



***Song of a Nation: The Untold Story of Canada's National Anthem.*** By Robert Harris. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2018. 212 pp. ISBN 9780771050923.

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Calixa Lavallée was the most gifted performer and composer in nineteenth-century Canada. The first major account of his life didn't appear until over four decades after his death in 1891. *Calixa Lavallée, musicien national du Canada*, by the Montreal church musician Eugène Lapierre, belongs to the Hans Christian Andersen school of biographical writing: Lapierre imagines his subject retaining a motif of his most famous song, "O Canada," from hearing it in childhood struck on the anvil of his blacksmith father.<sup>1</sup> This tearful fantasy was warmly praised in a letter to the author from the Abbé Lionel Groulx, leading figure of Québécois nationalism in the

Duplessis era ("the life of poor Lavallée stands as a symbol..."). In 1947, Lapierre produced the story in Montreal as a stage musical under the title *Le Vagabond de la gloire*.<sup>2</sup>

A further eight decades passed before the publication of a seriously researched life, Brian Christopher Thompson's *Anthems and Minstrel Shows: The Life and Times of Calixa Lavallée, 1842-1891*.<sup>3</sup> Thompson established that Lavallée spent considerably more of his active professional career in the US than in his native Canada, as performer and music director of several traveling minstrel troupes and as a bandsman in the Fourth Rhode Island Regiment of the Northern Army in the Civil War.

This short study by Robert Harris recounts the biography while centering on "O Canada," the development of its texts and music, and the involved story of its legal adoption as the Canadian anthem.

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1. Eugène Lapierre, *Calixa Lavallée, musicien national du Canada* (Montreal: Editions Albert Lévesque, 1936; 2nd rev. ed., Montreal: Granger Frères Ltée, 1950; 3rd. rev. ed. Montreal: Fides, 1966).

2. See John Beckwith, "Father of Romance, Vagabond of Glory: Two Canadian Composers as Stage Heroes," in *Music Traditions, Cultures, and Contexts*, edited by Robin Elliott and Gordon E. Smith (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010): 227-259.

3. Brian Christopher Thompson, *Anthems and Minstrel Shows: The Life and Times of Calixa Lavallée, 1842-1891* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015). See also Mireille Barrière's short book (62 pp.), *Calixa Lavallée* (Montreal: Lidéc, 1999).



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It may be an exaggeration in 2018 to call the life story “untold.” Harris contributes original elements from his personal research visits to the composer’s native village in the Richelieu Valley, now renamed “Calixa-Lavallée,” and to the battlefield at Antietam, Maryland, in which Lavallée and his regiment participated, and in several passages he vividly evokes the emotions Canadians derive from hearing or singing the anthem. He admirably traces the long parliamentary process by which adoption, and modification of the English text, were achieved (this aspect may not have been fully “told” before).

In his focus on “O Canada,” Harris was bound to discuss its similarity to the “March of the Priests” at the start of Act Two of Mozart’s opera *Die Zauberflöte*. Was Lavallée a plagiarist? The pitches of the first phrase, the mediant, dominant, and tonic of a major triad, are the same in both pieces, and both continue with an upward scale. The pattern, 3-5-1, is a commonly occurring feature of many compositions from the seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries. Eugène Lapierre cites a dozen examples besides the Mozart one, by composers such as Mendelssohn and Gounod, without charging Lavallée with theft. Thompson adds another, by Weber. No doubt Lavallée was familiar with *Die Zauberflöte*, but could claim that his song was a distinct creation—if anyone asked him (it’s not clear that anyone ever did).

In his thorough analysis of “O Canada,” Harris does not comment on the transposition of the melody’s last two notes—so frequently heard, though not intended by Lavallée. To sing that ending an octave higher than written is to misrepresent the lovely curve of the melody, repeating its highest note needlessly (it’s heard effectively a few notes previously), and to give the song a rather cheap applause-seeking finish.

Lavallée’s stature as a professional composer may not be sufficiently clear from this study: the biographical outline hardly mentions his works other than the anthem. His two musical comedies, *The Widow* and *TIQ (The Indian Question)* were both published in Boston in the 1880s, and *The Widow* was performed on a tour of half-a-dozen US centres; excerpts from *TIQ* have been performed and recorded although there seems to be no evidence of a full production. Harris notes that Lavallée performed in English during his many minstrel-show tours but the English-language libretti of the two stage works have always presented difficulties in their awkward word-setting, an oddity that has never been explained.

Harris starts one paragraph towards the end of the book, “If Calixa Lavallée is a tragic figure, it’s because all Canadians are”—surely an absurd statement. The rest of that paragraph develops into one of the book’s rare purple patches. Among the lapses, one may ponder if “seven long years” (p. 3) have more than fifty-two weeks, or “two ... long months” (p. 50) more than thirty-one days. Factual errors are few: Lavallée’s production of Gounod’s *Jeanne d’Arc* (p. 3) was not the “first opera in Quebec,” and the Toronto Symphony Orchestra played its “first all-Canadian concert” (p. 157) in 1947, not 2017.

*Song of a Nation* has no illustrations and no examples in musical notation. Most surprisingly, coming from such an experienced publisher, it has no index. Harris assures us that Lavallée was wounded at the Battle of Antietam but doesn’t say where this information is confirmed—one of several cases where a definite footnote seems called for. His “note on sources” (pp. 209-212) does not make up for this lack.