

Definitely the Opera

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Noir as the Puck



Hockey Noir in Montreal. Photo credit Maxime Boisvert

On paper, it looks like hubris: how can film noir, hockey, comics and opera tolerate (let alone enhance) one another? But ten minutes into *Hockey Noir*, a *graphic opera* composed by Andre Ristic to the libretto by Cecil Castellucci and video-projected comic book panels by Kimberlyn Porter, the resistance was futile. I sat up and got drawn in; the stock characters came alive to subvert the stereotype; the music became driven, full of energy and surprising at every turn.

You know that an opera succeeds if the words, the visuals, and the music blend *just so*, that intangible quality that makes or breaks the piece. It almost doesn't matter what an opera is made of or what it is 'about', as long as this particular alchemy happens. I have no interest in hockey nor can I fathom our obsession with it. I don't read comic books very often and to film noir I much prefer the screwball talkies. And yet and yet, none of that mattered in this case. The libretto (Cecil Castellucci, who collaborated with Ristic on another comic book opera) uses the clichés from noir films—stock characters of the double-crossing dame and the mobster, and some clichéd lines in the dialogue—which can potentially dull down the piece. But they are used knowingly, for mimetic exacerbation, and put through the wringer of the two languages, or to be more precise through the hard-boiled, lumpen and underground versions of the two languages. It's Montreal of the 1950s, pre-Quiet

Revolution, when the boss (corporate and criminal, both) indeed did speak English, if not exactly posh English, but the dominant language of the libretto is the joul, rough, rudimentary, spiked with anglicisms, and creative spelling and grammar.

To that, some singers have to add another layer: soprano Pascale Beaudin, who sings the “hotshot player” Bigowsky, has to sing in French with a heavy Anglo accent, and this tells us that Bigowsky followed the trajectory of many allophone immigrants families to Quebec: English first, then French (maybe) later. Bigowsky is, as Gretzky is too, an East European name, possibly Russian or Polish, and in one scene Beaudin/Bigowsky has a line in Russian (was it Russian?), preceded by “As my mother always said.” Another East European name gets a tangle of Anglo-Franco textual material: the mobster boss Romanov (baritone Pierre-Etienne Bergeron), who while technically a total Anglo, swears and threatens in both official languages. I have never encountered a swearing aria that relishes the words and ties them to music so effectively, let alone one in two languages, let alone one that employs Quebec’s Catholic treasure box of swears, let alone one in which the music intervenes to bleep the swear words before they’re completed.

So what happens in the opera? Well, as in many noirs, the plot is somewhat obscure, and in the event doesn’t matter all that much. The aforementioned young hotshot hockey player Bigowsky refuses to fix the Montreal-Toronto match on behalf of Romanov, who plans on putting a lot of money on a Toronto win. To avoid the consequences, and in a nod to *Some Like It Hot*, Bigowsky goes underground and starts dressing as a woman. His cloche hat is very much Jack Lemmon as Daphne, but without the camp and the winks – this is, thankfully, a touch darker and angstier. His best team mate Lafeuille (tenor Michiel Schrey) bonds with a fan girl who, it transpires, is a brilliant coach—in fact, Bigowsky *en feminine* who just can’t resist the call of the rink. The character is called Gal Friday, so Howard Hawks lovers also get a nod, as does the recurring character of the super competent female professional from the talkies like *His Girl Friday*. It’s raining references to opera’s own history too. The Dame/Madame Lasalle (mezzo Marie-Annick Beliveau) who’s plotting for the overthrow of Romanov gets a Queen of the Night-like aria—only grubby, low-rent and from within a deep existential crisis. Bigowsky is a trouser role in the best tradition of trouser roles, and as such of course gets a feminine attire act too so we can observe a soprano singing a man who for plot purposes cross-dresses as a woman. Another way the tradition is honoured is that Beliveau gets a romantic thing with a female singer – Madame Lasalle – and a proper seduction/recognition scene. Elsewhere in the opera, there’s a catalogue aria. Of sorts. In a thoroughly non-sexy version of a Don Giovanni standard, Lafeuille and Romanov in “Games played: 1123” list Lafeuille’s hockey stats.



Ristić's compelling music is the circulation that keeps this work so alive at all times. Ensemble Contemporain de Montreal is on stage, a string quartet, an electronic keyboard and a set of percussion instruments, all conducted by the ECM's AD Veronique Lacroix. As needed, the keyboard stands in for a Hammond organ, the electric instrument often heard in hockey matches of the era. The score is made up of the segments—arias, duos, ensembles—held together by detective voice-over (Jean Marchand). There's a pervading atmospheric darkness, continuously disturbed by the forces of angular twisted sounds, unusual pairings of timbre via voice with instrument or instrument with instrument, mimetic details like the swoosh of skates against the ice and pre-recorded sounds like the crowd cheering. No film noir music is directly quoted that I could tell, so no echoes of saxophone, fortunately. Madame Lasalle's arias involve some extended techniquing such as screaming in thinned out falsetto, and yo-yo-ing on a note for comic effect, but among other solos Bigowsky's going underground aria stands out – "How do you become invisible to men? Become a woman". The ensembles though is what I found most exciting of all. In "Quand l'avez-vu la derniere fois?" each character comes out of an electronic sound-field, which is pleasantly unpleasant and indeterminate, to tell of their last encounter with Bigowsky. The scenes of a hockey match at the end are fast and fun, as the projections, the characters and the instruments play without friction together. Shots are fired just before the final tutti, "J'aurais pu mourir", which works as an epilogue. Everybody survived, but the music is grim. Bigowsky's career continued going great until it didn't, Lafeuille retired to the suburbs, Lasalle became the new Montreal Boss and Romanov... well, ran for city council and later became prime minister (to accompany this statement, the projection showed an orange-haired Romanov).

I'm not entirely sure why the singers were miked. Were some voices distorted in real time, and had to stay plugged to the grid? I couldn't tell. But the small Jane Mallet certainly did not need singer amplification and the miking is perhaps the only component that diminished the show, not enhanced it.

The panels by Kimberlyn Porter are unfussy and vintage, no distracting details, and thanks to the video design by Serge Maheu they get some camera-like movement—closing in, gros plan, moving lense. They stay low key, and are there to complement the stage. Comic book panels may feel archaic and certainly less lively than film projections, but there's pleasure in that tech delay, and it works well with the 1940s and 1950s aesthetic.

Closes tonight at the Jane Mallet Theatre, and tours Belgium in Nov/Dec. Tickets [here](http://continuummusic.org/seasons/1718/hockey-noir.php) (<http://continuummusic.org/seasons/1718/hockey-noir.php>).

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