

femmes
fatales,
simpering
victims & #MeToo



Jane Archibald
(Konstanze) in
Wajdi Mouawad's
2018 Canadian
Opera Company
production of *The
Abduction from
the Seraglio*

Glynis Ratcliffe asks four Canadian singers:
how 'woke' is opera in an age of heightened
awareness around sexual assault and harassment?

No art form can exist in a vacuum, not even one that relies so heavily on creations from centuries past. The #MeToo social movement has sparked media debates about movies once deemed modern classics, songs once thought harmless, and comedy once viewed as cringeworthy, but still funny.

Opera isn't—and shouldn't be—immune. Its plots are rife with objectionable behaviour, stereotyped characters, and outdated social norms. Everyone knows it: singers, directors, and audiences. That said, no one is arguing that many of these problematic operas aren't masterpieces.

It therefore seems like the right time to take stock and speak with the singers who consistently have to go on stage and play victims of misogyny and abuse. How, from their perspective, has the movement impacted the opera community; what does it mean to perform these roles right now, and what kind of change is still needed?

Opera Canada spoke with four Canadian sopranos: Jane Archibald, Measha Brueggergosman, Teiya Kasahara, and Adrienne Pieczonka.

Bringing outdated themes to relevance today

One theme that emerged from our discussions was the idea of linking broader subject matters contained within opera with issues faced by marginalized members of society today. Pieczonka thought perhaps the timing was right for more detailed program notes. "There could be production notes in the opera programs," she wrote in an email, "to explain and put into context some of these issues so that the public can reflect upon them."

This was a sentiment suggested more than once. "We might be due for a scenario that involves a *Carmen* production," Brueggergosman noted, "then having a display dedicated to the current stats on domestic violence." She went on to explain how even a concept that seems as out of touch as the cornerstone plot point of *Le nozze di Figaro*, the *droit du seigneur*, can be relevant today.

"I don't see any problem with a women's outreach, not-for-profit coming alongside and helping us to educate people about the modern plight of violence against women, which we're seeing played out [on stage, in what amounts to] the systematic raping of new brides in *The Marriage of Figaro*," she explained. "One has to understand that this continues to happen. That's not some Mozartian fantasy, it came out of reality

Adrienne Pieczonka in the title role of Canadian Opera Company's 2012 production of *Tosca*



Teiya Kasahara in the 2018 SummerWorks Open Studios production of her one-person show, *The Queen in Me*



and it's something that continues to happen. The disqualification of women by rape. Rape as a tool of war. Rape as a means to control.”

Archibald, who has spent the majority of her career performing in Europe, mentioned she's rarely appeared in a

production that would be considered 'traditional.' "I don't think European directors are trying to make opera more relevant, it just *is* more relevant," she said. "There's less of a panicky feeling of having to preserve something, because if you have it in abundance, then you can afford to experiment and play. When you know any one opera is going to be performed again and again, then why not present it a thousand different ways?"

This was a topic that Brueggergosman spoke passionately about, as someone who refuses to back away from the hard subject matter presented in opera. "I never want things to be hidden because they offend. I think the volume should be turned up, so we're forced to confront what it is about this scenario that bothers us and why," she said. "So I mean louder, harder, kill her harder and more graphically, and then ask people—do you know anyone suffering? How can you make their lives better?"

What are singers who feel constrained doing to change the status quo?

"It's gotten exhausting for me for sure. Since I kind of woke up to that hard realization about six or seven years ago, which culminated with me discovering my queerness and coming out," said Kasahara, who identifies as non-binary. "It's been a continual discovery, a process, and a journey with exploring that. Also exploring my gender identity and my gender expression."

PHOTO: HENRY CHAN

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Teiya Kasahara

Kasahara has created a show that gives voice to their frustrations with the current state of opera and its lack of representation, called *The Queen in Me*. “I felt that being a singer, I wasn’t given the platform to say what I needed to say about opera, about the characters I was playing, about what I felt was not right in opera,” they explained. “The character of the Queen is compelled to voice her grievances, to voice her story, to voice the grievances of women, of people of colour, of queer people who are marginalized and continue to be pushed down within opera.”

Kasahara is so passionate about making space for marginalized voices in opera that they’re launching a new initiative with Aria Umezawa, co-founder of Toronto’s innovative, ‘indie’ company, Opera 5. In Oct. 2019, they will launch Amplified Opera. According to Kasahara, the company’s mission is to amplify equity-seeking artists; to create space and a platform for them, so they can share their stories and experiences on their own terms.

Shifting the perspective

It’s possible that in many cases, breathing new life and meaning into some of the more misogynistic operas may require a shift in gaze. To use a contemporary example, one of the most successful superhero movies in recent years is *Wonder Woman*. Since her creation, she’s been a powerful character who has always appeared to need far less clothing than her male counterparts. What made the movie so powerful for many women was director Patty Jenkins’ emphasis on what Wonder Woman’s body could do, rather than what her body looked like.

Obviously, opera is a different beast. But is there a new lens through which we can look at these operas?

Archibald was thoughtful when asked about how opera companies could shift the perspective a little bit, without compromising the integrity of a work. “Intelligent, respectful, carefully thought out new productions can go a long way to transforming these stories in which women are only victims and only archetypes,” she said. “You can sort of turn them on their ear. It’s all about how you frame things.”

“You’re not changing the piece but you’re looking at it from a different angle and that opens up a whole new world,” Archibald continued. “Maybe I’m being optimistic here, but it feels like there’s a seismic shift that’s not just lip service. I hope that it’s not. I see an awakening of men of all ages.”

In contrast, Pieczonka, who is well-acquainted with playing victims of abuse or misogyny, believes many of these operas don’t lend themselves to being staged in a way that alters the position of their female characters. “In my opinion you cannot stage *Tosca* or *Otello* in a new or different way which empowers

the leading ladies—this would change the plot. These works are masterpieces and come from another time.”

Brueggergosman’s response was succinct: “What would happen if more women were making staging choices is that more male characters would be held to account.”

Women in leadership roles

That’s the problem, though, isn’t it? It doesn’t matter how many brilliant, thoughtful men there are in opera’s leadership roles; as long as women aren’t given an equal opportunity, we won’t get to see how operas can be re-imagined from their perspective.

“I can tell you giving women more of a voice in our industry has only helped us. I don’t think classical music will continue to thrive if we don’t continue to keep involving more women in roles of leadership; in roles of decision making. There are a lot of decisions made prior to even showing up to a contract that affect you directly,” Brueggergosman noted. “You show up and all of these decisions, whether it’s costumes, the production, the lighting, the conductor—I get to choose none of that. And yet I’m the person who is seen by everyone.”

“The construct is already flawed,” she went on. “So by the time we get to repertoire, it’s almost like treating the symptom and not the actual disease. I don’t think the problem with classical music is the repertoire, I think it’s people making decisions about how it’s presented. And that isn’t up to singers.”

Kasahara agreed: “We don’t look hard enough to hire female conductors or female directors. It’s the whole production, from casting, to arts admin, to arts leadership, to getting more consultants, to librettists, to composers [that needs to change].”

While it’s impossible to equalize the playing field overnight, engaging directors who want to change the narrative for women in opera is a great place to start.

Archibald referenced the COC’s recent production of *The Abduction from the Seraglio* which, out of the many productions of the opera she’s performed in, was her favourite. She explained that director Wajdi Mouawad is a feminist and they approached the opera from a feminist perspective, “turning the entire thing on its head.”

The future

So where do these singers hope the winds of social change will nudge opera? Pieczonka sees the way forward in new creations. “We can encourage new composers and directors to create new works where women are strong and respected, where diversity is celebrated, not denigrated.”

Archibald was cautiously optimistic. “I think [#MeToo] is a really important thing and if this becomes the rule, not the exception, then there’s no question that there’ll be a shift in

Measha Brueggergosman (top, centre) as Giulietta in Semperoper Dresden's *The Tales of Hoffmann*



how we look at all these works of art,” she said. “Their music is so fabulous and so moving, I think they’ll survive and I hope they’ll be transformed. We will find a way to present them that’s not at odds with the long overdue idea that women are real people.”

Each singer’s passion for opera was evident, though they each had slightly different visions.

“Our art form, which we love so much and is the most powerful thing—that, you can see on stage, when it’s done properly. I think [this power] needs to be used—not hidden or edited, or somehow manipulated to assuage our sensitive ears. I think our society needs to be forced to feel a little bit nauseous,” asserted Brueggergosman.

Finally, Kasahara advocated for a more hands-on approach. “I think there needs to be more conversation, more exploration, but also I think we need to invite people in. We need to

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include people in this conversation who haven’t been included before. How can we make this respectful, interesting, and provocative?” they asked. “Yes, respecting the music, yes, respecting the text, but can

it be something exciting and new again? Taking the words or the notes on the page and making them a unique performance.

“That’s what’s exciting about opera, too—it’s live. It’s supposed to be new and always changing, always finding different nuances and interpretations every time we do it. Otherwise, what would be the point? It would be like a book or a novel or a piece of art that just sits on a wall and collects dust—and we have museums for that. But opera and music and theatre? It exists to be reimagined and reinterpreted.”

In our next issue, we’ll speak with directors, composers, and librettists about the impact of #MeToo. **OG**

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