

A different drummer: the birth of a province

The John Beckwith-James Reaney operatic collaboration with the rousing title Taptoo! raises many issues both in itself and in connection with the whole vexed question of Canadian-American relations. It raises many issues without attempting to provide solutions. This refusal to supply a neat answer I take to be the opera's greatest strength. Its open-endedness leaves the audience with the challenge, the obligation to engage more meaningfully, because more imaginatively, with the question of national survival. In an effort to grapple with some of the work's implications, as I perceive them, I have divided this paper into a number of sections dealing respectively with the genesis and performance history of the opera, a consideration of its themes, a discussion of the biblical and mythological subtexts, and the continuing relevance of the concerns raised throughout.

1.

Taptoo! was conceived in a somewhat unusual fashion as a “pre-sequel” or “prequel” to the Harry Somers-James Reaney opera Serinettes, first performed in 1990 at the Sharon Temple, north of Toronto¹. A few words about that opera would therefore prove helpful. Serinettes covers a period in the development of Toronto and surroundings from the end of the War of 1812 to the 1830s, a turbulent era in Upper Canada. The opera presents for the most part real-life figures from that period. For example, David Willson, an American expatriate, who separated from a Quaker group in Toronto to found his own Children of Peace, and to build their place of worship, the wonderful Sharon Temple, a place of light and music. Willson believed that “God is Peace” and that he himself was descended directly from his namesake, King David of the Old Testament. Intertwined with his story is that of the Jarvises and other members of the Family Compact in Toronto. The Jarvises own a “serinette”, a miniature barrel organ designed to train caged wild birds to imitate arias by Rossini and others. The thrust of the opera goes against such mechanical training in favour of a natural Canadian mode of expression. To reach this level of independence from foreign domination requires a growth in cultural maturity, a stage beyond that attainable in the infant colony depicted in Taptoo!

To return to that opera. It presents a series of episodes in another tumultuous era in Canada- United States, that of the years 1780 to 1810. We follow events beginning in New Jersey in the aftermath of the War of the American Revolution and ending in Upper Canada shortly before the War of 1812.

Both fledgling nations were struggling with their own insecurities and hostilities in an effort to achieve an identity and to come to some kind of terms with each other. The birth throes both of the American republic and of a Canadian province provided librettist and composer with a good deal of raw dramatic material. The choice of the “ballad opera” genre colours the social and political stance of Taptoo! This is history seen from the bottom up, a populist take on that formative period as well as, by implication, on the continuing legacy of trust/mistrust, understanding/misunderstanding in the fluctuating relations of the two societies.

Taptoo! not only encompasses a good deal of history, it has accumulated a history of its own in its ten years or so of existence. The work was conceived in 1992 and composed in 1993-94. In June 1994, John Hess directed a workshop performance in the Glenn Gould Studio of the CBC in Toronto. The first staged performance did not take place until March 1999, mounted by the McGill University Opera Department. On both these occasions, however, because of cutbacks in grants only piano and percussion accompanied the performance. Consequently, it was not until the series of performances by the Opera Division of the Faculty of Music at the University of Toronto (7, 8, 14, 15 March 2003) that anyone, including the composer, has been able to hear the complete orchestration. In particular, such open-air instruments as fifes, trumpets and percussion confer their own military colours on the pageantry accompanying the birth of a province.

2.

“Taptoo” (an older form of Tadoo”) is defined in two ways. Firstly, it takes the form of “a signal on a bugle, drum, etc., calling troops to their quarters at night”. Secondly and more to the point here, it is a “military display provided as entertainment”. Through his specialized orchestration John Beckwith has crafted a sound-world to evoke the life of two-hundred years ago. The opera Taptoo! is described as a “documentary ballad opera”. The tradition of the “ballad opera” is dealt with very ably and comprehensively by Professor Robin Elliott in his paper. What concerns me more is the element of the “documentary”, that is, the introduction of actual historical figures and events into a stage work. With his encyclopedic knowledge of earlier musical traditions, John Beckwith has capitalized on various hymns, marches and dances of that period to characterize the various national and regional groups. This intensifies the sense of authenticity and helps to avoid confusion.

Potentially there is a high risk of confusion. The action flows back and forth between the two emergent nations. Armies march and countermarch, refugee Loyalists trudge from the Mohawk Valley to their new life in Upper Canada. Seth Harple, the central figure, serves at different times as a drum major both to the American “Mad Anthony” Wayne and to the British John Graves Simcoe without any apparent feeling of betrayal or incongruity. Everyone is on the move; everything is in flux. There is a lack of definition and thus of identity, especially in the absence of a permanent border to serve as a demarcation between two differing attitudes to life in general and to politics in particular. To rewrite Robert Frost’s line: “Good borders make good neighbours”. It was not until the Convention of 1818 that the 49th Parallel was agreed upon as the border from Lake of the Woods westwards to the summit of the Rockies, extended by the Treaty of 1846 as far as the Strait of Georgia. Borders in themselves, of course, guarantee nothing, but they serve as a starting point of stability.

The most tangible form of stability in the opera is the idea of the family both on the individual and the communal levels. The Harple family, in its three generations, presents us with the most distinctive example. Jesse, father and grandfather, is a Quaker. His pacifist views eventually lead him to Upper Canada, having been tarred and feathered and had his home burnt down in New Jersey. Seth, his son, marries an Indian woman, Atahentsic, an action which brings about his being drummed out of the American forces as an “Indian lover”. They have a son, Seth junior, who dominates the final tableau of the work. No mention is made of this inter-racial marriage and family in Upper Canada. They are accepted into society even to the extent of becoming close friends of Lieutenant-Governor Simcoe and his wife. From a realistic point of view this may well strike one as highly unlikely, but from a symbolic perspective it underlies differences between Canada and America within the imagined world of the opera.

The Simcoes, without children of their own in this work, become the “parents” of Upper Canada including the Harples. Simcoe comes across not only as a wily commander of the Loyalist forces, but also as a visionary. Perhaps the highlight of the entire work comes in his aria just before the end of Act 1:

One day, Seth ... man
Will stop butchering his brothers...
The fighting over and done, and then

Peace, peace, peace.

Peace, stability, definition. The opposite of war with its flux. Perhaps for Simcoe, as later for David Willson at Sharon Temple, “God is Peace”.

For the boy Seth in Act 1, serving as a drummer in Simcoe’s army, the image of his commanding officer seems to take on something of the divine, hero-worship to the nth degree:

I felt so close to our Commander
There were no written orders.
We drummers and buglers were
Extensions of his mind.
We were his voice, his thunderous voice,
commanding, commanding.

The interaction of the historical and the fictional here starts to approximate the mythic.

Drama flourishes on conflict. Much of the conflict and most of the drama is propelled by Ebenezer Hatchway, the antagonist of the work, both as a boy and man. He is the most interesting because the most complex character, in some ways Cain to Seth’s Abel although he doesn’t succeed in killing him. Symbolically he represents Seth’s dark side, his “alter ego” or “doppelgänger”. Ebenezer leads the mob at the beginning of the opera to tar and feather Jesse and to burn his house down because he persists in drinking British tea. Throughout the opera Ebenezer personifies threat or violence. At the end, now Senator Hatchway of Kentucky, he promises to return in war to compel the Canadians to become Americans, employing images of animal predators such as the lion and the eagle in pursuit of the Canadian beaver. His two-faced behaviour – he is a thief and a liar – resembles very strongly the Trickster figure beloved of many mythologies. His duplicity extends even to his name. “Ebenezer” is a honourable Biblical name meaning “a stone or monument of help” – hence, stability – whereas “Hatchway” refers to a trap door, a secret entrance or exit – suggesting treachery.

However, it is Seth who attracts our attention in the beginning and end of the opera. Or, rather, two Seths. The first Seth as a boy in 1780, and then his son, Seth junior, in 1810. Each boy is playing at a naval battle between American and British ships in a tub of water. In New Jersey it is the British ship

which wins; in Toronto-York the American one triumphs. In the final scene there are actually two tubs, one for Lake Erie and the other for Lake Ontario. The Canadian-British ships cannot reach Lake Erie (because of Niagara Falls). A new navy will have to be built. The grown-ups looking on intone the last lines; “Expensive. Is it worth it? What should we do? What can we do?” By way of response young Seth splashes them with cold water: reality check. The closing stage direction reads: “Last image is the boy’s defiant face, a toy ship in either hand, young scion of an endangered baby colony”.

The boy and the province of Upper Canada are still in their infancy. How will they both grow to maturity? Behind this provocative and highly ambiguous ending there surely lies a biblical echo. In Isaiah, XI, there occur two relevant passages:

- (a) xi, 1: And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots:
- (b) xi, 6: The wolf shall also dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.

Jesse Harple and his grandson Seth? Lead into what? In the immediate future, we know, the War of 1812, with devastation and death on both sides of the border. But beyond that? I shall return to this in my final section.

My concern here has led us to the echoes or hints of the biblical and mythological implanted in the work. It is to the more explicit use of such resonating materials that I now wish to turn.

3.

As is only to be expected from the subject matter, explicit biblical references abound. In the beautiful choral prelude to Act 2, the immigrant Loyalists from the Mohawk Valley sing of walking “To the border river of Niagara/Crossing Jordan into promised lands”. They have escaped from the American version of the Egyptian bondage. The idea of Exodus permeates their imaginations:

Before we left for these wilderness roads,
We cut ourselves some ox-goads,
From the Balm of Gilead tree...

Once again the negative image of Egypt in the Old Testament surfaces in a possible echo of Jeremiah 46:11: “Go up into Gilead and take balm, O virgin, the daughter of Egypt: in vain shalt thou use many medicines; for thou shalt not be cured.” The Loyalists identify themselves with the liberated Israelites and the Americans with oppressive Egypt.

Even the Lieutenant-Governor’s ball evokes the Old Testament. Seth remarks to Atahentsic: “The Society of Friends frowns on dancing”. She responds: “King David danced before the Ark, didn’t he?” “I know,” Seth continues, “but a minuet? I always pictured him as stepdancing!” Stage direction: “He executes a few steps nimbly.” James Reaney presumably had in mind David “leaping and dancing before the Lord” (2 Samuel, 6, 16). Perhaps interfused with that Reaney remembered David Willson (in his putative descent from King David) and the emphasis he placed on music in the services of the Children of Peace.

In keeping with Puritan practice, the names of the Harple men are biblical. Jesse, the father, takes his from the founder of a tree or line from which, according to tradition, Christ was descended. The name possibly means “gift”, which is what he seems to hand on: the gift of faith and compassion. Seth was the name of the third son of Adam and Eve, born after Cain had murdered Abel. The name means “appointed, placed,” as though, despite everything, he is in the right place at the right time.

When we turn to mythology in the opera, we find it equally pervasive. This is not surprising, given that Reaney and Beckwith had already used a mythological underpinning in The Shivaree (1978). Here myth and ritual reinforce each other. The figures of Persephone, Ceres and Hades translate into comparable people of Southwestern Ontario a century ago. The opera takes its title from the ritual of the shivaree or charivari, consisting of a mock serenade played on assorted kitchen implements and other noisemakers to accompany the wedding night of newlyweds. Classical myth and local custom combine to reveal the universal in the everyday.

When they came to Taptoo!, they clearly had something similar in mind. Ritual, for instance, abounds. The nightly performance of taptoo to recall troops to camp, for one thing; then there are the various occasions of someone being “drummed out” or expelled from a regiment. This happens

to Ebenezer in Act 1, and to the older Seth in Act 2., while later in that act Ebenezer is literally thrown out of the Upper Canada legislature into the Niagara River.

These particular incidents form part of the drastic simplifications required by stage presentation, which tend to compress the action into archetypal patterns of behaviour. The historical and the fictional characters and incidents fuse into a mythical narrative of the foundation both of Upper Canada (specifically the region of Southwestern Ontario) and, by implication, Canada itself, or at least, its anglophone component.

With so much questing not only for victory, but even more for nationhood, it's not surprising that one comes across an allusion to the supreme embodiment of the quest, the Arthurian cycle. When Seth and Atahentsic decide to leave the United States, they arrive at the "mysterious and silent gates of Fort Defiance... like one of those mysterious castles that suddenly loom up in Arthurian romances". The incongruity of this association perhaps serves mainly as an example of the humour which runs through this work, yet jokes make serious points. In this case, man and wife are on a quest or pilgrimage not too unlike that of, say, Christian in Pilgrim's Progress.

Atahentsic, in fact, embodies the mythological in its most complete form. For the Huron and Iroquois nations, she is the mother of mankindⁱⁱ. Originally she lived in the sky but one day she slipped through a hole and began to fall. When the great turtle who lived in the primeval ocean saw what had happened, he ordered the other sea-creatures to fetch mud from the bottom of the ocean and to pile it on his great shell. In this way the earth came into being, so that when Atahentsic eventually landed her fall was broken. In addition to the positive, creative side of her nature, however, she was also evil, spreading disease and death. For our purposes, fortunately, the character in the opera displays only her good side. She is a loving wife and mother, heals with herbs and is not afraid to dispatch a rattlesnake (an American revolutionary symbol) with her bare hands.

She is described in the opera as the daughter of Chief Turtle of the Maumees. Little Turtle (1747-1812)ⁱⁱⁱ, as he was actually known, was a famous chief who, in 1791, inflicted on American forces under General St. Clair the greatest defeat in American history. He had a daughter, Sweet Breeze,

who married a white man, William Wells, an Indian agent. James Reaney perhaps mixed historical fact with a creation myth and came up with the figure of Atahentsic.

The case of Atahentsic typifies the process of creation in this work. Elements from diverse traditions merge, synthesize to produce a multi-level experience, inviting a range of interpretations.

4.

“The point of view of the opera is that of a child.” So its creators tell us. We all know the extraordinary remarks that may come out of the mouth of a babe. But behind the child’s vision and words there exist the visions of its two creators, two mature and experienced men of the theatre. How is the audience to react to the final tableau of young Seth holding two opposing warships as the spotlight fades to darkness? Some members respond pessimistically, others optimistically. Both reactions seem valid, and would prove even more valid if one were able to hold both simultaneously.

It strikes me that the refusal to offer a neat solution to the dilemma of what the “endangered baby colony” should do with regard to its powerful big brother next door is not an evasion but rather a realistic acknowledgement that there is no answer, at least not one clearcut and straightforward. Two hundred years of a largely one-sided dialogue on the part of Canadians have perhaps not changed very much.

The work was created in the aftermath of the first Gulf War of 1991. That period also witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union, leaving the United States as the only world superpower. Slightly earlier, on 1 January, 1989, the Free Trade Agreement was signed by Canada and the United States, expanded on 1 January 1994 to include Mexico in NAFTA. A series of tariff disputes has served to highlight tensions existing since the period of the opera.

And yet things continue, more or less. Quite coincidentally, a few days after the opening of the production in Toronto, an article by John Ralston Saul appeared in The Globe and Mail. Entitled “Think outside the box,” it discussed the Canadian genius in creating “a non-monolithic society”. In part it read:

And that originality emerges out of a long experience with experiment and complexity; one already begun in the 18th Century with the Quebec Act and the Constitutional Act of 1791.

These acts led us toward the highly unusual concept of a non-monolithic civilization. We moved in the opposite direction to our colonial masters – to say nothing of our closest neighbour – away from the obsession with a monolithic society or myth and toward the embracing of a non-monolithic complexity^{iv}.

Perhaps young Seth remains silent because he has nothing to say or sing or perhaps because there is so much to utter about the new province and country that he doesn't know where to begin.

In the conclusion to Walden, Thoreau makes the famous remark: “*If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer.*” One of the key scenes in Taptoo! involves Seth and his rival Ebenezer beating out different rhythms on their respective drums to order the location of “Mad Anthony” Wayne’s tent. Whatever Seth dictates, Ebenezer countermands. The two, as usual, are at loggerheads, and as the opera develops each drummer chooses a different country to follow. The Upper Canadians march to a different drummer.

Since its inception opera has been inseparable from myth. The very fact that the text is sung rather than spoken removes it from, raises it above, the everyday level of discourse. In this opera, drawing upon diverse musical, historical and mythological backgrounds, we witness the creation of the body politic of Upper Canada. If history serves as the memory of that body, then perhaps myth is its DNA – that ultimate entity which defines and differentiates one organism (or country or province) from all others, a different form of memory. If all that is so, then Taptoo! has fulfilled a deep need in the psyche of this particular region of the globe.

ⁱ Prequels are not common in operatic history. Perhaps the best-known (and the best) example is Rossini’s The Barber of Seville (1816), based on the first play of Beaumarchais’ trilogy, composed thirty years after Mozart’s The Marriage of Figaro (1786), which derives from the second play.

ⁱⁱ Bruce G. Trigger, The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People (2Vols); Montreal and London, 1976, Especially Vol. 1, pp. 77-78.

There is also a very interesting article by William N. Fenton, “This Island, The World on the Turtle’s Back,” Journal of American Folklore, 75, 1962, pp. 283-300, which examines the myths of the Huron and Iroquois peoples. I am greatly indebted to Professor Ramsey Cook for introducing me to this essential item.

ⁱⁱⁱ Harvey Lewis Carter, The Life and Times of Little Turtle. Urbana and Chicago: 1987.

^{iv} The Globe and Mail, March 11, 2003, p. A 13.