

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Against the Grain Theatre’s *Messiah/Complex* and Indigenous Sovereignty

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and the intensification of IBPOC (Indigenous, Black, and People of Color) activism during this time have prompted many in the classical music industry to pause and reflect on the ways in which we perpetuate colonialism and racism in our leadership and governance structures, programming, casting practices, performance practices, and treatment of IBPOC artists. This article focuses on *Messiah/Complex* (2020) by Toronto’s Against the Grain Theatre (AtG). All soloists were Indigenous or people of color. Based on conversations with several Indigenous artists involved in this project, this article argues that we need to move from thinking about how to include more Indigenous artists to thinking about how we can create space for Indigenous sovereignty. That is going to involve giving over decision-making power to Indigenous artists at all levels. *Messiah/Complex* could have made a more decisive move toward sovereignty if it had begun with conversations with IBPOC artists about what they want to say at this moment. The performers should have been able to decide not only what language to perform in but also whether they want to perform Handel’s music at all, who they want to collaborate with, and how they want to work together.

In December 2020, Toronto’s Against the Grain Theatre (AtG) released *Messiah/Complex*, which they describe as a “new interpretation of the *Messiah* with the goal of amplifying this unique moment of pride and inclusivity in Canada—honouring and giving support to Indigenous and underrepresented voices from coast-to-coast-to-frozen-coast, and hoping to share these voices with an international audience.”¹ Joel Ivany, AtG’s Founder and Artistic Director, and Renelitta Arluk, Director of Akpik Theatre and of Indigenous Arts at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, directed four choirs and twelve IBPOC (Indigenous, Black, and People of Color) soloists who perform Handel’s music in six languages: Arabic, Dene Kede, English, French, Southern Tutchone, and two dialects of Inuktitut/Inuttitut.² Streaming for free on YouTube during Christmas 2020 and the subsequent Easter and Christmas seasons, the film catapulted the indie opera company onto the world stage, garnering 144,819 views in forty-four countries after features in the *New York Times*, BBC, CBC

I am grateful to the artists who made time to speak with me and offer feedback on this article; Shelley Zhang, Caryl Clark, and Andrew Kania, who also commented on drafts of this piece; and the two anonymous reviewers. You have all brought my thoughts about *Messiah/Complex* into focus and deepened my understanding of what Indigenous sovereignty within Western classical music might look like. I also benefitted from sharing this work at the American Musicological Society, the AMS’s New York State–St. Lawrence chapter meeting, and the inaugural Watershed Festival, hosted by Queen’s University in 2021.

¹“*Messiah/Complex*: A Timeless Piece of Music with a Distinctly Canadian Twist,” Against the Grain Theatre, accessed November 13, 2022, <https://atgtheatre.com/upcoming/messiah-complex/>.

²I have opted for the acronym IBPOC instead of BIPOC because of the emphasis it places on Indigenous Peoples. “IBPOC Artistic Practices,” Primary Colours/Couleurs primaires, accessed November 13, 2022, https://www.primary-colours.ca/project_collections/21-ibpoc-artistic-practices#:~:text=IBPoC%20is%20a%20contemporary%20term,Indigenous%2Dfirst%20acronym%20%2D%20IBPoC.

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(Canadian Broadcasting Company), and several other major media outlets.³ Additionally, the digital album was nominated for a Juno award in 2022.⁴

The COVID-19 pandemic and intensification of IBPOC activism during this time have prompted many in the classical music industry to pause and reflect on the ways in which we perpetuate colonialism and racism in our leadership and governance structures, programming, casting practices, performance practices, and treatment of IBPOC artists. AtG is one of many companies in North America whose pandemic programming was motivated by anticolonial and/or antiracist intentions. This article focuses on *Messiah/Complex* not to uphold it as a model for anticolonial art music but, rather, because its shortcomings have been lost on the many journalists who have done so.

My choice of the adjective “anticolonial” instead of “decolonized” is deliberate. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang observe that “decolonization” has become a “metonym for social justice,” at least in the academy. They argue in favor of confining our use of decolonization to actions involving “the repatriation of Indigenous land and life.”⁵ Examples within the arts include the Yale Union of Portland, Oregon, giving their building and land to the Native Arts and Cultures Foundation in July 2020.⁶ The project “Xoxelxmetset te Syewa:l/Caring for Our Ancestors: Reconnecting Indigenous Songs with Community and Kin” can also be understood as decolonization in Tuck and Yang’s sense. As xwélméxw (Stó:lō/Skwah) scholar and artist Dylan Robinson explains, he and his collaborators are “re-connecting kinship between Indigenous songs and material culture—variously understood as loved ones, ancestors, life—and the communities that they come from.”⁷ Because

³The number of views is of the YouTube video as of April 18, 2022. Robin Whiffen shared the number of countries in an email from June 14, 2021. Coverage in major media outlets is listed in chronological order: Debra Yeo, “Virtual ‘Messiah’ a Cross-Country Quest,” *Toronto Star*, November 9, 2020, <https://www.pressreader.com/canada/toronto-star/20201109/282041919653796>; Brad Wheeler, “Against the Grain’s Daring Interpretation of Handel’s Messiah Might Get a Rise Out of the Hallelujah People,” *Globe and Mail*, December 9, 2020, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/music/article-against-the-grains-daring-interpretation-of-handels-messiah-might-get/>; CBC News: The National (@CBCTheNational), “When a Toronto theatre company moved their Handel’s Messiah performance online, they invited voices from every province and territory to join in,” Tweet, December 9, 2020, <https://twitter.com/cbcthenational/status/1336626646237937667?lang=en>; Paul Wells, “An Online Messiah Rises to the Occasion,” *Maclean’s*, December 10, 2020, <https://www.macleans.ca/culture/arts/an-online-messiah-rises-to-the-occasion/>; Gordon Bowness, “Occupy Handel: Singing the Praises of a Diverse Creation,” *Xtra*, December 11, 2020, <https://xtramagazine.com/culture/handel-messiah-complex-192397>; Jenna Simonov, “Messiah/Complex is a Joyful Screen Adaptation of Handel’s Holiday Stable,” *Globe and Mail*, December 14, 2020, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/music/article-messiahcomplex-is-a-joyful-screen-adaptation-of-handels-holiday-staple/>; Dan Bilefsky, “A ‘Messiah’ for the Multitudes, Freed from History’s Bonds,” *New York Times*, December 21, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/21/arts/music/handel-messiah-canada-indigenous.html>; BBC World Service, “A Diverse Interpretation of Handel’s Messiah,” BBC World Service: Newsday, December 29, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p092n4v7>; Margaret Atwood, “Margaret Atwood’s Today programme,” December 29, 2020, BBC Radio 4: Today Programme, 7:00 (throughout times refer to the time of the relevant segment as opposed to the total time of the video), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p092slb3?fbclid=IwAR2G6hC4m0owLdAEI-rt12B19SJM496yJ84bgiZ6DPhdndoWam0UOHNSws>; Suzanne Gervais, “Messiah/Complex: Un film canadien consacré au Messie de Haendel,” *France Musique*, December 29, 2020, <https://www.francemusique.fr/emissions/musique-connectee/musique-connectee-du-mardi-29-decembre-2020-90409>; Dan Bilefsky, “A Polarizing Canadian ‘Messiah’ Shows How Pandemic is Shaking Up Culture,” *New York Times: Canada Letter*, January 8, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/08/world/canada/canadian-messiah-pandemic.html>; Brad Wheeler, “With its Daring Film Version of Handel’s Messiah, a Small Canadian Theatre Company Defied the Pandemic and Thrived,” *Globe and Mail*, January 22, 2021, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/music/article-with-its-daring-film-version-of-handels-messiah-a-small-canadian/>.

⁴2022 Juno Nominees,” CBC Music, accessed November 13, 2022, <https://junoawards.ca/nominees/>.

⁵Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 21. See also Max Liboiron, “Anti-Colonial Science,” Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research (CLEAR), December 29, 2017, <https://civiclaboratory.nl/2017/12/29/feminist-anti-colonial-science/>; Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 26–27.

⁶“NACF to Gain Ownership of the Yale Union Building in Portland, Oregon,” Native Arts and Cultures Foundation blog, July 16, 2020, <https://www.nativeartsandcultures.org/nacf-yu-press-release>.

⁷Dylan Robinson, “Biography,” Dylan Robinson, accessed November 13, 2022, <https://www.dylanrobinson.ca/biography/>. For more on the idea of artworks as ancestors, see Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 86–92.

Messiah/Complex did not involve the repatriation of Indigenous land or life, it is better described by a less specific term like anticolonial.⁸

One of the many critical interventions Robinson has made in music scholarship has been to bring awareness to the idea of “listening positionality”: “how race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and cultural background intersect and influence the way we are able to hear sound, music, and the world around us.”⁹ My cultural background—as a second-generation Canadian of Mennonite and Polish ancestry—and training as a clarinetist in the Western classical tradition has made me into what Robinson refers to as a “hungry listener”; one more comfortable with songs as mere aesthetic objects than as beings with agency. I approached *Messiah/Complex* as someone who grew up watching my father perform *Messiah* every year in amateur choral groups. As a scholar, I have written about AtG’s efforts to remake canonical operas for contemporary audiences.¹⁰ Watching *Messiah/Complex* after having read Robinson’s *Hungry Listening* (which had come out earlier in 2020) raised questions and concerns that had not arisen in my earlier writing on AtG.

Where I live and work, the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples, a guiding principle of research and writing about Indigenous Peoples is “nothing about us without us.”¹¹ To center the experiences and perspectives of the Indigenous artists who created *Messiah/Complex*, I rely heavily on quotations from interviews and email exchanges I conducted as well as public Q&A sessions and roundtables on the film. Although all of the artists I spoke and corresponded with were satisfied with the end product, some mentioned ways in which the creative process could have been more supportive of Indigenous resurgence. For Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, writer, and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Indigenous resurgence or biskaabiiyang in Nishnaabemowin

does not literally mean returning to the past, but rather re-creating the cultural and political flourishing of the past to support the well-being of our contemporary citizens. It means reclaiming the fluidity around our traditions, not the rigidity of colonialism; it means encouraging the self-determination of individuals within our national and community-based contexts; and it means re-creating an artistic and intellectual renaissance within a larger political and cultural resurgence.¹²

Based on conversations with several Indigenous artists involved in this project, this article argues that supporting Indigenous resurgence within Western classical music is going to involve more than merely hiring more Indigenous artists. We also need to give these artists the space to question what classical music is and how it should be created, presented, and appreciated. In other words, we need to move from thinking about how to include more Indigenous artists to thinking about how we can create space for Indigenous sovereignty. That is going to involve giving over the decision-making power to Indigenous artists at all levels and in all capacities, not just in roles visible to the audience. AtG gave the Indigenous artists they worked with more autonomy than typical collaborations in classical music. However, because these artists joined the project after several key decisions had been made, their ability to make *Messiah* their own had decided limits.

⁸Here I am following the recommendation of Rena Roussin, a musicologist of Métis, Haida, and settler heritage, interviewed by Robyn Grant-Moran and Julie McIsaac, “Opera and Activism—Part I,” February 2, 2021, in *Key Change* podcast, season 1, episode 7, 28:50, <https://www.coc.ca/keychange/ep7>.

⁹Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 10. I also include the following positionality statement “as a tactic of refusing settler invisibility.” Jessica Bissett Perea and Gabriel Solis, “Asking the Indigeneity Question of American Music Studies,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 13, no. 4 (2019), 404.

¹⁰Nina Penner, *Storytelling in Opera and Musical Theatre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 173, 238–39.

¹¹This phrase originated in disability activism in the 1990s and has since been adopted by Indigenous activists in Canada. See, e.g., CBC News, “Classical Musicians Pushing for More Involvement in Indigenous Projects,” CBC News, March 2, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/sudbury/indigenous-music-gathering-1.5039496>.

¹²Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2011), 51.

Against the Grain Theatre and *Messiah*

AtG is an indie opera company that focuses on presenting canonical repertoire in new ways. In a video on AtG's website, soprano Jonelle Sills describes the company as "giving new life to traditional operatic work and introducing it to new audiences. Their drive is to reach people who are not reached by [traditional] opera."¹³ Their shows are typically set in present-day Toronto. Unlike most updatings (e.g., much of Peter Sellars's work), Joel Ivany's productions feature new English-language libretti. For this reason, Ivany refers to his productions as "transladaptations." Although remaining "congruent with the original libretto and music," AtG seeks "to represent the characters' circumstances and environments as belonging to and speaking to Canadians and Canada and the issues we face today."¹⁴

Most of AtG's shows are intimate, site-specific, and feature emerging artists, particularly from underrepresented groups. In 2011, they burst on to Toronto's opera scene with a production of *La Bohème* at the Tranzac Club. In the fall of 2019, AtG toured the production to bars in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, and the Yukon. Due to their budget and chosen venues, AtG typically performs reduced arrangements (e.g., piano only for *Bohème*) with somewhat heavier cuts than is typical at the big houses. Otherwise, they make minimal changes to the score. The choices AtG made in *Messiah/Complex* are congruent with their earlier work.

Handel's *Messiah* is a decidedly unlikely vehicle for Indigenous resurgence, something AtG acknowledges as part of the land acknowledgment at the beginning of the film.¹⁵ In the R/18 Collective's roundtable on March 23, 2021, musicologist Ellen Lockhart remarked that Handel composed *Messiah* at the "centre of empire. For centuries, it was a piece of British propaganda that was taken to different corners of the empire" to assimilate Indigenous Peoples into European and, specifically, Christian ways of thinking.¹⁶ Handel was, furthermore, no innocent bystander. In 2013, librarian David Hunter found Handel's name in a 1720 list of investors in the Royal African Company, one of Britain's two official slave trading companies.¹⁷ These investments cannot be neatly separated from Handel's creative work, Hunter notes. Handel used the profits to cover losses from his opera seasons in London. Furthermore, the very form of the English oratorio arose out of the patronage of James Bridges, the Duke of Chandos, patronage that was made possible by Chandos's own, much more substantial investments in the Royal African Company.¹⁸

For many Indigenous people in Canada, *Messiah* calls to mind the genocide committed by church-run residential schools, which operated from 1883 to 1996.¹⁹ In an effort to assimilate

¹³Jonelle Sills, "Meet Against the Grain Theatre," Against the Grain Theatre, March 2, 2021, YouTube video, 0:23, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ePvjg6CHaDo>.

¹⁴"About," Against the Grain Theatre, accessed November 13, 2022, <https://atgtheatre.com/about-us/>.

¹⁵"We are acutely aware of the contradictions *Messiah* brings, especially considering the Indigenous singers and co-creators that have taken part. The erasure of Indigenous languages by generations of cultural undoing is being reclaimed by some of the soloists you will hear sing. It not only shows their resilience but their generosity. Against the Grain Theatre acknowledges these erasures as atrocities that happened all across this country, and are still happening." Against the Grain Theatre, "Messiah/Complex," Against the Grain Theatre, YouTube video, December 13, 2020. This video is no longer publicly available. Reneltha Arluk wrote the statement and Miriam Khalil read it at the beginning of the film. Reneltha Arluk, interview with author, April 23, 2021.

¹⁶Ellen Lockhart, "Messiah/Complex Roundtable Hosted by the R/18 Collective," R18 Collective, March 31, 2021, YouTube video, 24:25, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3DjNQknw40>.

¹⁷Hunter found Handel's name in "The Names of the Adventurers of the Royal African Company of England" (May 9, 1720), the only copy of which is held at the Graduate School of Business Library at Harvard University. He subsequently found three Handel signatures under the buy and sell orders for the Royal African Company in 1720 at the National Archives in London. David Hunter, *The Lives of George Frideric Handel* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2015), 201–2; Will Robin, "Handel and the Slave Trade with David Hunter," May 11, 2021, in *Sound Expertise*, podcast, season 2, episode 8, 4:42, <https://soundexpertise.org/handel-and-the-slave-trade-with-david-hunter/>. Scholars already knew that Handel had invested in the South Sea Company, which was the other British company active in the slave trade, but this information was "ignored, denied, or occluded, presumably in order not to tarnish his image." Hunter, *Lives of George Frideric Handel*, 200.

¹⁸Hunter, *Lives of George Frideric Handel*, 204.

¹⁹Diyet mentions residential schools in connection with her decision to perform in *Messiah/Complex* in Wells, "An Online Messiah." It is unclear whether *Messiah* was regularly performed at residential schools in Canada. Beverley Diamond, "The Doubleness of Sound in Canada's Indian Residential Schools," in *This Thing Called Music: Essays in Honor of Bruno Nettl*, eds. Victoria Lindsay and Philip V. Bohlman (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 267–79, remarks that hymns and other liturgical music made up the bulk of music-making at residential schools in Canada.

Indigenous Peoples into white, settler society, the Canadian government forcibly removed Indigenous children from their families and sent them to schools that were typically far away from their communities and ancestral lands. Children were beaten for speaking their languages or practicing their cultural and spiritual traditions. Abuse—physical, emotional, psychological, sexual—was widespread. Overcrowding and substandard sanitation, food, and health care led to countless preventable deaths. In the summer of 2021, remains of over a 1,000 children were discovered in unmarked graves on the sites of residential schools in British Columbia and Saskatchewan.²⁰

The answer to the question of why AtG decided that *Messiah* was the work to give “support to Indigenous and underrepresented voices” in 2020 has less to do with the artistic properties of Handel’s work and its long and complex history than with plans AtG had in place prior to the pandemic. As AtG’s Executive Director Robin Whiffen outlined in an email exchange with me in June 2021, AtG had planned to remount their fully staged/choreographed production of *Messiah* (2013, 2015) at the Winter Garden Theatre in Toronto in December 2020. The Toronto Symphony Orchestra (TSO) had engaged Joel Ivany to direct a semi-staged *Rigoletto* in winter 2021. Through Ivany’s connection to the TSO, particularly the VP of Artistic Planning, Loie Fallis, these plans merged into *Messiah/Complex*.²¹

The approach AtG took to creating something they could share with an online audience was influenced by the reception of their initial forays into virtual programming. In June 2020, they launched AtGTV on YouTube, which initially featured interviews with industry leaders and an online version of their Opera Pub series called Quarantunes.²² Many of the Quarantunes concerts were recorded on the performers’ phones and broadcast live. AtG encouraged spectators to tune in at a specific time on their preferred social media platform (YouTube, FacebookLive, Twitter, or Twitch) and to share their reactions in the chat. Although AtG’s live Opera Pubs were successful at bringing opera to new audiences, the Quarantunes series was not. As directors Atom Egoyan and Fiona Shaw note in their interviews with Ivany in the summer and fall of 2020, something is lost when one isn’t sharing the same physical space with the singers, even more so with opera than with other performing arts because opera singing is typically unamplified.²³

With *Messiah/Complex*, AtG provided audiences with an experience that they could not get in a concert hall, including stunning aerial shots of the Kluane icefield and Saint Elias mountain range in the Yukon. Recording the audio and video separately not only allowed them to shoot outdoors but also to feature talent across Canada.

Whiffen recalled that their initial aim to have artistic representation from each of Canada’s provinces and territories “quickly evolved into the desire to engage only soloists who were representative of racially marginalized communities.” She described her team as “deeply impacted by the resurgence of Black Lives Matter in May [2020].”²⁴ In discussions after the premiere, Ivany also named Black Lives Matter (BLM) as one of the chief inspirations for *Messiah/Complex*.²⁵

AtG’s first response to BLM was to commission a blog post by Michael Zarathus-Cook, a Black music writer based in Toronto. In his post from June 19, 2020, he critiqued the “performative allyship” of diversity statements and token hires, and called on opera companies to give IBPOC artists “a seat at

²⁰For more on the history of residential schools in Canada, see the reports issued by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2007–15): “Reports,” National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, accessed November 13, 2022, <https://nctr.ca/records/reports/>. For a brief history of the TRC and some criticisms, see Keavy Martin and Dylan Robinson, “Introduction: ‘The Body is a Resonant Chamber,’” in *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action in and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, eds. Keavy Martin and Dylan Robinson (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), 5–8.

²¹Robin Whiffen, email to author, June 14, 2021.

²²Against the Grain Theatre, “#AtGTV Welcome to Against the Grain TV,” Against the Grain Theatre, June 11, 2020, YouTube video, 1:50, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=ITGsRBgnMYy>.

²³Atom Egoyan and Joel Ivany, “#AtGTV From The Director’s Chair: Atom Egoyan,” Against the Grain Theatre, streamed live on August 20, 2020, YouTube video, 24:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3ox00Aav7o>; Fiona Shaw and Joel Ivany, “#AtGTV From The Director’s Chair: Fiona Shaw,” Against the Grain Theatre, October 1, 2020, YouTube video, 18:05, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZIM17_ATxso.

²⁴Robin Whiffen, email to author, June 14, 2021.

²⁵Joel Ivany in Against the Grain Theatre, “*Messiah/Complex: The Making Of*,” Against the Grain Theatre, streamed live on April 1, 2021, YouTube video, 51:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnkCzmRm-8c>.

the table” and “a legitimate voice and presence in your boardrooms and conference calls.”²⁶ Subsequently, AtG invited Zarathus-Cook to chair two conversations about opera, racism, and other inequities in the industry, which they broadcast on FacebookLive on June 30 and July 1 (Canada Day), 2020.²⁷ The tenor of these conversations was similar to the conversation J’Nai Bridges and the LA Opera hosted on June 5, 2020, except that AtG’s conversations featured emerging (rather than established) IBPOC, queer, trans, and differently abled artists.²⁸

Inspired by these conversations, AtG decided to hire only IBPOC soloists. With seven Indigenous soloists and an Indigenous co-director, *Messiah/Complex* became less about BLM and more about Indigenous resurgence. Notably, AtG not only reached out to Indigenous opera singers like Deantha Edmunds and early music specialists like Jonathon Adams, but also to musical-theater singers (Julie Lumsden) and singer-songwriters (Diyet, Leela Gilday, and Looee Arreak). In so doing, they showcased a variety of ways Indigenous artists are pursuing careers in music and engaging with colonial structures such as the classical music canon.

Joel Ivany, a white settler, initially spearheaded *Messiah/Complex*. As part of the casting process, he consulted with Reneltha Arluk, a theater director of Inuvialuit, Cree, and Dene ancestry, whom he knew from his work at the Banff Centre. She recommended nêhiyaw michif (Cree-Métis) baritone Jonathon Adams, who suggested that Arluk be invited to co-direct. In my interview with Adams on April 18, 2021, they noted that “the Indigenous participants really needed to have an Indigenous leader because of the content and because of the history of *Messiah* and the piece and Canada. It was important to decentre whiteness, to decentre that Euro-centricity that’s so much a part of the annual *Messiah* tradition.”²⁹ The other Indigenous soloists agreed and Arluk took the lead on the direction of their numbers.

Indigenous-Settler Collaborations in Canada

Canada’s Multiculturalism Act of 1988 has encouraged an increasing number of collaborations between artists trained in Western classical and Indigenous musics.³⁰ In his study of these collaborations, Dylan Robinson notes that inviting Indigenous artists to participate in Western art music “could be understood as seeking to redress a history of compositional ‘resourcing’ and appropriation of non-Western music Yet to include Indigenous and non-Western musicians in such work may just as easily take part in a representational politics that does not necessarily address the structural inequities that underpin inclusion.”³¹

Robinson exposes the unequal power dynamics governing many well-funded and publicly praised musical collaborations, such as Tafelmusik’s *The Four Seasons: A Cycle of the Sun* (2003–7, 2013), featuring Inuit throat singers Sylvia Cloutier and June Shappa, Jeanne Lamon on violin, Aruna Narayan on the Indian sarangi, and Wen Zhao on the Chinese pipa. He gives Tafelmusik’s *Four Seasons* as an example of “inclusionary music.” Musicians from other traditions have been included, but only because they have agreed to conform to the norms and expectations of Western classical music. In

²⁶Michael Zarathus-Cook, “A Collective Awakening in the Performing Arts,” Against the Grain Theatre blog, June 19, 2020, <https://atgtheatre.com/a-collective-awakening-in-the-performing-arts/>.

²⁷Against the Grain Theatre, “A Collective Awakening in the Performing Arts: Panel 1,” Against the Grain Theatre, streamed live on June 30, 2020, FacebookLive, 1:32:32, <https://fb.watch/7pcDnjkmmy/>; Against the Grain Theatre, “A Collective Awakening in the Performing Arts: Panel 2,” Against the Grain Theatre, streamed live on July 1, 2020, FacebookLive, 1:47:09, <https://fb.watch/6iYWnsNnME/>.

²⁸LA Opera, “Lift Every Voice: A Conversation Hosted by J’Nai Bridges,” LA Opera, June 5, 2020, YouTube video, 1:23:32, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5APSkV5qyK4>.

²⁹Jonathon Adams, interview with author, April 18, 2021. Adams’s account agrees with Arluk’s, expressed not only in her interview with me (April 23, 2021), but also in R18 Collective, “Messiah/Complex Roundtable,” 12:25. Robin Whiffen, email to author, June 14, 2021, describes the process differently: “It was always our intention to have Indigenous leadership on this project through collaboration with the Banff Centre, but through discussions with Reneltha, the Banff Centre and the engaged artists, we engaged Reneltha as a co-director in early August.”

³⁰Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 3–4; Parmela Attariwala, “Eh 440: Tuning into the Effects of Multiculturalism on Publicly Funded Canadian Music” (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2013), 133.

³¹Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 5.

the documentary *The Four Seasons Mosaic* (2005), Lamon described the difficulty of getting Cloutier and Shappa to be “totally reliable and perfect every time.”³² As Robinson notes, the expectation that throat singers conform to the precisely measured nature of Baroque music and perform in precisely the same way each time “is to overlook the very nature of throat singing as play and the flexibility of time in play.”³³ The problem with merely including Indigenous artists, without altering existing ways of working, is that even the “best intentions of integration continue to reinforce and maintain the hierarchical dominance of art music as the genre to which other music must conform.”³⁴

For this reason, Robinson finds more promise in the approach he terms “Indigenous + art music,” which foregrounds (instead of attempting to efface) the irreconcilable nature of Western classical and Indigenous musics. As seen in Tafelmusik’s *Four Seasons*, these musical traditions not only contrast in terms of aesthetics and modes of production and appreciation, but also in terms of their assumptions about the ontology of music. Although classical musicians regard musical works as objects for aesthetic contemplation primarily and only secondarily in terms of other sorts of functions they may perform, in many Indigenous cultures, Robinson notes, songs function “as law, medicine, or primary historical documentation.”³⁵

Writer and arts consultant Soraya Peerbaye and violinist and ethnomusicologist Parmela Attariwala make similar recommendations in “Re-sounding the Orchestra: Relationships between Canadian Orchestras, Indigenous Peoples, and People of Colour,” a 2019 report commissioned by Orchestras Canada. The Indigenous artists and artists of color they interviewed “argue that, while inclusion may increase the representation of a group within a system, it does not alter the fundamental dynamics of that system, or their level of control within it.” Unfortunately, the “initiatives described by administrators and artistic directors [they interviewed] were primarily (though by no means exclusively) about access, inclusion and diversity; in other words, they included Indigenous artists and artists of colour, but did not necessarily change or cede the values, practices and protocols of the orchestra.”³⁶ Similarly to Robinson, Peerbaye and Attariwala argue that we need to move beyond inclusionary approaches and toward creating space for sovereignty, particularly for Indigenous artists but also artists of other historically marginalized groups.

Messiah/Complex: Singer Agency and Language Reclamation

Messiah/Complex began from a different starting point than most performances of *Messiah* or of Western classical music more generally. In a public Q&A AtG hosted on April 1, 2021, Spencer Britten, a Chinese-Canadian tenor, described his surprise that the first question Ivany asked him was “Who is Spencer and how can we represent that?” rather than the more familiar starting points of “How is this aria traditionally performed?” “What did the composer intend?” or “What does the director want to say?”³⁷ At the same event, Dene singer-songwriter Leela Gilday described being given an “open invitation to take the piece, whatever piece I chose, and make it my own.”³⁸ In the interview I did with Gilday on April 19, 2021, she added that she was “invited to be a collaborator. I chose the aria that I would sing. I decided what I would do with that aria, and none of it was prescriptive.”³⁹

Table 1 lists the arias the singers chose. Jonathon Adams and Catharine Daniel selected arias not intended for their genders or voice types. Adams performed the most commonly heard version of “But

³²Quoted in Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 140. A portion of *The Four Seasons Mosaic* is viewable on Vimeo as of November 13, 2022: Sylvia Cloutier, Aruna Narayan, Wen Zhao, Jeanne Lamon, and the Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra, “The Four Seasons Mosaic,” Fathom Film Group, March 3, 2011, Vimeo video, 6:00, <https://vimeo.com/20603011>.

³³Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 141.

³⁴Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 137.

³⁵Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 8.

³⁶Soraya Peerbaye and Parmela Attariwala, *Re-sounding the Orchestra: Relationships between Canadian Orchestras, Indigenous Peoples, and People of Colour* (Orchestras Canada, 2019), 24, <https://oc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Re-sounding-the-Orchestra-EN-June-5.pdf>.

³⁷Spencer Britten in Against the Grain Theatre, “Messiah/Complex: ‘The Making Of,’” 25:15.

³⁸Leela Gilday in Against the Grain Theatre, “Messiah/Complex: ‘The Making Of,’” 17:32.

³⁹Leela Gilday, interview with author, April 19, 2021.

Table 1. AtG's *Messiah/Complex* (2020)

Number	Featured performer(s)
Overture	Toronto Symphony Orchestra
“Comfort Ye My People” & “Ev’ry Valley Shall Be Exalted”	Spencer Britten
“Thus Saith the Lord” & “But Who May Abide the Day of His Coming?” (for alto)	Jonathon Adams
“And He Shall Purify”	UPEI Chamber Singers
“Ut’awkwadjch’e yesj ch’e yan nañ kāy” (“O Thou That Tellest Good Tidings to Zion” in Southern Tutchone)	Diyet
“For Unto Us a Child Is Born”	Le Choeur Louisbourg
Pifa	Toronto Symphony Orchestra
“Rejoice Greatly, O Daughter of Zion”	Andrea Lett
“He Shall Feed His Flock” (in Inuktitut & English)	Looe Arreak and Julie Lumsden
“Elle fut méprisée” (“He Was Despised” in French)	Rihab Chaieb
“Kuvianattuksovut itigangit” (“How Beautiful Are the Feet” in Inuktitut)	Deantha Edmunds
“Why Do the Nations so Furiously Rage Together?” (for bass)	Catherine Daniel
“Hallelujah”	Toronto Mendelssohn Choir
“Senewetsine, godí q̄t’e bek’eoresho” (“I Know that My Redeemer Liveth” in Dene Kede)	Leela Gilday
“Behold, I Tell You a Mystery” & “The Trumpet Shall Sound”	Elliot Madore
إِنْ كَانِ لِلَّهِ مَعْنَىٰ آمَنَّا بِهِ نَحْنُ آمِنُ بِهِ (If God Be for Us” in Arabic with opening chant)	Miriam Khalil
“Worthy Is the Lamb That Was Slain” & Amen	Halifax Camerata Singers

Who May Abide the Day of His Coming?” As a singer who specializes in historically informed approaches to Baroque music, Adams has performed the original setting of this text for bass, but not this later version Handel composed for the alto castrato Gaetano Guadagni.⁴⁰ In their interview with me, they explained that the alto version was commonly performed by basses in the nineteenth century and that its fiery coloratura is better suited to the images of Alberta’s “refinery alley” that accompanied their performance in *Messiah/Complex*.⁴¹

The singers also decided what language to perform in (in Table 1, numbers in languages other than English are in bold).⁴² When Ivany approached Diyet, a Southern Tutchone singer-songwriter from the Kluane First Nation, her initial reaction to performing in *Messiah* was “no thanks.” After completing a bachelor’s degree in Western classical voice at the University of Victoria, Diyet decided to walk away from that tradition and write her own music. As she explained to me in an interview on July 6, 2021, Ivany was not only asking her to return to classical music after a 20-year hiatus, but to do so performing a piece written “at the peak of British colonization” about the “coming of Christ.” Diyet’s mother is a residential school survivor. Like many Indigenous people of her generation, Diyet’s “relationship with the Christian religion is not positive.” What eventually convinced her to participate was Ivany’s invitation to “reinterpret what this music can mean to you as an Indigenous person

⁴⁰Donald Burrows, *Handel, Messiah* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 37, 46, 114–15n41.

⁴¹Jonathon Adams, interview with author, April 18, 2021.

⁴²Miriam Khalil, a soprano soloist (“If God Be for Us”) and Associate Artistic Director of AtG, suggested that the singers choose the language they perform in. Paula Citron, “Against The Grain’s ‘Messiah/Complex’ Makes a Welcome Return for Easter,” *Ludwig van Toronto*, April 1, 2021, <https://www.ludwig-van.com/toronto/2021/04/01/feature-against-the-grains-messiah-complex-makes-a-welcome-return-for-easter/>.

living where you live and the life that you live.” The only way she could feel “confident and comfortable doing this” was to “completely flip [*Messiah*] on its head: either sing it in my language or rewrite it.”⁴³

Diyet decided to perform “O Thou That Tellest Good Tidings to Zion” in Southern Tutchone (Table 2). She picked this number because its text reminded her of the land on which she lives—on the Saint Elias mountain range, home of the highest peak in Canada—as well as her people, who identify as mountain people.⁴⁴ She worked on the Southern Tutchone text with her grandmother, one of the few fluent speakers of their dialect. Diyet described their text as a “retelling” rather than a direct translation. Because Southern Tutchone is a tonal language, they needed to take liberties with the Biblical text “to find the right words that fit within the tone realm of what was happening musically.”⁴⁵ Their translation also involved a shift from Christian to Indigenous worldviews. The “good tidings” of which Diyet sang are not that “a virgin shall conceive and bear a son” but that “Creator has made all of this land (for us all).”

Language reclamation was also one of the main reasons Leela Gilday participated.⁴⁶ With translation assistance from her mother and aunties, she performed “I Know that My Redeemer Liveth” in Dene Kede (Table 3). In the R/18 Collective’s roundtable, Gilday explained that she “threw the libretto out and rewrote it” to reflect her own spiritual beliefs, which are based on Dene spirituality.⁴⁷ Like Diyet, Gilday removed all references to God and Christ. In the promotional spotlight AtG released on their website prior to the initial airing of *Messiah/Complex*, Gilday provided the following gloss: “I talk about the spirit of the land, the water and the earth—the whole world. And then I speak about transformation. When you pass away, your spirit transforms—I believe in the Creator, and that when you pass away, you join the Creator.”⁴⁸

Similarly, Tunisian-Canadian mezzo-soprano Rihab Chaieb described “reclaim[ing] the *Messiah* as my own” by taking “Jesus out of the equation” in her performance of “He Was Despised” in French.⁴⁹ On the day of the recording, she decided to sing “Elle fut méprisée” to make a personal statement about the Islamophobia she and female members of her family have experienced since immigrating to Québec.⁵⁰ In June 2019, the Québec government under Premier François Legault passed Bill 21, which banned public employees from wearing religious symbols (including head scarves, turbans, and kippas) at work. Despite the bill’s neutral title, “Act of Respecting the Laicity of the State,” it has predominantly affected Muslim women who wear the hijab.⁵¹ Chaieb’s mother has been on the receiving end of the increase in macro and microaggressions toward Muslim women who wear head-coverings.⁵² Although Diyet, Gilday, and Chaieb all de-Christianized their performances, Chaieb’s number was the only one that attracted negative attention in the YouTube chat.⁵³

⁴³Diyet, interview with author, July 6, 2021.

⁴⁴Diyet, interview with author, July 6, 2021.

⁴⁵Diyet, interview with author, July 6, 2021.

⁴⁶Gilday is working on an entire album of original songs in Dene Kede. Gilday in R18 Collective, “*Messiah/Complex Roundtable*,” 16:49; Gilday in Against the Grain Theatre, “*Messiah/Complex: ‘The Making Of,’*” 19:55, 58:14.

⁴⁷Gilday in R18 Collective, “*Messiah/Complex Roundtable*,” 32:05. Gilday first rewrote the lyrics in English and then translated that text. Gilday in Against the Grain Theatre, “*Messiah/Complex: ‘The Making Of,’*” 18:00.

⁴⁸Leela Gilday, quoted in “*Messiah/Complex Artist Spotlight: Leela Gilday*,” Against the Grain Theatre, accessed November 13, 2022, <https://atgtheatre.com/messiah-complex-artist-spotlight-leela-gilday/>. Gilday preferred not to include an English translation. Although her portion of the film did have subtitles, she regrets this decision because “the English words don’t necessarily capture the worldview that’s embedded in the language.” Gilday in R18 Collective, “*Messiah/Complex Roundtable*,” 1:08:02.

⁴⁹Chaieb in Bilefsky, “‘*Messiah*’ for the Multitudes.”

⁵⁰Joel Ivany, “The Creative Journey to *Messiah/Complex*” (presented at Shared Perspectives, Brock University, Music Department, Zoom, January 20, 2021).

⁵¹Amy Chung, “How Bill 21 has Affected These Quebec Women in the Workplace,” *Huffington Post Canada*, March 8, 2021, https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/bill-21-quebec-women_ca_6045524fc5b60208555f904f.

⁵²Chaieb in Bilefsky, “‘*Messiah*’ for the Multitudes”; Jonathan Montpetit, “Muslim Women Report Spike in Harassment, Discrimination since Bill 21 Tabled,” CBC News: Montreal, May 13, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/muslim-women-report-spike-in-harassment-discrimination-since-bill-21-tabled-1.5134539>.

⁵³Examples include “not sure about the SHE, I mean it is about the Saviour ...” from Angela Reichenbach and “Scriptures are very clear that Jesus was a man of sorrows, Beautiful voice, but disappointed by the political correctness” from YouTube account

Table 2. Jennens’s libretto and Diyet’s text in Southern Tutchone and English

	Jennens’s libretto	Diyet’s Southern Tutchone text	Diyet’s text in English
Recit.	Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son,	Dazhan dáh keyi ye dáh dań shų.	This is our land and our people too.
	and shall call His name Emmanuel, God with us.	Ut’awkwadjch’e yesj ch’e yan nań käy.	Creator has made all of this land (for us all).
Aria	O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion,	Mą kwandúr shàwthān kui’i’ yena ts’àn.	Who brings this good new to us?
	get thee up into the high mountain.	Atl’a udakwanje kwandúr dhal tth’iday ts’ań kwandúr.	Share the news from the top of the mountain.
		Mą kwandúr shàwthān kui’i’ yena ts’àn.	Who brings this good new to us?
		Atl’a udakwanje kwandúr dhal tth’iday ts’ań kwandúr.	Share the news from the top of the highest mountain.
	O thou that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem,	Mą kwandúr ku’i’ Ut’awkwadjch’e yena ts’àn.	Who brings Creator’s story to us?
	lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid;	Tlų tl’a, Ukwānje naasāt. Ukwānje naasāt.	It is true. Say it with a strong voice. Say it with a strong voice.
	say unto the cities of Judah,	Tlāw kaadųdli na ukwanje naasāt ye.	Do not be afraid to say it with a strong voice.
	behold your God!	Ut’awkwadjch’e dāāye ada.	Creator (Creation) is here.
		Tlāw kaadųdli na ukwanje naasāt ye.	Do not be afraid to say it with a strong voice.
		Yan Ut’awkwadjch’e.	This is Creator (Creation).
	O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion,	Mą kwandúr shàwthān kui’i’ yena ts’àn.	Who brings this good news to us?
	Arise, shine, for thy light is come,	Nààjal. Kama k’ench’al ke k’aah’ kwadach’e.	Arise. Daybreak is here. Get up and give thanks.
		Nààjal. Nààjal. Kama k’ench’al ke k’aah’ kwadach’e.	Arise. Arise. Daybreak is here. Get up and give thanks.
	and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.	Ut’awkwadjch’e yesj ch’e yan nań käy.	Creator has made all of this land (for us).
		Ut’awkwadjch’e dāāye ada.	The Creator is here.

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Table 3. Jennens's libretto and Gilday's text in Dene Kede

Jennens's libretto	Gilday's text in Dene Kede
I know that my Redeemer liveth,	Senwetsine, newetsine
and that He shall stand	godí q̄t'e bek'eoreshq̄, be'eoreshq̄, newesine
at the latter day upon the earth.	Nę yíí, tu yíí, dayí yíí, nę k'e k'ola godí, nę k'e k'ola godí
And though worms destroy this body,	łǎ dzene sewíle gha
yet in my flesh shall I see God.	kúlú belaorewíle gotse'é, Newetsine hé gots'ǎdíá
For now is Christ risen from the dead,	hé súdú hǎhtı gha, hé súdú hǎhtı gha
the first fruits of them that sleep.	denets'iné dene newehtsine yek'édı q̄t'e

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Singers who decided not to perform in English also decided whether to have subtitles. Looee Arreak and Deantha Edmunds opted to leave their numbers in Inuktitut/Inuttitut untranslated.⁵⁴ Métis visual artist David Garneau notes:

The colonial attitude is characterized not only by scopophilia, a drive to look, but also by an urge to penetrate, to traverse, to know, to translate, to own and exploit. The attitude assumes that everything should be accessible to those with the means and will to access them; everything is ultimately comprehensible, a potential commodity, resource, or salvage. ... The primary sites of Indigenous resistance, then, are not the rare open battles between the colonized and the dominant but the everyday active refusals of complete engagement with agents of assimilation. This includes speaking with one's own in one's own way, refusing translation and full explanations, creating trade goods that imitate core culture without violating it, and refusing to be a Native informant.⁵⁵

Refusing translation is one way to resist the colonial attitude. However, because the film lacked program notes, some viewers did not recognize this as an artistic and political choice.⁵⁶

Visual Storytelling

The singers also led discussions about the visual imagery that would accompany their musical performances. In my interview with Adams, they explained that they wanted their segment to expose “the colonial impact on the land.”⁵⁷ They filmed their segment on their godparents' land in Sherwood Park County in Treaty 6 territory. They explained that refinery alley—showcased at the very beginning of their segment—is visible from the estate and has affected the water there.

Adams also wanted their segment to reflect their Two-Spirit identity.⁵⁸ Their spotlight on AtG's website provides a fuller explanation of the impetus for their number:

name Harvey yyyPepneck. Chat comments to Against the Grain Theatre, “Messiah/Complex,” December 13, 2020. This video is no longer publicly available.

⁵⁴Arluk in R18 Collective, “Messiah/Complex Roundtable,” 1:10:03.

⁵⁵David Garneau, “Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation: Art, Curation, and Healing,” in *Arts of Engagement*, eds. Keavy Martin and Dylan Robinson (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2016), 23. See also Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 21–25.

⁵⁶During Looee Arreak's segment, e.g., Lee Boal remarked in the chat: “Translation? No subtitles? I don't see them for this segment?” Chat comments on Against the Grain Theatre, “Messiah/Complex.”

⁵⁷Jonathon Adams, interview with author, April 18, 2021.

⁵⁸Two-Spirit is a pan-Indigenous term referring to the traditional role of non-binary people in many Indigenous societies in North America. The term was officially adopted at the Third Annual Native American Gay and Lesbian Gathering in Winnipeg, Manitoba in 1990.

I'm from Alberta, so we started with the concept of refinery—associated with resource extraction. We created a character [played by actor Nathan Loitz] who is a refinery worker—and after work, as he comes back onto his land, which is a place where he feels safe, and he builds a fire for himself—contrasting the fire of industry he works with at the refinery. And then, I emerge.

I'm a representation of the forest, of the land, and being from the land—a timeless being. That's what I think of when I think of my own two-spirit identity—a feeling of oneness with nature, with the land and the water. Historically two-spirit people were medicine people. They carried out ceremonial functions, in many nations they were respected as knowledge keepers, and associated with wisdom.

Eventually, in the film, it becomes clear that the refinery worker and this two-spirit figure are connected—and as the worker comes closer, we embrace.⁵⁹

Arluk described their meeting as representing the worker realizing “how unnatural or how impactful land resource extraction is.”⁶⁰ Without changing a word or note of the aria, Adams completely changed its meaning in *Messiah/Complex*. The “He” of the Biblical text no longer refers to Jesus but to the Two-Spirit being Adams portrays.

Because of COVID-19 travel restrictions, Arluk and Ivany were not on set for all of the filming. Arluk, based in Alberta, was only able to be physically present for Adams's and Lumsden's shoots. Both Arluk and Adams attributed the success of Adams's segment to their ability to work together on location. In their interview with me, Adams explained that they “could respond to the light and the land. And our animal relatives were on site with us and guiding us. I really felt the presence of my ancestors there too, guiding us from place to place.”⁶¹ Even though Arluk had storyboarded Adams's number, she confessed that if they hadn't been on set together, “I don't think that would have been the film we would have gotten, because we were changing the concept a day or two days before we shot it. ... A lot of the shots didn't change, but the intention of the shots and the reason why the shots were shot really changed” to bring Adams's Two-Spirit identity to the forefront.⁶² One way they did that was through the tattooing on Adams's chin and neck. “There was the practice of women having markings on their face and men having markings on their body in Cree culture,” Adams explained to CBC News. “With stage makeup, I made the image of a tattoo running all the way from my chin down onto my chest to represent what it means to be two-spirit.”⁶³

Gilday also stressed the importance of working with Indigenous directors and filmmakers. She has described her segment as a vision of Dene futurism. “Our ancestors are with us all the time,” she explained in AtG's public Q&A session. “We are still living that worldview and that traditional life though we may live our lives in the city. And the spiritual underpinnings of that are something that has gone on for thousands of years.”⁶⁴ Her number represents the change that comes over a Dene woman after participating in Dene Ceremonies, such as smudging and feeding the fire. Gilday stressed that she was filmed performing Ceremony, not merely pretending to do so.⁶⁵ Arluk explained the power of this decision in her interview with me: “the church punished us [in residential schools] and the government punished us [through incarceration] to do our ceremonial practice and her doing it on film during *Messiah/Complex* gives a sense of self-determination of spiritual practice.”⁶⁶ Gilday was initially hesitant about performing Ceremony on camera, citing that “our Ceremonies are not

⁵⁹Jonathon Adams, quoted in “Messiah/Complex Artist Spotlight: Jonathon Adams,” Against the Grain Theatre, accessed November 13, 2022, <https://atgtheatre.com/messiah-complex-artist-spotlight-jonathon-adams/>.

⁶⁰Reneltha Arluk, interview with author, April 23, 2021.

⁶¹Jonathon Adams, interview with author, April 18, 2021.

⁶²Reneltha Arluk, interview with author, April 23, 2021.

⁶³Jonathon Adams in Natalie Valteau, “Two-Spirit Albertan Joins Singers across Canada to Make New Version of Handel's *Messiah*,” CBC News: Calgary, December 15, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/two-spirit-albertan-singer-handel-s-messiah-1.5842751>.

⁶⁴Gilday in Against the Grain Theatre, “Messiah/Complex: ‘The Making Of,’” 40:13.

⁶⁵Gilday in R18 Collective, “Messiah/Complex Roundtable,” 48:17.

⁶⁶Reneltha Arluk, interview with author, April 23, 2021. Gilday made a similar point in R18 Collective, “Messiah/Complex Roundtable,” 1:14:17.

performative.” It was only because she was working with Dene filmmakers Amos Scott and Deneze Nakehk’o with whom she had worked before that she felt comfortable performing Ceremony in front of them and trusting that they would represent it in an appropriate light.⁶⁷

Sanctity of the Score

Deantha Edmunds, an Inuk opera singer, writer, and composer wanted her number to draw attention to the long history of European art music in Labrador. Moravian missionaries settled on the North Coast of Labrador in 1771 and brought music by Handel and other European composers. “The Inuit not only learned how to read and write this music,” Edmunds explains in her spotlight on AtG’s website, “but they changed it over time and transformed it. They recomposed and reinterpreted it to reflect their culture and traditions.”⁶⁸ Tom Gordon, a musicologist who has cataloged the music in Moravian churches in Labrador, has argued that “despite its European origins, despite the fact that it was something that was imposed on them by the missionaries, [the Inuit in Labrador] regard this wholly as their own music, and with good reason, because over two hundred years, they have made it their own. It’s no longer what it started as.”⁶⁹ Unfortunately, this story was not dramatized in the film itself. Only listeners who happened to peruse AtG’s website would have discovered that this was not the first time Handel had been performed in Inuttitut. This point could have been articulated in the film itself if Edmunds was shown performing from historical sources and demonstrating the ways in which her people adapted this music, not only through translation but also through recomposition.

This missed opportunity points to a decided limitation of *Messiah/Complex*. The biggest change to Handel’s score was the Melkite (Byzantine) chant Miriam Khalil performed in lieu of the recitative before “If God Be for Us,” which she performed in Arabic.⁷⁰

For an updating to involve revisions to the score is unusual within Western art music practice. *Messiah*, however, has received several notable musical modernizations including the 1992 album *Handel’s Messiah: A Soulful Celebration*, which inflects Handel’s score with elements of African American spirituals, blues, jazz, R&B, and hip hop. The following year, Marin Alsop delivered a similar aesthetic to live audiences in New York City with *Too Hot to Handel: The Gospel Messiah*.

An even more direct comparison comes from the Toronto-based company Soundstreams. They have been producing versions of their *Electric Messiah* since 2015. Like AtG, they opted for a streamable video in 2020, describing it as “a full-length music video that reimagines Handel’s classic for today’s world.”⁷¹ In keeping with their mandate to showcase work by living composers and musicians, they made minimal changes to the texts and, instead, fit these texts with new music for harpsichord, shō, guitar, electric organ, turntables, and electronics. Influences on the 2020 *Electric Messiah* ranged from contemporary art music in the Euro-American tradition to electronic dance music (EDM), pop, hip hop, and folk.

Not all classical singers would be willing and able to don the hat of composer or arranger. However, because AtG invited Indigenous artists who work outside of the sphere of classical music, their cast of

⁶⁷Gilday in R18 Collective, “Messiah/Complex Roundtable,” 47:55.

⁶⁸Deantha Edmunds, quoted in “Messiah/Complex Artist Spotlight: Deantha Edmunds,” Against the Grain Theatre, accessed November 13, 2022, <https://atgtheatre.com/messiah-complex-artist-spotlight-deantha-edmunds/>.

⁶⁹Tom Gordon in Nigel Markham, dir., *Till We Meet Again: Moravian Music in Labrador* (Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 2013). Gordon discusses examples in Tom Gordon, “Found in Translation: The Inuit Voice in Moravian Music,” *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 22, no. 1 (2007), <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/nflds/article/view/10106/10369>, para. 17–21, 22–27. Edmunds has recorded some of this music in Deantha Edmunds, Karrie Obed, Innisimara Vocal Ensemble, Suncor Energy String Quartet, and Tom Gordon, *Pillorikput Inuit: Inuktitut Arias for All Seasons*, independent compact disc, 2015.

⁷⁰Miriam Khalil explained this decision in an email to the author, April 10, 2021: “When the idea of singing the text in Arabic came up, I suggested that I sing the beginning with the same words in the same way I would have sung it in the Melkite Catholic tradition (Byzantium chant) that I grew up with. It was improvised but also using a common or topical tune that we use when reading the liturgy.”

⁷¹“Past Events: 2020/2021: *Electric Messiah*.” Soundstreams, accessed November 13, 2022, <https://soundstreams.ca/events/electric-messiah-6/>.

soloists included several seasoned songwriters and composers, including Gilday, Diyet, and Edmunds. There are several reasons why *Messiah/Complex* did not showcase their songwriting skills. The first is the project's leadership: Ivany is a stage director and librettist who specializes in updating the visual and textual components of canonical pieces.⁷² Arluk also describes her work as "text-driven, being theatre-based."⁷³ By contrast, composers and musicians have always been the driving force behind Soundstreams's *Electric Messiah*.

Second, AtG commissioned the TSO to supply backing tracks from Handel's *Messiah* before Arluk and the singers had been brought on board.⁷⁴ Thus, agreeing to perform in *Messiah/Complex* amounted to agreeing to perform Handel with the TSO. In my interview with Gilday, she described being given "free reign to rewrite the melody," adding that she considered including melodic elements of traditional Dene songs, as she has done in her own compositions. She also thought about "adding other elements like the Dene drum," but concluded that "it never was obviously appropriate." Given that the TSO would be laying down their tracks first, the drummer would have had to follow the orchestra, rather than functioning in the traditional role as the leader of the ensemble. Moreover because the TSO would be performing Handel's score as written, Gilday noted that she "would have still had to write it within the chord structure of [Handel's] music."⁷⁵

The tight production timeline also prevented more extensive musical adaptations.⁷⁶ Unlike Soundstreams, AtG had never produced a musically updated version of *Messiah*. "Just rewriting the lyrics and translating them into Dene Kede (which was not a direct translation) was a huge challenge and took quite a lot of time," Gilday explained. When I asked her whether she would have been interested in recomposing the music in the style of her other creative work, she responded that this interested her, but that "it would have been a much larger project for me. I would have had to take pause to really see whether I would have been up for that in the middle of the pandemic when I've reinvented my career completely."⁷⁷

In my interview with Diyet, she also expressed interest in undertaking musical changes that would have been "supportive of the language," such as adding a traditional hand drum or rattle or having the chorus part (which was omitted) sung in Southern Tutchone or as a chant.⁷⁸ However, like Gilday, she noted that recomposition would have required more time. It also would have required more money to appropriately compensate singers who decided to take on additional duties as arrangers or composers.

In the R/18 Collective's roundtable, Ivany admitted that "from a musical perspective, we were only scratching the surface in terms of what could have been done."⁷⁹ When I asked Ivany why they didn't explore more extensive musical adaptations, he admitted that they "contemplated having each artist decide their own instrumentation and [musical] interpretation, but thought it may not come across as cohesively. The project was already possibly going to be not the most unified with ten teams of filmmakers, different languages etc."⁸⁰

Given that this film purports to represent Canada in 2020, a degree of incongruity (as heard in Soundstreams's *Electric Messiah*) is, arguably, desirable. Because of colonization and immigration, the peoples who currently reside on the lands known as Canada are not unified. Furthermore, as Robinson notes, when stylistic cohesion is achieved in collaborations between musicians trained in Western classical and Indigenous musics, it is typically the Indigenous musicians who are expected to compromise.⁸¹

⁷²AtG has only started commissioning newly composed work with *BOUND* (2022) and *Identity: A Song Cycle* (2022). "BOUND," Against the Grain Theatre, accessed November 13, 2022, <https://atgtheatre.com/bound/>; "Identity: A Song Cycle," Against the Grain Theatre, accessed November 13, 2022, <https://atgtheatre.com/upcoming/identity-song-cycle/>.

⁷³Reneltta Arluk in Against the Grain Theatre, "Messiah/Complex: 'The Making Of,'" 54:58.

⁷⁴Robin Whiffen, email to author, June 14, 2021.

⁷⁵Leela Gilday, interview with author, April 19, 2021.

⁷⁶Reneltta Arluk, interview with author, April 23, 2021, recalls that "it wasn't until halfway through or near the end when Joel was thinking how they could have incorporated other sounds to it. Those were offered, but the musical deadlines led to the inability to incorporate new ideas."

⁷⁷Leela Gilday, interview with author, April 19, 2021.

⁷⁸Diyet, interview with author, July 6, 2021.

⁷⁹Ivany in R18 Collective, "Messiah/Complex Roundtable," 30:06.

⁸⁰Joel Ivany, email to author, April 15, 2021.

⁸¹Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 6–9, 137.

Of course not every singer would have wanted to change the score. As Jonathon Adams explained to me, their approach to “Indigenous resurgence through an early music lens is that we should perform the music as written. As a Two-Spirit, as a queer Indigenous person, me singing the music that was actually put upon us, was used to indoctrinate us in the colonizers’ language, but then reimagining the narrative framework and the impetus for that expression, that’s what I think is really powerful.” They were concerned that changing the text or music may “send a message out that ‘this music is fine. This music doesn’t have a problematic history. This music doesn’t have a role in colonization and cultural genocide.’” In their segment of the film, they aligned “the role of the music to the role of the refinery.” They wanted their “visual narrative ... to both include and accuse the source material in a way” by making “the words descriptive of and complicit in the genocide.”⁸²

Recording Process

Although Adams was pleased with their segment of the film, in their interview with me, they described the process as “very challenging,” not only because of COVID-19, but also because of “the way that we were offered [to participate].” Each singer had one Zoom meeting with the conductor, Johannes Debus, in which to work out the tempi and phrasing. Adams is accustomed to approaching tempi “from an affect-based place, in a rhetorical sense,” and through a “process-oriented way of working,” but was, instead, required to give a metronome marking.⁸³

The TSO recorded their portions at the end of September 2020, which were then sent out to the singers. Adams had a single hour in a recording studio to record their vocal tracks. Coming from early music, Adams is used to having considerable freedom in their musical interpretation. Because the TSO’s part was pre-recorded, however, Adams had to “memorize exactly the number of beats that they left me for a cadenza.”⁸⁴ Given the health and safety measures in Toronto during the fall of 2020, it was not possible for even local singers to record with the orchestra. However, Debus could have been more responsive to the ways in which Adams wanted to collaborate.

Debus seems to have taken a different approach to his meetings with singers outside of the world of Western classical music. In conversation with me, Diyet described Debus as being remarkably open, even to the idea of performing new arrangements.⁸⁵ Due to time and budget constraints, however, the only major musical change to her number was the omission of the chorus parts. Both Diyet and Gilday described singing phrases for Debus and hearing him play the accompaniment back at the piano.⁸⁶ Diyet described trying out various tempi and eventually settling on a “happy tempo” that was slow enough that the words would be intelligible but fast enough that she would have enough breath to make it through each phrase. Both singer-songwriters were satisfied with the orchestra’s recordings. Gilday described hers as “pretty much bang on to what we had discussed.”⁸⁷

Diyet and Gilday also had more positive experiences of the recording process than Adams did, but both spent much longer than an hour laying down their tracks. Gilday recorded herself at the home studio she built during the pandemic. Although Diyet recorded outside of her home, she also described doing many takes over multiple days with a producer (Matthew Lien) she had worked with before on traditional music in Southern Tutchone.⁸⁸

Although Adams wished that they could have “recorded in the same room at the same time,” Gilday surprised me by saying that this “wouldn’t have been better for me. I probably never would have participated in a live setting to be honest with you. Being able to showcase my territory ... The recording

⁸²Jonathon Adams, interview with author, April 18, 2021. Adams discusses how they are pursuing Indigenous resurgence in Janet Smith, “Baritone Jonathon Adams Brings Indigenous and Two-Spirit Identity to the Classical World,” *Create a Stir*, June 10, 2021, <https://www.createastir.ca/articles/jonathon-adams-emv-panel>.

⁸³Jonathon Adams, interview with author, April 18, 2021.

⁸⁴Jonathon Adams, interview with author, April 18, 2021.

⁸⁵Diyet, interview with author, July 6, 2021.

⁸⁶Diyet, interview with author, July 6, 2021; Leela Gilday, interview with author, April 19, 2021.

⁸⁷Leela Gilday, interview with author, April 19, 2021.

⁸⁸Diyet, interview with author, July 6, 2021.

studio is much more forgiving than a live performance setting.”⁸⁹ When I asked her whether it would have been preferable to have recorded with the orchestra in the same room, she confessed: “I wouldn’t have been able to make it through the piece. It’s been twenty-five years since I sang opera. I had thirty takes. This was a unique situation. Maybe if I was a professional opera singer, it would be much better to be in person to record with the orchestra.”⁹⁰

Indigenous Protocols and Indigenous Resurgence

The restrictions imposed by COVID-19 not only allowed artists like Gilday and Diyet to participate but moreover to thrive. In other respects, AtG could have done more to support their Indigenous co-creators. The recommendations in this section are based on conversations I had with Indigenous participants. To protect their anonymity, I am avoiding direct quotations.

AtG was aware of Handel’s investments in the slave trade as well as the associations *Messiah* may have for the Indigenous artists they were collaborating with.⁹¹ Nevertheless, they did not give these artists an opportunity to meet on their own to discuss their feelings about performing this work or how their performance could further Indigenous resurgence. “While decolonization and Indigenousization is collective work,” Garneau notes, “it sometimes requires occasions of separation—moments where Indigenous people take space and time to work things out among themselves, and parallel moments when allies ought to do the same.”⁹² Garneau has created works that “visualize Indigenous intellectual spaces that exist apart from a non-Indigenous gaze and interlocution.”⁹³ Such spaces are important, he explains, because “when Indigenous folks (anyone, really), know they are being surveyed by non-members, the nature of their ways of being and becoming alters. Whether the onlookers are conscious agents of colonization or not, their shaping gaze can trigger a Reserve-response, an inhibition or a conformation to settler expectations.”⁹⁴

Creating spaces for Indigenous sovereignty within the creative process (as well as parallel spaces for settlers to reflect on their own relationships with *Messiah* and with Indigenous Peoples) would have supported the artists’ emotional and spiritual health and could only have enriched the final product. Importantly, the artists would have needed to be paid for this time in a way that is appropriate to the emotional and spiritual labor it demands.

Although several artists reached out to Elders for translation assistance and to talk through their involvement in *Messiah/Complex*, this was something they needed to seek out for themselves. Embedding keepers of Traditional Knowledge into the process for all participants would have relieved the Indigenous artists of the responsibility to find the supports they needed.⁹⁵ For settlers, such conversations could have been an opportunity to discuss how *Messiah/Complex* could, in Robinson’s words, “make visible structures of settler colonialism and white supremacy that underpin art music’s presentation and composition.”⁹⁶

Ceremony also could have aided Indigenous participants in working through their feelings regarding Handel’s *Messiah*. Due to the pandemic, the possibilities for incorporating Ceremony were limited.

⁸⁹Jonathon Adams, interview with author, April 18, 2021; Leela Gilday, interview with author, April 19, 2021. The ellipsis in Gilday’s interview indicates an incomplete sentence as opposed to an omission.

⁹⁰Leela Gilday, interview with author, April 19, 2021.

⁹¹Joel Ivany expresses awareness of Handel’s investments in the slave trade in R18 Collective, “Messiah/Complex Roundtable,” 1:28:05. Caryl Clark and Michael Hutcheon brought Hunter’s work to AtG’s attention after AtG began seeking sponsorship for *Messiah/Complex*. Caryl Clark, personal communication with author, December 2021.

⁹²Garneau, “Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation,” 23.

⁹³Garneau, “Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation,” 26.

⁹⁴Garneau, “Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation,” 27.

⁹⁵Ivany has brought Indigenous consultants onto previous projects. For example, Gilday worked as a dramaturg and cultural consultant on *Kopernicus* (AtG, 2017, 2019) and other projects at Banff’s summer opera program, even though none of these works were by or about Indigenous Peoples. Leela Gilday, interview with author, April 19, 2021.

⁹⁶Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 100.

Nevertheless, Arluk successfully incorporated Ceremony in Akpik Theatre's Zoom production of *Pawâkan Macbeth*, which aired May 1, 2020, during the early days of the lockdown.⁹⁷

Reception

In the R/18 Collective's roundtable on *Messiah/Complex*, Mi'kmaw professor of English Robbie Richardson raised the "danger that this can be appropriated into feel-good narratives of Canadian liberal multiculturalism, much like the notion of 'reconciliation' for Indigenous people has been rendered almost meaningless in the face of boil water advisories, land disputes, and continued systemic racism."⁹⁸ Ivany responded that AtG did not intend to put forth *Messiah/Complex* as "the perfect solution." They merely hoped that it would be a "step in the right direction."⁹⁹

Richardson's concerns have not been unfounded. The press has been overwhelmingly positive. "It's hard to imagine a more awe-inspiring lesson on reconciliation and inclusion," gushed Brad Wheeler in the *Globe and Mail's* second story on the film. "A masterpiece has been made masterclass to those open to the message."¹⁰⁰ The comments on YouTube were predominantly (self-)congratulatory remarks about how diverse and inclusive a place Canada is. During Chaieb's number, for example, Carolyne Thompson remarked in the chat: "I'm so proud to be a Canadian. This project what our country is all about ... a celebration of beauty, peace, love and diversity."¹⁰¹

For viewers in other countries, *Messiah/Complex* confirmed Canada's image as model multicultural nation. For example, Barbara Bloemink remarked in the comments:

I am in my NYC apt sobbing thru the beauty of this Messiah ... and saluting CANADA for leading and showing the rest of us what true Diversity and shared Joy and Beauty and Hope look and sound like and unite us across all different races, religions, cultures into what makes us most extraordinarily HUMAN. Thank you Canada and everyone involved in making and sharing this beautiful tribute we so need at this time in human history.¹⁰²

Based on the YouTube comments, *Messiah/Complex* also tended to affirm for viewers the universality of the Western art music canon. For example, Anne Scott thanked AtG for "bringing together all the pieces of a true Canadian and universal spirituality!"¹⁰³ In one of the few critical comments, Pegi Evers remarked: "Great for neo-liberals who think this represents 'diversity,' but I thought we were supposed to be decolonizing from the assumed Euro-supremacy of classic composers and 'music theory,' not celebrating it."¹⁰⁴

Robinson observes the tendency for "'feel-good' artistic spectacle" to substitute for "social work, environmental change, and political change."¹⁰⁵ This is especially true of shows like *Messiah/Complex* that evoke strong emotional reactions.¹⁰⁶ Robinson observes that "the intensity of affect when experiencing socially and politically oriented performance allows for a conflation of affect with efficacy. Audiences are persuaded, or more accurately *feel*, that something has happened; a moment (or more) of something ineffable that might best be called 'reconciliation' has been witnessed because our affective response is irreducible, and as such does not lie."¹⁰⁷ Robinson argues that we need to move "beyond the position of intergenerational bystanders. It is necessary to acknowledge the

⁹⁷ Akpik Theatre, "Pawâkan Macbeth Zoom Akpik Theatre," Renelta Arluk, May 2, 2020, Vimeo video, 49:37, <https://vimeo.com/414277799>.

⁹⁸ Robbie Richardson in R18 Collective, "Messiah/Complex Roundtable," 57:07.

⁹⁹ Ivany in R18 Collective, "Messiah/Complex Roundtable," 57:54.

¹⁰⁰ Wheeler, "Daring Film Version of Handel's Messiah."

¹⁰¹ Carolyne Thompson, chat comment on Against the Grain Theatre, "Messiah/Complex."

¹⁰² Barbara Bloemink, comment on Against the Grain Theatre, "Messiah/Complex."

¹⁰³ Anne Scott, comment on Against the Grain Theatre, "Messiah/Complex."

¹⁰⁴ Pegi Evers, comment on Against the Grain Theatre, "Messiah/Complex."

¹⁰⁵ Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 180.

¹⁰⁶ There were dozens of references to tears in the YouTube chat and comments.

¹⁰⁷ Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 218.

privilege and power that we hold within our artistic and working communities, and then find ways to give over such power that move beyond forms of inclusion.”¹⁰⁸

From Inclusion to Sovereignty

AtG took steps toward giving over some of their power as a settler-run cultural institution in Toronto by hiring an Indigenous co-director and an entire cast of IBPOC soloists. In conversation with Dylan Robinson, Lisa C. Ravensberger, a theater artist of Ojibwe/Swampy Cree and English/Irish descent, notes that

even in classical/traditionally “white” roles, if those characters are inhabited by a brown body, that character’s previously one-dimensional worldview has the potential, for possibly the first time, to be enlivened and coloured by a complexity that encompasses more than just an ethno-European experience of power, time, history, land, et cetera. The work is richer for it and, I’d like to think, so are we.¹⁰⁹

AtG did not merely hire IBPOC soloists to perform *Messiah* in the same way as they may have done in the past. They invited them to use Handel’s music to speak to their lived experience and issues of importance to them. The artistic choices they made—from the language in which they sang to the imagery that accompanied their performances—raised issues not normally raised in performances of *Messiah*. Diyet, Gilday, Edmunds, and Arreak showed that Indigenous languages are not dead or dying but in fact are making a resurgence. Adams exposed the environmental costs of colonization on their homeland. These are but a few examples of how Indigenous artists enacted sovereignty over their segments of *Messiah/Complex*.

Regarding the collaborative process as a whole, however, AtG could have gone further in relinquishing power to the IBPOC artists they hired. Arluk and the soloists joined the team after the main parameters of the project had been decided, including the decision to perform Handel’s score as written, accompanied by the TSO. Not being part of that decision-making process limited the degree to which the soloists can be considered co-authors of *Messiah/Complex* as a whole. The philosopher Paisley Livingston argues that being an author involves exercising sufficient control over the artistic planning for the work and the work’s final form.¹¹⁰ The singers performed that role in their individual segments but were not involved in the work’s planning from its initial stages nor were they consulted about the overall shape of the film. Gilday confessed to me that she “had no idea what the production [as a whole] was going to look like at all.”¹¹¹ In this respect, *Messiah/Complex* bears more resemblance to Robinson’s “inclusionary music” than a process that begins by giving IBPOC artists a blank slate with which to work.

Although the musical influences over Soundstreams’s *Electric Messiah* extend beyond Western classical and Indigenous musics, much about both their process and end product bear comparison with Robinson’s “Indigenous + art music” category. Adam Scime, music director and composer on the 2020 edition, notes that they invite the musicians involved in each iteration to “bring their own voice to sculpt the project” and that they “give everyone equal collaborative footing.”¹¹² As shown in Table 4, the featured performers authored many of the arrangements. In keeping with Robinson’s recommendations, Soundstreams made no attempt to smooth over the differences between, for example, SlowPitchSound’s turntablism, Métis and French-Canadian composer Ian Cusson’s newly composed *O Death, O Grave*, and Scime’s beach-dance-party arrangement of the “Hallelujah” chorus.

¹⁰⁸Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 232. On the idea of intergenerational responsibility, see Dylan Robinson, “Intergenerational Sense, Intergenerational Responsibility,” in *Arts of Engagement*, eds. Keavy Martin and Dylan Robinson (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2016), 62–64.

¹⁰⁹Dylan Robinson, “Acts of Defiance in Indigenous Theatre: A Conversation with Lisa C. Ravensbergen,” in *Arts of Engagement*, eds. Keavy Martin and Dylan Robinson (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2016), 190.

¹¹⁰Paisley Livingston, *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman: On Film as Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 71.

¹¹¹Leela Gilday, interview with author, April 19, 2021.

¹¹²Adam Scime in Lawrence Cherney and Adam Scime, “Electric Messiah Inside Look with Composer/Music Director Adam Scime,” Soundstreams, December 15, 2020, YouTube video, 2:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgdkOvK1v8E>.

Table 4. Soundstreams's *Electric Messiah* (2020)

Number	Composer/arranger	Featured performer(s)
"Comfort Ye"	arr. Kyle Benders	All singers
"Ev'ry Valley"	arr. Jonathan MacArthur	Jonathan MacArthur and Libydo (dancer)
"Hallelujah Interruption"	SlowPitchSound & Libydo	Libydo
"O Death, O Grave"	Ian Cusson	Teiya Kasahara and Andrew Adridge
"How Beautiful Are the Feet"	arr. Christopher Bagan	Lindsay McIntyre
"Pastoral Symphony"	SlowPitchSound & Libydo	Libydo
"Behold the Lamb of God"	arr. Kyle Benders	All singers
"All We Like Sheep Have Gone Astray"	Adam Scime	All singers
"He Was Despised"	arr. Teiya Kasahara	Teiya Kasahara
"Interlude"	SlowPitchSound, Libydo, & Adam Scime	Libydo
"The People That Walked in Darkness"	w/ spoken word by Andrew Adridge	Andrew Adridge
"I Know that My Redeemer Liveth"	arr. Lindsay McIntyre & Wesley Shen	Lindsay McIntyre and Wesley Shen (shō)
"Hallelujah"	arr. Adam Scime	All singers

Soundstreams not only went further than AtG in giving over artistic control to IBPOC artists, but the sonic results questioned the hegemony of the European art music tradition.

Messiah/Complex could have made a more decisive move toward sovereignty if it had begun with conversations with IBPOC artists about what they want to say, artistically and politically, at this moment. The performers should have been able to decide not only what language to perform in but also whether they want to perform Handel's music at all, who they want to collaborate with, and how they want to work together, with AtG recognizing that Indigenous working methods may take more time.¹¹³ Moreover, singers who decided to take on additional duties as translators, poets, arrangers, or composers should have been appropriately compensated for this labor.

There are many systemic reasons why AtG did not take this approach. First, this is not how most opera companies, even indie companies like AtG, are accustomed to working. Although Peerbaye and Attariwala's report concerns Canadian orchestras, many of their observations apply to the opera world as well. Opera companies are "hierarchical and rigidly structured in terms of creation and production processes and protocols of decision-making."¹¹⁴ They specialize in presenting predominantly European works from the past. They endeavor to present these works in ways that resonate with audiences in their communities. However, because they regard the operatic work as more or less synonymous with the score, the focus tends to be on appearing diverse rather than sounding diverse.¹¹⁵

Even when musicians from other traditions are brought in to collaborate with classically trained musicians, there are barriers toward these artists working productively on equal terms. Current training programs for musicians in the Western art music tradition focus almost exclusively on performing the notes on the page rather than on improvising or composing.¹¹⁶ They also rarely involve

¹¹³Both Arluk and Robinson note that Indigenous processes sometimes take more time. Early Music Vancouver, "Continuum: A Conversation on Historical Musics & Indigenous Resurgence | EMV," Early Music Vancouver, June 15, 2021, YouTube video, 5:20, 8:20, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fTFEBHzyot0>.

¹¹⁴Peerbaye and Attariwala, *Re-sounding the Orchestra*, 4.

¹¹⁵Peerbaye and Attariwala, *Re-sounding the Orchestra*, 14.

¹¹⁶Peerbaye and Attariwala, *Re-sounding the Orchestra*, 43–44.

intercultural collaboration. Finally, inviting more artists to the decision-making table and following Indigenous protocols takes more time and money, and most classical music organizations are already in financially precarious positions.

Nevertheless, IBPOC-led companies, such as Amplified Opera in Toronto, are demonstrating that it is possible to work productively in new ways. For example, Marion Newman, Kwagiulth/Stó:ló mezzo soprano and Co-Founder of Amplified Opera, is developing a new opera, *Namwayut*, with Calgary Opera in which she has free reign as to the subject, her collaborators, and their working methods. Newman decided to work with multiple composers: Ian Cusson and Parmela Attariwala. Even more unusually, she and the other singers are involved in the compositional process; their voices holding authority equal to that of Cusson and Attariwala. At the end of their initial workshop (January–February 2021), the librettist Yvette Nolan remarked: “We can’t even tell who made what happen. Everything is so woven together.”¹¹⁷ Through Amplified Opera’s work as consultants (e.g., Disruptors-in-Residence at the Canadian Opera Company, 2021–22), they are sharing these new collaborative approaches with the big houses. Companies like Amplified Opera and projects like *Namwayut* point toward a future for opera, and classical music more generally, that is grounded in equity and sovereignty for IBPOC artists.

Messiah/Complex Revisited

In response to calls from audience members and the press for *Messiah/Complex* to become an annual holiday tradition, AtG brought it back for the 2021 Christmas season.¹¹⁸ They made no changes to the film itself but added a 30-minute “pre-show” showcasing The Messiah Project, a community engagement effort by AtG and Opera InReach. They gave two high school choirs in Canada the opportunity for mentorship from industry professionals, culminating in the production of a music video of the “Hallelujah” chorus that would be screened during the pre-show.¹¹⁹ As Opera InReach Co-Founder Daevyd Pepper explained in the pre-show, they “weren’t looking for a polished, perfect performance. We wanted to see heart. We wanted to see soul. We wanted to see how the choir was engaging with their community.” Accordingly, they encouraged choirs to “submit applications in whatever way they felt most showed their community off, whether that be a video, a letter, a painting, a TikTok, [an Instagram] Reel.”¹²⁰

The choirs they selected were the Agincourt Singers of Agincourt Collegiate Institute in Scarborough, Ontario and the Mennonite Collegiate Institute (MCI) Concert Choir from Gretna, Manitoba. Both choirs performed the same music to the same backing track the TSO recorded for *Messiah/Complex*. Although each choir produced their own videos, the pre-show only showed a composite video. Images of racially diverse students from Scarborough appearing to make music with Mennonites singing in front of a grain elevator were in keeping with AtG’s decision to emphasize unity over difference in *Messiah/Complex*. Moreover as with *Messiah/Complex*, these choices tended to blunt the messages individual artists/groups were attempting to convey. For example, Andrew Adridge, Co-Founder of Opera InReach and alumnus of Agincourt Collegiate, directed the Agincourt video to represent changes in choir practice before and after the COVID-19 outbreak. I

¹¹⁷Yvette Nolan in Calgary Opera, “The Seeds of Namwayut,” Calgary Opera, March 23, 2021, Vimeo video, 15:17, <https://calgaryopera.com/namwayut>.

¹¹⁸Audience reactions to this effect include those by YouTube account holders John Ryerson, Bruce Hoffmann, Oksana ML, and R S in the live chat and Rita Forman, Barbara Popel, and Patricia Black in the comments. AtG’s announcement of *Messiah/Complex*’s return in April 2021 quotes from the *Los Angeles Times*’s review: “This deserves to become a holiday classic.” “*Messiah/Complex* Receives Encore Presentation in Time for Easter,” Against the Grain Theatre, March 22, 2021, <https://atgtheatre.com/messiah-complex-receives-encore-presentation-in-time-for-easter/>.

¹¹⁹The mentorship component consisted of a live meet-and-greet with artists involved in *Messiah/Complex* and a choral masterclass. Joel Ivany came to speak with the Agincourt Singers and Simon Rivard (the TSO’s resident conductor) was the clinician. Andrea Lett represented *Messiah/Complex* for the Mennonite Collegiate Singers and Janet Brenneman from Canadian Mennonite University was the clinician.

¹²⁰Daevyd Pepper in Against the Grain Theatre, “*Messiah/Complex*—The Messiah Project Pre-Show,” Against the Grain Theatre, streamed live on December 12, 2021, YouTube video, 11:54, <https://youtu.be/IRAIW3XKj68?t=714>.

found this narrative to be much clearer in Agincourt's solo video than when their performance was intercut with that of the MCI choir.¹²¹

For me, the relaunch was a missed opportunity to critically reflect on *Messiah/Complex* and take it further. At the very least, I would have liked to see the students' performances incorporated into the 2021 *Messiah/Complex* rather than presented as a mere opener to the real event by the professionals. Seeing AtG treat *Messiah/Complex* as an evolving artist statement would have also been more in keeping with Ivany's hope that *Messiah/Complex* would be a step in the right direction. Sovereignty for IBPOC artists within classical music is not going to be accomplished with one action. It is something we are going to need to continually work toward.¹²²

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¹²¹The individual and composite videos are available to stream from Against the Grain Theatre, "The Messiah Project," Against the Grain Theatre, accessed November 13, 2022, <https://atgtheatre.com/the-messiah-project/>.

¹²²Viewing works or productions as subject to change is not the norm in classical music. However, Soundstreams's *Electric Messiah* changes from year to year. Another example is Teiya Kasahara's *Butterfly Project: The Ballad of Chō-Chō San*. Kasahara explains that they "call this particular creation a 'project' because I don't think it will ever be finished, nor do I think this type of work should finish: (un)learning and (un)doing, (un)seeing, and cultivating an intentional awareness concerning where our most prized canonical works come from. It is only by understanding lived histories and through constant humility that I believe we can find ways to reimagine operas such as *Madama Butterfly*." Teiya Kasahara, *The Butterfly Project* program (Confluence Concerts, 2022), https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c521f69aa49a192bd54a9cf/t/6206d116d0bc844e29f7b39b/1644613931626/Confluence_Programme_ButterflyProject_V2.pdf.

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