

Spotlight on Music Collections: Interview with Marion Newman (Nege'ga,) Mezzo Soprano

While previous Spotlight columns have focused on music collections and archives in Canada through the voices of those who work with them, this interview takes a slightly different angle by focusing on the career of mezzo soprano Marion Newman (Nege'ga), an internationally recognized opera singer who will be joining the University of Victoria School of Music as Assistant Professor on July 1, 2024. Newman is known across Canada and worldwide for her performances of the works of living Indigenous composers.

In this interview, Marion discusses navigating - and stretching the limits of - the modern world of opera while proudly bearing her identity as Kwagiulth and Sto:lo. She also reflects on the complexities of balancing Indigenous traditions with modern Western music practices and, in particular, her experiences working with written, recorded, and published Indigenous-composed music when Indigenous songs and stories have often been passed down orally and through memory. In addition, Marion discusses the role that library collections may play in her work as a faculty member at the University of Victoria. The interviewer, Kyra Folk-Farber, is honoured to be good friends with Marion as well as former singing colleagues while they both lived in Toronto, and collaborating with Marion on this interview was, unsurprisingly, a total delight.

Spotlight on Music Collections aims to profile interesting or unique music collections and archives in Canada through the voices of those who work with them. If you have a suggestion for a collection or individual to be featured in a future edition of this column, please email: camlreview@caml-acbm.org.

Hi, Marion. Can you introduce yourself to our readers?

My name is Marion Newman. My traditional name is Nege'ga. I am a Kwagiulth and Sto:lo mezzo-soprano with English, Irish, and Scottish heritage. I like to distinguish between my First Nations lived experience and my heritage from across the pond because although I've visited my relatives in England, performed opera in Ireland, taken Scottish dancing lessons as a kid, and have celebrated Robbie Burns day by eating haggis on occasion, I haven't spent enough time in any of those places to really feel that I am connected to them meaningfully and culturally. I have also noticed that I am never asked to perform concerts around Scottish, Irish or English themes, even though I've always



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

been open about that heritage. And this is of note because I am constantly asked to perform works and concerts with Indigenous themes.

IMAGE 1. MARION NEWMAN PHOTO CREDIT : V. TONY HAUSER



In addition to my singing career, I have a few other roles. I am the radio host for Saturday Afternoon at the Opera on CBC, our Canadian National radio station. I will be joining the teaching faculty at the University of Victoria, my alma mater, as Assistant Professor of Voice in July 2024, and I am a co-founder of [Amplified Opera](#)². I have been dipping my toes into the

waters of dramaturgy and direction, too, developing Indigenous led opera and curating performances of all kinds.

I am claimed by both my Kwagiulth and Sto:lo communities and enrolled as a band member of the Kwakiutl Band at the Northern tip of Vancouver Island. While I represent my family and my communities and am responsible for doing so in a good way as a visibly Indigenous person, I do not represent every Indigenous person when I speak. The Indigenous cultures across North America differ vastly in many ways and it's important not to generalise in a way that encourages pan-Indigeneity because that is a form of erasure. As I gather experience and meet more colleagues with good ideas and different understandings of our ways, I sometimes change my mind about issues based on the evidence and experience they present. Being in relation with my communities means that I always need to be aware of how I represent all of us, even though I maintain my own agency and points of view.

Can you talk about some of your notable performances that include music by Indigenous composers? What are some Indigenous-themed operas and shows you have performed in recent years?

I have been a part of nearly every Indigenous-themed opera and song cycle that has emerged within the past 30 years or so. As a classically trained opera singer with a Masters in voice from the

² Amplified Opera's stated mandate is to place artists at the centre of public discourse. The company hopes to "hold space for challenging and diverse voices to express themselves and share their experiences in a way that feels authentic and on their own terms." <https://www.amplifiedopera.com/our-story>.

San Francisco Conservatory who can sight read well, I have been sought out to represent a number of Indigenous roles, particularly for new works. While we talk about and encourage colour-blind casting in the operatic sphere, I still think it's important to cast Indigenous singers in Indigenous roles. There has been a long history of romanticised depictions of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people. This kind of misrepresentation leads to a loss of identity, confusion, and misled expectations for those of us who live the experience of being Indigenous every day. I have arrived at many first rehearsals, costume fittings, and even performances where I suddenly realised that there had been an expectation of how an Indigenous person should appear, and I did not meet that expectation. Fringe, feathers and beads – the Hollywood style look of a pan-Indigenous person – are all things I wear occasionally, but I also tend to wear the same fashions that most singers wear to auditions, rehearsals, and performances. I have been mistaken for Mediterranean or some kind of Asian mix among those who don't yet know that I'm from people who have lived in what is now called Canada for thousands of years. I have yet to run into anyone who immediately thinks I'm Irish, Scottish, or English. While we work toward shedding the stereotypes and bringing forth a more fulsome and accurate image of Indigenous people, I prefer to know that the people playing Indigenous characters are informed in their acting choices by real, lived experience.

I've played the Third Lady in an Indigenized version of *The Magic Flute* by Mozart with the Vancouver Opera. In that production, the costumes, set, and narrative were changed to make Tamino a youth from the x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam) Nation of the area. Some of the spoken text was translated into hənqəmiñəñ. This was an early show of interest in telling stories of the land in a way that included the original peoples of the opera's adapted location. It seemed bold and progressive at the time, and the visuals, which were created by Indigenous artisans that were hired for that particular project, were truly striking. But cultural needs have shifted, and I don't think we need to re-paint the western canon with an Indigenous brush anymore. We have our own stories to tell.

I played the lead role of Noodin-Kwe in the opera *Giiwedīn* by Spy Denommé-Welch (Algonquin-Anishnaabe) and Catherine Magowan (Jewish Hungarian-Canadian). This was a story about the displacement of women in their traditional roles as Matriarchs and political decision makers as British colonialism rolled over North American lands and peoples. Spy crafted the libretto and some of the melodies, and Catherine co-composed the score.

I was nominated for a Dora Award for my portrayal of Shanawdithit in the opera of the same name. Yvette Nolan, an Algonquin playwright, director, and dramaturg, and Dean Burry, a Canadian composer, were the creators of *Shanawdithit*. This opera depicted the final months of the "last of the Beothuk" people. After being captured during a raid, Shanawdithit was an indentured servant to a family of settlers and was then sold to a historian to live out her final months. That historian mined Shanawdithit of her language and knowledge of her culture, with the intention of starting a Beothuk Institute in memory of a disappeared people, as Shanawdithit slowly succumbed to what is believed to be tuberculosis. It is well known in oral histories of the Mi'kmaq that the Beothuk

intermarried with them, and that many may have integrated during the Beothuk purge in order to survive. It served the government to disappear an entire people so they could lay claim to the lands and resources. One of the things I loved most about this opera and the creation of it was that Indigenous creators and artists were heavily involved in the process. The story wasn't yet another piece of trauma porn or a made-up love story of an explorer finding meaningful connection in the wilds of the new world. Unlike pieces by non-Indigenous creatives who have tried to tell stories about us by serving these stereotypical romantic notions, Shanawdithit is a role I would happily perform again.

I Call myself Princess, capitalization missing for 'myself' on purpose, is a play with opera in it by Jani Lauzon, Métis artist. I was sought out to play the role of Tsianina Redfeather. Tsianina was a real person, like Shanawdithit, and she travelled throughout North America and Europe performing re-imagined melodies of Indigenous peoples from across the continent. Composer Charles Wakefield Cadman and librettist Nelle Eberhart took melodies from Indigenous communities throughout the United States and turned them into quaint parlour songs that Tsianina sang while Cadman accompanied her on the piano or on his wooden flute. This would be considered blatant cultural appropriation by today's standards. However, in the early 1900's, Tsianina would have been forbidden to perform her own community's songs or ceremonies, let alone to appear in anything resembling regalia, so this was one way that she could stay somewhat connected to her culture and keep those melodies alive. Tsianina was also able to remain independent and to live freely off the reservation. In this play, a young Indigenous opera singer named Will discovered Tsianina and Cadman's work while he attended opera school in a large city in the present day. Through the magic of a sacred fire, Tsianina and Will meet across time and discuss why Tsianina was engaging in a practice that would be so frowned upon today. It was a wonderful reminder of one way that people like me have remained resilient, adjusting to the times in order to remain present today.

Missing is an opera about missing and murdered Indigenous women. I became involved in workshops for the music just after the libretto-writing stage was complete. Marie Clements (Dene, Métis) wrote the libretto and Brian Current wrote the score. I played the role of Dr. Rose Wilson, an Indigenous lawyer who tours universities to speak to the epidemic of missing Indigenous women, in the City Opera Vancouver/Pacific Opera Victoria co-production and world premiere, the remount that toured throughout western Canada, and the Alaskan production with Anchorage Opera.

I will also be performing the role of Dr. Wilson for the recording of the opera, set for release in 2025. I am part of a collective of artists called ATOM; Artists of The Opera Missing. We are making sure this story continues to be told through this emotional and incredibly beautiful medium, and that it will raise awareness and empathy that we hope will lead to solutions. Once the recording is available, we hope to find many more opportunities for this opera to be performed. I have directed scenes from this opera for the students at Manitoba University's Desautel School of Music and am negotiating possibly directing a full production of the work for one of Canada's indie opera companies.

One of the most important lessons I have learned from engaging with this opera is that it is not only important to cast the opera with people who have lived experience, but that it is also important to include Indigenous representation in the musical and dramatic leadership of the piece. Tim Long is a Muskogee/Creek and Choctaw conductor, and he has held the baton for all of the performances I've been in. We have had a non-Indigenous director for one production and an Indigenous female director for another. I had to work for over a month to pull out of the heaviness of the earlier productions. The Indigenous female director inherently understood that we didn't need to "get into character and the depression" of missing a loved one. As Indigenous people, we all know the reality of missing loved ones, and we carry that reality alongside our everyday thoughts and feelings. It was a relief to be able to perform such a difficult story without being torn apart. The performances, as directed from two very different viewpoints, had the same respective impacts on the audience, even though the effect it had on the Indigenous and non-Indigenous cast members was less damaging in the second case.

Can you share some examples of how your performances of Indigenous operas have impacted your audiences?

Every piece of Indigenous opera or theatre that I've engaged in has started conversations. Conversations with audience members as well as the companies that are mounting the work, the other players, and the creative teams, including stage management and stage hands. Sometimes people are afraid to ask questions and other times I am weary of the questions they aren't afraid to ask. Being Indigenous in a time when we are given some space to share our realities and ways of being is a winding path full of joys and heartaches. I have come to realise that, for various reasons, the general public is either unaware that we even still exist or that most of us don't wish to be seen as victims. I experience so much joy in my life and I know that it is the ability to experience joy that has made our people resilient and keeps us rising in this society, despite what has been done and what has been taken away. Because of these works and the opportunities to meet with audience members after a show, or to engage in discussions via email well after the fact, I have been able to change minds and hearts. I have been able to share that people like me are healthy and working to bring back our ways that the government tried to take from us.

I have seen audience members express feeling very challenged by the truths that were presented by operas we created. And I've heard back from people who, after sitting with those difficult realities for a while, are grateful to have been given the chance to know more. I've heard that those people are having an easier time engaging in meaningful conversations with their institutions, and that those conversations lead to changes that create better spaces for people like me. We call it reconciliation in Canada, at the moment. After so much use, a word like that can lose its meaning for some, and I think that engaging through art with the topics that create reconciliation is a great way to break down the resistance that people feel when they are uncertain of the outcome.



IMAGE 2. MARION NEWMAN IN THE WORLD PREMIER OF SHAWNADITHIT, AN INDEGENOUS-CANADIAN OPERA COMPOSED BY DEAN BURRY. PHOTO CREDIT: DAHLIA KATZ.

In your view, how do written opera scores and public performances align with some First Nation groups' oral traditions?

Through the Potlatch Ban (legally in place for over 60 years), residential schools, forced adoptions, and a fraught child welfare system among other things we should have lost any and all connection with who we have always been. By quietly taking our ceremonies and cultural ways underground, we still remember much of our traditions, our ways of being, and our songs. Someone wise told me that our elders are our libraries. They are libraries that we need to nurture and care for and listen to before they pass. We have always kept our knowledge through oral tradition, and maybe that has given us strong memories. Sometimes those memories come in the form of thoughts in words and sometimes they come through facility in certain activities.

Music has always made perfect sense to me and has come somewhat easily. I know that music and dance are inextricably connected and that both are important for sharing and performing our traditional ceremonies. Our potlatches are feasts that are moved along through a series of songs that are danced. The dances include beautiful wooden masks, button blankets, and aprons that have percussive objects sewn into them – all of which serve a purpose. As we have started to

include public performances and opera scores as mediums for sharing our stories, some want to engage, and some do not. I have yet to meet someone who isn't curious about how opera singers make the sounds we do, and I've had many traditional singers ask if I have tips for how to make their voices last for several-day-long potlatch ceremonies.

At the last potlatch I attended, one of the elders asked me to sing opera during a dinner break. I did because you cannot say no to an elder. And it felt quite strange to be singing an aria from Samson and Delilah acapella in a Big House. There was a ripple of what felt like shock that ran through the house and for the remaining days of the ceremony I was approached over and over again by people shyly telling me they thought my opera singing was really cool. Writing down my thoughts for this article instead of recording a spoken set of answers doesn't seem odd. Neither does writing down the words and the music for an opera that is created and/or led by Indigenous artists. The times have changed, and so have we. This is partly due to forced assimilation, and partly because there is oral evidence that we have been taking on new ways since the dawn of time. We are humans and we are curious and we are able, so we evolve.

I have a feeling that the misconceptions and misrepresentations of Indigenous people won't end during my lifetime. This is one of the reasons why I think it's important to publish these musical works and keep them in libraries where people will have access to them. Even if the needle moves and we reach a different place in our work to gain equality and equity, we should be able to look back at the path that has been taken to get us to that point. I also think that some of the musical works that are being developed today belong in the current AND future canons.

Do the Indigenous composers you work with generally publish their scores (or plan to publish their scores) or record the performances? What have you observed about how they approach creating in these non-traditional formats?

The Indigenous composers I work with all send out scores that are beautifully rendered using composition software. Most companies and orchestras refuse to play hand-written scores these days and much fewer would be willing to engage in the time it took to learn music orally. In terms of publishing, there are Indigenous composers who publish, and there are some who prefer not to. As we are all navigating the various ways that we traditionally dealt with copyrights or permissions, there is an active ongoing discussion happening in Indigenous circles. I participate in some of these discussions, but certainly not all of them. I've discussed the idea of giving verbal credit and whether or not to say "the song came to me" rather than "I composed" to fit with what we think we know of our traditions. At the moment, the default is to say one has composed a piece, but I think it is interesting to consider other, more traditional options.

Recording performances does seem to be widely popular, and I would guess that this is because it seems to fit well within the tradition of sharing our music orally. My dad's community drum group, which learns and sometimes performs traditional songs from the wide range of represented Indigenous Nations, encourages pulling out cell phones to record the songs they are learning so that

they have a reference to practise with at home. None of the people in that group are ever seen scribbling the songs onto staff paper, although they do share lyric sheets. The drum group is mostly made up of people who have not studied Western classical music, whereas all the composers I'm aware of are classically trained in the Western tradition.

I should also note that there is ongoing work with the Canadian Music Centre (CMC) to create space for Indigenous composers. Several Indigenous composers have been turned away from the CMC composer collective in the past as they were not seen as "professional" or up to the standards of the CMC. During discussions with the Indigenous musical community over the past several years, the CMC has been made aware that Indigenous musicians are unhappy with the practise of "borrowing" tunes from the ethnomusicologist-collected works that reside in various museums. For a time in the 60s and 70s and even into the 80s, non-Indigenous composers were encouraged to borrow from these recordings and to compose around them or to include them in order to create an invented version of "a truly Canadian sound." Little or no consideration was given to what these songs meant, which communities they came from, who should be contacted about permissions, or whether it was respectful to use these supposed folk tunes in a public setting.

As Indigenous scholars and musicians are finally being included in these conversations, it has come to light that there are some serious misuses of traditional melodies, and that they need to be dealt with one by one. A committee of Indigenous artists, [the Indigenous Advisory Council](#)³, is systematically going through the infringing works and discussing what ought to be done about them. Dr. Dylan Robinson xwélmexw (Stó:lō/Skwah), a professor at the University of British Columbia, started this movement. When the Canadian Opera Company (COC) mounted a production of *Louis Riel*, an opera by Harry Somers with libretto by Mavor Moore, Dylan entered into conversation with the COC about a piece that was used as a lullaby within the opera. The song in question was called the *Kuyas*, and it came from the Nisga'a of the Northwest Coast. It is a funeral song that belongs to a particular family and is meant to be sung only by family members on the day a family member passes. The Nisga'a were totally unaware that their song was being used as a lullaby in an opera about the Métis people from in and around Manitoba that was written by non-Indigenous men. The COC agreed to partner with the National Arts Centre in Ottawa to commission a replacement aria by Métis composer Ian Cusson. Moore had already written text for the lullaby, so Ian only needed to write the music and orchestrate it to suit the instrumentation that Somers had established. The *Kuyas* was returned with an apology to the Nisga'a, and the remaining family members of Somers and Moore, who inherited their artistic legacies, as well as the companies that were mounting *Louis Riel*, learned valuable lessons. I sincerely hope that more composers take it upon themselves to make similar reparations, create solutions, and engage in productive dialogue with the communities who they have taken music from. We understand that

³ "Introducing the Indigenous Advisory Council (IAC)," Canadian Music Centre, accessed May 1, 2024, <https://cmccanada.org/indigenous-advisory-council/>.

these “borrowings” were not done with ill intent, but now that we all know better, it is time to engage in the work of doing better.

In my work as a back-up singer with Jeremy Dutcher, while he was workshopping ideas for his newest album, we did everything orally. It was amazing to see how much he held in his head and how easily he taught us the lines we were to sing. He also made room for harmonisation and improvisation during these sessions. As a person who learned to play the piano via the Suzuki method AND as a culturally aware Kwagiulth and Sto:lo person, I was comfortable with this method of collaboration and learning.

I mentioned that I have done some dramaturgy in my introduction. The most exciting work that I am doing in that role is called *Namwayut*. I was invited by Bramwell Tovey to create a new opera as dramaturg for Calgary Opera. I was given the green light to go about this work in whatever way I wanted and with whatever team I wished to work with. I started by inviting Yvette Nolan to have a conversation with me about being the librettist, or scribe, for the development of the libretto. I started with the idea that I’d like to create an opera around the idea of a phrase that is repeated in Indigenous company. “All My Relations” is often said at the end of a speech or statement. Translated into Kwakwaka’wakw All My Relations is *Namwayut*. Kwakwaka’wakw is the language of the Kwakwaka’wakw, of which the Kwagiulth are a part. *Namwayut* means that we are all one: humans, Earth, plants, animals, elements, and the spiritual realm. We are all connected. I wanted to tell a non-traumatic story through opera. Yvette and I agreed to invite two composers, Ian Cusson, who is Métis, and Parmela Attariwala, who is an ethnomusicologist and musician in addition to being a composer. We then invited some singers who we knew would work well in a collaborative manner, and who also happen to be Indigenous or people of colour. As our piece and our collaborative process has moved along, we have invited some non-POC friends to join us as well. No reconciliation can happen without including everyone, and I think that our collaboration can work well for anyone who is interested in creating art as a community. We are having all sorts of interesting conversations about how to distinguish roles when we aren’t staying within our previously understood parameters. We are working on how to credit this work and how to share our working process if the piece should carry on beyond us. And we are building a really beautiful opera with Indigenous leadership. More on that to come in the next few years...

As a scholar, teacher, performer, and especially in your upcoming role as faculty at University of Victoria, how do you see yourself using the physical score collections and music recordings available to you at UVic or other academic music libraries?

In my role as a teacher, I will be enthusiastically drawing on the canon of songs and arias that I learned to sing from as a student. I am eager to see the current collection of 20th and 21st Century music scores at UVic and discover music that I might not have had access to elsewhere. As Indigenous people, the scope of our connection to the world around us has changed drastically since the days when our knowledge was passed along through oral traditions only. I don’t think there is anything wrong with “remembering” via paper and ink. My mum worked in our local library

while I was growing up and she used that library to its full advantage while homeschooling my siblings and me until we went on to study at the various universities we attended. Our sideboard in the kitchen was always overflowing with books on every subject we mentioned out loud, in case we wanted to know more than our in-person discussions had given us. I still have most of my physical scores that I bought before the days of downloading digital scores to my iPad, and I will be storing those scores in my office at UVic. They still provide inspiration and a scribbled account (always in pencil) of my growth as a musician that I enjoy reflecting on whenever I pull out a score at a different stage of life. And for all the music I wasn't able to buy, I will be heading to the music library to check it out there. I love the feel of a score in my hands and the sounds made as the collaborative pianist balances playing and flipping to the next page. I also have memories of listening to hours of music in the UVic library to prepare for my "drop the needle" exams in music history. Now that I also have access to online music listening libraries, I may not need to use those physical recordings as often... but for repertoire that is only available in that format, I will happily make the trek across campus. I will be teaching a vocal chamber music class, and I don't have as many scores for that repertoire as I do for solo rep, so I'm sure the library will come in handy for that, too. I'm looking forward to accessing licensed streaming databases, digital recording databases, and digital score collections through my affiliation with the University, both for teaching and for my own research.

What is next for you?

I have a concert coming up at National Sawdust in Brooklyn, New York, the purpose of which is to raise awareness and funds for the Plimpton Foundation. The Foundation has been formed to commission Indigenous composers to create the [North American Indigenous Songbook](#)⁴. We hope that once we have published our collection, music libraries will include it alongside the existing canon.

Immediately following that concert, I will head to Vancouver for ten days of workshopping, rehearsing, and performing a concert with *musica intima*. A terrific vocal ensemble, *musica intima* has invited me to curate a concert for them, and I am programming works by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous composers, including myself! The title for the program is *Ki'mola*, meaning "walking together," and I've imagined a world in which settlers came to North America to engage in meaningful conversation and a sharing of ways so that we all remained equal. The concert takes place on June 1st, and my hope is that we will give ourselves and our audience some inspiration to bring the best of who we are as artists and listeners to the work of reconciliation and peace.⁵

⁴ "The North American Indigenous Songbook," The Plimpton Foundation, accessed May 1, 2024, <https://www.theplimptonfoundation.org/the-north-american-indigenous-songbook>.

⁵ More information about *Ki'mola* and *musica intima* can be found at <https://www.musicaintima.org/kimola>.

Thank you so much for your responses to these questions. Is there anything you'd like to add for our readers?

There is a new opera in development, based on the novel *Indians on Vacation* by Thomas King. Royce Vavrek has created the libretto and Ian Cusson has written the music. I have been participating in all workshops for the music of this work-in-progress, and I performed an excerpt for Edmonton Opera during the pandemic, i.e. when only video content was permitted. That video is available on my [YouTube playlist](#)⁶. I'll be joining the workshop of the orchestrated version in Banff in June 2024. The story is about an Indigenous couple, Bird and Mimi, who take a vacation to Prague. Bird brings along his demons: the ones that tell him he isn't good enough, his health is failing, he will never amount to anything as a journalist or as a writer. Mimi brings her curiosity, practicality, courage, and large capacity to feel empathy and love for everyone, including her husband. I get to play Mimi, and I have been enjoying every single step of the development and work on this piece, which shines a light on Indigenous normality and joy rather than just honing in on trauma. There are tinges of sadness as the two recall some of the events that could have held them back... that held their relatives back. It is wonderful to have the chance to be part of an opera that represents my own full and realistic experience as an Indigenous woman.

⁶ Edmonton Opera, "Indians on Vacation: The Wild Rose Project," YouTube video, November 19, 2021, <https://youtu.be/wleehpYpilU?si=nIqFOSHEFLVmrBKx>.