

REVIEW

‘Two Odysseys’ operas tackle life and death in Indigenous tongues

Soundstreams’ Cree work excels at immersing us in a culture’s ethos, but the Sami creation takes an old legend and makes it speak to our times, writes John Terauds.

By John Terauds Special to the Star

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Two Odysseys: Pimooteewin/Gallabartnit

3 stars

Co-directed by Cole Alvis and Michael Greyeyes. Conducted by David Fallis. Until Nov. 17 at the Ada Slight Hall, Daniels Spectrum, 585 Dundas St. E. soundstreams.ca

Billed as the world’s first two operas to be sung in their respective Indigenous languages, the halves of “Two Odysseys: Pimooteewin/Gallabartnit” are at once unlikely marquee-mates and wonderfully complementary.

If they have a unified message, it is about our need to make sense of the inevitable cycle of life and death.

These two recent works are brought together from Canada’s Cree heritage and Norway’s northern Sami people (once called Laplanders) by Soundstreams. This Toronto institution has a long-standing devotion to walking the experimental periphery of art music and musical theatre.

The performances and production were impressive on Wednesday night at the Daniels Spectrum’s Slight Hall, smack in renewed and gentrified Regent Park. Here was a powerful example of how much clever staging can accomplish with a bare minimum of set, costumes and props. There were two dancers to provide constant movement, and the choir members were frequently brought into the stage action physically.

The storytelling was good, too. I would say that “Pimooteewin,” the 35-minute Cree work by librettist Tomson Highway and composer Melissa Hui, developed in co-operation with co-director Michael Greyeyes’ Signal Theatre, does the better job of fully immersing us in a culture’s ethos. But the 55-minute “Gallabartnit,” by Rawdna Carita Eira and composer Britta Bystrom, takes an old legend and makes it speak powerfully to the troubled times we live in.

Soundstreams premiered “Pimooteewin” back in 2008. It is an absorbing journey into the land of the dead, where the trickster wolf and his friend the eagle discover the perils of tampering with the natural order of things. The spoken dialogue is in English (with Cree surtitles), while the sung parts are in Cree (with English surtitles).

Hui’s haunting score, which deftly walks the tightrope between tonal and atonal music, is aging well. It was powerfully brought to life by a small ensemble of strings, clarinet and percussion, and 15 members of Choir 21, confidently conducted by David Fallis.

Choir 21 tenor Bud Roach reprises his originating role as Weesageechak, the Trickster. He was in particularly fine and expressive voice on Wednesday alongside Métis soprano Melody Courage as Misigoo, the eagle.

“Pimooteewin” is one of those deftly created works that suspends time as it tells its story, and the excellent performances incite us to hope that we won’t have to leave this alternate universe for a while.

“Gallabartnit,” performed entirely in Sami (a language related to the Finno-Ugric tongues of Finland, Hungary and Estonia) tells of Aile, a young woman who runs off with a bear. She returns to visit her birth family with her three children. Aile’s kinfolk, whom she remembers as loving and nurturing, do not react well to the news that a bear is hanging from the family tree. The consequences are tragic.

Bystrom’s score is rhythmically complex and spiky. It defines moods with great clarity but is less friendly to the unfamiliar ear than Hui’s. Courage as Aile was well paired with tenor Asitha Tennekoon as the bear. Together, they had strong chemistry and presence in this hard-biting story.

The design crew need to be counted among the stars of this production, especially Melissa Joakim, whose lighting worked much of the evening’s visual magic.

It’s not at all clear that these two operas should sit together on the same bill, but it is great to be able to experience a melding of Indigenous and modern European artforms in creative new ways.

Classical music writer John Terauds is a freelance contributor for the Star, based in Toronto. He is supported by the Rubin Institute for Music Criticism, San Francisco Conservatory of Music and Ann and Gordon Getty Foundation. Follow him on Twitter @JohnTerauds

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