

## Composer's Remarks

I've spent the last few weeks in rehearsals. Despite a good deal of nail-biting, it's been a wonderful experience. In the course of it, there came back something I learned in college, and that is the first chapter of *What is Art?* by Tolstoy. It describes an opera rehearsal – all the apparent chaos and the endless repetitions – and Tolstoy asks, how could this be art? Later in the book he arrives at his definition of art: he says, if I can recall rightly, that art is a human activity in which one person experiences certain thoughts and feelings and by means of various symbols passes them on to others, who also experience them. Perhaps the (to him) meaningless jumble of the rehearsal process was an example of the “various symbols” being brought to life, in this case in a *performing* art. As I listened to the comments and analyses of our speakers today, I reflected, was this what was in my mind? – was I trying to pass along my thoughts and feelings about Reaney's story, using my symbols of voices and instruments? I remember the opera director Herman Geiger-Torel was asked to explain the growing popularity of opera, this elaborate and expensive medium, and he said it was because an opera is such a powerful mix, a story whose emotions are intensified when conveyed through music.

Listening to the papers today, I've jotted down points I wanted to respond to. In an exchange of correspondence between the musicologist Jean Boivin and the composer Denys Bouliane, which appeared recently in a Quebec journal, the composer asks at the end of one letter, “Où sont les musicologues?” This struck a chord: composers always want comment and interpretation of their work, but in Canada the musicologists (in other words, those trained for the task) habitually concern themselves with other repertoires. It's been a refreshing change to have these thoughtful and illuminating comments made today by not only musicologists but scholars from other disciplines.

John Mayo identified James Reaney as an ideal librettist. I second that. Reaney's first draft of *Taptoo!* was sprawling, even messy, but it had a splendid story line and was full of musical possibilities. For example, he had already researched the fife-and-drum procedures, and noted some of the popular and patriotic songs appropriate to the period. One of my first thoughts was that some of the characters needed to be built up. Reaney always responds to suggestions of this sort promptly and with wonderful ideas. For example, I considered the work would need more of the contrast of

women's voices: couldn't the roles of Elizabeth Simcoe and Atahentsic be expanded? In short order he produced a duet scene built around the five senses. I wondered if there could be more emphasis on the warm love-feelings between Seth and Atahentsic, and he produced an extended duet for those two characters.

I want to thank John Mayo for referring to our radio collages of the 1960s. I was quite touched by his recorded examples, having not heard them in years. He thought the boy's voice in *Canada Dot* could have been mine: in fact was my eldest son, then aged about twelve.

A questioner compared the collage genre to a quilt. It's an image which has occasionally been applied to my music, including by me. I often compose by starting anywhere, gathering stuff (ideas, motives, patterns) and only somewhat later establishing beginning, middle, and end. So, yes – a quilt. Someone else wondered if the mock Sousa march in *All the Bees and All the Keys* was related to the military sections of *Taptoo!*? I don't know. Mayo's recorded excerpt ended at what bandmen in Sousa's day used to call the "dog fight" – a bridge section where, by convention, treble and bass instruments toss a short motive back and forth. I tried to incorporate that formula, and I tried to do the same with the formulas of the taptoo ceremony in the opera; so the comment is probably valid.

Eric Domville's research revealed many points I hadn't seen, and I thank him for that. Why are Canadians not Americans? is Reaney's summary of the opera's theme. I try these days to persuade my five-year-old granddaughter that the final letter of the alphabet is not "zee," but it's a losing battle. On the other hand, how about this one?: there are no Boxing Day sales in the U. S.

Domville regards Ebenezer as the alter ego of Seth. I find this a true observation, though I hadn't thought of it before. As to his point that Simcoe's title needs to be clarified, I agree. Reaney and I had to check over and over about this. In his Queen's Rangers days he was a major, then he was lieutenant-governor, but mixups continually occur: for example, a magazine illustration just the other day called him *Sir* John Graves Simcoe, and we Torontonians remember a former hotel, the *Lord* Simcoe – so called, the owners said, because it was near Simcoe Street, and all the other hotels in the chain were named after lords.

Eric challenged me to produce the third opera in the originally-conceived historical trilogy. Reaney is the person to ask about that first of all. My answer is contained in a line near the end of

the final scene of *Taptoo!* When Seth Junior points out says that the Upper Canadians have no navy to defend themselves, they respond with “where’s the money?”

Robin Elliott traced meticulously the opera’s musical quotations, and compared them with other uses of the same music. Some of these I didn’t know about – for example, the origin of “Over the hills and far away” as a recruiting tune. He refers to the inclusion of Daniel Read’s tune “Wyndham” on the barrel organ in the Sharon Temple. We have to note this now in the past tense, since the current state of the organ and indeed of the Temple itself is lamentable, judging by my visit there last year. Lack of money again? – probably. Anyway the upkeep of this extraordinary historic building and its collection is declining. In the early 1980s, Geoffrey Payzant painstakingly restored the pinning of the old barrels to make the organ playable for visitors to the Temple, but now the instrument just sits in the unheated Temple all winter, and is not available to listen to.

Robin found irony in my use of “General Burgoyne’s Minuet.” In fact I recall, looking for a tune for that part of the ball scene, my eyes popped when I saw the title in David Johnson’s *Scottish Fiddle Music in the Eighteenth Century*. It seemed appropriate, and I didn’t think more deeply than that about it. A questioner wanted to know about the game-song “Marching down to old Quebec.” I found it in one of Edith Fowke’s publications, and when I consulted her about it she kindly looked up some extra lyrics which we were able to use. When we did *Taptoo!* at McGill, both francophone and anglophone students in the cast asked, if this is an opera about Toronto, why are we doing it in Montreal? My first answer was that so far no one in Toronto wanted to do it. But then I told them on a free afternoon on a nice day I went strolling in Old Montreal and discovered in the Place d’armes a plaque marking the place where a statue of George III once stood – until it was destroyed by the Americans in their occupation of the city in 1775. So in many ways the opera relates to all of Canada as it was in the eighteenth century, not just to Toronto or Upper Canada.

I’m grateful to Ken Purvis both for his stimulating talk today and for having given me the benefit of his expertise in the history of military music at early stages of the writing of *Taptoo!* His recorded example of the conventional military taptoo, with fifes and drums, corresponds to the appropriate scenes in the opera, but the tempos are quite different. I somehow imagined the “doubling” would be quicker than the “singling.” The three-beat signal for the start of the ceremony relates to *The Magic Flute* – something I hadn’t recognized when I was working on it. The G major

arpeggio which forms the “closing” of the taptoo comes twice in the opera, near the end of the drum-lesson scene in Act One, and again in the reprise of the taptoo towards the end of Act Two. But I do it much more slowly, I suppose for dramatic emphasis.

I appreciate Ramsay Cook’s remarks on the projected visuals, and will pass them on to the producers. The idea of ending with a gradual updating of the city skyline relates to an early draft, when we thought the opera would be presented at Historic Fort York. That aim was soon rejected when we found it was acoustically impossible: you couldn’t hear a brass band there, let alone a boy soprano. Reaney envisioned that, as the summer outdoor performance ended, it would get dark and the modern skyscrapers would come into view, emphasizing the growth and change on this site since the early nineteenth century. About a week before we opened, I remembered this and suggested it as the closing projection. Some audience members seemed to find it optimistic, others pessimistic: myself, I just want you to hear the mandolin tremolo as the scene fades. The McGill production, a critic commented, was played for laughs (I don’t think this was meant as a criticism). This production, I find, makes it a darker piece, and the ending is serious and provocative.

Cecilia Morgan spoke of the status of women in the period of the opera. In Scene 3 of Act One, the montage of daily life in the fort, the women have the line, “Nice clean water, to wash [the men’s] bloodied shirts in,” but later, after presumably another battle, they sing of “Six more bloody shirts to wash,” turning from good-natured comment to mild swearing. Questioners referred to Atahensic’s costume. Realistically she would not wear a deerskin jacket and moccasins in a family situation, but I have to defend this as a way of immediately establishing her as an aboriginal. I agree it’s something of a cliché but on the stage the point has to be made speedily. Concerning the caricaturing of Mrs Simcoe, again on behalf of the production team I must plead guilty. She was a more complex person than shown in the opera, but you have to make choices: in a limited time in the theatre you can’t make a rounded biographical portrait of every character. Reading her biography gave me great respect for her; she had many children, outlived her husband by forty years, was altogether a strong personality. In a short time in the opera (one of my composing tools is a stopwatch), we show her relating her Canadian experiences to her English upbringing, and this was what a gentlewoman did. In her diaries she is forever complaining about her mosquito bites. I agree it’s a caricature, but perhaps not a wholly inauthentic one.

[A postscript, added post-symposium: a few days after its opening, *Taptoo!* was reviewed in both the *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star*. What was most distressing to me in the published comments was that neither reviewer mentioned the theme of the opera, let alone its (I think) obvious contemporary appropriateness, which formed the basis for about three-quarters of the commentary at the symposium, and almost the entire concluding round table. “Canada/U.S. relations” was a phrase on every front page in those weeks, but evidently unheard-of by the “entertainment section” staff.]

John Beckwith