available to **young people under the age of 15, standing room, Opera Under 30** presented by **TD Bank Group, student groups** and **rush seating**, visit [coc.ca](http://coc.ca).

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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### **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](http://coc.ca).

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