

MISSING: AUDIO AND VIDEO LINKS

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iEJUAsFwOaM>

Excerpts from the opera *Missing*: by Marie Clements & Brian Current

Video 3:39

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_uVpIU-STg&list=PLQHNA9wdaAUHzMO_PxLX1fwlEx8lCN0kj&index=5&t=0s

Arts Champions Summit 2018: Pacific Opera Victoria

Video 7:05

Pacific Opera Victoria's Director of Community Engagement Rebecca Hass talks about the collaboration and community engagement behind the development of *Missing*, and how it has been transformative for Pacific Opera as we move forward with a broadening circle of partners.

Presented at 'Transformation through Collaboration' the Arts Champions Summit, powered by Pecha Kucha event, June 6, 2018.

<https://www.icimusique.ca/articles/19306/missing-un-opera-engage-sur-la-disparition-des-fem>

Missing, un opéra engagé sur la disparition des femmes autochtones

Ici Musique with Sylvia L'Écuyer, November 18, 2017

Audio 13:05

Missing raconte le destin de deux femmes; une femme autochtone assassinée et celui d'Ava une femme blanche. La journaliste Anais Eldoujdaini a vu ce nouvel opéra de la librettiste Marie Clements et du compositeur Brian Current. Elle a été très touchée par l'oeuvre. Écoutez le compte rendu qu'elle a préparé pour l'émission Place à l'opéra diffusée sur IciMusique avec Sylvia L'Écuyer.

<https://www.cbc.ca/listen/shows/north-by-northwest/segment/14570472>

'Missing': new opera highlights stories of vanished Indigenous women

North by Northwest with Sheryl MacKay, October 28, 2017

Audio 18:24

It's been the subject of a national inquiry and, now, the topic of missing and murdered Indigenous women is coming to the stage in both Vancouver and Victoria in the form of an opera.

<https://www.straight.com/arts/988596/missing-straddles-realms-disturbing-reality-and-dreams>

Missing straddles the realms of disturbing reality and dreams

by Alexander Varty, October 31, 2017



Baritone Clarence Logan, mezzo Rose-Ellen Nichols, and soprano Melody Courage. Photo: Emily Cooper

As a playwright, director, and multimedia artist, Marie Clements is known for her fearless determination to tell Indigenous stories—but even she was hesitant, at first, to explore the new-to-her world of opera while writing about missing and murdered women.

“When you’re asked to write on this theme or this reality, sometimes your first response is ‘Oh, I don’t know if I can go in there,’ just because of the gravity of it,” she tells the *Straight* from Toronto, where her musical documentary, *The Road Forward*, is screening at the ImagiNATIVE Film & Media Arts Festival.

But the story needed to be told, and Clements is not one to back away from a challenge. The result is *Missing*, her collaboration with Toronto-based composer Brian Current, City Opera Vancouver, and Pacific Opera Victoria, produced in partnership with Vancouver Moving Theatre/DTES Heart of the City Festival.

Technically, the biggest issue for the Métis artist was learning a medium she'd previously overlooked. "A lot of times, in thinking of opera, I would think that it was just for people who had money, you know," she says, adding that for a playwright, the idiom's compressed style of storytelling required some adjustment. "I find that opera's very lean," she explains. But Clements adds that it's a multimedia art form, which fits in with her preferences and with First Nations storytelling tradition. *Missing* unfolds in Vancouver and along the Highway of Tears in northern B.C., but it also takes place in the realm of dreams, the land of myth, and the caverns of the unconscious.

At its core, though, is something very real: how our culture stereotypes Indigenous women and puts them in constant danger of rape or worse. That's why Ava, the young, non-Native woman who is one of the opera's two protagonists does not, at first, extend empathy to the "unnamed Native girl" she sees hitchhiking in the North.

"There's a moment where she's feeling 'Well, should I pull over?' " Clements explains. "But it's getting dark and she's a bit scared, so she doesn't pull over, and that's how the story begins. It's this kind of chance seeing each other for a moment, and then we go on from there."

Over the course of *Missing*, the nameless hitchhiker gains a posthumous identity, and Ava develops an understanding of her complicity in the events that led to the girl's death—a satisfyingly theatrical frame for a story that is both under-reported and all too familiar. "I think it's important that it be told everywhere and anywhere, because we're tired of having to tell this story and tired of it happening," Clements says. "It's shocking on so many levels. To me and to so many other people, this is not an Indigenous issue; it's a human issue. As human beings we have a responsibility to end this, and so we're asking for people to open their hearts, to be able to comprehend on an emotional level what's really happening in this country."

In a separate interview, Current admits that he was initially ignorant of the extent of the dangers Indigenous women face, but that his dawning understanding helped shape the musical language he's opted to use.

"The very first performance of this will be for families of the victims, right?" he says. "A closed event with grief counsellors, and it's going to be intense. And if we're going to talk directly to them, then I don't want it to be in some big avant-garde, complex language. I want them to understand it the very first time that they hear it. It's really much more about impact and communication than anything I've done before."

It's about inclusion, too. Much of *Missing* will be sung in Gitxsan, and the production team plans to take it on the road to communities along the Highway of Tears.

"Half the cast is Indigenous, and there is something extraordinary about seeing these beautiful performers who come, many of them, with their own cultural positions and also this trained voice out of the European tradition," Clements says. "They're able to bring all that to the stage, and I think that's unique. For me, it's a gift—and something that in itself would make you want to sit up and go 'What's going on here? I want to see that.' "

City Opera Vancouver and Pacific Opera Victoria present *Missing* in partnership with Vancouver Moving Theatre and the Downtown Eastside Heart of the City Festival at the York Theatre every other night from Friday to next Saturday (November 3 to 11).

<http://www.cbc.ca/amp/1.4375797>

New opera about MMIWG tells a story 'that we're all responsible to,' says co-creator

Missing will be on stage at Vancouver's York Theatre from Nov. 3-11, then travels to Victoria

Chantelle Bellrichard - CBC News, October 29, 2017



Librettist Marie Clements hopes sharing the story of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls through a chamber opera will help more people to connect with the stories they see and hear in the news. (The Road Forward - mediaspace.nfb.ca)

One of the creators of a new opera premiering in Vancouver next week hopes it will make the stories of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls more real for its audience.

Missing is a chamber opera that tells the story, in Gitxsanimaax and English, of a non-Indigenous woman and a First Nations woman who cross paths in northern B.C.

Librettist Marie Clements describes it as a chance encounter that changes both women's lives forever.

Clements, a Vancouver-based Métis/Dene playwright and filmmaker, says she was hesitant at first when she was approached by City Opera Vancouver to write the libretto.

"I think the topic of this opera has a lot of responsibility to it and gravity," she said. "But I was very intrigued about telling this story in a genre that usually doesn't tell stories like this and to reach audiences that don't usually hear stories like this."

Clements said she hopes by sharing the story of missing and murdered women and girls through a chamber opera — with what she imagines will be a largely non-Indigenous audience — that more people will be able to connect with the stories they see and hear in the news with compassion.



Métis coloratura soprano Melody Courage performs as the unnamed First Nations woman in *Missing*. (Emily Cooper)

"I think as an artist, that's part of our job — to do what we can to make this story real and create hopefully some kind of empathy, so that people can look at it or actually feel it," she said.

"I felt that it's important for us to not only look at missing and murdered as a Native issue or a Native story, but to look at it as a Canadian story, unfortunately, and one that we're all responsible to."

Audiences will be taken to two parts of the province — northern B.C. along what's known as the Highway of Tears, and Vancouver's Downtown Eastside — two areas of B.C. where many families have lost someone to violence, or seen family members go missing.

The opera is a co-production between City Opera Vancouver and Pacific Opera Victoria, and is composed by award-winning composer Brian Current. Peter Hinton, who recently helmed the Canadian Opera Company's *Louis Riel*, directs.

An 'overwhelming' ongoing tragedy

Clements said when she thinks about how many Indigenous women and girls have gone missing or been killed across the country, she wonders how it can still be happening.

"It seems to me overwhelming that it's kind of had this longevity of occurrence in our country. And I don't think there's a week or month goes by where we're not seeing posts of missing or murdered Aboriginal women," she said.

In developing *Missing*, Clements said she was grateful the opera companies moved early on to consult with those closest with the tragedy and to follow appropriate protocol.

Families of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls will be the first to see the opera, in a private performance on Nov. 1. After that, *Missing* will premiere at the Cultch's York Theatre in Vancouver on Nov. 3, where performances will continue until Nov. 11.

It will then move on the Baumann Centre in Victoria from Nov. 17-26.

'Missing' Turns Tragedy Into Art

B.C.'s Highway of Tears goes from headline fodder to artistic inspiration in an ambitious new opera.

November 1, 2017 By Roberta Staley

The silhouette of a man sprints across the stage. There are no flashing knives, no obvious murder weapon—just murky, muddled violence that is absorbed more than it is seen, like a nightmare sprung to life out of the depths of sleep. A girl's voice cries out: "Tell Momma I ran! I ran! I ran as hard as I could. Tell Momma I ran!" These words are the final, lingering echoes of the 16-year-old whose death marks her as one more victim along northern British Columbia's Highway 16, better known as the Highway of Tears.

The number of murdered and missing Aboriginal women in Canada is testament to the racism and gender violence that runs deeply through this nation's veins. Since 1980, 1,200 Aboriginal women have gone missing or have been murdered, with an estimated 50 Indigenous women and girls vanishing along this notorious stretch of B.C. highway since 1970. The issue has finally gained the attention of Ottawa, with the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls launched in late 2016, but it seems incongruous—and certainly ambitious—to take this tragedy and render it into art.

Yet this is precisely what City Opera Vancouver has done with *Missing*, its newly created chamber opera, which runs for five nights starting November 3 at Vancouver's York Theatre, followed by five shows at Pacific Opera Victoria. The intimate two-act production focuses on an Aboriginal teen whose fate is sealed when she misses the school bus and hitchhikes home along Highway 16, only to be picked up by a predator. Against this backdrop, the grief and horror endured by survivors, who wait in vain for news of a missing loved one, is thrown into sharp relief. By humanizing the families of the victims, *Missing* honours their journey into the abyss and, hopefully, back toward some semblance of peace, says its composer, the Juno Award-winning Brian Current.



As *Missing*'s librettist, Vancouver filmmaker and Métis playwright Marie Clements elucidates this violent demimonde with empathetic elegance. For her, the work is a cathartic reckoning, the start of a healing journey for both Aboriginal people and the colonial culture, evoking "the hope that we're evolving to this idea that we are responsible to each other."

Similarly complex themes have been fearlessly embraced by City Opera Vancouver throughout its 11-year history. The company's works have explored territory from the loss of a child (*Sumidagawa*, 2010) to the invisible trauma of war (*Fallujah*, 2011). *Missing*, however, is new ground for this

adventurous company, with sections of Clements's libretto sung in Gitksan, the Aboriginal language traditionally spoken in the region ribboned by Highway 16. By replacing common opera staples like German or Italian with the sonorous and throaty sounds of the Gitksan language (one native speaker described it as "like swallowing a fishbone"), the chamber opera becomes firmly rooted in Aboriginal history and experience.

Authenticity is imperative in telling this "painful and necessary story," says City Opera Vancouver's artistic director Charles Barber. To achieve this, the company invited families and friends of the missing to critique the production at various workshops and brought in vocal coach and Gitksan speaker Vince Gogag to ensure the delivery and pronunciation of the language ring true—although four of the opera's seven singers are Aboriginal, none are Gitksan speakers. Feedback from those with a personal connection to the opera's source material was crucial in its development, says Toronto's Current, recalling how he changed the score after one workshop participant told him, "We don't sing that high." As a result, the minimalist score for *Missing* "is different from anything that I've ever done before," says Current.

With its exploration of the universal theme of loss, *Missing* lays the foundation for a bridge between two cultural solitudes that must work together, embracing reconciliation and ultimately forgiveness, to give birth to a new Canada—one where we realize that we are all each other's keeper.

<https://beta.theglobeandmail.com/arts/theatre-and-performance/city-opera-vancouver-takes-on-tragedy-in-the-downtowneastside/article36778203>

A 'tragically timely' opera

City Opera Vancouver's *Missing* deals with the staggering losses of women and girls – missing and murdered – in Canada's Indigenous communities



Rose Ellen Nichols and Melody Courage star in *Missing* at City Opera Vancouver.
Photos by Emily Cooper

Marsha Lederman, The Globe and Mail, October 31, 2017

Charles Barber was walking his beloved rescue dog Grendel through Vancouver's Downtown Eastside when he landed on the subject matter for his company's next opera. This part of town was experiencing an epidemic – still is – and he wanted to create a work of art to call attention to it. Four years later, Grendel has died, and the opera is about to have its world premiere.

Missing, as the publicity material states, is a story everyone knows, about a woman no one remembers. It's a chamber opera, sung mostly in English, but also in Gitksan. And it deals with the staggering losses of women and girls – missing and murdered – in Canada's Indigenous communities.

"If 1,200 white women had gone missing, imagine what the response would have been," says Barber, artistic director of City Opera Vancouver and the driving force behind this commission. The actual number of missing and murdered Indigenous women, he adds, is surely far higher than official figures.

"Missing may be the most important work we have ever done," he says. "It is tragically timely, but [the issue] has been going on for years and there is no end in sight."

As Barber attended rehearsals in Vancouver ahead of the opera's world premiere, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls was hearing gutting testimony in Winnipeg. The inquiry itself continues to be controversial and is dealing with criticism and high-profile resignations.

The opera, co-commissioned and co-produced with Pacific Opera Victoria, is set in the Downtown Eastside and along Highway 16, British Columbia's notorious Highway of Tears. Métis/Dene playwright Marie Clements wrote the libretto; Juno Award winner Brian Current composed the score. It is directed by Peter Hinton, who recently directed the Canadian Opera Company's remount of the 1967 opera *Louis Riel*.

"Riel was very much a piece about colonization," Hinton says. "And this opera is a look at what decolonization might look like. So while the subject matter is very serious and about grave injustice and tragedy, I find it very hopeful. because it's about the spirit finding home, it's about continuance, it's about the collision of culture."

Clements, an award-winning actor, writer and director for theatre, film and radio, had not written an opera before. But when she was approached by Barber, she thought that opera could be an effective way to tell this story. "It's such a different form for me, but it's also connected to theatre and I think there's such an emotional quality to operas and kind of an epicness to it," she says, "and I really wanted to be able to kind of see what that was."

A few months after receiving the commission, Clements was in Prince George, B.C., for her documentary *The Road Forward* (a film about First Nations activism) and was struck by the prevalence of the tragedy. "I didn't speak to one person who had not been somehow personally connected to it – whether they went to high school with someone or whether they knew parents of someone or whether they were directly affected. When we read the newspaper [or] we see it on the news, it can feel like it's [happening to] somebody else. But it's really close to a lot of people," she says. "That's shocking that it's just so present."

Current wrote the music over an accelerated period in his basement at home, with photos of missing women and mothers of missing women propped up on his piano – "just to remember that this is not just any old piece or any old commission. This is a tragedy that is not fiction," he says, pointing out that in the time he was writing, four Indigenous women were murdered in Winnipeg and two went missing in Ontario.

"There's such a strong sense of mission about this piece," says Current, who is not Indigenous. "It's just kind of unbelievable that this is happening right in our backyard."

To turn mission into music, Current employed a musical language that is more direct and less opaque than is typical for him, with major and minor chords. "Because I don't want people to have to listen to it six times to get it. I want people to get it right away. I want it to have impact the first time they see it."

At rehearsal earlier this month, Hinton watched carefully as Melody Courage and Caitlin Wood sang a key scene together, under the guidance of conductor Timothy Long, who is native American, of Muscogee Creek and Choctaw descent.

(Long was originally scheduled to conduct the opera only during its Victoria run but will now do so in Vancouver as well, because of health issues Barber is dealing with.)



Left to right: Clarence Logan, Melody Courage and Rose Ellen Nichols.



The opera, co-commissioned and co-produced with Pacific Opera Victoria, is set in the Downtown Eastside and along Highway 16, British Columbia's notorious Highway of Tears.

Courage, who is Métis, plays the unnamed First Nations girl. Wood plays Ava, the white girl.

Courage initially thought she would be unable to play the role because of other commitments, but after speaking to Barber about the project, she found a way. "I just remember being in tears and being like: I have to be part of spreading this message," she says. "Because it hasn't gotten the attention that it needs."

Some of the opera is sung in Gitksan – with translations by native speaker Vincent Gogag, who was also diction coach. It's a guttural endeavour, speaking Gitksan, which Gogag has described as talking as if you have a fishbone in your throat. This has been challenging – but also rewarding.

"I feel really grateful that I'm able to be in a show where I'm able to hear and then sing this beautiful language," Wood says. "Because a big thing in colonization is that their language was taken away, so being able to hear this language is really special."

Grief counsellors will be at each performance. Two days before the opera's world premiere, a free, invitation-only private performance will be held for family and friends of missing and murdered Indigenous women. The creative team understands what an emotional night that will inevitably be.

"When you do opera, even if the storyline is difficult, generally it's from the 1700s and somebody died or somebody lost their lover. But you're never in the same space as someone who has had such a tragedy," Wood says.

"Wanting to serve this story with respect for them and for these families is difficult and is a big responsibility. And as someone who's Caucasian, I feel grateful that I'm a part of this story.

"I know on that night I'll probably cry and cry and cry after the show," she continues. "Because I can't even imagine losing a daughter or a sister or a mother in this way. I think it's really brave for the people who are going to come."

Missing is at the York Theatre in Vancouver Nov. 3-11 and at the Baumann Centre for Pacific Opera Victoria Nov. 17-26. A 2018 tour is being planned along the Highway of Tears (cityoperavancouver.com; pov.bc.ca).

<http://www.windspeaker.com/news/windspeaker-news/missing-marie-clements-first-ever-opera-libretto-premieres-nov-3/>

“Missing”, Marie Clements’ first-ever opera libretto, premieres Nov. 3

Thursday, October 12th, 2017 2:37pm

By Andrea Smith, Windspeaker.com Contributor

“We’ve had nearly a week of rehearsals, and so far I’m totally impressed with the voices I’m hearing and the discussion with our amazing director around the whole story... why we’re telling it, who we’re telling it to.” — Marion Newman

Distinguished Méis playwright Marie Clements is about to shed new light on a national issue with her opera, “Missing,” which premieres Nov. 3rd in Vancouver.

The opera features a narrative woven around missing and murdered Indigenous women, contrasted with the experience of a more privileged non-Indigenous child.

The eyes of this child are opened as the story unfolds, and so, too, will the eyes and minds of the audience.

“With Missing we have the rare opportunity to inform about this crisis in a meaningful and unprecedented way... We commissioned Marie Clements to write her first-ever opera libretto to honor the memory of each and every missing and murdered Indigenous woman,” said Charles Barber, artistic director, City Opera Vancouver.

“The poignant tale she so brilliantly conceived lends itself to opera, as the human voice is a powerful vehicle to draw deep emotion and introspection. It is the story of two women who represent so many — one who survives and one who does not—and it’s through their story we find hope and... healing,” he added.

Vancouver City Opera and Pacific Opera Victoria have collaborated to create the show. It plays at the York Theatre on Commercial Drive in Vancouver on Nov. 3 through Nov. 11 at varying times throughout each day.

The story is set in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, as well as along BC’s Highway 16, known as the Highway of Tears. The majority of the piece is done in English, however there are words and songs written in Gitksan interspersed throughout, because the majority of the territory Highway 16 is located on belongs to the Gitksan people.

Melody Courage plays the role of the “unnamed Native girl,” whose body is found by “White girl Ava”.

“Marie Clements is a brilliant playwright, and there are ideas as to why she does everything... I believe I go unnamed not only because my body goes undiscovered, but because I’m representing 1,200 missing and murdered Indigenous women. It’s not just one person, but the Native girl represents all of them,”



Rose-Ellen Nichols with Melody Courage (right) who plays the role of the “unnamed Native girl.”
Photos by Emily Cooper

said Courage, sharing her thoughts on why she believes Clements purposefully left her character nameless.

“I think the way Marie wrote it, it was not to make it a tragedy. I mean, it’s definitely tragic what has happened to the women, but she didn’t want it to be a tragedy... just more to trigger awareness for everyone of what has happened, and what is still happening,” said Courage.

The music that accompanies the entire show, to Courage, is very moving. Brian Current created the musical score, and it includes the talents of the Rose-Ellen Nichols, a Coast Salish mezzo-soprano performer; Clarence Logan, a bass baritone from the Moosomin First Nation in Saskatchewan; mezzo-soprano performer Heather Molloy; and tenor Kaden Fosberg. And there is a seven-piece chamber orchestra which Charles Barber leads.

“What Brian Current has done with the score, to paint the horror, and the dissonance... all of these emotions you can hear through the music. It’s really beautiful,” said Courage.

While Peter Hinton directs, performing alongside Courage is Caitlin Wood, filling the role of “White girl Ava;” And Marion Newman, from the Kwagiulth and Sto:lo First Nations, performs the role of the Indigenous university professor, Dr. Wilson.

Newman was particularly drawn to this role because she feels it’s something she’s been informally rehearsing for for years.

“I have grown up knowing about the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women. Certainly, my parents always made sure I had my own vehicle or a ride, and that I would never be in a position where I didn’t have control,” said Newman, describing how serious the issue was, even when she was growing up.

“It seemed overbearing at the time, but as an adult, I get it,” she said.

And not only does she have first-hand experience dealing with the anxiety of actually fearing that she, too, might become a missing or murdered woman, but she follows the issue politically and in the news, and spends some of her own time enlightening others about Indigenous issue.

For Newman, she hopes the audience will come away with a greater understanding of the issue, but also with greater compassion for Indigenous people struggling to find solutions.

“We’ve had nearly a week of rehearsals, and so far I’m totally impressed with the voices I’m hearing and the discussion with our amazing director around the whole story... why we’re telling it, who we’re telling it to,” said Newman.

“It’s certainly having an impact on me... And I feel like it cannot fail to help other people learn,” she said.



<http://vancouversun.com/entertainment/local-arts/missing-new-opera-honours-murdered-and-vanished-aboriginal-women-and-girls>

Missing: New opera honours murdered and vanished Aboriginal women and girls

Stuart Derdeyn

Nov. 3, 7, 9, 11, 8 p.m.; Nov. 5, 2 p.m. | York Theatre, 639 Commercial Dr.

Tickets and info: From \$22 at theCultch.com



From magic flutes to Dons doing deals with the Devil, to Valkyries and seasonal rites, operas take on a lot of topics. Even in light of that fact, City Opera Vancouver and Pacific Opera Victoria commissioning a chamber work based upon the Canadian national tragedy of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls stands out.

How do you translate something so raw, happening right now and in the news today, onto the musical stage?

The task fell to Métis playwright Marie Clements and JUNO Award-winning composer Brian Current. The result is a new chamber

opera titled *Missing*, which has its world premiere in Vancouver this November.

“The shameful fact that this is an everyday current event meant that we needed to create a work that could be personal and that both native and non-native people could identify with and experience right there and not at arm’s length or in a news report that can be dismissed,” said Marie Clements. “I really wanted to create a piece about two young women at a time in their life when anything is possible, who were loved and had good families, and what would happen if they met by chance, if their paths crossed, and how it would affect their stories forever.”

Missing is set between Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside and B.C.’s Highway 16, the Highway of Tears where at least 18 women have disappeared or been discovered murdered since 1969. The story follows the intertwined stories of a white girl, named Ava, who is drawn to the language and traditions and monumental hardships of the “unknown Native Girl” she crosses paths with. As her community struggles toward reconciliation, Ava experiences the same internally. Clements says that the story is meant to reflect the real fear that real people feel for their children.

“What would happen if my daughter didn’t come home, it’s a real universal fear that everyone experiences, but it’s one that is particularly close to a lot of native parents about their daughters,” said Clements. “This is a national/international problem, but choosing the Highway of Tears came along with the contradiction of this stunning, beautiful land and the realization that so many of our women are buried in our province. Why aren’t we all trying to do something to prevent this epidemic.”

So *Missing* is a call to action. It is also intended to honour the 1,200-plus missing and murdered First Nations, Inuit and Métis women and girls in Canada.

“Because it is a modern opera and an active tale, it made sense to have the opera in the both Gitksan and English,” she said. “We grieve in different languages and we experience life in different languages, so it made sense to go back to the original language of our country in the story.”



Rose Ellen Nichols (Mezzo) and Melody Courage (Soprano) star in the opera *Missing*, which runs from Nov. 3 to 11 at the York Theatre.

Incorporating those languages, the different cultures and bringing it together into something musical that can be performed by the cast and the seven-piece orchestra under conductor Timothy Long fell to composer Brian Current. He says when he was approached by Pacific Opera about the project it became more than another musical entertainment.

“I’m not an Indigenous person, but I hope my role in this is to lead people to have the similar eye-opening experience about this issue that I had while I was working on this, and that will lead to a critical mass of people who want laws enacted to protect these women and girls,” said Current. “The sense of mission around this piece was unlike anything I’ve ever written before. It made it really easy to get out of bed every morning and bang out the music is a much shorter time than it would usually take.”

Considerable research and collaboration with First Nations communities throughout B.C. went into the score, which incorporates a good deal of traditional melodies and rhythms into its orchestrations. This was an interesting process, even incorporating — with permission — an old traditional wedding song.

“About a third of the opera is in Gitksan and our language consultant, Vince Gogag, would translate Marie’s libretto and then recorded himself speaking the lines,” said Current. “So I took those and spent several wonderful weeks transcribing that language into musical notation. The rhythms, inflections and the melodies flowed from that material and I tried to make it as authentic as possible and, like with the words, stay out of the way.”

Typically, the composer often makes the libretto fit the music. Current said that he approached Clements’ words as something he needed to keep just as they were in the book.

“In this context, it would have been antithetical for a man, a white man, to do what is the typical act of working over the libretto,” he said. “So if I was going to change anything, I would get Marie on the phone to go over it. Unfortunately, this meant that she had to get to know my singing voice, which is also a tragedy.”

It was absolutely paramount that there was a constant back and forth between Clement and the consultants to be sure that all traditional protocols were followed when drawing from First Nations sources. The music of *Missing* had to be “incorporation, not appropriation.”

“This was a new experience for me, having to hand over the work to the composer and the rest of the team is quite demanding in terms of how final the work needs to be,” said Clements. “But the energy around it and the way it was developed really gave the story grace.”

Métis Canadian coloratura soprano Melody Courage performs the role of the unnamed First Nations woman and Alberta-born soprano Caitlin Wood sings the role of Ava. Marion Newman, of mixed First Nations and European colonial heritage, plays Indigenous university professor Dr. Wilson.

Coast Salish mezzo-soprano Rose-Elle Nichols, Moosomin First Nation bass-baritone Clarence Logan, Vancouver mezzo-soprano Heather Molloy and Victoria tenor Kaden Fosberg winds out the cast. Peter Hinton, who helmed the Canadian Opera Company’s 2017 work *Louis Riel* as well as the opening of the 2017 Shaw Festival, will direct.

<http://www.timescolonist.com/entertainment/music/singer-touched-by-victims-families-strength-1.23095679>

Singer touched by victims' families strength

Sarah Petrescu / Times Colonist, November 16, 2017



Sooke-raised mezzo-soprano Marion Newman, left, in *Missing*, with fellow cast members Kaden Forsberg, Caitlin Wood and Heather Molloy.

Photograph By Michelle Doherty 778.985.7344, DIAMOND'S EDGE PHOTOGRAPHY

ON STAGE

What: *Missing*

When: Opens Friday, runs to Nov. 26

Where: The Baumann Centre, 925 Balmoral Road

Tickets: \$15/\$30 Sold out (waitlist being taken)

For more information: pov.bc.ca

Sooke-raised mezzo-soprano Marion Newman says performing *Missing*, a chamber opera about murdered and missing Indigenous women in B.C., in front of families of real-life victims was an emotional but necessary experience.

The performance, a few weeks ago in Vancouver, was the one she was most nervous about, said Newman, 45, who plays the role of a university professor confronting racism in an intense class discussion. “After, in the talkback, some women said they came expecting to feel closed, but saw themselves and their experiences. They opened up and shared so eloquently about their missing family members. I was so touched and proud of their strength.”

The opera, by Marie Clements and Brian Current, opens at Pacific Opera Victoria’s Baumann Centre this week and includes a private performance for local families of victims.

Newman was involved in the opera from an early stage, singing excerpts by different composers for a test group. She said Current’s music stood out for its range and depth and was closest to opera.

“He had an understanding of the depth of emotion needed,” she said. But it was Clements’ libretto that really hooked her. “I cried a lot reading it,” said Newman, who was intrigued by the powerful scenes and poetic writing — but also suggested that audience members read the synopsis prior to watching the opera.

“There’s not a lot of chatter. It gets right to the core of the message: That we need to see Indigenous communities and people as human beings to be taken seriously and the same as us in every way and deserving to be treated as such.”

The story begins with a car crash on the Highway of Tears in Northern B.C., where a white woman named Ava (soprano Caitlin Wood) and a Native Girl (Métis soprano Melody Courage) cross paths. The scene then shifts to the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver and other spaces, dealing with issues of systemic racism and the more than 1,200 missing and murdered women in North America.

Clements, also an award-winning creator and producer in film, television and radio, wrote the opera in English and Gitksan (from northwestern B.C. First Nations) with the help of translator Vincent Gogag.

Newman said *Missing* is not the first production she’s been part of that incorporates Indigenous themes and culture with classical music, but it’s one of the more satisfying.

“There’s a respect and understanding there needs to be an Indigenous voice in the process,” said Newman. “The collaboration is also interesting. ... The Gitksan language fits opera because there are a lot of whispered sounds.”

Newman grew up in an environment rich in both traditions. Her father, from the Kwagiulth and Stó:lo First Nations, was a survivor of the residential-school system and shifted from work as a fisherman and logger to become a respected artist — as is her brother Carey Newman.

Her mother was a teacher who worked in Indigenous communities and decided to homeschool her three children after witnessing racism in the education system.

Newman was surrounded by music, CBC Radio Two mostly, and got her start as a pianist at five when a teacher at the Victoria Conservatory of Music noticed she had a knack.

It was later in her teens, as she pursued a piano-teaching certificate through the Conservatory and Camosun College, that she found her big opera voice. “I had to take voice lessons as part of the program, and one time, when my teacher was out of the room, I started to sing like an opera singer as a joke,” said Newman, who went on to complete music degrees at the University of Victoria and San Francisco Conservatory of Music before building a career as a Toronto-based soloist.

She often comes home to work with Pacific Opera Victoria and said she hopes Missing receives funding to tour nationally. “Activism and music are meeting in this in a very successful way. It’s extremely important to me [that these issues] are discussed.”

Clements, who splits her time between Vancouver and Galiano Island, also hopes to tour Missing. She said opera is a “new animal” for her but she was keen to work on the project when approached. “This story has to be told not just through the news or one person. It needs to be repeated and felt in all areas, so hopefully some change can come.”

Related events

- Friday — Marie Clements speaks at UVic: The Missing librettist, also an accomplished director, writer and performer, will hold a public reading at 12:45 p.m. in the MacIntyre Studio at the Phoenix Theatre at the University of Victoria.
- Saturday — The Road Forward screening: Clements brings her musical documentary The Road Forward to the Vic Theatre at 7 p.m. and will take part in public talk afterwards. The film connects the beginnings of Indigenous nationalism in the 1930s and civil rights to First Nations activism today.
- Tuesday — Lunchbox Opera: A recital at the Baumann Centre at 12:30 p.m. features songs from Canadian operas and performances by soprano Stephanie Nakagawa and Missing singers Caitlin Wood, Melody Courage and Kaden Forsberg. Bring a bag lunch.
- Saturday, Nov. 25 — Classical Music and Indigenous Culture: A discussion of Indigenous art forms, adaptations and cultural practices as they intersect with opera and classical music, featuring Kwakwaka’wakw artist Lou-ann Neel and Coast Salish violinist Swil Kanim. The event is at 2 p.m. at the Baumann Centre.

<http://operacanada.ca/review-missing-city-opera-vancouver-nov-3-2017/>

Review: Missing, City Opera Vancouver, Nov. 3, 2017

By Robert Jordan

"...a powerful story that tackles all the issues it should, head-on and unflinchingly"



(l-r) Kaden Forsberg, Caitlin Wood, Marion Newman and Melody Courage in City Opera Vancouver's Missing Photo: Michelle Doherty, Diamond's Edge Photography

Missing, a co-commission by City Opera Vancouver and Pacific Opera Victoria, opened at Vancouver's York Theatre on Nov. 3 and moves to Victoria for an already sold-out run on the 17th. A courageous commission, yes, but also canny: COV and POV must have put out feelers into the ether that convinced them this was an opera whose time has come.

Meditation on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls

Set in Vancouver's downtown East side and along B.C.'s Highway of Tears—the Prince George to Prince Rupert stretch of Highway 16—Missing eschews familiar operatic conventions such as showy arias, huge choruses and a linear plot. It is a relentlessly probing meditation on how the murders and unexplained disappearances of at least 18 women along the Highway of Tears and 1200 Canada-wide—most of them Indigenous—affect everyone in the victims' circles of life.

In Métis-Dene writer/actor Marie Clements' unconventional libretto, a succession of seemingly unrelated scenes tumble along after each other, but then gradually and inevitably begin to cohere, deeply and powerfully, to reveal an inner logic. Under Peter Hinton's clear and sensitive direction, there was a dream-like quality in the pacing. Events unfolded in a not always linear and logical way and with a

fascinating blend of English and Gitksan (the language spoken by the Gitksan Nation in the region around the Highway of Tears). Brian Current's minimalist score underpinned this dreamy essence admirably, though it could have used some extra bite at more emotionally intense moments.

The seven adroitly cast singers (no chorus) were accompanied by a seven-member ensemble conducted by Timothy Long (replacing indisposed COV Artistic Director, Charles Barber). Set and costume design by Andy Moro and Carmen Thompson were marvellously evocative of place and person in the narrative flow.



Caitlin Wood (front) and Rose-Ellen Nichols (rear) in City Opera Vancouver's Missing Photo: Michelle Doherty, Diamond's Edge Photography

Powerful performances by mainly Indigenous cast

The story pivots about the gradual coming together of a young, white woman, Ava (soprano Caitlin Wood) and a Native Girl (eloquently sung by Métis soprano Melody Courage). They “meet” on the Highway of Tears when Ava is in a horrific car crash and she “sees” the murdered Native Girl, in the same spot. Gradually, by the opera's end, they reach reconciliation in a supremely poignant scene when the developed trust between them enables Ava allow the Native Girl to hold her newborn child—a child the Native Girl will never have—while their voices bond in gentle, accepting harmony.



Melody Courage (front) and Kaden Forsberg (rear) in City Opera Vancouver's Missing Photo: Michelle Doherty, Diamond's Edge Photography

The primary roles are Ava and the Native Girl but the opera's catalyst is the surprisingly enlightened University Professor, Dr. Wilson, authoritatively sung by mezzo-soprano Marion Newman, who starts Ava on her journey. This involves Ava losing her best friend, Jess (convincingly sung by mezzo-soprano Heather Molloy) but regaining a relationship with her boyfriend Devon (tenor Kaden Forsberg).

The Native Mother (of the Native Girl) is not a large role, but it is significant as sung with forthright gravitas by mezzo-soprano Rose-Ellen Nichols. In her keening, she voices not only her own mourning, but also a universal anguish, acting as the emotional beacon the other searching souls turn to for their bearing.



A scene from City Opera Vancouver's Missing Photo: Michelle Doherty, Diamond's Edge Photography

The creators of *Missing* have forged a powerful story that tackles all the issues it should, head-on and unflinchingly. Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*, presented by Vancouver Opera this past spring, deals with similarly devastating losses. But *Missing* starts where the Heggie piece leaves off, going one step further to the healing and reconciliation that can come after bereavement. It needs to be seen and heard.

<https://www.thewholenote.com/index.php/other-media/blog/concert-reviews/27448-concert-report-city-opera-vancouver-s-dirge-for-the-missing>

Concert Report: City Opera Vancouver's Dirge for the Missing

Written by Roberta Staley, November 8, 2017



It's not many operas where the audience, at the end of a performance, remains on its feet following a standing ovation to chant along to a surprise denouement, in this case the *Women's Warrior Song*, led by an Indigenous woman beating a round, animal-hide hand drum. Many audience members took up the mesmerizing chant, until the song and drumming ceased.

A dirge of pain, rage and healing, the *Women's Warrior Song* is heard at marches commemorating Canada's missing and murdered Indigenous women. The spirit of the song has been reimagined as the one-act chamber opera *Missing*, a City Opera Vancouver creation, overseen by artistic director Charles Barber, which premiered November 3 at the York Theatre in Vancouver and continues until November 11. It then moves to Victoria's Baumann Centre for Opera, for six shows starting November 17.

Missing breaks with much classical opera not only in its bold subject matter – racism against native peoples as well as the ongoing tragedy of Canada's missing and murdered Indigenous women – but also its sparse, eloquent storytelling, complemented by a minimalist set design, that delves into magic realism and metaphor as a means to express pain and, possibly, redemption. It is also unique in that four of the seven opera singers are Indigenous, while the libretto is written partly in Gitksan, an Indigenous language spoken in northwestern British Columbia. In the hands of librettist Marie Clements of Vancouver, an award-winning Métis writer, director, producer and playwright, words become as powerful as arrows, each one piercing deep-seated emotions, from guilt, sorrow and enlightenment among white viewers to – for Indigenous members of the audience – grief and a sense of vindication from having the suffering of one's community acknowledged and honoured in a public setting.

The power of *Missing's* libretto is magnified by the equally spare music of Toronto-based JUNO Award-winning composer Brian Current, whose sublime score – conducted here by Timothy Long – soars and plummets in unison with the fierce complexity of emotions that are brought to bear through the telling of this tragic tale.

To underscore the immensity of the tragedy, *Missing* reveals early in the libretto that 1,200 Indigenous women have been murdered or disappeared in Canada. Such a grim but abstract figure is made accessible by telling two linked, but very different, tales. One is the suffering of an Indigenous family whose daughter, a high school student, goes missing while hitchhiking along BC's Highway 16, known as the Highway of Tears, a lonely northern forest roadway where possibly dozens of native women have vanished. The other story arc is a masterful rendering of the chasm that divides Canada's European and Indigenous cultures, and exposes white culture's blasé attitude towards the missing and murdered. This thread is expressed through the near-death experience of Ava, a law student from Vancouver, whose car goes off the road during a nighttime drive along Highway 16.



Sustaining horrific injuries in the crash, Ava's car lands near the place where the native high school teen has been murdered and her corpse abandoned. The dead teenager, played with ethereal grace by coloratura soprano Melody Courage, has seemingly left an imprint that haunts the dark forest. In that moment, with her body broken, Ava somehow absorbs both the horror of the slaying and with it, the spirit of the murdered girl.

Ava is performed by soprano Caitlin Wood with exquisite vulnerability as the young law student who is struggling to heal, beset by nightmares and flashbacks to inexplicable events. When she resumes law school in Vancouver a year after the accident, it becomes evident she has been transformed; she is inscrutable to best friend and fellow law student Jess, whose sense of white entitlement and opaque racism is played with artful subtlety by mezzo-soprano Heather Malloy.

Ava doesn't support Jess's bigoted challenge to Indigenous guest lecturer Dr. Wilson, played with dignity and power by mezzo-soprano Marion Newman, whose discussion of entrenched racism highlights the inherent injustice of Canada's legal system. This leads to a rift between Jess and Ava, expressed in a soaring, bitter duet that is both heartbreaking and magnificent to watch.

Much later, when Ava gives birth to a baby and finds her mental equilibrium uprooted by the child's chronic crying, the native teen once again permeates her consciousness. The murdered girl gives Ava the horrifying details of her final moments and laments what she will never experience: love, a family and unfulfilled ambitions to become a lawyer.

Missing is an extraordinarily moving and thought-provoking work, and a milestone for the opera world. It has taken a painful and horrifying topic and rendered it into accessible art. Ultimately, its message is a universal one: open our eyes and hearts to each other's pain. By doing so, humanity has a chance for healing and redemption. *Missing* begins this healing journey in a magnificent mélange of singing, acting and music that, one hopes, will be seen by audiences across Canada and the world.

Missing premiered at City Opera Vancouver on November 3 and runs until November 11, 2017, followed by a run at Pacific Opera Victoria from November 17 to 26, 2017. This report on *Missing* is part of a series of articles on thewholenote.com on music in the Vancouver area, in light of the Vancouver-based ISCM 2017 festival this month.

Roberta Staley is a Vancouver-based independent magazine writer and editor and documentary filmmaker.

<http://victoria.showbill.ca/missing/>



Cast of Missing / Photo by Dean Kalyan

November 16, 2017

Review by Shayli Robinson, Showbill.ca Staff Writer

Co-commissioned by Pacific Opera Victoria and City Opera Vancouver, *Missing* is an opera that brings the reality of too many families to light in a new way by nationally renowned Métis playwright Marie Clements (Librettist) and Juno-winning composer Brian Current.

For years, indigenous women have been taken from their families while hitchhiking (due to a lack of transportation services) from their remote communities along Highway 16, widely known as the Highway of Tears, and while living and working in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Clements brings this issue to the opera world by telling the story of a Native Girl (Melody Courage, Coloratura Soprano) who dies along the Highway of Tears but lives in the memory of Ava (Caitlin Wood, Soprano), a young white woman who survives a crash not far from her. Throughout law classes taught by Dr. Wilson (Marion Newman, Mezzo-Soprano), an expiring relationship with her long-time friend Jess (Heather Molloy, Mezzo-Soprano), marriage to Devon (Kaden Forsberg, Tenor), and her pregnancy, Ava is haunted by the Native Girl. We also see the Native Girl's Native Mother (Rose-Ellen Nichols, Mezzo-Soprano) and brother, Angus Wilde (Clarence Logan, Bass Baritone), mourning their untimely loss and imagining the future she wanted for herself, which is paralleled in Ava's life. Through this and Ava seeing the nameless Native Girl in herself and all around her, the two ultimately achieve reconciliation. Perhaps most importantly about the show is that half of it is sung in Gitxsanimaax, the language of the Gitxsan people on whose territory much of the Highway of Tears rests; employs a cast and crew that is mostly indigenous; and is the first large-scale Canadian opera to ever do so.

The show opens with Yuxwelupton, Bradley Dick, from the Songhees First Nation welcoming those in the room to his family's territory. Pacific Opera Victoria took great care to follow the local nations' healing protocols and had healers from WSÁNEĆ to Snuneymuxw territories cleansing those who wanted it before and after the show as well as counsellors on-site afterwards; free services which long lines of show-goers waited patiently for.

Taking place on a stunning set of thousands of autumn leaves and what appears to be cedar, the cast flows across the stage seamlessly in stunning costumes designed by Carmen Thompson with intention in every move. The heart-wrenching pieces are often backlit with projections of the moon, snow, and Gitxsanimaax words while the live orchestra (conducted by Timothy Long) plays perfectly in time. At two points throughout the performance, a female native performer asks "what am I to you? A human being?" as the word MISSING is projected across the stage behind them.

Bottom Line:

Missing is a piece that at once fills your heart and tugs it down through your gut. It brings a traditionally European art form to a major issue facing indigenous communities by drawing upon the lived experiences of communities and the knowledge of indigenous language holders and storytellers of all mediums.

<http://www.timescolonist.com/entertainment/power-of-opera-gives-story-of-missing-indigenous-women-emotional-depth-1.23099825>

Power of opera gives story of missing Indigenous women emotional depth

Sarah Petrescu / Times Colonist, November 21, 2017



The cast of *Missing*, a new opera by Marie Clements and Brian Current about Canada's missing and murdered Indigenous women. The opera, a co-commission between Pacific Opera Victoria and City Opera Vancouver, runs until Nov. 26 at The Baumann Centre.

Photograph By Dean Kalyan

What: *Missing*

When: Runs to Nov. 26

Where: The Baumann Centre, 925 Balmoral Rd.

Tickets: \$15/\$30, sold out (waitlist being taken)

For more information: pov.bc.ca

Stars: Four (out of five)

Missing, a new opera by Marie Clements and Brian Current about Canada's missing and murdered Indigenous women, is a beautiful and difficult homage to a crucial part of our present and past.

The chamber opera is a co-commission between Pacific Opera Victoria and City Opera Vancouver. Clements, a well-known Métis writer and producer, stepped out of her comfort zone to write the libretto and produced a gripping, poetic story with powerful scenes and shifting timelines.

The opera opens with the sound of pounding rain on the Highway of Tears in Northern B.C.

College student Ava is in a terrible car crash and hanging from a tree when she sees Native Girl lying on the ground. As Ava's life goes on in Vancouver, she sees and speaks with Native Girl. The story makes clear how similar the young women are, in their hopes, dreams and potential, but also how disparate in their fates.

Missing debuted in Vancouver this month and opened in Victoria at the Baumann Centre this week, starting with a private performance for family and friends of missing and murdered Indigenous women — of which there are about 1,200 in Canada.

A memorial poster at the entrance to the performance hall was signed by these guests, the first reminder of the families experiencing trauma and loss.

Tissues were offered with programs before the show began, which I soon regretted not taking, as well as cultural and emotional support workers afterwards and a sage and cedar cleansing.

The atmospheric set was scattered with fall leaves and fronted with a whale rib-like sculpture. The scenes were brilliantly set by designer Andy Moro with projections of moving and still artwork, shifting from nature to the city and Native Girl's village.

The challenging subject matter — the loss of Native Girl and other missing murdered Indigenous women, as well as racism — was well-served by the operatic form, which allowed the audience to experience the story on a deep emotional level.

Soprano Melody Courage (Native Girl) had immense range and power as she sang first in Gitksan, a whispery and vowel-heavy dialect, and then in English. Caitlin Wood (Ava) is also a powerful soprano with a deep, rich voice that filled the small hall, which doubles as a rehearsal space. Their huge voices together provided some of the most intense and gripping moments of the opera.

Current's score, under the direction of Timothy Long, also provided dramatic depth — shifting from minimalist and traditional classical music to jazz-like sections and using heavy percussive elements. The small orchestra even tapped and clapped some sections, while others were sung a capella.

Mezzo-soprano Marion Newman exuded strength and restraint in the challenging role of Dr. Wilson, who gets into a heated debate about racism in a college class and has some of the few spoken sections of the opera.

She says: "Answer me this — what happens to a society when we can't recognize another human being as another human being? What happens to a society when we can't recognize a part of ourselves as a part of ourselves? What are we missing?"

The pivotal scene sets in motion Ava's journey to reconcile what she has now seen, the tragic loss of Native Girl. The story moves along with Ava opening up to Indigenous culture, getting married and becoming a mother, culminating in an offer to Native Girl and peace between them.

Throughout the opera, Native Girl's mother, played by mezzo-soprano Rose-Ellen Nichols, is shown in anguish over her daughter's death. When her voice is finally heard, it is a gutting scene sung with such visceral raw emotion it reverberates until the end of the opera.

The word "missing" is repeated throughout the opera and this works for the most part, save for a few instances when it's sung as a chorus and seems anthemic and slightly jarring to the narrative.

After the performance, a woman took to the stage to offer the Women's Warrior song — "as medicine," she said. The song has long been part of the Stolen Sisters Memorial Marches and other gatherings for murdered and missing Indigenous women around the country.

<http://operacanada.ca/review-missing-pacific-opera-victoria/>

Another take; Review: Missing, Pacific Opera Victoria, Nov. 19, 2017

"the simple force of the tragedy the Indigenous community continues to face makes [Missing] a must-see, for all Canadians"

November 23, 2017

Robin Miller



(L-r) Heather Molloy, Marion Newman, Caitlin Wood, Rose-Ellen Nicols, Clarence Logan, Kaden Forsberg, Melody Courage in POV's Missing Photo: Dean Kalyan

As an opera, *Missing* is under-written. As an important piece of theatre that builds over its short 80 minutes to a shatteringly emotional conclusion, this Pacific Opera Victoria production is something every Canadian should see.

Co-commissioned by Pacific Opera Victoria and City Opera Vancouver, *Missing* opened first at Vancouver's traditional, proscenium arch York Theatre on Nov. 3. It then moved to a sold-out run at POV's Baumann Centre headquarters, a more intimate space where the audience sits flat on the floor, practically face-to-face with the performers on their low platform. We can hear them breathe; they can see our eyes and know intimately how their performance is affecting us.



(l-r) Kaden Forsberg, Caitlin Wood and Heather Molloy in POV's Missing Photo: Dean Kalyan

The Highway of Tears

POV clearly worked closely with the Indigenous community to ensure the production reflected and respected Indigenous culture and values. The centre smelled of burning grass as we entered. Local elder Bradley Dick introduced himself and his ancestry in his first language, then in English, and offered us a traditional song before the opera began. Smudging and cedar brushing were available after the performance for anyone who felt the need to soothe their soul. And these details were important. It made sure that we, as a predominantly white audience, felt welcomed even though, as the libretto by Métis-Dene writer/actor Marie Clements made clear, the Indigenous community has little reason to love us.

Missing begins along the Highway of Tears, the 720-kilometre stretch of Highway 16 in northern BC between Prince George and Prince Rupert, where an unknown number of Aboriginal women and girls (the police say 19, but Aboriginal communities place it at over 40) have been murdered or have disappeared since 1969. Very few of their cases have been solved. Joined with other cases across Canada, the number of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls reaches over a thousand.

The Native Girl

In this story, a young white woman named Ava (soprano Caitlin Wood) is badly injured in a car crash. Thrown into a tree, she sees the body of another young woman, known only as Native Girl (compelling Métis soprano Melody Courage), on the ground below. Their eyes meet and they connect profoundly. Native Girl keeps reappearing in Ava's life, reflected in windows and mirrors; Ava begins to work with UBC professor Dr. Ruth Wilson (strong First Nations mezzo Marion Newman) to learn the Gitksan language and culture; she marries white boyfriend Devon (Kaden Forsberg) in a Gitksan ceremony; Ava witnesses Native Girl's murder in a dream.

Weaving in and out of this narrative is a second, involving Native Girl's mother (Coast Salish mezzo Rose- Ellen Nichols) and brother (bass-baritone Clarence Logan, whose mother is from Moosomin First

Nations). Native Mother's grief is so deep, much of the time she can only sit and mourn. Native Girl's brother feels guilty because he was not able to protect his sister.

All of the roles were well sung, including the small, thankless part of Jess (mezzo Heather Molloy), a law school friend of Ava's who embodies everything that is hateful about unthinking prejudice. They were also all meticulously performed under the direction of Peter Hinton, although the technique of having characters pace slowly from side to side, effective early on to give body to the weight of grief experienced by the Indigenous community, felt slightly overdone by the end. But that over-repetition became noticeable only because the singers simply did not have enough to sing.



Marion Newman in POV's *Missing*: Photo: Dean Kalyan

The opera

The musical intention of Clements and composer Brian Current may have been to avoid the usual arias, duets and choruses appearing at regular intervals to break up the recitative. But there isn't, in fact, that much recitative and, instead of being an opera, this feels more like a chamber music suite (ably performed by a seven-member ensemble under Native American conductor Timothy Long), with some singing here and there. Current's orchestral language is spare but gripping, and would be interesting to listen to with no singing at all, but the few times the characters were given the opportunity to express themselves in aria or ensemble form, his work (and the libretto) lifted to the very nearly sublime. Native Mother's one keening song to her lost child, in Gitksan, was both a universal cry of anguish, and a searing look into her damaged soul.

Missing needs more of that: more libretto, more opportunity for all of the characters to tell their stories and become three-dimensional. At the same time though, its dramatic and visual power—helped by a stunning set that includes a giant, skeletal rib cage on the floor and haunting projections on the scrim covering the bones of a longhouse, by Euro/Omushkego Cree artist Andy Moro—and the simple force of the tragedy the Indigenous community continues to face make this production a must-see, for all Canadians.

<https://reconciliationsyllabus.wordpress.com/2018/01/02/what-is-missing-marie-clementss-new-opera-about-missing-and-murdered-indigenous-women/>

reconciliationsyllabus

a TRC-inspired gathering of materials for teaching law



“What is missing?”: Marie Clements’s New Opera about Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women

Heidi Darroch Posted on January 2, 2018

Violence against Indigenous women and girls is pervasive in Canada. The National Inquiry Interim Report, (*Our Women and Girls are Sacred*) cites an estimate that Indigenous women are “12 times more likely to be murdered or missing than any other women in Canada, and 16 times more likely than Caucasian women” (at pp. 7-8). And the Native Women’s Association of Canada points out that numbers alone communicate little about the lives of Indigenous women and girls, or the calamitous losses experienced by their families and communities. As NWAC point out in their discussion of the Faceless Dolls Project, “each statistic tells a story.”

In a new chamber opera that debuted in 2017 in British Columbia, librettist Marie Clements and composer Brian Current portray ongoing colonial violence against Indigenous women and girls and emphasize the need for difficult learning.

Missing, performed in English and the Gitksan language, immerses audience members in a discomfiting comparison of the divergent life chances of two young women with similar aspirations. Ava, a white law student, passes by a hitchhiker on the notorious Highway 16, the “Highway of Tears” where so many women have gone missing. After a car accident, she glimpses the body of a high school student, a character Clements names only “Native Girl,” who stands in for the multitude of lost girls and women.

Ava returns to her studies after recovering and encounters Dr. Wilson, a guest lecturer, whose discussion of missing and murdered Indigenous women challenges students to move beyond fleeting sympathy to grapple with their own complicity. “What is missing,” Dr. Wilson asks the students, in a society that “can’t recognize another human being as another human being?” One of Ava’s classmates disavows shared responsibility for the structures and histories that make Indigenous women vulnerable to violence; she angrily insists that they are to blame for their own “bad choices.”

The student’s defensive reaction in the opera, and her reliance on problematic stereotypes, will be familiar to many instructors. Maxine Matilpi explains that “when we dispel lies and deal with the omissions from their prior education, non-Indigenous students tell me that they would rather we didn’t

spend so much class time on colonization or racism; they find it uncomfortable and frustrating, even irritating” (See her article “Personal Political Pedagogy with Respect to #MMIW” in D. Memee Lovell-Harvard and Jennifer Brant, eds, *Forever Loved: Exposing the Hidden Crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls in Canada* (2016), p. 264).

But in the opera, Ava, is not defensive. She has been transformed by her near-fatal accident, and is receptive to Dr. Wilson, who instructs her in the Gitksan language and then mentors her when she becomes a new mother. The care and cultural teachings that Ava receives are further reminders of what the other young woman was deprived of by her assailant, while scenes of her mother’s limitless grief portray how badly she is missed. As Ava encounters Native Girl in uncanny ways, she learns to reach out to her, offering care and witnessing.

Marie Clements, an acclaimed Métis playwright (she is also the writer and director of the new film *The Road Forward*), when interviewed about *Missing*, said that her desire was to create a work in this Opera that would engage the empathy of Indigenous and non-Indigenous audience members by portraying “a Canadian story . . . one that we’re all responsible to.”

The disappearances and tragic deaths continue, and at the first hearings of the National Inquiry, families have described losses that extend across generations. Marilyn Dumont, a Métis poet and professor, commemorates Helen Betty Osborne, a high school student who had to move away from home to attend high school. “Betty,” Dumont writes, “if I set out to write this poem about you / it might turn out instead / to be about me / or any one of /my female relatives.”

Clements’ opera is a great resource for those looking for ways to engage with the difficult realities of our shared colonial histories in ways that make this story one that we are all responsible to.

SOME RESOURCES:

Chantelle Bellerichard, “New opera about MMIWG tells a story ‘that we’re all responsible to,’ says co-creator” (Oct 29, 2017) <http://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/mmiwg-opera-to-premiere-in-vancouver-next-week-1.4375797>

Sarah Petrescu, “Power of Opera Gives Story of Missing Indigenous Women Emotional Depth” (Nov 21, 2017) <http://www.timescolonist.com/entertainment/power-of-opera-gives-story-of-missing-indigenous-women-emotional-depth-1.23099825>

Interim Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, “Our Women and Girls are Sacred” (2017) <http://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/files/ni-mmiwg-interim-report-en.pdf>

Highway of Tears Symposium Recommendation Report (2006)
<http://www.turtleisland.org/healing/highwayoftears.pdf>

Jorge Barerra, “100s of Faceless Dolls Disappear” (Oct 10, 2017)
<http://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/mmiwg-faceless-dolls-disappear-1.4363768>

Heidi Darroch: I teach first-year writing and literature courses at the University of Victoria where I am an Assistant Teaching Professor in the Department of English. My research interesting include reconciliation and redress, contemporary Canadian fiction and poetry, and women writers.