

## Native Earth Performing Arts GIIWEDIN

Many highly interesting productions have come out of **Native Earth Performing Arts**. The organization is usually associated with theatre, but its latest venture was the very ambitious *Giiwedín*, *A First Nations Opera* (Apr 8-24), composed by Catherine Magowan and Spy Dénommmé-Welch with a libretto by Dénommmé-Welch. In the program notes, Native Earth's Artistic Director, Yvette Nolan, justifies the medium of opera because the art form tells such big stories, and First Nations people have big stories to tell.

*Giiwedín* means North Wind, and the heroine is an Aboriginal woman, Noodin-Kwe, Wind Woman, who lives for 200 years. Her beginnings are in the Royal Proclamation of 1763, when the British Crown pledged fair negotiations over land rights and then proceeded to break every promise. From the building of the railway through Native lands near Lake Temiskaming in northern Ontario to contemporary times and the birth of her mixed-race child, Noodin-Kwe's life is bound up in a continued resistance against colonialism. The opera is a metaphor for the upheaval of Native culture by the coming of the white man. The story is told like a First Peoples' myth. Animals sing and time has no reality. The bitter truth of the Aboriginal experience is the anchor.

The creators chose Baroque music as a base because that was the European musical mainstream when Noodin-Kwe's story begins. They did, however, cunningly mix together rhythms from both traditional First Nations and popular European music, which gives *Giiwedín* its unique sensibility. The four-member ensemble, deftly conducted by Gregory Oh, included harpsichord (Sara Anne Churchill), archlute (Lucas Harris), violin (Edwin Huizinga) and cello (Mary-Katherine Finch). The musicians were deliberately placed on the side of the stage to be better integrated with the singers.

The incorporation of standard conventions of European opera (arias, duets, ensembles and recitative) represents, for Dénommmé-Welch and Magowan, the effect of industrialization on Native peoples. The result is a score that is both modern and traditional at the same time—tuneful yet dissonant, melodic yet rhythmic. One of the most memorable extended passages

is "Extra! Extra!" in which the cast outlines the key historical events that happened between 1890 and 1950. The Weeping Forest chorus is particularly moving, as is the Timber Wolves' duet. Throughout are beautiful instrumental interludes that are evocative tone poems on their own. The libretto contains some very clever rhyming couplets.

Native Canadian mezzo Marion Newman (Noodin-Kwe) came to the project with an already formidable reputation. She has a gorgeous voice, lustrous and burnished in sound, which she can bend at will, whether as a soft lullaby for her child or a ringing declamation against injustice. The rest of the multi-

racial cast played multiple characters, but each had a key role as well. Unfortunately, tenor James McLennan's voice was severely under the weather, so while he acted out his roles, tenor Martin Houtman sang them, sitting with the orchestra behind a music stand. He has a strong, supple tenor and his Minister, that most villainous of white men, was bold and fierce. Others in the cast included Ryan Allen (Noodin-Kwe's son, John), Jesse Clark (Jean, the French-Canadian surveyor and father of John) and Lawrence Cotton (Dr. Carlton, who performs a lobotomy on the rebellious Noodin-Kwe). Noodin-Kwe's animal friends were Nicole Joy-Fraser (Mahigan, her faithful dog), Catharin Carew (Mahkwa, a bear) and

Neema Bickersteth and Jessica Lloyd (Timber Wolves).

Kudos to director Maria Lamont for the sense of ritual. The piece was skillfully and economically manoeuvred to accommodate the multiple roles with highlighted moments of both humor and drama. Camellia Koo's set was a stage covered in fragrant wood chips, and at the appropriate time, key props would appear, like Noodin-Kwe's cooking fire. A particularly strong feature was the series of lights embedded into the stage floor that turned red when the blood flowed. Jackie Chau's period costumes for the whites were counterbalanced by the buckskins for Noodin-Kwe and the animals. Michelle Ramsay's rhapsodic lighting design captured the mysterious spirit of the north. Choreographer Michelle Olson devised clever movement for the animals. One hopes *Giiwedín* has a shelf life because it deserves wider exposure. —Paula Citron



Marion Newman  
(Noodin-Kwe) and  
Jesse Clark (Jean)