

Grand Opera, Musical Brothel: COMUS's *Nightbloom*, the CEE, and the Innovation of Canadian Opera

Colleen Renihan

Volume 41, numéro 2, 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1117688ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1117688ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes

ISSN

1911-0146 (imprimé)

1918-512X (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Renihan, C. (2021). Grand Opera, Musical Brothel: COMUS's *Nightbloom*, the CEE, and the Innovation of Canadian Opera. *Intersections*, 41(2), 29–41.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1117688ar>

Résumé de l'article

Dans les années 1970 et 1980, l'effervescence du théâtre musical—un genre combinant les genres de la comédie musicale, du théâtre expérimental et de l'opéra—a favorisé la création de plusieurs nouvelles compagnies canadiennes d'opéra/théâtre musical spécialisées dans les oeuvres croisées, ainsi qu'un déferlement créatif d'oeuvres originales défiant les genres. Dans cet article, j'explore cette période d'expérimentation générique dans l'histoire de l'opéra canadien, en me concentrant sur le travail de la compagnie innovante COMUS Music Theatre, fondée en 1975 à Toronto. Cette compagnie cherchait à révolutionner le théâtre musical en présentant des oeuvres qui faisaient appel à d'autres médias, ainsi qu'au théâtre, à la musique populaire, à la danse et aux arts de la scène. La production de *Nightbloom* (février 1984) de COMUS Music Theatre est un exemple de l'innovation et de l'expérimentation génériques de la compagnie. Par le biais d'analyses musicales et textuelles, et d'entrevues avec des personnages clés de la création, j'explore les façons audacieuses dont le COMUS Music Theatre a réussi à imaginer une nouvelle voie pour les chanteurs d'opéra et pour le théâtre musical au Canada dans les années 1970.

GRAND OPERA, MUSICAL BROTHEL: COMUS'S NIGHTBLOOM, THE CEE, AND THE INNOVATION OF CANADIAN OPERA¹

Colleen Renihan

In the 1970s and 1980s, a flurry of activity in music theatre—a genre that defines itself by its innovative and experimental approach to sung theatre—prompted the creation of several new Toronto-based new music theatre companies specializing in crossover work, along with a creative outpouring of original genre-defying pieces. Examples of this work include COMUS Music Theatre's "dusk-to-dawn musical/theatrical ritual" *RA* (also known as *Patria 6*) by R. Murray Schafer in 1988, a piece for which the audience of "initiates" journeyed on a pilgrimage through the Ontario Science Centre to take in the show overnight; Brazen Overtures's *Boom, Baby Boom* in 1988, a jazz play about immigration to Toronto, with music by Nic Gotham and directed by Banuta Rubess; and Tapestry New Opera's *Nigredo Hotel*, composed by Nic Gotham to a libretto by Ann-Marie MacDonald, which was premiered in May 1992. Despite the pioneering work produced by these Toronto-based companies, this history has all but entirely evaded scholarly study.² Indeed, while in their 2008 book *The New Music Theatre*, Salzman and Desi discuss several international developments that fall under this umbrella—including the more heavily publicized works of composer-creators active during the same period such as Philip Glass and Meredith Monk—Canada is mentioned only in passing.³

1 I would like to thank several individuals without whom this research would have been impossible. I thank Michael Bawtree, Billie Bridgman, Claire Hopkinson, and Jim Montgomery for their many insights in interviews. Thank you to Dr. Alexa Woloshyn for the invitation to speak at the CEE 50 Hybrid Symposium hosted by Carnegie Mellon University on October 8, 2022. This version of the paper includes valuable feedback from that event. Finally, my great thanks to David Jaeger for his generosity in offering his time and memories to this paper, and for reading a draft of it. Thanks also to David and to Jim Montgomery for lending me a box of CEE *Nightbloom* materials to peruse as I completed work on this paper.

2 I have written previously about some of Bawtree's work at the Banff Centre for the Arts and the Stratford Festival in "Pitching Opera: Defining and Dividing Music Theatre at Canadian Festivals 1970–1990." *The Journal of the Society for American Music*, Special Issue on Festivals and Musical Life, 2020: 33–50 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196319000531>.

3 Salzman mentions Bawtree's work at the Banff Centre, R. Murray Schafer's compositions, and the founding of Chant Libres in Montreal in 1990 under the direction of Pauline Vaillancourt with her focus on voice. He also notes the interest that Chant Libres took in electronic media.

In this article, I mobilize archival research and interviews to explore this rich period of generic experimentation in the history of Canadian music theatre/opera by focusing on the work of one innovative company, COMUS Music Theatre, founded in 1975 in Toronto, and specifically, its 1984 collaboration with the Canadian Electronic Ensemble (CEE) on *Nightbloom*, a piece that exemplifies creative collaborative practices, and that combines elements from opera, electronic music, popular music, and musical theatre.

HISTORY OF COMUS

COMUS Music Theatre was operational from 1975–1987 in Toronto. Its name derives from John Milton's *Masque of Comus*, a play about the god of festivity in ancient Greek mythology, and the son and cup-bearer of Dionysus.⁴ Founded by Michael Bawtree, Gabriel Charpentier, and Maureen Forrester, the company sought to revolutionize Canadian music theatre by presenting works that engaged with other media as well as with theatre, popular music, dance, and performance art.⁵ Bawtree's inspiration in this respect was the work of Walter Felsenstein, specifically his conception of music theatre as an extension of theatre. Bawtree was also deeply inspired by the work of Nancy Rhodes and Encompass Music Theatre in New York, as well as with Bawtree's work with the International Theatre Institute, which he recalled existing in two centers in Canada in the 1960s.⁶

Throughout the years, COMUS's artistic directors included Bawtree, Giulio Kukurugya, Billie Bridgman, and Steven McNeff. As the CEE's James (Jim) Montgomery described it, COMUS sought to pursue this generic extension or outgrowth of opera into the twentieth century under the rubric of the European term *music theatre*. To achieve this, COMUS undertook a diverse series of programs and activities and produced a range of works over the years. Its first production, *Harry's Back in Town*, was a Broadway musical based on the life and music of songwriter Harry Warren, developed and directed by Bawtree with librettist Tony Thomas and music director Peter Mann. The musical ran for fourteen weeks in the fall of 1976. Its second, in June 1977, demonstrated the company's generic range in Menotti's *The Medium* with COMUS co-founder Maureen Forrester in the title role.

In addition to a number of workshops, reading sessions, and premieres of Canadian works of music theatre, COMUS also produced the Canadian premieres of international and American new music theatre works such as Viktor Ullmann's *The Emperor of Atlantis* in 1979. The company also produced Kurt Weill's *Seven Deadly Sins* and *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* as well as Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*.

4 Comus's representation of anarchy and chaos is evidenced in the music theatre company's experimental approach to music theatre. David Jaeger has also made the observation that the company's name references a theatrical tradition that pre-dates opera, thereby avoiding the trappings of opera. Several of the company's directors, including Hutchison, Bawtree, and Bridgman, also referenced the fact that they also understood it to stand for "Canada Ought to Make Use of its Singers."

5 Before founding COMUS Music Theatre, Bawtree had been approached to direct *The Beggar's Opera* at the Guelph Spring Festival by Nikki Goldschmidt. See Wardrop 2013.

6 The work of Walter Felsenstein, as it relates to music theatre, is presented in Fuchs 1975. This information was shared in an interview with Michael Bawtree in Wolfville, NS, December 5, 2016.

One of the mandates of COMUS was to put pressure on traditional notions of “opera” and “musical theatre.” The dramatic training of Bawtree and Claire Hopkinson affected the approach to genre and performance in the productions COMUS staged. Both Hopkinson and Bawtree spoke of the need for singers to be singing actors rather than singers who had no sense of theatre space, or who sacrificed theatrical storytelling for vocal production. They also took it upon themselves to institute training programs for their singers to ensure the development of their dramatic skills.

The artistic roots of COMUS’s original founders were diverse, thus contributing to the adventurous and innovative spirit of the company and focus of its endeavours: Maureen Forrester was an internationally renowned contralto performing frequently at the Metropolitan Opera. Gabriel Charpentier composed for the Stratford Festival and was a significant poet in addition to being a first-rate composer. As France Meloin writes, “in Charpentier, all the performing arts converge” (Taylor and Plouffe 2015). One of Bawtree’s formative experiences was his early training at Simon Fraser University as the Resident in Theatre in 1965, where he met R. Murray Schafer, a resident in Media Arts, who also had grand ideas about music theatre as a site of convergence of the arts. As Bawtree explains, “it was through [Schafer] that I first became interested in the philosophical and theoretical *combinations* of the arts—the *Gesamtkunstwerk* [as Bawtree called it].”⁷ Bawtree’s training and experience was in theatre and to some extent musical theatre. Bawtree’s work at the Banff Centre for the Arts and the Stratford Festival served as outlets for his uniquely interdisciplinary ideas about the broad and theatrically-based training of music theatre artists and the ideal form and future of the genre, which were further honed at COMUS.

Despite the obvious artistic benefits of the experimental and innovative spirit with which the company approached new works, this caused challenges. Bawtree spoke of the difficulty of pitching COMUS’s works to audiences.⁸ As Claire Hopkinson, Administrative Director of COMUS from 1983–1986 recalls, COMUS’s audience was comprised neither of the opera crowd, nor of the musical theatre public. Rather, it was what Hopkinson describes as the “contemporary music crowd,” though, as Hopkinson recalls, the pieces they produced were difficult to market as they didn’t fit into a particular generic box per se.

7 Bawtree recalls working with Schafer on The Centre for Communication in the Arts at Simon Fraser University in 1965. Schafer’s knowledge of the German Bauhaus tradition was foundational to the centre. Bawtree and Schafer’s collaboration would continue at the Stratford Festival, where Bawtree was the Artistic Director of the Third Stage (now the Patterson Theatre), and in collaboration with Jean Gascon, they produced Schafer’s *Patria 2: Requiems for the Party Girl* as the first work of music theatre on that stage.

8 Michael Bawtree, interview with the author, Wolfville, NS, December 5, 2016. The challenges that COMUS faced were, as Bawtree saw them, twofold: “First it’s the question of how do you get the arts councils and granting issues to believe that music theatre is worth supporting, and finding a way to support it, because their little silos of music, drama, don’t encourage this kind of thing. But then, the second thing is the audience. Who is your audience? Is it the opera audience? No—Most of the opera audience is going to *Tosca* and *La Boheme*. They don’t even like to go to modern operas. Then the drama people go to theatre, and think it’s musicals and either they don’t want to go to serious musicals or they want some song-and-dance. So, the issue is to locate your audience and locating a loyal following.”

Hopkinson recalls COMUS as being “friendless at times,” a sentiment she also recalled being true of Tapestry Opera’s earliest days.⁹ This was a particular challenge where funding was concerned: while the Ontario and Toronto Arts Councils were sources of funding for projects, the Canada Arts Council was particularly difficult to win over for major funding, as several of these new companies did not fit in the theatre envelope, nor did they fit in the opera envelope. When the Music Theatre funders project was established, there was finally a place for innovation and funding. But as Hopkinson recalls, the experience of these smaller companies (even Tapestry) in the shadow of these large companies wasn’t always an easy one—larger opera companies in the POCC (Professional Opera Companies of Canada) were resistant to smaller or mid-size companies joining, as they would dilute the funding pool. They had to ask themselves the question: were they project oriented, or were they an institution? Most decided that they were an institution. In 1984, COMUS Music Theatre was credited by the International Society for Contemporary Music as having produced more than half of all the premieres of contemporary music theatre in North America.¹⁰

In line with its mandate to explore generically creative works, for many COMUS productions, performers came from a variety of backgrounds. In fact, the hiring and training of truly multi-modal singer actors in music theatre was a central aspect of the company’s mandate.¹¹ While operatic voices were employed (the most famous example being that of Maureen Forrester), the production also featured British Columbian Calla Krause, a belt singer, as well as Avo Kittask and Caralyn Tomlin, who had previously performed in Gilbert & Sullivan productions in the Toronto area, as well as in new music productions such as John Beckwith’s *The Shivaree* in 1982.¹²

NIGHTBLOOM: VOLCANIC POTENTIAL

COMUS’s 1984 collaboration with the Canadian Electronic Ensemble on *Nightbloom* was an attestation to their commitment to generic promiscuity. With a libretto by Sean Mulcahy based on James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and music by the Canadian Electronic Ensemble, *Nightbloom* combines elements from opera, electronic music, popular music, and musical theatre.¹³ As seen in

9 Claire Hopkinson and Billie Bridgman. Interview with the author, Toronto, ON, May 10, 2019.

10 Claire Hopkinson, interview with the author, 16 April, 2018. See also Wardrop 2013. Examples of companies doing similar things were few and far between, but Bawtree cites Nancy Rhodes’s Encompass New Opera Theatre in New York, which was also founded in 1975.

11 Incidentally this also became central to Bawtree’s work at the Banff Centre, and informed the Centre’s opera programming moving forward, for example in the *Opera as Theatre* program that ran at the Banff Centre under the direction of Kelly Robinson from 2005 to 2013. The focus on theatrical authenticity, as he described it, can be seen in his descriptions of the opera programs. See The Banff Centre website, <https://www.banffcentre.ca/banff-centre-opera-productions>. Accessed 8 August, 2023.

12 Performers included Athena Voyatzis, Calla Krause, Clair Roger, Don McManus, Kevin Hicks, Jan Filis, and Kris Ryan. See <https://www.canadianelectronicensemble.com/chronology-1980-89/> for further details.

13 It is interesting to note that Cage’s *Roaratorio*, commissioned by IRCAM in 1979, was also based on a piece by Joyce (*Finnegan’s Wake*). His *Europas*, commissioned in 1987 by Heinz-Klaus Metzger and Frankfurt Opera at Almeida Theatre in London, also commented on traditional elements from European repertory operas.

figure 1, *Nightbloom*'s generic fluidity and variety was referenced immediately on the handbill, which features, not accidentally, Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, Bernstein's *West Side Story*, and Rogers & Hart's *Pal Joey*.¹⁴ The musical score was composed by all four members of the CEE—David Grimes, David Jaeger, Larry Lake, and James Montgomery. The dance sequences were choreographed by Don Calderwood, which helped to blend the fantastical with reality.¹⁵ Modal mixing was evident on many levels, including the mixing of dream and reality, which was also supported by both the costume and set designer, Reg Bronskill, and lighting designer, Harry Frehner.

As advertised in the press release of January 13, 1984, the piece “focuses on the memories, desires, and fears of Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom whose hallucinations take form and come to life before their eyes” (1984). The subject matter, Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Portrait of the Artist* was decidedly “low brow” in terms of its content—certainly a more gritty operatic subject than most, though of course opera's history is peppered with examples that mix low and high forms.¹⁶ In a *Toronto Sun* article, Wilder Penfield wrote, “To see it in rehearsal was to be disarmed. The wild words have been swept into a fantasy both exotic and erotic. ‘Intellectual raunch’ was one phrase that came to mind” (1984). Lynette Fortune, from *Eye Opener*, is quoted as saying “Grand opera, musical brothel . . . *Nightbloom* has . . . volcanic potential” (1984). Finally, a January 1984 letter by Ruby Mercer, selling the piece to *Opera Canada* subscribers, emphasized the piece's generic fluidity in her pronouncement that “opera music theatre is a thriving growing art form in Canada!”¹⁷

FRAGMENTATION

Investigating the work's sound world is a challenging endeavor, since recordings of the final product are sonically less than ideal, and several sections are missing in the extant sound files. These pieces, in addition to a box of materials that Montgomery of the CEE lent to me, as well as interviews with five of the creators—most notably Jaeger, with whom I spent several illuminating in-person visits learning about the piece—have nevertheless offered me access to aspects of the authors' intentions for this piece.

14 *Porgy and Bess* and *West Side Story* are generically mixed, and there has been significant debate surrounding their heritage and audience. *Pal Joey* is known as the most “integrated” of Rogers and Hart's musicals.

15 Calderwood is perhaps best known in Canada as the choreographer for Sharon, Lois, and Bram's *Elephant Show*, and several of their television and film productions.

16 Examples are many, and include many of the most prominent repertory operas such as Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Bizet's *Carmen*, but particularly works such as Weill's *Threepenny Opera*, Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, Bernstein's *West Side Story*, etc. This flexibility of musical style reflected Joyce's own musical upbringing and literary references; he made reference to all kinds of musical genres high and low throughout his oeuvre, and his familiarity with these genres was extensive. Also of interest is the fact that Joyce was a singer, rendering the choice to depict a version of his *Ulysses* in music theatre a particularly apt one.

17 Ruby Mercer, letter to *Opera Canada* subscribers, January 1984. Personal archives of James Montgomery.

Figure 1. *Nightbloom* handbill

The fragmented feeling of the narrative was a reflection of both the literary and musical models of its creative sources. Joyce's literary style is characteristically fragmented, and the narrative of *Ulysses* is categorically dream-like and non-linear. William Littler's review reflects this aspect of the piece: "[the piece gives] theatrical form to Joyce's own stream-of-consciousness techniques. Continuity fragments. Images overlap. Thoughts tumble across each other" (1984). And in support of this, the work's musical forms also reflect non-linearity, fragmentation, and a sense of dreaminess that is partially a result of the wide array of musical traditions and styles that are included in its score.

The involvement of the Canadian Electronic Ensemble was also significant in the challenges it presented to traditional conceptions of music theatre and opera both in terms of its musical vocabulary, but also of its compositional approach. Hopkinson describes the Canadian Electronic Ensemble as “the rave revolutionaries of the music theatre scene [. . .] they were up for experimentation.”¹⁸ The group had collaborated on two previous music theatre projects prior to their work on *Nightbloom*: Gregory Levin’s and John Murrell’s *Electric Gospel* and *Prelude in the Theatre*—a double-bill of one-act operas that ran for four nights at Toronto Free Theatre, November 26–28, 1980, and *Eye of the Beholder*, with book, lyrics, and music by the CEE in the same year.¹⁹ As it had done in its two previous music theatre collaborations, the CEE created the *Nightbloom* score by way of a unique collaborative model (“collective composition”), whereby each member composed several scenes that were then stitched together to form the whole (figure 2). As Montgomery and Jaeger explained, the collaborative process—one that emphasized flexibility—was central to the group’s work: “All the creative participants came together with a flexible concept—the idea was to give and take so that [the theatre people] could play theatrically. Build it, then critique it, then knock it down. That was just Phase I.”²⁰ Jaeger and Montgomery noted the uniqueness of this kind of working style, particularly in opera at the time. The presence and resonance of the electronic sound throughout much of the piece lends a kind of disorientation and dream-likeness to the piece, particularly when it is accompanied by echoes, ghostly and disembodied voices, and pitch bending. Finally, some voices—but not all—were amplified at moments in the production, confirming in other ways the creative approach to genre and to the fragmented and varied nature of the performance’s soundscape.

THE OFF-BROADWAY OF OPERA

One of the most fascinating aspects of the piece—and one that defined it for COMUS’s creators—was its generic fluidity, its refusal to abide by the traditions or parameters of either opera or musical theatre. As Salzman and Desi explain, this was a characteristic feature of new music theatre—“the off-Broadway of opera” (2008). Penfield described *Nightbloom* as follows: “The score was consistently melodic, and Mozartean and musical-comedic as it was modern; the extensive use of synthesizers seemed to provide an affordable way of upholstering the arrangements” (1984). John Kraglund distanced it from opera slightly, however, writing, “*Nightbloom* is music theatre—i.e. theatre with a musical score and actors that sometimes sing, after a fashion. Its relationship to the music theatre of Gershwin, Bernstein, and Sondheim (claimed by the producers)

18 Claire Hopkinson and Billie Bridgman, interview with the author, Toronto, ON, May 10, 2019.

19 The double-bill performance, *A Night of Music Drama*, was performed November 26–29, 1980, at the Toronto Free Theatre, Toronto ON. Both productions were directed by Sean Mulcahy.

20 David Jaeger and Jim Montgomery, interview with the author, Toronto, ON, July 12, 2018. *Beholder* was directed by Bawtree, and featured performers Billie Bridgman, Rob Campbell, William Douglas, Patricia Rideout, and Karen Skidmore. See <https://www.canadianelectronicensemble.com/chronology-1980-89/>.

was not immediately clear in last night's premiere at Harbourfront's Premiere Dance Theatre. But neither does it risk being confused with traditional opera, whose plots are not likely to be derided by those who attend the performances of *Nightbloom* [...]” (1984).²¹ And yet, the operatic is never completely abandoned.

Figure 2. *Nightbloom* scenes divided by CEE composer

SCENE #	PAGE	TITLE	CHARACTERS	COMPOSER
1C	1 - 3	Ireland Song	Narrator, Stephen, Bloom	Jim Montgomery
1A		The Sermon	Priest, Stephen, Mother, Voice of Mother (Bloom)	David Grimes
6B	0039a - 39e	Brothel Theme (Zoey's Song)	Zoey, Bloom, FLORA	David Jaeger
1D	3a - 3e	Bloom's Aria	Bloom (Molly, Boylan, Voices of 1st Man & 2nd Man)	Jim Montgomery
2	4 - 10	Middle Leg / PASHA BLOOM	Narrator, Bloom, Flora, Kitty, Carr, Compton	David Jaeger
3A	12 - 19	The Mrs.' Accusations	Mrs. Barry, Bellingham, Talboys	Jim Montgomery
3B	19 - 28	The Me Too Quartet	Mrs. Barry, Bellingham, Talboys, Bloom	Jim Montgomery
	1 - 3	Ireland Song	Narrator, Stephen, Bloom	Jim Montgomery
1B		Molly's Bedroom	Molly, Bloom	Jim Montgomery
4	29	Attendant Phenomena	Narrator	David Jaeger
5A	30 - 35	The Stews WHAT WENT FORN (If You See Kay)	Streetgirls #1, #2, #3, Stephen	David Jaeger
5B	35a - 35d	Stephen's Aria	Stephen	David Grimes
6A	36 - 39	Kidney of Bloom	Nun Flora Nun Kitty Nun Zoey (Bloom)	David Grimes
6B	39a - 39e	Brothel Theme (Zoey's Song)	Zoey, Bloom, FLORA (Stephen, BLOOM , Kitty, Citizen #1, Citizen #2)	David Jaeger
6C	40 - 45	Mucksweat	Zoey, Bloom, Stephen, Flora, Kitty, Citizen Citizen #1 & #2	David Grimes
6D	46 - 47	Sexual Hijinx CARR (The Dance) <i>Gunn</i>	As in 6C	David Grimes
6E	47 -	The Apparition (Mother's Ghost)	As in 6C, Voice of Mother	David Grimes
7	54 - 69	The Confrontation (Finale)	Stephen, Bloom, Carr, Compton, Z., K., F.	Larry Lake

21 John Kraglund (1984) also commented on the interplay between the real and the fantastical throughout the piece, also a prominent feature of Joyce's narrative. Jaeger and Montgomery spoke about how the piece ended up pleasing some and displeasing others because of its generically fluid nature. They recall Harry Freedman being disappointed because it wasn't strange enough. R. Murray Schafer is recalled to have particularly appreciated it.

Example 1. *Nightbloom* opening

SONG OF IRELAND MOTHER IRELAND

from 1

(Bass) What spectacle confronted them when they immersed. doubly dark, from obscurity, into the penumbra of the night. X

(Tenor) I-re-land, mother I-re-land. WAVE WHITE BREAST SHIPWRECK

ON DIM SHORE COAL SMOKE SEA, BLESSED TRINITY

The heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit.

I-re-land mother I-re-land

I-re-land mother I-re-land SCAL-LING BROTH and RAIN-DEW WET ON DUBLINS

bag-ga-lugs leath-ern Ni-Hou-li-Han

STONES ERIN GREEN WOVEN SHADE

The piece begins, for example, with a section composed by Montgomery. A folksong of sorts that emerges amid an electronic tapestry of sustained and broken triads, perhaps reminiscent of Philip Glass's operas, alternates with a recorded voice that is projected into the theatre space. The tenor voice of the folksong sings in a charming, easy tone that leaves the audience's sense of the genre and the intention of the piece in flux.

Example 2. *Nightbloom*, “The Leg of the Duck,” mm. 38–51

The image shows a handwritten musical score for a scene from *Nightbloom*. The score is divided into three systems, each starting with a measure number in a circle: 38, 43, and 47. The first system (measures 38-42) is for Stephen and features lyrics: "DI-TONED", "IN E-", "LUC-", "TAS-LY", "PRE-CON DI-TONED". The second system (measures 43-46) is for Stephen and features lyrics: "f 70 BE-COME". The third system (measures 47-51) is for Stephen, Whore One, and Whore Two. It features lyrics: "EC-CO.", "IF... YOU... SEE... KAY", and "IF... YOU... SEE... KAY". The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamics like *pp* (pianissimo). There are also handwritten annotations like "(LOUD + VULGAR)" and "(LOUD + VULGAR)". The score is written on a single page with a vertical line on the right side.

Stephen appears later in a solo number in Scene 5, which is labeled “Stephen’s Aria,” with music written by Jaeger (Jaeger also penned “Bloom’s Aria” in Scene 1d). Jaeger cites Stockhausen and Berio as influences, and we also hear a reference to the Tristan chord near the beginning of the aria, which features a hybrid opera-musical theatre style and operatic tenor vocal production. The section as a whole, however, features a more diverse tapestry of stylistic influences. The aria leads directly into a duet, “The Leg of the Duck,” by

“Whore 1 and Whore 2,” as they’re named in the score, penned by Jaeger. The piercing timbre of the women (transcribed a semitone apart, and some of it set as spoken text) heard against a minimalist ostinato is an important marker of the experimental nature of the piece. The risqué nature of both the lyrics (the women sing, “if you see kay,” and “see you in tea”) and the screams and unconventional vocalism at the limits of the women’s voices (and of Stephen’s in this performance), are outright rejections of operatic convention (example 2).

One of the most fascinating sections of the work is Montgomery’s duet between Bloom and Molly in Scene 3 (listed on one copy as 1b)—the scene when we hear Molly’s famous soliloquy. Here, the remarkable combination of the operatic voice of Bloom and the belt mix as sung by Molly makes for a rich tapestry of class, gender, and stylistic tensions.

CONCLUSION

In addition to COMUS’s innovations that were extended through daring commissions and collaborations, as we’ve seen with *Nightbloom*, the company was also innovative in terms of their plans for training young performers in a way that supported the more forward-looking conceit of the world of operatic performance—one that supported borrowing and contributing to popular music as well. In 1979, for example, it hosted a series of classes, workshops, and seminars in the basics of music theatre production, performance, and dance in its Trinity Street Studios.²² The other important development in this respect was COMUS’s Opera Reading series that provided much-needed opportunities to workshop and perform works by Canadian composers.²³

In 1987, COMUS was in discussions with the Canadian Opera Company about the possibilities of COMUS’s work encompassing the COC’s experimental arm, though plans didn’t ultimately pan out in this respect.²⁴ The company closed that year, though its impact on the history of music theatre in Canada cannot be underestimated. Bawtree recalled, “Even if an institution doesn’t

22 The theatricality of these spaces is noteworthy and may have, in some respects, inspired the creation of works of music theatre for the CEE. In a conversation about the spaces in which they worked, David Jaeger shared, “I wonder if being in that place helped to give rise to the impulse to create music theatre?” David Jaeger and Jim Montgomery, interview with the author, Toronto, ON, July 12, 2018.

23 The COMUS Opera Reading series allowed composers and librettists an opportunity to hear performances of their works. This series included performances of Paul McIntyre’s *Death of a Hired Man* (1979), Harry Somers’s *The Fool* (1979), Milton Barnes’s *Thespis* (1980), Maurice Blackburn’s *Silent Measures* (1980), Charles Wilson’s *Kamouraska* (1980), and Graham George’s *A King for Corsica* (1981). The CEE’s *Eye of the Beholder* was also premiered by COMUS in 1980. COMUS also produced several Canadian premieres such as David Keane’s *The Devil Constructs* (1980) and *Harlequins* (1980), Bentley Jarvis, James Montgomery, and Cameron Tingley’s *Catalysis* (1981), John Oswald and Marvin Green’s *Pitch* (1982), Bentley Jarvis and Robert Mulder’s *Chroma* (1982), and Howard Gerhard and bp Nichol’s *Space Opera* (1985). COMUS also gave workshop premieres of Gregory Levin and Mavor Moore’s *Ghost Dance* (1985), and Quenten Doolittle’s *Silver City* (1986).

24 From 2016–2019, Against the Grain Theatre was the smaller more experimental arm supported by the Canadian Opera Company, though its mandate is certainly less revolutionary than that of COMUS. In January 2021, the Canadian Opera Company designated the Toronto-based Amplified Opera as Disruptor-in-Residence, an outgrowth of its career development programs and Company-in-Residence program established in 2016.

survive, the ideas that it's been pushing out do, and the people who have been involved with them, even if the institution dies, they carry those ideas forward. [. . .].” This is also true of the CEE. The ideas and energy sowed by all involved in the creation of *Nightbloom*, especially those of the CEE, acted as a catalyst for future work in opera-new music theatre, and its life force can be felt, perhaps most directly, in the work of Tapestry Opera in Toronto, which was formed as the Tapestry Singers in 1976, incorporated as Tapestry New Opera in 1979, and is thriving today in Toronto as a site of innovative new works of music theatre. *Nightbloom* evidences the significant role that the Canadian Electronic Ensemble played in the continued experimentation with and innovation of Canadian new music theatre in the 1980s.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- COMUS Music Theatre. 1984. “COMUS Music Theatre presents the World Premiere of *Nightbloom*.” Press Release. January 13, 1984.
- Fortune, Lynette. 1984. “Review of *Nightbloom*.” *The Eye Opener*. February, 1984.
- Fuchs, Peter Paul, ed. and transl. 1975. *The Music Theatre of Walter Felsenstein: Collected Articles, Speeches and Interviews by Walter Felsenstein and Others*. Norton.
- Kraglund, John. 1984. “Music Theatre Tackles Joyce’s Prose.” *The Globe and Mail*. February 11, 1984.
- Littler, William. 1984. “Operatic Tour of Joyce’s World.” *Toronto Star*. February 12, 1984.
- Penfield, Wilder III. 1984. “Nightbloom: Brand New.” *Toronto Sun*. February 9, 1984.
- Salzman, Eric and Thomas Desi. 2008. *The new music theater: Seeing the voice, hearing the body*. Oxford University Press.
- Taylor, Rachelle and Hélène Plouffe. 2015. “Gabriel Charpentier.” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Historica Canada. Last updated July 17, 2015.
- Wardrop, Patricia. 2013. “COMUS Music Theatre of Canada.” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Historica Canada. Last updated December 16, 2013.

ABSTRACT

In the 1970s and 1980s, a flurry of activity in music theatre—a genre combining the genres of musical theatre, experimental theatre, and opera—prompted the creation of several new Canadian opera/music theatre companies specializing in crossover work, along with a creative outpouring of original genre-defying pieces. In this paper, I explore this period of generic experimentation in the history of Canadian opera, focusing on the work of the innovative company COMUS Music Theatre, founded in 1975 in Toronto. The company sought to revolutionize music theatre by presenting works that engaged with other media, as well as with theatre, popular music, dance, and performance art. COMUS Music Theatre’s production of *Nightbloom* (February 1984) serves as an example of the company’s generic innovation and experimentation. Through musical and textual analysis, and interviews with key figures in its creation, I explore

the bold ways that COMUS Music Theatre succeeded in imagining a new way forward for opera singers and for music theatre in Canada in the 1970s.

Keywords: CEE, COMUS, Music Theatre, Opera

RÉSUMÉ

Dans les années 1970 et 1980, l'effervescence du théâtre musical—un genre combinant les genres de la comédie musicale, du théâtre expérimental et de l'opéra—a favorisé la création de plusieurs nouvelles compagnies canadiennes d'opéra/théâtre musical spécialisées dans les œuvres croisées, ainsi qu'un déferlement créatif d'œuvres originales défiant les genres. Dans cet article, j'explore cette période d'expérimentation générique dans l'histoire de l'opéra canadien, en me concentrant sur le travail de la compagnie innovante COMUS Music Theatre, fondée en 1975 à Toronto. Cette compagnie cherchait à révolutionner le théâtre musical en présentant des œuvres qui faisaient appel à d'autres médias, ainsi qu'au théâtre, à la musique populaire, à la danse et aux arts de la scène. La production de *Nightbloom* (février 1984) de COMUS Music Theatre est un exemple de l'innovation et de l'expérimentation génériques de la compagnie. Par le biais d'analyses musicales et textuelles, et d'entrevues avec des personnages clés de la création, j'explore les façons audacieuses dont le COMUS Music Theatre a réussi à imaginer une nouvelle voie pour les chanteurs d'opéra et pour le théâtre musical au Canada dans les années 1970.

Mots-clés : CEE, COMUS, théâtre musical, opéra

BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Colleen Renihan is Associate Professor and Queen's National Scholar at the DAN School of Drama and Music at Queen's University. She holds an MA and PhD in Musicology from the University of Toronto, and an Artist Diploma in Opera from the Vancouver Academy of Music. Her research focuses on issues of voice, gesture transmission, memory, temporality, and the role of the arts in healthy aging. She has published chapters in several edited collections on opera, and in the journals *twentieth century music*, *The Journal of the Society for American Music*, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, *The Journal of Music, Health, and Wellbeing*, *The Journal of Singing*, and *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image*. Her monograph, *The Operatic Archive: American Opera as History*, was published by Routledge in 2020.