

It's Hockey Opera Hat Trick: Music, Libretto, Graphics

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Projections command attention in André Ristic's 'Hockey Noir,' staged by Ensemble Contemporain de Montréal. Soprano Pascale Beaudin (in suit) is Bigowski, and mezzo Marie-Annick Béliveau is Madame Lasalle. (Photos: Maxime Boisvert)

By Arthur Kaptainis

MONTREAL – Sport and opera rarely intersect, despite the high drama they share as spectator phenomena. The [Ensemble Contemporain de Montréal](#) is marking its 30 years as a purveyor of newness by mounting and touring *Hockey Noir*, an 80-minute chamber opera that combines mesmerizing graphics, an evocative libretto in two languages, and music that is inventive if not always easy to like.



Tenor Michiel Schrey portrays hockey veteran Lafeuille.

The setting, as the title implies, is the not-too-distant past: Montreal in the 1950s, a town of dark alleys, smoldering cigars, classic retail signage, mob bosses, and hockey, hockey, hockey. The Montreal Quabs (“Habs” is a common nickname of the real-life Montreal Canadiens hockey team) and their longtime rivals, the Toronto Pine Needles (no footnote necessary), are meeting in the playoffs.

Romanov, a gangster gratuitously portrayed as Russian, would like the local heroes to throw the final game, and pressures young Bigowsky, who owes him money, to do just that. When this player disappears, Romanov tries to convince a veteran, Lafeuille, to retire, a request that conflicts with his personal desire to end his career with a [Stanley Cup](#).

All this fiction riffs artfully on history. The name “Lafeuille” can hardly fail to remind viewers of [Guy Lafleur](#), a Canadiens star of the 1970s and early '80s, although the icon of the old-but-still-dangerous player is most likely to bring to mind the revered Canadiens forward of the 1940s and '50s, [Maurice “Rocket” Richard](#). The [1951 disappearance of Bill Barilko](#) of the Toronto Maple Leafs (whose body was found 11 years later among the remains of other victims of a wilderness airplane crash) was also clearly on the mind of librettist [Cecil Castellucci](#) (director [Marie-Josée Chartier](#) is credited with the storyboard).



Marie-Annick Béliveau is the gangster's moll, Madame Lasalle.

[Raymond Chandler](#) might also merit a mention. Romanov has his mandatory moll, Madame Lasalle. There is a detective, Loiseau, who looms large as a narrator. Characters relate to each other in interesting ways, as indeed do the storytelling devices. Yet the haunting projected images by graphic designer [Kimberlyn Porter](#), animated by [Serge Maheu](#), exert the greatest pull on our attention; singers in period costumes (designed by [Cheryl Lalonde](#)) mostly stand and deliver.

One reason for this dramatic restraint was the presence on stage of a string quartet, keyboardist, and percussionist, all dressed in hockey jerseys and conducted with athletic flair by ECM founder [Véronique Lacroix](#), wearing a striped referee's uniform. Apart from devouring space that could have been used for blocking, this configuration heightened our awareness, for better or worse, of [André Ristic's](#) gritty music.

Not all of it was tough: Sometimes the clouds broke to allow a little Bartókian expression, but mostly we heard sounds that communicated motion rather than emotion. Glissandos evoked the Zamboni ice-cleaning machine with humorless efficiency. Ristic allowed himself only faint references to an old-fashioned arena organ (what fun that could have been). Percussion was largely superfluous.



Baritone Pierre-Étienne Bergeron is the gangster, Romanov.

Vocals ranged from “contemporary” leaps and dips to ensemble chants. A few of Lasalle's highs were too high to be sung in full voice. A reference to the [Queen of the Night](#)? Well, if you say so. One standout interlude on May 4 was this character's Act 3 aria, rendered with pathos by mezzo [Marie-Annick Béliveau](#). The other capable performers were soprano [Pascale Beaudin](#) in the trouser role of Bigowsky (who, in a clever nod to operatic tradition, eventually disguises himself as a woman), the light tenor [Michiel Schrey](#) as Lafeuille, and the sturdy baritone [Pierre-Étienne Bergeron](#), looking rather clownish as Romanov. All wore microphones, unnecessarily in the [Monument-National](#), a beautiful midsize theatre from 1894.

Despite my reservations, *Hockey Noir* can be counted a moderate success on the strength of the compelling visuals, which recreate the atmosphere of Montreal in its bilingual heyday. Surtitles are incorporated into the comic-book graphic design. I was grateful for the spelling-out on screen of some very colloquial French. Beaudin as Bigowsky produced a labored English accent that I would have been hard pressed to improve on myself. Veteran actor [Jean Marchand](#) spoke Loiseau's (exclusively French) narration with appropriate gravitas. We see this Bogartian, fedora-wearing character as a graphic image but not on stage.

As a project supported by the [New Chapter program of the Canada Council for the Arts](#), *Hockey Noir* will travel to Toronto on May 10 and 11 in a [presentation by Continuum and the Toronto Comic Art Festival](#). It is also booked for two performances later this year in another bilingual country, Belgium. Its flaws notwithstanding, *Hockey Noir* is a promising showcase for the value of “graphic opera” as a genre and sports as a source of stories worth telling in the opera house.

Arthur Kaptainis writes about music for the Montreal Gazette and Musical Toronto.

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John Fleming
MCANA President

Welcome to Classical Voice North America, the online journal of the Music Critics Association of North America, of which I was elected president in July. I have been a member of MCANA for 25 years, joining after I became performing arts critic of Florida's *St. Petersburg Times* (now the *Tampa Bay Times*).

I remember fondly the first MCANA annual meeting I attended, organized around the Lyric Opera of Chicago's 1992 premiere of *McTeague*, with score by William Bolcom. That meeting gave me – then new to music criticism – the invaluable opportunity to get acquainted with leading journalists in a specialized field. Many newspapers and magazines sent their staff critics, a far cry from the situation today when traditional print is severely stressed. Still, our meetings continue to be a great way to exchange ideas and hear top-notch performers together.

Under Barbara Jepson, my predecessor as president, and other MCANA leaders, CVNA was launched in September 2013 to provide a new outlet for classical music coverage. With readers in 90 countries it has shown consistent growth, recently passing half a million page views on 1,100 stories by 123 authors, the great majority of whom are members of MCANA.

Thank you for reading CVNA, which seeks to convey the richness of musical life in North America and elsewhere, with reviews and commentary by expert MCANA members and occasional guest contributors. If you happen to be a writer with experience in classical music, please consider this an invitation to [join us](#).

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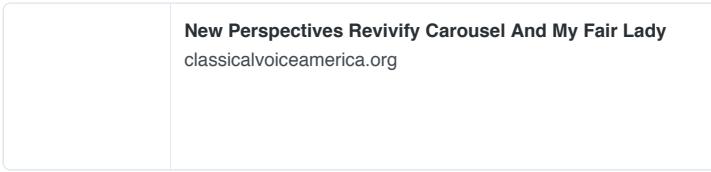
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