



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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FOR MORE INFORMATION
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HISTORY-MAKING
FIRST FULL-SCALE INDIGENOUS-LED OPERA
LI KEUR: RIEL'S HEART OF THE NORTH
WILL OPEN MANITOBA OPERA'S 2023/24 SEASON

Manitoba Opera announced today at an event held at the Centennial Concert Hall in Winnipeg that the company's 51st season will open November 18, 22, and 24 with ***Li Keur: Riel's Heart of the North*** (pronounced **lee cur**), the first full-scale Indigenous-led opera presented on a Canadian opera mainstage.

This world premiere will be paired with the return of one of the most popular operas of all time, ***Carmen***, which was cancelled in March 2020 owing to the pandemic. *Carmen* will take to the stage on April 13, 17, and 19, 2024. Both productions will be presented at the Centennial Concert Hall.

"The 2023/24 season - our 51st - will feature the vibrant music, dance, and languages of the Métis people on our stage in *Li Keur: Riel's Heart of the North*, as well as the dramatic characters, vivid rhythms, and the themes of jealousy, fate, and freedom of *Carmen*. It is a rich tapestry bursting at the seams with music, song, celebration, and drama," stated Larry Desrochers, General Director & CEO.

"We are very proud to present an exciting new world premiere that celebrates the Métis people and one of opera's most treasured works in our 2023/24 season," commented Judith Chambers, Chair, Board of Trustees. "*Li Keur: Riel's Heart of the North* and *Carmen* will both showcase the art form's ability to move us by telling stories through music and song."

LI KEUR: RIEL'S HEART OF THE NORTH

This cross-cultural collaboration is a celebration of Métis women, language, and culture, conceptualized by Métis poet and librettist **Dr. Suzanne M. Steele**, with music by Métis composer/fiddler **Alex Kusturok** and composer **Neil Weisensel**.

...MO 23/24 Season Announcement

2. MO 23/24 Season Announcement

“With *Li Keur*, I am trying to reconnect so much of that which was lost to my Gaudry, Fayant, Morin, DuCharmes, David, Beauchamps, and Desjardins families, and for so many other Michif families, and that is, each other,” explains Dr. Steele. “Sometime around the 1870s, our vibrant, intact, and prosperous families and communities were cast, scattered like windflowers across the prairies into a century and a half of hard times. And so, in a way through this work, I try to emulate the Anishinaabe keeper of the medicines, Marie Serpente (named in part for an ancestor of mine), who in this opera — as all our women for centuries and millennia — sews together the violence of men not once, but twice — that is, the violence of the historic. But importantly, I am also trying, as all Indigenous women continue to, sew together our cultures, our webs of family, and from the sometimes ugly in this world, make something beautiful. In this, through words and story, I have tried to bead some of our world for us to share and enjoy together once again and to shine a light on who we are.”

A full-scale production, this epic opera features eight vocal soloists, the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, two Michif choirs, a narrator, fiddlers, and dancers.

“It’s such an honour to be a part of something so powerful,” commented Alex Kusturok, composer and Métis fiddler. “Something like this hasn’t been done before for the Métis culture, and I’m humbled to have a small part in it. I look forward to seeing what comes from this, and I’m beyond excited to be working with a group of amazing people.”

“Working on *Li Keur, Riel's Heart of the North* has been nothing short of a transformational project for me since I started work on it in 2017,” said composer Neil Weisensel. “Researching and composing this piece has changed how I work, how I teach, and how I see the world. Inspired by Suzanne Steele's powerful and poetic libretto and blessed to be able to collaborate with fellow composer Alex Kusturok, I feel like we have succeeded in creating a unique and entertaining story for Manitoba Opera's mainstage.”

STORY CONCEPT/LANGUAGE RECLAMATION

Li Keur: Riel's Heart of the North explores the strength of Métis women through generations. It opens with a wholly imagined becoming story in which a female hunter tracks and takes down a buffalo with a bullet made of pure light. This she skins and then smokes its hide, and through this she brings the Métis people into existence and creates the stars and constellation that will guide the Métis home. In the present day, a young Métisse learns about her great-great-grandmother - a female sharpshooter - and her fateful meeting with Riel and his travelling companions in 19th century Montana.

At its heart, this opera seeks to celebrate Métis languages and ways of being. Sung in Heritage-Michif, French-Michif, Anishinaabemowin, French, and English, the opera’s text was developed with Indigenous language keepers who continue to be involved with the project. *Li Keur* brings these languages, which have survived decades of attempted erasure, back to the centre stage at the heart of this continent.

3. MO 23/24 Season Announcement

Li Keur places Métis culture, a founding culture of our province, on Manitoba Opera's mainstage. The Red River jig, which features prominently in the score, along with other traditional and contemporary Métis music by Kusturok, is for the Métis peoples, not only a national anthem, it is a prayer, a celebration, and a compass with which Michifs find their way home. Red River music, born of a specific place and rooted in a specific culture, continue to thrive and with *Li Keur* this music is celebrated through the power of Métis fiddle, dance, language, and through the operatic voice.

THE CREATIVE TEAM

DR. SUZANNE M. STEELE *LIBRETTIST/STORYTELLER*

Award-winning Métis poet, installation artist, librettist, and Canadian war artist, Suzanne Steele (Gaudry/Fayant) PhD, MLIS, BMus (voice) and Jeff Ryan's critically acclaimed, *Afghanistan: Requiem for a Generation*, has been performed with stellar casts by the Vancouver and Toronto Symphonies and the Calgary Philharmonic. Steele has hereditary connections to Marguerite Riel. Her work is studied at the PhD, Master and undergraduate level, and broadcast internationally.

ALEX KUSTUROK *COMPOSER/FIDDLER*

Métis composer and writer, Alex Kusturok, has composed, recorded, and performed widely. A third-generation fiddler, he is the son of the three-time Grand Masters Fiddle Championship, Patti Kusturok, and is known for his fiery, dynamic style of fiddling and footwork.

NEIL WEISENSEL *COMPOSER*

Neil Weisensel is a veteran opera composer; his background is white settler with French/German ancestry. His eight acclaimed operas have been performed over 240 times across Canada and the United States. In 2014, Vancouver Opera premiered his anti-bullying opera *Stickboy*. Weisensel has won grants and prizes from the National Endowment for the Arts, Opera America, and the Canada Council. He holds degrees in composition and performance from the University of Manitoba and University of British Columbia.

SIMON MIRON *DIRECTOR*

The production will be led by Winnipeg multi-disciplinary artist Simon Miron, a Francophone Métis who will be making his Manitoba Opera debut as director. Simon has worked on 80 productions across Canada and the UK including dozens of new works.

THE ARTISTS

Casting will be announced soon and features an impressive array of local and national Métis and First Nations artists.

PRODUCTION UNDERWRITER: BMO FINANCIAL GROUP

BMO, a proud partner of Manitoba Opera for over a decade, has provided ground-breaking support of \$435,000 to underwrite the production of *Li Kuer*.

4. MO 23/24 Season Announcement

“At BMO, we have a proud 200-year legacy of boldly growing the good *in business and life*,” says Kristen Kennedy, Regional Vice President, Winnipeg, BMO. “Supporting the creation of *Li Keur* at Manitoba Opera reflects our shared commitment to advance diversity on the operatic stage and the bank’s Purpose to drive progress towards a thriving economy, a sustainable future, and an inclusive society.”

CARMEN

There’s no dispute that composer Georges Bizet’s immortal classic is irresistible. Ground-breaking in its realism at its premiere in 1875, *Carmen* has since become one of the most popular operas of all time.

Bizet’s music is spilling over with a wealth of melody and Spanish rhythms. It is memorable and sensuous and features some of opera’s most beloved arias including Carmen’s smoky Habanera and Don José’s Flower Song, as well as the rousing Toreador Song.

With the libretto by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy (based on the story of the same name by French novelist Prosper Mérimée), *Carmen* will be sung in French with French dialogue and projected English translations.

THE STORY

Carmen can have any man she wants and discards them as easily as she does the cigarettes she makes. When she seduces the proud young soldier Don José only to cast him aside for the handsome bullfighter, jealousy ignites, and José is pushed to the brink. Carmen’s tragic fate has been sealed.

THE ARTISTS

One of today’s most exciting and versatile artists to sing Carmen, mezzo-soprano **Ginger Costa-Jackson**, will be making her company debut as the fiery temptress. Celebrated Canadian tenor **David Pomeroy** will be reprising his role as Don José, the obsessive corporal.

The much sought-after bass-baritone **Daniel Okulitch** returns to the MO stage to sing the role of the charismatic bullfighter Escamillo. Okulitch was outstanding in the title role of Manitoba Opera’s 2018 production of *Don Giovanni*. Winnipeg’s musical treasure, soprano **Lara Ciekiewicz**, will grace the stage as Micaëla and is sure to bring her sensitive interpretation to this role.

Other principal cast members include **Giles Tomkins** (Zuniga), **Lara Secord-Haid** (Frasquita), **Barbara King** (Mercedes), **Johnathon Kirby** (Morales/Dancaire), and **Jean-Philippe Lazure** (Remendado). **Brian Deedrick** will be directing. **Tyrone Paterson** is conducting with the **Manitoba Opera Chorus** and **Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra**.

TICKETS

Season subscriptions are currently on sale. Single tickets will go on sale in September. For more information, call 204-944-8824 or go to mbopera.ca