

## Performance Reviews

### ***Sweet Land*, a new opera by The Industry.**

**February 29–March 15, 2020, Los Angeles State Historic Park.**

Creative Team: Raven Chacon, Composer; Du Yun, Composer; Aja Couchois Duncan, Librettist; Douglas Kearney, Librettist; Cannupa Hanska Luger, Director and Costume Designer; Yuval Sharon, Director. Program notes and video streaming available on demand: <https://theindustry.org/sweet-land-opera/>.

Jelena Novak

Opera and musical theater continue to serve as forums for debate, invoking a wide range of topics in history, mythology, power, and politics. Recent North American operas are no exception, with composers and librettists often being preoccupied with questions of power and colonization. Let me cite just a few examples. One of the first contemporary operas I ever saw was Philip Glass's and Robert Wilson's *O Corvo Branco* (The White Raven) (1998) about the Portuguese age of discovery, an age marked by the conquest of new worlds and above all by the famous expedition led by Vasco da Gama, who pioneered the sea route to India that gave Portugal a dominant position in the spice trade of the time. Another opera by Philip Glass, *The Voyage* (1992), was commissioned and first performed at The Metropolitan Opera house to mark 500 years since Christopher Columbus's discovery of America. Curiosity and courage, overcoming a fear of the unknown, the discovery and conquest of the new worlds, the effects of colonization; these are all among Glass's themes in this work. The composer John Adams and director Peter Sellars likewise turn to American history and mythology in their operas. They typically zoom in on some of the most spectacular and politically charged events from the United States' complex history—the gold rush in *Girls of the Golden West* (2017), the Trinity nuclear test in *Doctor Atomic* (2005), and, famously, Richard Nixon's historical visit to

Mao Zedong in *Nixon in China* (1987). One might also mention here Steve Reich's and Beryl Korot's *Three Tales* (2002), one of which is dedicated to the testing of atomic bombs on Bikini Island, a grim episode from the Cold War nuclear arms race. And finally there is Laurie Anderson, who problematizes what it really means to be American in several of her works, for example in *Homeland* (2007). In all of these there is an attempt to discuss and illuminate, often critically, important dimensions of American history and mythology.

In mapping out this context for *Sweet Land* (2020), the newest opera of the Los Angeles-based opera company The Industry, I am tempted to invoke the arrow John Cage fired into the operatic relationships between Europe and United States: "For two hundred years the Europeans have been sending us their operas. Now I'm sending them back." On the occasion of the production of Cage's *Europeras* 1 and 2 by director Yuval Sharon, The Industry's founder and leader, this quotation was singled out.<sup>1</sup> It signals the duality between European and American operatic worlds, a duality that appears to be of central importance to the poetics of Sharon himself. His career as an opera director has developed successfully along two separate tracks. He has created site-specific ground-breaking contemporary operas with The Industry, mostly with American artists—productions include *Invisible Cities* (2013), *Hopscotch* (2015) and *War of the Worlds* (2017)—while in parallel directing conventional, mostly European, operatic repertoire in opera houses and festivals both in Europe and in the United States. Recently Sharon's position in the world of conventional opera in the US was institutionalized when he became director of Michigan Opera Theatre, while at the same time remaining artistic director and leader of The Industry.

On a different note from these North American composers and directors, there are at least a few made-in-Europe operas dealing more specifically with American culture, myths, and stereotypes, and in particular with the "Wild West": *ROSA: The Death of a Composer, a horse drama* (1994) by Louis Andriessen and Peter Greenaway, and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (2017–2018) by Gavin Bryars, to mention but two. Operas and music theater pieces by Glass/Wilson, Adams/Sellars, Reich/Korot, Anderson, Andriessen/Greenaway and Bryars all offer some of the coordinates that enable me to map *Sweet Land*: to contextualize it and interpret it.

<sup>1</sup> The quotation appeared on The Industry's twitter account (@industryopera), February 8, 2018, <https://twitter.com/industryopera/status/961641708369854464>.

“The company that created *Invisible Cities* and *Hopscotch*, now brings you a grotesque historical pageant that disrupts the dominant narrative of American identity”: this is the announcement on The Industry’s website.<sup>2</sup> *Sweet Land*, The Industry’s latest operatic spectacle, was world-premiered on March 1, 2020, in Los Angeles State Historic Park. However, the performances were soon halted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The cast and crew gathered on March 15 to film the show in an attempt to save it from premature disappearance, and the two videos documenting the piece have since been streamed on demand.<sup>3</sup> In the course of the original performance the audience was divided into two groups so that each group could only see one part of the show. Members of each of the two audience groups were expected to finish the story on their own as the experience of being excluded from the other group was an important part of the concept.

I believe that this concept of exclusion was clear to all of those who were lucky enough to attend the live performance. For the rest of us, experiencing *Sweet Land* only through the video, the division is not apparent, though it becomes clearer after reading the program booklet. “Sweet Land ... is conceived as an opera that erases itself: as the audience processes through the LA State Historic Park, the space behind you disappears, in a musical and visual experience revealing the mechanism of historic erasure. The audience is split on diverging tracks through a park to experience contrasting stories of America and its founding.”<sup>4</sup>

The two halves of the audience never actually saw the same show. Consequently, there are now two stream-on-demand videos designed to mimic the live experience of seeing two sides of the same story. While reading about the divided audiences, I decided to follow the initial concept of the creative team in their account of the live performance in Los Angeles State Historic Park, and consequently for the purposes of this text I have focused mainly on the first online video. The other side of the story remains to be explored.

To clarify the distinction between the two performance tracks, and the two subsequently made videos, I should list their contents. The work is in five parts. The first is named “Contact” (music by Raven Chacon and Du Yun, libretto by Douglas Kearney), and here the audience has not yet

<sup>2</sup> “Sweet Land,” *The Industry*, accessed September 30, 2020, <https://theindustryla.org/sweet-land-opera/>.

<sup>3</sup> “Sweet Land: A New Opera by The Industry,” *Vimeo*, March 17, 2020, <http://stream.sweetlandopera.com/>. The videos were edited by Geoff Boothby and produced by Comotion.

<sup>4</sup> Lindsey Schoenholtz, “Meet the Voices of *Sweet Land*,” *The Industry* (blog), December 2, 2019, <https://theindustryla.org/meet-the-voices-of-sweet-land/>.

been divided. After “Contact,” the first audience group is assigned to “Feast 1” (music by Du Yun, libretto by Aja Couchois Duncan) and the second group to “Train 1” (music by Raven Chacon, libretto by Douglas Kearney). The two groups reconnect at “The Crossroads” (music by both Yun and Chacon, and improvisations by Carmina Escobar, Micaela Tobin and Sharon Chohi Kim). After that the audience is divided again for “Feast 2” (music by Chacon, libretto by Kearney) and “Train 2” (music by Yun, libretto by Duncan), and at the end they all go back to the starting point for the final scene “Echoes & Expulsions” (music by Chacon and Yun, libretto by Duncan and Kearney).

As in the previous operas by The Industry, *Sweet Land* is site-specific. For example, the opera for headphones, *Invisible Cities*, was performed at Los Angeles Union Station, which is freighted with symbolic meaning in relation to the treatment of minorities by Californian society.<sup>5</sup> This is because the site originally housed Chinatown, part of which was torn down in order to make way for the station. The urban planning historian David Sloane talks about this urban intervention in an Artbound documentary about the making of *Invisible Cities*. He says that “it was an act of white dictation, of power within the city and it is the symbol of the way that California had struggled with racial minorities, particularly Asian minorities, for decades. In all those ways Union Station is a very complicated social space as well as a spectacularly beautiful built space.”<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, the Los Angeles State Historic Park, also in a Chinatown neighborhood, takes center stage in *Sweet Land*, since it too has a complex history related to immigrants—it used to be one of the busiest immigration stations for newcomers arriving to the city from the East. “In the *Sweet Land* program booklet and pre-show literature, much is made of the fact that LA State Historic Park where this performance takes place sits roughly where the Native American Tongva village Yaang-na and its cornfield once lay—an area replete with memories (many tragic) close to Downtown and the original pueblo.”<sup>7</sup> So the universal—yet at the same time specifically North American—story of “Hosts” and “Arrivals” in *Sweet Land* finds its

<sup>5</sup> The Industry’s *Invisible Cities* is the subject of Megan Steigerwald Ille’s article “The Operatic Ear: Mediating Aurality” on this very same issue of *Sound Stage Screen* (pp. 119–143, <https://doi.org/10.13130/sss14186>).

<sup>6</sup> “Invisible Cities”, Artbound documentary, KCET, accessed October 2, 2020, 06:44–07:15, <https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/episodes/invisible-cities>.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon Williams, “The Industry 2020 Review: *Sweet Land*,” *OperaWire*, March 12, 2020, <https://operawire.com/the-industry-2020-review-sweet-land/>.

ideal partnership in this piece of land and in the historical layers of meanings it holds together. The opera is staged in a series of temporary structures designed by Tanya Orellana and Carlo Maghirang, all sitting lightly on the soil of the park, and easily removed. Two of them are of a circular shape, and we have an impressive bird's eye view of them at the beginning of the video.

Duality is one of the keywords for an understanding of this opera. There are two librettists (Kearney and Duncan), two directors (Sharon and Cannupa Hanska Luger, who is also costume designer), and two composers (Yun and Chacon). But there is more to *Sweet Land* than demonstrating how these several pairs work towards the same goal. The most important dimension of duality for the authors of this project concerns exclusion from the pair, and a resulting imbalance between the two sides. The focus is on how one feels and functions when not being “inside” and/or when one is not in a position of power. The authors, in other words, want to project their dialogue as a means of learning about each other's experience.

In the trailer for *Sweet Land* Sharon announces the company's turn towards the topic of Americanness: “The Industry has often taken the audience on diverging paths and telling different narratives simultaneously. *Sweet Land* is the first time that we are using that tactic to talk about American history ... This opera is all about a reckoning with our American identity. That we really look at the myths around who we are and try to dismantle that”.<sup>8</sup> In *Sweet Land* the question of what it means to be American is posed openly. However, it appears to me that several of The Industry's earlier pieces are equally about American myths and identity, even if that precise question is not brought up so directly. It is hard to imagine *Hopscotch*, an opera for twenty-four cars, set anywhere other than the United States, and particularly Los Angeles. Automobility, the use of automobiles as the major means of transportation, and the role of cars in daily life are all tightly connected to experiencing a Los Angeles—and more broadly an American—culture.<sup>9</sup> Another opera, *War of the Worlds*, based on the 1938 radio drama created by Orson Welles, also raises particular questions germane to US culture, and especially the “country's troubled relationship with truth.”<sup>10</sup> Those operas

<sup>8</sup> Yuval Sharon in “*Sweet Land* Trailer,” YouTube video hosted on *The Industry* home page, accessed August 29, 2020, 00:22–00:33, 02:15–02:24, <https://theindustryla.org/sweet-land-opera/>.

<sup>9</sup> See Cotten Seiler, *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Jessica Gelt “*War of the Worlds* to Invade Disney Hall and the Streets of Downtown

also look at the American myth in one way or another. But just why it is important for North Americans to “really look at the myths around who we are and try to dismantle that” *at this particular moment* is the truly interesting question, and it needs to be answered in light of the political, pandemic, ecological, and other crises, as well as the racial, class, gender, and other inequalities still present in contemporary American society.

“Central to the project is the diversity of its voices”, emphasizes Sharon. And indeed, the spectrum of various cultural heritages that various artists bring to this piece is impressive. “Composer Raven Chacon is from the Navajo Nation and advocates for indigenous composers and musicians ... Du Yun is a Chinese immigrant whose recent work is rooted in a lack of understanding and empathy around immigration. ... Librettist Aja Couchois Duncan is a mixed-race Ojibwe writer with a focus on social justice. Douglas Kearney is a poet whose writing, in the words of *BOMB* magazine, ‘pulls history apart, recombining it to reveal an alternative less whitewashed by enfranchised power.’ Co-director Cannupa Hanksa Luger is a multi-disciplinary installation artist of Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, Lakota, Austrian, and Norwegian descent.”<sup>11</sup> All those “other voices” give off intriguing creative reflections that make the whole piece glitter with variegated color and light.

For me, the question is what, if anything, holds the whole operatic tissue of such diverse creative voices together, and prevents the whole structure from falling apart? The answer that first comes to mind after watching the video is the role of stereotypes. The story, despite its non-linear structure, is quite stereotypical. There are Hosts and there are Arrivals. The Arrivals arrive and start to trouble the Hosts. This is confirmed musically when one of the main Arrivals starts to sing with his countertenor voice. So the Arrivals represent authority, order, and constructed tradition. Hosts on the other hand, are actually “the others” for Arrivals. And the music of the Hosts is accordingly exotic—often modal, full of various “non-operatic” vocal peculiarities, and seasoned with the unpredictable, the experimental, and the unfathomable. A workable synthesis, a real cohabitation between two sides—operatic (conventional) and non-operatic (experimental, exotic)—is somehow not truly achieved for most of the opera. Thus, the fragmented musical structure and the various musical

L.A.” *Los Angeles Times*, November 8, 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-la-phil-war-worlds-20171108-story.html>.

<sup>11</sup> “*Sweet Land*,” Yuval Sharon’s personal website, accessed September 15, 2020, <https://www.yuvalsharon.com/#/sweet-land/>.

languages and references add more to the cacophony of voices than to their synergy. The circumstance of the forced marriage between the Arrival Jimmy Gin (Scott Belluz, countertenor) and the Host girl Makwa (Kelci Hahn, soprano) becomes “the screen” through which stereotypes of power in terms of gender and race are projected. The marriage scene is particularly rich with such references as efforts are being made to re-use stereotypes while trying to make them grotesque. It is a mechanism that remains stuck in the process, so that the stereotypes, rigid as they are, overshadow the intention to question them. The naturalistic acting of the operatic characters in “Feast 1” and “Feast 2” represents another stereotype. The characters assume postures and gestures of a “realistic” type, but realism in opera is a complicated issue, as singing invariably deconstructs the realism. With exaggerated naturalistic acting and conventional operatic singing, what happens in Feasts is probably even more grotesque than the authors wanted it to be.

To my surprise, given that the opera seeks to reinvent myths of American history and its people, including their struggles and their powers, I find the most striking section to be the one that features animals and monsters, including coyotes and immortal, Wiindigo-cursed evil spirit with an appetite for human flesh (they come from the folklore of First Nations Algonquin tribes). Monsters and animals are also “others,” in this case other than human. But unlike the line between Hosts and Arrivals—which is stereotypical and predictable, based as it is on the power that comes with colonization—that between animals/monsters and humans affords the authors more subtle opportunities, especially in the vocal sphere.

“The Crossroads” features two coyotes (Carmina Escobar and Micaela Tobin) and a Wiindigo (Sharon Chohi Kim). This part of the opera is rather short, lasting less than three minutes in the video. However, the video footage has been subject to some montage editing, so that what we see on the screen and what we hear at the same time is not synchronized, and the line between the singing body and the sung voice becomes blurred. That desynchronization is interesting and telling. The most impressive figure is Wiindigo, who is depicted as an anthropomorphic creature with long black and white fur covering the entirety of its body, and (curiously) with a huge mouth and visible teeth at the back of the head (see figure 1). The mouth is half opened, and all kinds of screams and choking sounds are assigned to it in Sharon Chohi Kim’s vocal improvisations. The desynchronization poses all kinds of questions, and works surprisingly well, as (for a short time



Fig. 1 Sharon Chohi Kim as Wiindigo. Still frame from the video trailer of *Sweet Land* by The Industry.

at least) both musical and visual elements of the opera escape the world of realism.

The Wiindigo creature becomes all mouth, all voice. It claims the right to have a voice, a right that is usually the exclusive preserve of the human domain, since monsters, like animals, are normally not considered to have a voice. Wiindigo's chocking sounds, combined with the howling improvisations of two singing coyote figures, constitute the deepest, the most "knowing" moment in *Sweet Land*, the moment at which those who normally are not allowed to have a voice finally sing. It is the moment when *Sweet Land* manages to escape from stereotypes, not taking the voice for granted and asking crucial questions about who owns the voice, both for singing and, metaphorically, for being human, and why.

These are the questions that Yuval Sharon places at the heart of *Sweet Land*:

Who is telling America's story? How can opera participate in an experiential "re-write" of that story? What can music and theatrical representation rectify that history books or documentaries cannot? And the most important question of all: How can the process of creating this work of art reflect the society we actually want to create?<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The Industry, "Sweet Land Workshop," *The Industry* (blog), May 21, 2019, <https://theindustry.org/sweet-land-workshop/>.

I find coyotes and the Wiindigo monster the true heroes of this operatic quest for a new relationality. They are removed from stereotypes, realism, and conventions. They manage to reach beyond the history books and the documentaries; they are activists and poets at the same time. They fight metaphorically for their voice, a different voice that can also sing, together. They are the brave “others” who can make a difference, at least in this opera.

**Jelena Novak** is a researcher at CESEM (Center for Study of the Sociology and Aesthetics of Music), FCSH, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa. Her fields of interests are modern and contemporary music, recent opera and musical theatre, music and new media, capitalist realism, voice studies in the age of posthuman and feminine identities in music. Exploring those fields, she works as a researcher, lecturer, writer, dramaturg, music critic, editor and curator focused on bringing together critical theory and contemporary art. She has been a founding committee member of the Society for Minimalist Music and a founding member of the editorial collective TkH [Walking Theory]. In 2013 she won the Thurnau Award for Music-Theatre Studies from the University of Bayreuth, Germany. Her most recent books are *Postopera: Reinventing the Voice-Body* (2015), *Operofilia* (2018) and *Einstein on the Beach: Opera beyond Drama* (co-edited with John Richardson, 2019). She is currently preparing the co-edited volume (with Kris Dittel) *Singing beyond Human*. Her latest achievement as a dramaturg is: *LIMBO, an Opera* (Tel Aviv, 2019) and that same year she co-curated (with K. Dittel) the exhibition “Post-Opera” at TENT, Rotterdam.