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OPERA AMERICA SELECTS 15 PARTICIPANTS FOR ITS 2020 LEADERSHIP INTENSIVE PROGRAM

U.S., CANADA, EUROPE & LATIN AMERICA REPRESENTED

January 7, 2020 (New York) — **OPERA America** is pleased to announce the 15 participants from the United States, Canada, Europe and Latin America who have been selected for its 2020 Leadership Intensive program. These future industry leaders were chosen from a pool of 44 candidates through a competitive selection process focusing on candidates' potential to make significant contributions to the opera field. The program was generously established with the continued support of American Express.

The 2020 Leadership Intensive participants selected by OPERA America are **Derrell Acon**, director of engagement and equity, Long Beach Opera; **Joe Barnes**, company manager, the Metropolitan Opera; **Robert Boldin**, artistic administrator, Pittsburgh Opera; **Piper Gunnarson**, executive director, On Site Opera; **Julia Noulin-Mérat**, associate producer, Boston Lyric Opera, and co-artistic director, Guerilla Opera; **Andrea Puente-Catán**, major gifts officer, Hispanic affairs, San Diego Opera; **Chris Thoren**, Fogel general manager, strategy and communications, Chicago Opera Theater; **Eleanor Parker Walter**, director of marketing and community engagement, Opera Birmingham; **Noah Stern Weber**, independent consultant; and **Arthur White**, director of external affairs, Michigan Opera Theatre.

OPERA America's partner organizations, Opera.ca, Opera Europa and Ópera Latinoamérica, selected and have underwritten the participation of the Canadian, European and Latin American leaders. They are **Aisling Fitzgerald**, opera producer and production stage manager, Wexford Festival Opera/Cork Opera House; **Yvette Guigueno**, director of development, Pacific Opera Victoria; **Pierina Lavanca**, coordinator of institutional projects, Auditorio Nacional del Sodre; **Margarita María Mora Medina**, director of marketing, advertising and communications, Teatro Mayor Julio Mario Santo Domingo; and **Lauri Pokkinen**, audience outreach and social responsibility manager, Finnish National Opera and Ballet.

This is the seventh class of Leadership Intensive participants to have been selected since the program's inception in 2012.

"The Leadership Intensive has proven to be a catalyst for the development of a new generation of opera leaders who would not otherwise have access to such specialized learning opportunities or to an international network of peers," stated Marc. A. Scorca, president/CEO of OPERA America. "Alumni from the program now hold 10 percent of executive leadership positions at member companies across the United States."

The Leadership Intensive exemplifies OPERA America's long-standing commitment to identify and encourage the field's most promising administrators who will help move opera forward for years to come. This program provides them with a unique experience designed to bolster their leadership capacity and advance their careers.

"American Express has long supported the advancement of emerging nonprofit leaders and performing arts institutions," said Timothy J. McClimon, president of the American Express Foundation. "Through our continued investment in OPERA America's Leadership Intensive program, we hope to develop the next generation in opera who are committed to the longevity of this art form."

To kick off the program, participants will convene at OPERA America's National Opera Center in New York City from January 31 through February 7, 2020, for a weeklong learning program that will address strategic issues, build essential skills and foster strong professional connections. These developing leaders will be prepared to apply new skills, share their learning with colleagues and demonstrate leadership that contributes to their local companies and communities. Expert faculty for the February session includes **Astrid Baumgardner**, J.D., certified professional coach; **Micaela Blei**, Ph.D., storyteller and educator; **Jeremiah Marks**, chief financial officer, Opera Philadelphia; **Michelle Ramos**, J.D., Ph.D., executive director, Alternate ROOTS; **Sarah Carter**, director of learning and leadership, OPERA America; **Laura Lee Everett**, chief programs officer, OPERA America; and **Marc A. Scorca**, president/CEO, OPERA America.

Building upon that weeklong foundation in January, Leadership Intensive participants will take part in additional professional development activities throughout the year, including regular group coaching calls, webinars with field executives and roundtable discussions at OPERA America's annual conference, making this an extended professional development experience.

For more information about the Leadership Intensive, including a list of the program's alumni, visit operaamerica.org/Leadership.

PROFILES OF 2020 LEADERSHIP INTENSIVE PARTICIPANTS

Derrell Acon, Director of Engagement and Equity, Long Beach Opera



Bass-baritone Derrell Acon holds a doctoral degree in 19th-century opera history and performance and a Master of Music from the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music. He graduated *summa cum laude* from Lawrence University and Conservatory of Music with a Bachelor of Music in vocal performance and a Bachelor of Arts in government with a minor in ethnic studies. Acon has been featured operatically and in scholarly contexts in Italy, Germany, Ethiopia, Oman and the U.S. His work on Black Motivation has been presented at conferences such as the National Association for Ethnic Studies and National Association of Negro Musicians. He was a 2013–2014 U.S. Fulbright scholar to Italy, where he researched Verdian opera and lectured on the black experience in America, and an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grantee for his work in opera analysis and performance. Acon's most recent research on "The Singing Blacktivist" has been presented at the National Men of Color Summit, in conjunction with Portland Opera's *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*, at the University of Chicago, and in residence at the Marcus Center in Milwaukee. He has contributed as a repertoire specialist to the Royal Conservatory of Music and has acted as pre-opera lecturer for The Glimmerglass Festival, Des Moines Metro Opera and Long Beach Opera. Prominent roles include Leporello in *Don Giovanni*, Kecal in *The Bartered Bride*, and the title role in *Don Bucefalo*. He recently appeared as Antron McCray in the widely acclaimed premiere of *The Central Park Five* by Anthony Davis and as Caspar in Heartbeat Opera's *Der Freischütz*.

Joe Barnes, Company Manager, The Metropolitan Opera



Joe Barnes began his career at the Metropolitan Opera in 2003 as a part-time wrangler for the Met Children’s Chorus. Now the Met’s company manager, Barnes supervises and plans the artistic budget, participates in season schedule planning and supervises all aspects of the internal administration of singers, musicians and all other performers. He collaborates on labor relations, as well as artistic planning for performers in new productions. Barnes was a member of the Met’s negotiating team for the most recent negotiations with artist and musician unions. Previously at the Met, he has worked as director of supernumeraries and children, and before that as rehearsal associate. He was a casting consultant for actors in a staged concert of André Previn’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* at Carnegie Hall. Barnes has also worked as a teaching artist in the D.C. area. Prior to his administrative career, he performed professionally in musical theater for 11 years. For the Smithsonian Institution, he performed as a lecturing artist, incorporating both performance of American Songbook classics and biographical

lecture, throughout the Washington, D.C., area and at the Smithsonian Museums. Barnes holds a degree in music and theater from the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. He participated in the Folger Shakespeare Theater’s “Text, Context and Performance.” He grew up in Cheverly, Maryland, and now lives in New York City.

Robert Boldin, Artistic Administrator, Pittsburgh Opera



Robert Boldin is artistic administrator at Pittsburgh Opera, where his primary responsibilities include overseeing finances; managing contracts and logistics for the company’s principal artists, orchestra and chorus; handling artist services; acting as company manager and orchestra personnel manager; producing the daily schedule; and hosting and lecturing for Opera Up Close, the company’s lecture series. Boldin also serves as a producer for Co-Opera — a collaborative project with Carnegie Mellon University that fosters and produces new, short operas, written and performed by students. Prior to returning to Pittsburgh, he spent four seasons as music administrator at Houston Grand Opera, where his primary responsibilities included management of the orchestra, chorus and media activities. While at HGO, he also produced its nationally syndicated radio broadcast series, produced the world premiere recording of Ricky Ian Gordon’s *A Coffin in Egypt* and was a guest lecturer for the company’s pre-curtain lecture series. Prior to his work in administration, Boldin enjoyed a career as a

professional opera singer. He has sung with Chicago Opera Theater, Cincinnati Opera and San Diego Opera, among others, as well as with the choruses of Lyric Opera of Chicago and Pittsburgh Opera. He can be heard on the world-premiere recording of Robert Kurka’s *The Good Soldier Schweik*. A Pittsburgh native, Boldin holds degrees in music from Carnegie Mellon and Northwestern Universities. He is dedicated to the cultivation of young singers and enjoys an ongoing relationship with Carnegie Mellon University’s Voice Department.

Aisling Fitzgerald, Opera Producer and Production Stage Manager, Wexford Festival Opera/Cork Opera House



Aisling Fitzgerald is an opera producer and production stage manager from Ireland. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Music, a Bachelor of Music and a Higher Diploma in Education (music and English) from University College Cork. Fitzgerald studied stage management at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, and she has worked exclusively in opera stage management with international award-winning opera festivals and houses, including Shanghai Grand Opera, Les Azuriales Opera, New York City’s Joyce Theater, Wexford Festival Opera, Garsington Opera, Opera Holland Park and Grange Park Opera, as well as at prestigious venues such as Buckingham Palace and the Royal Albert Hall. From 2010 to 2016, she worked primarily with the Royal Ballet and Royal Opera at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. On returning to Ireland in 2016, Fitzgerald has since developed a series of lectures and presentations for third-level education about opera stage management and non-performance career opportunities for music and theater graduates. Her research interests include the Irish

opera identity and the incorporation of performance psychology into the training of opera singers. Fitzgerald works as producer for the Opera Concert Series at the Cork Opera House and production stage manager for Wexford Festival Opera, and she was recently appointed producing facilitator and mentor for the M.A. in arts management and creative producing at University College Cork.

Yvette Guigueno, Director of Development, Pacific Opera Victoria



Yvette Guigueno recently joined Pacific Opera Victoria as the director of development, overseeing philanthropic and corporate relationships. She previously spent five years at Royal Roads University leading its fundraising team. Guigueno began her career in the arts in 2007 as an administrator at the Victoria Symphony, and she worked in both fundraising and audience development before settling into sponsorship management. She is active in the community and serves as a board member for both Kaleidoscope Theatre and the Victoria chapter of the Canadian Association of Gift Planners (CAGP). She also works with youth as a roller derby coach. Guigueno earned an M.B.A. in executive management from Royal Roads University and holds a CFRE.

Piper Gunnarson, Executive Director, On Site Opera



Piper Gunnarson is a seasoned nonprofit arts administrator with a background in theater administration, having worked for organizations spanning all manifestations of the art form, including classical plays, new work, musicals and children's theater. Prior to joining the team at On Site Opera, Gunnarson was the managing director for the Random Farms Kids' Theater, a prominent youth-focused theater institution in Westchester, New York, where she steered strategic plans to establish and strengthen the administrative functions of the company. Prior to that, she served as general manager and producer for the Gallatin Arts Festival and director of development for the Abingdon Theatre Company, as well as consulted for numerous nonprofit theaters on fundraising and strategic planning. She also worked in the education department of the Geffen Playhouse, managed grants for the Will Geer Theatrum Botanicum, and apprenticed with the Lark Play Development Center on program management.

Gunnarson holds a B.A. in theater from the University of California, San Diego, and an M.A. in leadership for the arts from NYU's Gallatin School of Individualized Study.

Pierina Lavanca, Coordinator of Institutional Projects, Auditorio Nacional del Sodre



Pierina Lavanca, a native of Montevideo, Uruguay, discovered her passion for artistic projects while at university and decided to develop her career in that direction, convinced of its potential to contribute to sustainable human development. She joined Auditorio Nacional del Sodre in 2015 as a member of its technical direction department, responsible for budgeting and managing the technical crew. She currently serves as coordinator of institutional projects, working on strategic planning and coordinating a wide variety of projects. Previously, she worked at the state-owned National Development Corporation in the operational and financial management of several cultural and social projects. Lavanca holds a postgraduate degree in cultural management from University of the Republic, Uruguay, a bachelor's degree in public accounting, and a university technician degree in administration. She also teaches business management and administration at the School of Economic Sciences and administration at the University of the Republic.

Margarita María Mora Medina, Director of Marketing, Advertising and Communications, Teatro Mayor Julio Mario Santo Domingo



Margarita María Mora Medina is the director of marketing, advertising and communications at Teatro Mayor Julio Mario Santo Domingo. She studied social communications at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana and business administration at the Universidad del Rosario. From 2010 to 2015, she was in charge of communications strategy for the government's Technology Plan and the Ministry of Technology and Communications. For 12 years, Medina worked at the National Museum of Colombia as head of communications. She has also served as a communication consultant for BID Plan Pacifico de Planeación Nacional and for Bogotá's secretary of culture, recreation and sports. Since 2008, she has been a visiting professor in the management program of Universidad del Rosario and in the museology programs of the National University of Colombia and the Externado University of Colombia.

Julia Noulin-Mérat, Associate Producer, Boston Lyric Opera, and Co-Artistic Director, Guerilla Opera



Julia Noulin-Mérat is a French, American and Canadian producer with over 14 years' experience in the performing arts. She is co-artistic director of Guerilla Opera, where she began as producer and head of production, and serves as associate producer at Boston Lyric Opera, a post she has held for the past seven years. In addition, Noulin-Mérat has worked on over 400 opera, theater and television productions, including 20 new operas and 22 new plays, and produced 50 shows. She is the principal designer at Noulin-Mérat Studio. Other projects include a TEDx talk on site-specific opera productions in the modern age; *Neverland* (with China Broadway), a \$20 million, 50,000-square-foot immersive theater piece in Beijing that required collaboration with 650 people; and *Playground* (Opera Omaha), a touring operatic sound sculpture created in collaboration with composer Ellen Reid. She has served on the adjudication panel for OPERA America's Director-Designer Showcase and recently was selected for OA's Mentorship Program for Women. Much of her work involves site-specific installations, including productions at Boston Lyric Opera. Noulin-Mérat is an advocate for new works and new audience development, and has produced programs for social media engagement (such as tweet seats at final dress rehearsals and live streaming of performances), tactile performances for visually impaired audiences, historically informed performances with period instruments, and community-specific performances.

Lauri Pokkinen, Audience Outreach and Social Responsibility Manager, Finnish National Opera and Ballet



Lauri Pokkinen is a management professional in the fields of opera and classical music. He has extensive knowledge of leading music institutions in Finland, including the largest arts festival in northern Europe, the Helsinki Festival, and the leading contemporary music festival, Musica nova Helsinki. After working as a producer at these festivals, Pokkinen had the great privilege to be employed as the first-ever audience outreach and social responsibility manager at the Finnish National Opera and Ballet. Since 2017, he has also been a member of the board of directors of Opera Europa, the sister organization of OPERA America. Pokkinen studied musicology, marketing and management at the University of Helsinki and the Freie Universität Berlin. He holds a master's degree in musicology from the University of Helsinki.

Andrea Puente-Catán, Major Gifts Officer, Hispanic Affairs, San Diego Opera



Andrea Puente-Catán has had a multifaceted and diverse career as a professional harpist, accomplished fundraiser, classical music producer and advocate of Hispanic culture and opera in Spanish. As major gifts officer, Hispanic affairs, at San Diego Opera, she oversees the Opera en Español program and plans and executes strategies to build relationships with major donors and media partners. She actively promotes and lectures on Spanish opera and on the work of her late husband, opera composer Daniel Catán, at opera houses in the U.S. and Latin America. She was invited to speak at the Ópera Latinoamérica conference in August 2019. She served as the principal harpist of several orchestras in Mexico and the U.S. As a recipient of a Rockefeller Fellowship, she commissioned and performed works by contemporary Mexican and American composers. Puente-Catán earned an M.S. in fundraising and grantmaking at New York University and an M.M. from California State University, Los Angeles.

Chris Thoren, Fogel General Manager, Strategy and Communications, Chicago Opera Theater



Chris Thoren is the Henry and Frances Fogel general manager of strategy and communications at Chicago Opera Theater, where they oversee the company's strategic brand and all outgoing communications. Thoren led COT through a strategic rebrand, developed a living style guide, streamlined marketing and PR initiatives, and increased ticket and subscription revenue by five percent year over year. Before COT, Thoren worked on the communications and marketing staff for the House Theatre of Chicago, where they spearheaded expansive audience engagement and social media initiatives. They have served on directing teams at the House, Writer's Theatre and Arc Theatre, and in the development of multiple world- and local-premiere plays. In all their work, Thoren is dedicated to building community through inclusive and accessible art and storytelling. Thoren graduated from Loyola University of Chicago in 2013 with degrees in theater and English, and since then has served as a freelance director, storyteller and communications specialist.

Eleanor Parker Walter, Director of Marketing and Community Engagement, Opera Birmingham



Eleanor Parker Walter joined Opera Birmingham as director of marketing and communications in 2010 and additionally assumed the role of director of development for a portion of her tenure. She has also served as liaison to Amici — Young Friends of Opera Birmingham. Prior to moving to Birmingham, Walter lived in New York City, where she worked as an account executive for Buena Vista, Walt Disney and Touchstone Pictures, and Miramax Films. Her community activities have included serving as vice-president of the Greater Birmingham Humane Society Auxiliary, for which she has also volunteered as a foster for homeless pets. She is a sustainer of the Junior League of Birmingham and New York City, having served on numerous councils and as a committee chair. She was a charter member of the Alabama Ballet Junior Board and a founding member of the former Birmingham Arts Junior Alliance, as well as a member of the Young Professionals of Birmingham, Rotaract Club of Birmingham, and Junior Patrons of the Birmingham Museum of Art and the Alys Stephens Performing Arts Center. She has also served on the Executive Committee of the Jefferson County Chapter of the University of Alabama Alumni Association. She is a current nominee for Leadership Birmingham and the *Birmingham Business Journal's* "Top 40 Under 40." Walter is a native of Tusculumbia, Alabama, and a graduate of the University of Alabama, where she received a Bachelor of Arts in communication and information sciences, majoring in public relations with a minor in English.

Noah Stern Weber, Independent Consultant



Noah Stern Weber is an advocate for the arts who works to create a modern art form for a 21st-century audience. As a producer and then director of development at Beth Morrison Projects, he oversaw exceptional growth of a company pushing the edge of innovation in the field. While working as artistic services manager at OPERA America, he directed an overhaul of its external funding program, led forums on administration, technical production and new works, and served as a mentor to the awardees of Opera Grants for Female Composers: Discovery Grants. In 2014, Weber served as the interim executive director of the New York Opera Alliance and oversaw a comprehensive restructuring effort. As the artistic administrator at The Little Orchestra Society, he led labor negotiations, planned two full seasons and oversaw a music director search. Weber consults in strategic planning and project development, offering a holistic approach to efficient management and the development of new works. He was recently invited to the American Express Leadership Academy. He has received training in nonprofit fundraising (NYFA), professional development (BAM/Devos Professional Development Program), employment law (The Foundation Center) and labor negotiations (National Labor Relations Board). He earned an M.F.A. from Bard College-Conservatory and a B.M. from the Peabody Institute of Johns Hopkins University.

Arthur White, Director of External Affairs, Michigan Opera Theatre



Arthur White has built his career in the performing arts both on and off the stage. He has been a singer, artist manager, administrator and producer. As an impresario, White has presented operatic artists at numerous domestic and international venues, from the Shanghai Bund to Carnegie Hall. In 2013, he joined Michigan Opera Theatre, where he conceived and successfully implemented the Opera Club community engagement program in Metro-Detroit. He served as a presenter and panelist at Opera Conference 2015, where he shared techniques and strategies for building diverse opera audiences at the grassroots community level. In 2018, he was tapped to become MOT's director of external affairs.

For more information about OPERA America, career development for artists and administrators, or other programs visit operaamerica.org.



About OPERA America

OPERA America (operaamerica.org) leads and serves the entire opera community, supporting the creation, presentation and enjoyment of opera. The organization is committed to:

- Delivering professional development to artists, administrators and trustees.
- Increasing appreciation of opera through educational and audience development resources.
- Offering support and services that foster the creation and presentation of new works.
- Fostering equity, diversity and inclusion across all aspects of the opera industry.
- Undertaking national research and representing the field to policymakers and the media.
- Managing the National Opera Center, a custom-built facility that provides a centralized space for collaboration, rehearsal and performance.

Founded in 1970, OPERA America fulfills its mission through public programs, an annual conference, regional workshops, consultations, granting programs, publications and online resources. It is the only organization serving all constituents of opera: artists, administrators, trustees, educators and audience members. Membership includes 160 professional opera companies; 350 associate, business and education members; and 1,600 individuals. OPERA America extends its reach to 80,000 annual visitors to its National Opera Center and over 50,000 subscribers and followers on digital and social media. Representing over 90 percent of eligible professional companies, OPERA America is empowered to lead field-wide change.

OPERA America's long tradition of supporting and nurturing the creation and development of new works led to the formation of the Opera Fund, a growing endowment that allows OPERA America to make a direct impact on the ongoing creation and presentation of new opera and music-theater works. Currently, OPERA America awards more than \$2 million each year through its range of grant initiatives.

About American Express: Developing New Leaders for Tomorrow

One of American Express' three philanthropic platforms is Developing New Leaders for Tomorrow. Under this giving initiative, which recognizes the significance of strong leadership in the nonprofit and social purpose sectors, American Express makes grants focused on training high potential emerging leaders to tackle important issues in the 21st century. More than 100,000 emerging nonprofit and social sector leaders worldwide have benefitted from American Express leadership programs, including the American Express Leadership Academy. For leadership journey stories and additional resources, visit [LeaderStories.org](https://www.americanexpress.com/leaderstories).