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Margaret Atwood and Music

Margaret Atwood received an unprecedented reception when she appeared for a curtain call on the opening night of the Canadian Opera Company production of *The Handmaid's Tale* – 'the greatest roar I've ever heard from a Toronto audience,' according to one critic (Bernstein). This is confirmation that for many people, the main interest in the Toronto production of *The Handmaid's Tale* was Atwood's novel, rather than Poul Ruders's music or Paul Bentley's libretto, notwithstanding the considerable merits of both. As a result, it seems an opportune moment to consider how music has intersected with Atwood's life and career over the years. In the interests of imposing some order on this unruly topic, this essay is divided into two sections: 'Music in Atwood's Life and Works,' and 'Atwood as Librettist.'

MUSIC IN ATWOOD'S LIFE AND WORKS

Drawing on the Atwood papers in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, and on various published accounts, including the biographies by Rosemary Sullivan and Nathalie Cooke, we can piece together an account of the role that music has played in Atwood's life.¹

Judging from written accounts, music does not appear to rank at or near the top of Atwood's interests. Political and environmental activism, the biological sciences, the visual arts, and food and the culinary arts all seem to be of greater interest and more importance to her than music, to judge from her public statements and writings. Any number of reasons could be cited for this, from the strong influence of her science-oriented family to the underdeveloped state of music education in Canada during her youth. But let us start at the beginning and work our way forwards from there.

Though born in Ottawa in 1939, Atwood moved to Toronto with her family at the age of six, and has lived in the latter city off and on to the present day. As a toddler, Atwood, like most children, was given to humming and singing to herself while playing. When her mother commented on her singing once, Atwood replied 'Oh yes, I have lots of

1 Atwood began depositing her papers with the University of Toronto in 1970; they are in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, catalogued in MS Coll 200 and 335. A finding aid to the Atwood papers is available online at <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/fisher/findaids/atwood.pdf>.

little hums like that running around inside my head' (Sullivan, 34). This inarticulate youthful singing soon matured into impromptu performances of radio ads, Brownie songs, and popular songs of yesteryear. 'Land of the Silver Birch' was certainly in her repertoire as a Brownie. Atwood's article 'True North,' written for the one hundredth anniversary issue of *Saturday Night* (January 1987) and republished in the collection *Moving Targets* (43-58), was originally titled 'Land of the Silver Birch,' and it begins by quoting the first verse of that well-known Canadian song. The article continues, 'We sang this once, squatting around the papier-mâché Magic Mushroom in the Brownie pack ... It brought tears to our eyes, and not for simple reasons' (43-44). The article ends with Atwood's parody of the song: 'Land of the septic tank, / Home of the speedboat, / Where still the four-wheel-drive / Wanders at will, / Blue lake and tacky shore, / I will return once moore / Vroom-diddy-vroom-vroom / Vroom-diddy-vroom-vroom / Vroo-OO-oo-oom' (57). As is often the case with Atwood, music is a symbol of things gone wrong: the childlike imagery of the original version of the song at the start of her article represents the time before acid rain and mercury and lead deposits etched their deadly poison into the northern landscape. The parodied version of the song at the end of the article brings us to the stark present, a time when 'the north is no longer a refuge,' as Atwood writes (57).

In grade school Atwood was subjected to piano lessons, still an obligatory part of a middle-class Canadian upbringing in a time before television and computer and video games monopolized children's spare time. The lessons, however, as was and is so often the case, seem not to have led anywhere. It may not be altogether a coincidence that the very first reference to music in Atwood's first novel (*The Edible Woman*) is about 'the child performing her morning penance at the piano' (11). This vignette is elaborated upon in *The Robber Bride*. Tony in that novel suffers through excruciating piano lessons as a child: 'Tony knows that Tony isn't musical and that these lessons will lead nowhere. How could they? Tony, with her little rodent paws, can't even span an octave' (157). Despite her own piano lessons, Atwood has admitted on several occasions in the past that she could not read music.² In this respect, of course, she is a typical product of her time and place, for only one in ten Canadians is musically literate, in the sense of being able to read music notation.

Choral singing was also a regular and somewhat more enjoyable part of Atwood's primary and secondary school years. In high school, she was a member of a small choir that sang for Rotary luncheons, and she participated in school productions of *Oklahoma!* and *Brigadoon*. As a young university student, she got a job running the nature program at White Pine,

2 In a letter to John Beckwith dated 15 August 1964, Atwood writes, 'Regret to say I'm quite unable to read music' (John Beckwith Papers, Faculty of Music Library, University of Toronto, MS Coll 10, box 4, folder 32). See also n6.

a Jewish summer camp, and while there she learned left-wing political songs from an earlier era. As Sullivan speculates, the impact of these songs may have 'filtered into her mind, layering her political sensibility' (83).

At the University of Toronto, Atwood participated in and helped to write student revues at Victoria College, and worked as an occasional music reviewer for a student newspaper (the *Varsity*). That her musical interests were broadening out by this time is indicated by Sullivan's assertion that Atwood introduced her tutor, Jay Macpherson, to Bartók's opera *Bluebeard's Castle* (97). At the other end of the musical spectrum, rock and roll had taken her fancy as well. In an undergraduate essay on 'The Use of the Supernatural in the Novel,' written in third year for Macpherson, Atwood begins by alluding to the fact that the supernatural was a common literary trope in popular songs of the day.³ She cites the lyrics of the 1960 number one hit 'Teen Angel' by way of example. It is a rather gruesome ballad about a young woman who is killed when the car she is in with her boyfriend is hit by a train. They flee before the car is struck, but she goes back to retrieve a ring she had received from him, with tragic results.

Mark Dinning had his brief moment of fame with 'Teen Angel' in 1960, but it was Elvis Presley, of course, who was the number one popular music celebrity of the day. His Maple Leaf Gardens appearance in April 1957 was greeted by twenty-three thousand screaming young Torontonians. I don't know whether Atwood was among the twenty-three thousand in attendance on that occasion (I suspect not), but she was almost certainly an Elvis fan by then. In her 'Letter to America' published in newspapers in 2003 and later anthologized in *Moving Targets* (324-27), Atwood listed Elvis, along with the Andrews Sisters, Ella Fitzgerald, and the Platters, as the 'music I sang and danced to' (324) when young. Elvis even makes a cameo appearance in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In the 'Historical Notes' which conclude the novel, we learn that Offred's story was transmitted on some thirty cassette tapes. Each tape begins with a couple of songs, presumably to hide the illicit narrative from the Gilead authorities. Included in the set are four tapes of 'Elvis Presley's Golden Years' (284).⁴ This revelation that Offred's entire narrative is a palimpsest over tapes of popular music is a nice framing touch, for in the first paragraph of the novel, Offred notes that the dormitory for the handmaids-in-training was a gymnasium, and that 'Dances would have been held there; the music lingered, a palimpsest of unheard sound, style upon style.'

Some famous Canadian musicians who would have been Atwood's contemporaries in Toronto during the 1950s include Glenn Gould, Gordon Lightfoot, Teresa Stratas, and Ian and Sylvia Tyson. Ian Tyson and Gould

3 The essay is in the Atwood Papers, ms Coll 200, box 3, folder 13.

4 In the libretto for Poul Ruders's opera, Elvis is omitted from the list of tapes.

were born on the same day one year apart, and they are six and seven years older than Atwood respectively. Stratas and Sylvia Tyson are about the same age as Atwood – Stratas a little older and Tyson a little younger – and Lightfoot was born just one day before Atwood.

Some of these musicians have left their mark in the Atwood oeuvre. We learn, for instance, that the real name of the mad genius Crake in Atwood's novel *Oryx and Crake* was Glenn; he was named after 'a dead pianist, some boy genius with two n's' (70). Crake and Gould share more than a name: both are (like Atwood) animal lovers and, in an interview in *Maclean's* in 2003 (Bethune), Atwood surmised that Gould, like Crake, suffered from Asperger's syndrome, a variant of autism that seems to be characteristic of many creative high achievers.

Sylvia Tyson turns up in Atwood's short story 'Isis in Darkness' from the 1991 collection *Wilderness Tips*. Toronto's Bohemian Embassy, a coffee-house that offered poetry readings and jazz, and was a hot spot in the urban folk music revival, figures prominently in that story. Atwood was frequenting the Bohemian Embassy by 1960, and it was the site of her first public poetry reading. The coffee-house is called by its real name in the story. Atwood notes that it was a haven for 'young people who wanted some exit from the lumpen bourgeoisie and the shackles of respectable wage-earning' (54). Poetry supplied this exit from bourgeois respectability for some, and film-making for others, but for those without the intellectual pretensions such activities entailed the exit came from 'playing drums in a group with a disgusting name such as Animal Fats or The Living Snot' (54). What I believe to be a vignette of Sylvia Tyson in that story reads as follows:

There was a musical interlude, as there always was on Tuesdays. A girl with long, straight, dark hair parted in the middle sat on a high stool, an autoharp across her knees, and sang several mournful folk songs in a high, clear voice. (56)

Now compare that citation to this excerpt from a speech that Atwood made in 1979, about a dozen years before she wrote 'Isis in Darkness.' The occasion was a benefit concert for the Canadian branch of Amnesty International, and Atwood was introducing the featured performer for the evening, Sylvia Tyson (née Fricker):

The musical interlude for those poetry evenings was a young folksinger named Sylvia Fricker. She played the autoharp and sang folksongs in a clear, silvery voice, and I'm sure that some of us grubby wordsmiths felt that if we could sing like that we wouldn't have to bother with poetry.⁵

5 'Tyson Concert,' Margaret Atwood Papers, ms Coll 200, box 56, file 52.

Photos of Sylvia Tyson from that period confirm that she did indeed have long, straight, dark hair parted in the middle. Mournful folk songs were her stock-in-trade in those days, though I have been unable to confirm that 'Banks of the Ohio,' which the young woman in the story sings, was part of her repertoire. That song was, however, made famous in 1961, when it was recorded by Tyson's contemporary Joan Baez, an artist with whom she has frequently been compared.

While doing graduate studies at Radcliffe and Harvard, Atwood absorbed the widespread cultural activities on offer, including Boston Symphony open rehearsals, which she attended with Jim Polk. Polk, who became Atwood's first husband in June 1967, was a very good pianist; Atwood also bought a harpsichord for him after the couple moved to Edmonton in 1968. At about this time, Atwood took up the recorder in a serious way, and the young couple played trio sonatas together with a flautist friend; presumably she had, then, learned to read music by that point.⁶ The recorder has been a lasting companion for Atwood. For the New York radio show 'Survival Kit' on WNYC (first aired on 21 September 2003), Atwood was asked what ten items she would pack in a survival kit; she listed her recorder and music for it in her package, and also the works of Beethoven.⁷

The most interesting fictional character from Atwood's novels from my point of view is West from *The Robber Bride*. West is, like me, a musicologist at the University of Toronto. (Within a five-year period University of Toronto musicologists figured prominently in two important Canadian novels: Robertson Davies's *The Lyre of Orpheus* in 1988 and *The Robber Bride* in 1993.) West is introduced at the beginning of chapter 4 of *The Robber Bride* as follows:

West is a musicologist. Some of what he does is traditional – influences, variants, derivations – but he's also involved in one of those cross-disciplinary projects that have become so popular lately. He's mixed up with a bunch of neurophysiologists from the medical school; together they're studying the effects of music on the human brain. (17)

We subsequently learn that West also plays the lute, which he uses to accompany himself while singing English folk songs, and after he marries Tony he takes up the spinet. Tony is forever fearful that Xenia, the robber bride of the title, will sweep into their lives again and steal West away from

6 In a 1977 interview Atwood stated, 'People have set my poems to music before – it's always been college students who would do it without telling me. Then they'd send me the score which I couldn't read' (O'Toole, 'Atwood'). The inability to read a score of contemporary music, however, does not mean that Atwood could not make her way through the recorder part of a baroque trio sonata.

7 See <http://www.wnyc.org/shows/survivalkit/episodes/09212003> (accessed 1 June 2005).

her as she has done before. We learn only towards the end of the book that in fact Xenia ended her relationship with West because she found him boring, a revelation that makes me think, somewhat uncomfortably, that perhaps Atwood has indeed spent some time among musicologists. I looked through the research papers for *The Robber Bride* in the Atwood collection at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library to see if I could ascertain whether West is based on an actual scholar. There is a lot of information in those notes about military history, mirror-image twins, perfumes, draft dodgers, left- versus right-handedness, Teutons, and Laura Secord, but somewhat to my surprise, there is not a single reference to musicology. Only later did the obvious answer present itself to me: West, at least as far as his musical and scholarly interests, rather than his dullness, are concerned, is a conflation of two important men in Atwood's life: her first husband, Jim Polk, and her brother, Harold Atwood. From Polk comes the interest in early music (the harpsichord that Atwood bought for Polk, for instance, becomes a spinet in the novel). And from Harold Atwood, a neurophysiologist, comes the research into music and the brain. As people have often noted, Atwood can be uncannily prophetic, and this is an interesting case in point: the cross-disciplinary work on the relationship between music and the brain in the novel is the subject of a current research project at the Faculty of Music – the Sonic BRAIN Laboratory, directed by Lee Bartel.

ATWOOD AS LIBRETTIST

Included among the Atwood papers in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library is a six-page typescript that dates from 1956, when the author was in grade 12. It is headed 'Synthesia – Operetta in One Act,'⁸ and was a skit written by Atwood for performance in her home economics class at Leaside High School. The cast includes King Coal and his Queen, their three daughters, Orlon, Nylon, and Dacron (all fabrics which are, of course, coal derivatives), and Sir William Wooley. The skit features six or seven songs, sung to 'O My Darling Clementine' and tunes from *The Tales of Hoffmann* and *H.M.S. Pinafore*. The operetta celebrates the wonderful qualities of synthetic fabrics, while Sir William Wooley laments his one great flaw – that he shrinks in the wash. Sir William's problems are solved when he marries Orlon (who was played by Atwood). Though this work has never been published, it is referred to obliquely by Atwood in quite a few later interviews as evidence of an early interest in opera, or at least musical theatre.

Eight years later, when Atwood was a graduate student at Harvard University, a commission arrived from the CBC to write the text for a choral

8 The work is called 'Synthesis' in the finding aid to the Margaret Atwood Papers (p 10).

composition to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth in 1564. The composer was to be John Beckwith, who made it a condition of his acceptance that the text *not* be by Shakespeare. Beckwith had recently collaborated with Atwood's one-time tutor Jay Macpherson on a cantata (*Jonah*, which dates from 1963), and she was his first choice for this project as well. Macpherson, however, recommended Atwood. Atwood's clever libretto is about the place of Shakespeare in Canadian life. Beckwith has provided a fine summary of the text: 'A prologue and epilogue suggest, first, the anticipation of a Stratford Shakespeare performance and, at the last, the reflections on this experience, which nourish the visitor through the long Canadian winter. In between are four episodes sketching a modern-Canadian youth-to-old-age cycle in terms of familiar Shakespeare images.'⁹

During the period of this collaboration, which took place between January and June of 1964, Atwood was variously in Vancouver teaching at the University of British Columbia, in Toronto for a meeting with Beckwith in his office in the Edward Johnson Building,¹⁰ and in England on vacation. It is a testament to Atwood's speed, but also to the efficiency of Canada Post, that the project was completed in time for the premiere performance, which took place at the Ermitage in Montreal (a broadcast taping without audience) in November 1964. The correspondence reveals that Beckwith wrote to Atwood in England, c/o Canada House in London, on 31 May 1964 requesting changes to the text and a new epilogue; Atwood wrote the required text on the back of the envelope and it was back in Beckwith's hands by 12 June! The 'live' premiere of *The Trumpets of Summer*, as the resulting work is known,¹¹ took place on 1 March 1965 at Redpath Hall in McGill University under George Little. The first Toronto performance took place in May 1965 by the Festival Singers; a second was given in February 1966 as part of Toronto's Ten Centuries Concerts. The Festival Singers with soloists under Elmer Iseler recorded the work in February 1969 for a CBC/Capitol Records co-production, and that performance was reissued recently on compact disc.¹²

For the first Festival Singers performance, BMI Canada produced a libretto. Shortly after I moved to Toronto in 1979 as a graduate student in

9 Typescript, Atwood Papers, MS Coll 200, box 41, file 3.

10 Beckwith's office in 1964 was room 206 of the Edward Johnson Building. That room is currently the location of Lee Bartel's Sonic BRAIN Laboratory, mentioned above.

11 Atwood (undated typescript, John Beckwith Papers, Faculty of Music Library, University of Toronto, MS Coll 10, box 4, file 32) suggested three possible titles for the work: *This Instrumental Pageant*, *The Trumpets of Summer*; and *A Masque for Daily Faces*. Atwood preferred the first title, but deferred to Jay Macpherson and John Beckwith's choice of the second one.

12 The original LP version, which included a lyrics booklet, has recently been offered for sale on the Internet at over \$1200 US. The recording was reissued in 2003 by Centrediscs on *Canadian Composers Portraits: John Beckwith* (CMC CD 9103).

musicology at the University of Toronto, I purchased a copy of that modest libretto (sixteen pages in octavo format, stapled) in a used book store for a couple of dollars. It was filed away as part of my modest collection of Canadian libretti. A few years later, I saw this very same libretto for sale in an antiquarian book shop for hundreds of dollars. As an impecunious graduate student, the temptation was too great. I promptly went to a different antiquarian book shop and offered to sell them my copy of the document. This Atwood 'publication' was thought to be so rare that the owner of the book shop was highly suspicious about how I came to acquire it. He seemed to suspect that I had either (a) photocopied it or (b) stolen a copy from the Atwood papers in the Thomas Fisher Library. Investigation of paper watermarks proved the authenticity of my document, and a call to the Thomas Fisher Library confirmed that the copy in the Atwood collection was not missing. And so, a deal was done, and the libretto earned me a tidy sum.

There is more to the story of this libretto. The Vancouver bookseller William Hoffer offered a copy for sale in the late 1980s at \$600.¹³ The National Library brought this fact to the attention of Beckwith, who in turn wrote to Hoffer to inquire about the provenance of the copy, and to question the ethics of the inflated price. Hoffer, who liked to think of himself as a sort of Canadian Karl Kraus, wrote a caustic three-page letter in reply. This occasioned a second letter from Beckwith, which in turn brought on another circumloquacious reply from Hoffer. This lively correspondence touches on copyright laws and the antiquarian book trade; Hoffer also mentions the circumstances by which he acquired the libretto.¹⁴ The *Trumpets of Summer* libretto, at Atwood's request, has never appeared in any collection of her writings.¹⁵ It continues to be offered for sale from time to time by antiquarian booksellers for many hundreds of dollars, a mute testimonial to the peculiarities of the acquisitive urge and the economic law of supply and demand.¹⁶

13 As item 40 in his *List No. 71* where it is listed as the libretto for 'John Backworth's [sic] Choral Suite.'

14 Hoffer (1944-97) was known for his cantankerous and petulant opinions, and his bookstore catalogues provided him with an outlet for his increasingly vitriolic rants. In his *List No. 73* he offered for sale, as item no. 13, the first letter that John Beckwith had written to him; the catalogue description manages to insult both Beckwith and the Institute for Canadian Music. In his first letter to Beckwith, he calls Atwood 'a Faustian jerk' (letter of 23 March 1989). The correspondence and photocopies from the two Hoffer catalogues are all in the John Beckwith Papers, Faculty of Music Library, University of Toronto (MS Coll 10, box 4, file 32).

15 Aside from the original BMI Canada libretto, the complete text is available as an insert to both the original LP recording of the work and the recent Centrediscs reissue of it (see n12 above for details).

16 Beckwith, spurred by the exchange with Hoffer and the loss of his own copy of the libretto, contacted Berandol, the successor to BMI Canada. He learned that the libretto was

The next Atwood libretto dates from five years after *The Trumpets of Summer*. When I came across this work in the Atwood papers,¹⁷ I was somewhat surprised because I did not recall having read anything about it in either the Sullivan or Cooke biographies. And it is not a title one would forget: the work is called *Oratorio for Sasquatch, Man and Two Androids*. Though not well known to literary or music scholars, this work is popular with those who have an interest in the entity known variously as Bigfoot, Sasquatch, Yeti, or the Abominable Snowman. Atwood's libretto was commissioned by the CBC for its radio series *Anthology*, and was published by the CBC in 1970 along with five other poems by Canadian writers that were commissioned for the same series (Purdy).

A leaf of instructions for *Sasquatch* gives some details about what the broadcast must have sounded like: Atwood writes that the title character 'should sound other-worldly, non-human,' whereas Android 1 has a 'thin, precise, scientific voice' and Android 2 is 'deeper, matter-of-fact, a sort of Rod & Gun voice.' The Man is a Native Indian, 'old, dignified, just a hint of non-WASP accent.' There are also suggestions for the background music: Atwood wanted sounds like those on an RCA recording titled *Electronomusic* (1968) by John Pfeiffer, though she adds patriotically 'would prefer Canadian electronic music if you know of anything that would work.' The work itself is another dark fantasy about the rape of the natural environment; the most despicable human urges are voiced by the two androids, ironically, whereas the Native Indian's concern is for living at peace with the untamed wilderness, as personified by the Sasquatch. Atwood's creative use of the Sasquatch did not end with this poem: Jimmy, a lone human survivor of the environmental and biological catastrophe in *Oryx and Crake*, calls himself Snowman, for in the ravaged post-apocalyptic earth in which he dwells, his existence is as tenuous and fraught with danger as that of the Abominable Snowman.

A fourth libretto, *Masque*, also exists only in manuscript.¹⁸ It was created in 1977 by Atwood as part of a collaborative exercise with the composer Raymond Pannell and the choreographer Ann Ditchburn. *Masque* opens promisingly: it is set in 'Hades, in the form of a cocktail party at the Hyatt Regency.' This was Atwood's first experience as the librettist for a theatrical piece for professional performers; unfortunately, the resultant work seems to have been an unmitigated disaster. When the work was staged by the National Ballet of Canada as part of a choreographic workshop at the Bathurst Street Theatre in April 1977, it met with damning reviews. The

not as rare as antiquarian booksellers would have us believe: Berandol had dozens of copies of it!

17 Margaret Atwood Papers, MS Coll 200, box 41, file 13.

18 Margaret Atwood Papers, MS Coll 200, box 41, files 9-11. The work is titled *Masque* in all of Atwood's manuscripts, but the title had been changed to *Circe* by the time it was performed in April 1977.

Globe and Mail critic found Atwood's words 'bloodless' and Ditchburn's choreography 'stingy,' and concluded that the work was 'a pretentious crock' and 'an unqualified disaster' (O'Toole, 'Far from Bewitching'). The work was quickly shelved and has never been referred to again, much less revived.

An unfinished libretto project, one that literally existed only in Atwood's dreams, is alluded to in her preface to the Virago Press edition of Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush*, later reprinted in *Moving Targets* (34-42). Atwood writes there of an interesting experience that she had while a graduate student at Harvard: 'I had a particularly vivid dream [that] I had written an opera about Susanna Moodie, and there she was, all by herself on a completely white stage, singing like Lucia di Lammermoor' (35). This dream led her to hunt up a copy of *Roughing It in the Bush* in the Harvard library, and this in turn led some six months later not to a Lucia-like opera, but rather to a series of poems titled *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*.

One of the poems in that collection, titled 'Charivari,' begins as follows:

They capped their heads with feathers, masked
their faces, wore their clothes backwards, howled
with torches through the midnight winter

and dragged the black man from his house
to the jolting music of broken
instruments, pretending to each other

it was a joke, until
they killed him. I don't know
what happened to the white bride.

What begins here as an innocent mock serenade for the newlyweds suddenly turns to a chilling depiction of racism and violence. The line 'jolting music of broken instruments' is an extraordinarily powerful metaphor for the complete and utter breakdown of civility, which leads in turn to violence and murder. The poem ends with a similar metaphor: 'resist those cracked drumbeats. Stop this. Become human.' Music's ability to inspire us to extremes of emotion – in this case brutality – has rarely been more powerfully evoked.

A word or two is in order about Atwood's recent collaboration with Randolph Peters for the Canadian Opera Company. Following upon the success of *The Golden Asse*, which Peters composed for the coc to a libretto written by Robertson Davies shortly before his death, it seemed a good idea to get Peters together with Atwood and see what would transpire. The initial idea was to make a libretto based on John Gardner's 1971 novel *Grendel*, which tells the story of the Beowulf legend from the point of view

of Grendel, a monster that bears more than a passing resemblance to Sasquatch. Another idea was to use a story from Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*; science-fiction operas by Philip Glass had recently demonstrated the popularity of this sub-genre. But the rights for both the Gardner and Bradbury works had already been optioned off to other people, so it was back to the drawing board. Atwood next produced a libretto based on the life of Pauline Johnson. This was back in 1999, and publicity at the time stated that the opera would be premiered sometime between 2002 and 2004. Peters, however, was not happy with the libretto when he read it: 'He turned an odd shade of green' is how Atwood has put it (Everett-Green, 20). And so yet another libretto was scrapped, and a fresh one created. This one, the last to date as far as I am aware, is titled *Inanna's Journey*, and is based on a five-thousand-year-old story from ancient Sumeria about the most important deity in Mesopotamian society – Inanna, goddess of love, fertility, and war. When asked about her views on the operatic marriage of text and music, Atwood replied 'I don't consider this a marriage – so far it's just a flirtation' (Everett-Green, 21). The coc is obviously hoping this flirtation will lead not only to a marriage, but also to healthy offspring: the company is considering *Inanna's Journey* for a premiere performance in the new opera house during the 2006–7 season.

As relief from her ongoing labours as an opera librettist, Atwood recently turned to a different but related task. She was asked by the group One Ring Zero to provide some words for a rock song. The lyrics she wrote were set to music and released in June 2004 on the CD *As Smart As We Are*.¹⁹ This recording is part of a fringe movement in contemporary pop music known as Lit Rock. Joshua Camp, a member of One Ring Zero, defined Lit Rock in the liner notes for the recording as music in which 'people recognize the names of the people who wrote the lyrics.' Another way of looking at it is that Lit Rock is marketed as a book with a free recording, rather than a recording with a free book. It is interesting that several famous writers – among them Paul Auster, Dave Eggers, and Daniel Handler, in addition to Atwood – agreed to write lyrics for this relatively unknown group. A simple explanation is offered in the liner notes for the recording: 'every writer wants to be a rock star.'

Atwood's experience of music and her professional activities as a wordsmith for musicians range widely: from Elvis Presley to early music and from rock lyrics to opera libretti. Despite her own admissions of her lack of skill in music and the fact that music seems to rank fairly far down

19 Atwood's contribution, 'Frankenstein Monster Song,' is a rather poignant soliloquy sung in a Leonard Cohen-esque monotone on the recording by Olivier Conan. I note in passing that this is not the only Margaret Atwood Frankenstein song; her poem 'Speeches for Dr. Frankenstein' from the collection *The Animals in That Country* was set to music for soprano and computer-generated tape back in 1981 by the Toronto-born composer Bruce Pennycook.

in her list of priorities, she has enjoyed more success as an inspirer of musical creativity than most other writers of her day – and her best work in this area may well be ahead of her.

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