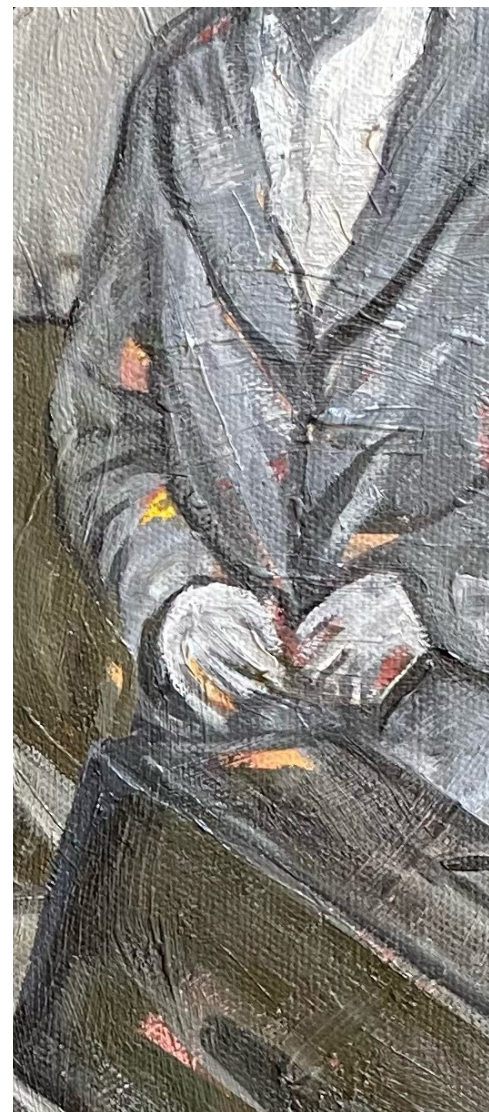




Aunt Helen

MONICA PEARCE

MAUREEN BATT, SOPRANO • SIMON DOCKING, PIANO



Program Notes

In a life of collecting stories and music Dr. Helen Creighton (1899-1989) was truly a pioneer, and her contribution to the documentation of Maritime folksongs is unparalleled. She lived a life of adventure—including helping survivors of the Halifax Explosion of 1917 and driving an ambulance to help with health education—that also took her to hamlets and villages throughout Nova Scotia and New Brunswick in a quest that would lead to the preservation of more than 4,000 folksongs.

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 the 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.

Monica Pearce



Libretto

Aunt Helen

A one-act opera for soprano

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

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 singer 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!

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

Composer Reflection

When I hear *Aunt Helen* now, almost 10 years after its writing, it is like visiting with an old friend. I remember beginning to brainstorm about the opera, putting together a proposal for the Opera from Scratch program in Halifax, NS, with the idea to write for my dear friend and singer Maureen Batt. Maureen and I had already become fast friends in Toronto, working together on a number of creative projects and coming to each other for advice for our concert-presenting ventures—me, with the Toy Piano Composers, and her, with Essential Opera. When the proposal was accepted, I got to work researching Helen Creighton; reading her words, reading articles about her, and listening to the collected audio recordings. Reading Creighton's autobiography, *A Life in Folklore*, I was delighted; through her words I met someone who I really admired. She was someone who had a strong mission and a fun, adventurous spirit, someone who was willing to do hard work with little recognition. She was also someone who clearly bucked gender stereotypes! I was smitten.

During the workshop week at Opera from Scratch 2012, Maureen and I delved even deeper into the opera, investigating musical and dramatic opportunities to bring magic to the work. Essential in that process was collaborative pianist Simon Docking, who brought nuance and thoughtful consideration to the different musical plains that the work covers. Several of Creighton's relatives were at the première, which was incredibly special for us. Folklorist and

author Clary Croft, who worked with Helen Creighton for many years, wrote to us after watching the opera: "I especially liked the part where 'Helen' was remembering a melody and then riffed on it. When Sharon and I would take Helen for a drive she would sit in the back seat and as we passed through a community where she had collected a certain song, she would tap me on the shoulder, remind me of the song collected, and then say, 'Sing it!'. She had hundreds of songs in her head and now, thankfully, those songs are in my head too. And again, thankfully, people like Monica are bringing them forward."

With this recording, I hope that many more have the opportunity to hear the work and learn more about Helen Creighton.

Monica Pearce

For more information and to read about Helen Creighton's work, please visit helencreighton.org

Artist Reflection

Aunt Helen has a special place in my heart; it is warm and inviting, just like its namesake, Helen Creighton, and just like its composer, Monica Pearce.

I have wanted to record *Aunt Helen* ever since Simon Docking and I premièred it at Opera from Scratch in 2012. It is very important to me that works have more of a life than just their première, so I was thrilled when Opera Nova Scotia invited me to give *Aunt Helen* its staged première in 2015 with Lynette Wahlstrom on piano. And I've enjoyed performing this opera in several recitals with pianists Tara Scott and Wesley Shen.

Monica Pearce and I had worked together on a few projects before *Aunt Helen*. In 2010, I commissioned her to write me a duet for two duelling singers, which became *Opening Number*. In 2012, with the Toy Piano Composers, I premièred her opera short, *Cake*, about a bride-to-be planning her wedding cake. And it was later that same year that we decided to go to the week-long Opera from Scratch singer–composer program in Halifax. I am so grateful for that time together, because it solidified what we already knew we were building: a beautiful artistic partnership and friendship.

Monica's vocal writing fits me like a velvet glove, and I feel so honoured whenever I get to perform her works. Essential Opera, for which I am the co–artistic director, commissioned Monica to write two operas: *Etiquette*

(2014), in which I played Dorothy Parker, and *December* (2020), in which I played a spokesperson/customer service representative for Top Priority Air and a security guard. I have also performed two of her works for toy piano: *Kandinsky* and *The Bliss of Fatigue*.

I am delighted to have Simon Docking on this recording with me. This is our second recording project, the first being *Lady of the Lake* in 2017. Whether we are doing a live performance or a recording, we have so much fun. And I am always in awe of the richness and warmth he exudes, both in his playing and in his personality.

Thank you to the Creighton family for your support in this project throughout its journey. Thank you, Véronique, for your stunning paintings of Helen. Thank you, Leaf Music, for always making me sound so beautiful. Thank you, Music Nova Scotia, for helping me make this recording.

It is my hope that you love this piece as much as I do. It is truly with great pleasure that we present *Aunt Helen*.

Maureen Batt

Maureen Batt, soprano

Maureen Batt is celebrated for her “rich, warm sound and masterful acting” (*Opera Canada*). Maureen focuses on promoting Canadian classical contemporary repertoire by collaborating with composers to commission, première, and re-perform their works. Her debut album, *Lady of the Lake*, includes song cycles by Schubert and Halifax-based composer Fiona Ryan and was nominated for Classical Recording of the Year (2018) by the East Coast Music Association (ECMA) and Music Nova Scotia. She is also featured on Saman Shahi’s album *Breathing in the Shadows* (2020) with Tara Scott on piano.

She has created several Canadian opera roles, including Helen (*Aunt Helen*), Bride (*Cake*), and Dorothy Parker (*Etiquette*) by composer Monica Pearce; Keri Ferrell (*Hipster Grifter*) and Anna (*Regina*) by Elisha Denburg; Lorelei Henderson (*Stockholm Syndrome*) by Fiona Ryan; Hannah (*Hannah & Paige and the Zombie Pirates*) and Cindy (*Heather: Cindy + Mindy =BFFS 4EVER*) by Christopher Thornborrow; and Mother/Sister Mary Francis (*Time of Trouble*) by Elizabeth Raum.

She is the co-artistic director of Essential Opera—an opera company founded in 2010 with Erin Bardua—and part of the Indie Opera Toronto collective. Essential Opera celebrated its 10th anniversary with two short opera films of works by Canadian composers Anna Pidgorna and Monica Pearce. In 2015, Maureen founded Crossing Borders, a contemporary classical recital series which has toured programs of art song, opera arias, musical theatre,

and electronics to the United States, Canada, and Colombia. In addition to introducing composers and their works in these countries, in its short history Crossing Borders has already presented 15 world premières.

Maureen has a Master of Music from the University of Toronto, a Bachelor of Music from Dalhousie University, and a Bachelor of Arts from St. Thomas University (French and Spanish). Professional training programs include: Wholeness in Motion (Wisconsin, US), Centre for Operatic Studies (Sulmona, Italy), Contemporary Performance Studies, VISI (Vancouver, BC), Tapestry New Opera 101 Songbook (Toronto, ON), Opera from Scratch and Halifax Summer Opera Festival (Halifax, NS), St. Andrews Opera Workshop (St. Andrews, NB), Daniel Ferro Vocal Program (Greve in Chianti, Italy), and Casalmaggiore International Festival (Casalmaggiore, Italy).

Maureen is a member of the national board of directors of the Canadian Music Centre. She has received grants from the SOCAN Foundation, Ontario Arts Council, Canada Council for the Arts, Canada’s Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), FACTOR, Music Nova Scotia, and Arts Nova Scotia.

Maureen teaches voice, offers workshops online, and is a frequent music festival adjudicator. As an educator, Maureen invites her students to explore their singing through the lens of wholeness, embodied play, curiosity, and compassion.

Simon Docking, pianist

Australian-born pianist Simon Docking has appeared as a soloist for Toronto's Soundstreams, the Winnipeg New Music Festival, Scotia Festival of Music, Symphony Nova Scotia, Acadia University's Shattering the Silence, Australia's Aurora Festival, the new music group Stroma in New Zealand, and MATA Festival in New York.

Simon has often been heard on CBC Radio, ABC Classic FM (Australia), Swedish Radio, and Radio New Zealand.

Active as a chamber musician, Simon has been a founding member of several ensembles, including the Toronto-based group Toca Loca, which has been presented by nearly every new music series in Canada from St. John's to Vancouver, and appeared in New York, California, and at the C3 Festival at Berlin's legendary Berghain. Toca Loca has released two CDs: *P*P* (2009) and *SHED* (2010).

Simon studied piano in Australia with Ransford Elsley, and holds a doctorate in piano performance from SUNY Stony Brook, where he worked with Gilbert Kalish and upon graduation was awarded New York State's Thayer Fellowship for the Arts. In October 2011 Simon received an Established Artist Recognition Award from the Province of Nova Scotia.

Simon lives in Halifax, where he is the Managing and Artistic Director of Scotia Festival of Music.



Monica Pearce, composer and librettist

Monica Pearce is an arts administrator, concert presenter, and composer specializing in opera, chamber music, and everything toy piano-related. She was born in Prince Edward Island, began her professional career in Toronto, and recently relocated to McAllen, Texas, after a couple of years in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Monica's work has been performed and commissioned by the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, the Orchestre symphonique de Montréal, International Contemporary Ensemble, New Music Detroit, Array Ensemble, Talisker Players, Essential Opera, Bicycle Opera Project, TorQ Percussion Quartet, junctQín keyboard collective, and Thin Edge New Music Collective, among others. Her operas have toured throughout Ontario and been performed across Canada and the United States, while her toy piano works are frequently played internationally. She is currently recording a multi-work piece entitled *Textile Fantasies* that includes *chain maille* (percussion quartet), *houndstooth* (solo piano), *damask* (toy piano/tabla), *denim* (two toy piano/two percussion), *velvet* (for marimba quartet), *leather* (piano and percussion), *toile de jouy* (harpsichord), and *silks* (solo piano). She recently won the Harry Freedman Award for her harpsichord work *toile de jouy*, commissioned by Wesley Shen.

Monica co-founded the emerging composer collective the Toy Piano Composers in 2008 with Chris Thornborrow. The Toy Piano Composers have presented more than 120 new works and in 2017 released their debut album, *Toy Piano Composers*.

She is also active as a librettist and has worked with composer Cecilia Livingston on a Dora Award-nominated opera on the life of Anne Frank entitled *Singing Only Softly*. Monica's written works have been performed by Loose Tea Theatre, Musique 3 Femmes, Bicycle Opera Project, Opera Nova Scotia, Vocalypse Productions, Caution Tape Sound Collective, and the Toy Piano Composers.







Credits

Maureen Batt

Soprano

Simon Docking

Piano

Monica Pearce

Composer & Librettist

Jeremy VanSlyke

Producer

Ben B. Creelman

Recording Engineer

Kristan Toczko

Graphic Designer

Véronique MacKenzie

Artwork Paintings

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1. Intro
2. Thank you for the invitation
3. I'll Give My Love an Apple
4. Some of my stories
5. The Stormy Scenes of Winter
6. Obstacles
7. Nova Scotia Song (Farewell to Nova Scotia)