

ESSENTIAL OPERA

Presents

The world première of "Aunt Helen" and the re-release of "December"

Two short operas by Monica Pearce

December 21-31, 2021



Aunt Helen Program note:

Dr. Helen Creighton was truly a pioneer in collecting folksongs, and her contribution to the documentation of Maritime folksongs is unparalleled. She lived a life of adventure, from helping survivors from the Halifax Explosion, to driving an ambulance to help with health education, to collecting innumerable folksongs, and many more untold.

Based on her autobiography *A Life in Folklore*, I wrote the libretto as a one-sided radio interview that might have occurred in her seventies. The unseen interviewer asks three questions: 1) How did you come to be a folksong collector? 2) What are some of your favorite stories from your travels? and 3) What are some of the obstacles you encountered? Through answering these questions, "Aunt Helen" gives us a glimpse into her life and into her personality. Amidst her interview, several folksongs are heard, partly to give further meaning to her answers, and partly to colour her experience with the most intrinsic material of her life.

This work was written for the Opera from Scratch workshop in Halifax, Nova Scotia in 2012. Many thanks to Vocalypse Productions Artistic Director Janice Isabel Jackson, soprano Maureen Batt, and Helen Creighton Folklore Society.

Helen Creighton materials, including biographical information from *A Life in Folklore* by Helen Creighton (Creighton, Helen. *A Life in Folklore*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1975), and musical excerpts from "Nova Scotia Song" and "I'll give my love an apple" from *Traditional Songs from Nova Scotia* (Creighton, Helen & Senior, Doreen. *Traditional Songs from Nova Scotia*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1987) are used with permission from the Creighton Family.

December Program Note:

December is about two women (Julia and Natasha) in the first year of their relationship who are preparing to meet Julia's parents for the first time. They are taking a trip to Julia's family home for Christmas and the opera follows them as they prepare and pack for the trip, and their time waiting/stressing at the airport security line. Their trip is with Top Priority Air, represented by a Top Priority Air spokesperson, a customer service representative, and a security officer.

FULL CREDITS AND LIBRETTI

THE AUNT HELEN TEAM

Aunt Helen – Short Opera Film Credits

Music and Libretto: Monica Pearce

Dr. Helen Creighton: Maureen Batt, soprano

Piano: Simon Docking

Director/Director of Photography: Claire Fraser

Editor: Claire Fraser

Art Department/Production Assistant: Anna Shepard

Background Actor: Anna Shepard

Audio Recording: Leaf Music

(Producer: Jeremy VanSlyke, Associate Producer: Ben B. Creelman)

Archival Images, courtesy of Dartmouth Heritage Museum:

Family Photograph of Creighton Family c. 1905

Dartmouth Street in aftermath of Halifax Harbour Explosion 1917

Helen Creighton standing with Ben Henneberry and Mr. & Mrs. Faulkner, c. 1940

Helen Creighton standing in front of Ambulance c. 1918

Stock Footage of Car driving through vineyard & Nova Scotia Flag from Adobe Stock

Special thank you to Terry Eyland, Shannon Baxter, and the Dartmouth Heritage Museum. And heartfelt thanks to Mickie Zinck and the Creighton Family.

Thank you to Music Nova Scotia for their investment towards both the sound recording and the short film.

THE DECEMBER TEAM

Cast: Erin Bardua, Maureen Batt, and Danielle Buonaiuto, sopranos

Music Director/Conductor: Tara Scott

String Quartet: Jennifer Jones, violin; Anne Simons, violin; Alexandra Bates, viola; Hilary Brown, cello

Video director: Halley Davies

Video editor: Claire Fraser

Videographer NYC: Elizabeth van Os

Audio engineering NS: Leaf Music; Ben B. Creelman, producer

Audio engineering NYC: Jennifer Nulsen, Swan Studios NYC

Graphic design: Tom Belding

Production assistant: Laura Thornton, Thornton Communications

Lighting assistant: Kwasi Asare

Background extras: Kwasi Asare, Erin Bardua, Halley Davies, Claire Fraser

Video trailers: Anna Shepard

December was written for Essential Opera with support from the SOCAN Foundation commissioning matching program and private donors.

This film production is funded by Arts Nova Scotia and the Canada Council for the Arts.

Aunt Helen
a one-act opera for soprano

Libretto

(Question #1: We are here with Dr. Helen Creighton – what shall we call you? And how did you come to be a folklorist?)1

Thank you for the invitation,
It's my distinct pleasure to be here!

Ah, yes, shall we begin?
Doctor Creighton? No, no, no, please...
Call me Aunt Helen, dear.
Makes me feel right back at home on the radio!

You want to know why I became a collector of songs.
I have always courted adventure,
Since I was a little girl, since I was a girl.

I have had many lives -
Tree-climber, ambulance driver, radio host. Story teller, library dweller,
And above all folksong collector,
I collect folksongs.

This is my great adventure.

I'll Give My Love an Apple

*I'll give my love an apple
Without any core,
I'll give my love a dwelling
Without any door;*

*I'll give my love a palace
Wherein she may be,
That she might unlock it
Without any key.*

(Question #2: You must be full of stories about your collections. Can you share a few with our listeners?)

You want to know some of my stories, dear?
The secret is to make your singer want to sing!

One singer was so shy
It took him an hour to clear his throat.

One singer covered his face
and peeked at me while singing.
One sing could only sing
After a game of forty-fives.

And gem after gem,
I switched from hand to hand,
Trying to keep up!

The Stormy Scenes of Winter

(instrumental)

(Question #3: Did you encounter obstacles on your way?)

Ah, yes, you want to talk about obstacles.
Was it always easy? No.
Sometimes I was sick.
Sometimes I was so tired
I'd sleep for days at a time.
Sometimes I dreamed of another life,
Sometimes I dreamed of a husband, a family...

But then, you know,
My life was too exciting for that.

One singer told me he knew as many songs
As there are stars in the sky
If he could only remember.

Even when I knew nothing,
I knew something,
These old songs should be written down
Before they're lost.

I looked around me,
And I saw only myself to do it.

Nova Scotia Song

*Farewell to Nova Scotia,
The seabound coast!
Let your mountains dark and dreary be,
For when I am far away
On the briny ocean tossed,
Will you ever heave a sigh and a wish for me?*

It's been a treat,
Thank you for having me.
Until next time!

Note: Questions are implied by the answers, they are not part of the sung text.



December

a one-act opera for three sopranos and string quartet

Libretto:

Soprano 1: Julia

Soprano 2: Natasha

Soprano 3: Top Priority Air spokesperson, Top Priority Air customer service representative, security officer(s)

Scene I

Top Priority Air spokesperson: Travelling home for the holidays? There's no greater gift than being home with family. Let us help you get there, stress-free. Top Priority Air – where you are our top priority.

Scene II

Julia: I'm packed! I think I'm packed. Do I...have everything for tomorrow?

Natasha: Passport?

Julia: Check!

Natasha: Toothbrush/headphones/charger/jammies/Advil/back-up Advil?

Julia: Check/check/check/check/check/check!

Natasha: Chocolate for the plane?

Julia: Check! Are you packed yet?

Natasha: I'm so ready! Julia, I'm packed.
Well, I'm basically packed.

Julia: Come on, Natasha...

Natasha: One more load of laundry, I swear,
then I'm packed.
Soon I'll have my personal item!

Julia: I wish I wasn't so tense,
Bringing her home to meet my family
for the first time.

Natasha: Such a big step for her, for us.
Bringing me home to meet her family.

Julia: Bringing her home to meet my family.

Natasha and Julia: Bringing me/her
Bringing me/her home to meet my/her family.

Natasha: Hey, did you pack the Christmas presents? Mine are on the dresser wrapped.

Julia: I definitely did not. We are going to have to check something for sure.

Scene III

Julia on the phone with customer service. Natasha packing in an adjacent room.

Top Priority Air CSR: Welcome to Top Priority Air! For English, press or say one. If you have an existing reservation, press or say two.

Julia: Representative.

Top Priority Air CSR: If you want to sign up for Top Priority Rewards card, press or say three. If you -

Julia: Speak to a representative.

Top Priority Air CSR: If you are calling about lost baggage, press or say four.

Julia: Representative, speak to a representative (*presses button over and over*)

Top Priority Air CSR: All of our agents are currently assisting other Top Priority customers. Please hold for the next available agent. Did you know you can find answers to your questions at toppriorityair.com?

Duet

Julia:

It's been a while
Since I saw my family.
They text, they check in.
They really try.

Natasha:

Julia was such a sweet surprise.
Unexpected and honest and lovely!
It's been about a year for us.

Julia: With my family, I know it's me
I don't fit in,
Always travelling home, alone.
Not married with kids
and gay.

Natasha:

This trip is a big deal
She's sharing her family with me.
Big for me too.
It's been a while
Since I felt something like family.

Julia: I want them to meet her,
To love her like I do.
To start planning,
To start saving a seat at the table
For her.
When I come home,
When we come home.

Natasha: I don't want to wait anymore.
I know that I know, she is my home.

Scene IV

At the airport security line

Julia: Thanks for staying on the call. You know how anxious airports make me.

Natasha: Don't worry – I will be here the whole time, and tomorrow I'll be there in person.

Security Officer: Boarding pass? Boarding pass?

Julia: I should have enough time.

Natasha: You have tons of time.

Julia: Do I?

Security Officer: Boarding pass?

Julia: You never know with security, with the holidays.

Natasha: The line's moving, see?

Julia: Is it?

Should I take my shoes off now...or?

Security Officer: Ma'am please leave your shoes on.

Julia: Am I old enough to be "ma'am"ed?

Natasha: Julia, relax, this line is the hardest part, after this it's smooth sailing.

Security Officer: Travelling with a laptop?
Travelling with a laptop?

Julia: Are you kidding? I'm not going to relax
until you've met my family
and everything is perfect
and everything is fine
and Christmas is over.

Natasha: You can't wait til then to relax, you'll miss all the best parts!

Security Officer: Anything in your pockets? Any liquids or gels?

Julia: No, all good.

Security Officer: Ma'am! Ma'am – is this your bag?
Come over here.

You can't travel with this water bottle!

Julia: I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry, oh my god,
how did that even get there?
(Julia looks very guilty as she realizes she caused this)

Natasha: I'm sorry! I wasn't even watching!

Security Officer: Ma'am! Ma'am! You have to unwrap this!

Natasha: Oh! Well, this wasn't my plan for this but
I don't want to wait anymore.
I know that I know,
You are my home.

Natasha and Julia: You are my home.

***Please inform the composer of any performances of these operas at
monicampearce@gmail.com.