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The magazine of OPERA America — the national service organization for opera, which leads and serves the entire opera community, supporting the creation, presentation and enjoyment of opera.

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ON THE COVER: Kari Marie Sorenson as Elisetta and Alexandra Christoforakis as Fidalma in The University of Maryland — Maryland Opera Studio's production of Cimarosa's *Il Matrimonio Segreto*, directed by Nick Olcott with design by Daniel Conway (scenery), Tim Burrow (costumes) and Andrew J. Guban (lighting). Photo by Cory Weaver.

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Launching a career as an opera singer, like the art form itself, is complex.



In a rapidly changing world, there are some essentials that remain constant — among them, many of the steps a singer must take when embarking on an operatic career. Choices made now can resonate in years to come. While the need to select the right coach or repertoire may be obvious, the considerations involved with each decision are as complex and nuanced as the aspiring singer's own voice.

In its role as national service organization for performing artists, OPERA America has created *Perspectives* a four-volume series to help guide the singer through these important career choices. Wrong choices once made can be difficult to reverse. If you plan a singing career in opera, this series provides the insights and information you need to inform your key decisions.

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OPERA America's annual conferences are a source of learning for the OPERA America staff as well as for our members. This was especially true of *Opera Conference 2009*, hosted with exceptional graciousness and ability by Houston Grand Opera.

One of the inherent strengths of the opera field is the variety among opera companies. Length of seasons, months of performance, sizes of venues and budgets are just a few of the variables that enable every opera company to create its own identity and respond to the unique resources and sensibilities of its community. Artistic and managerial options increase when the economy is thriving and revenue flows from ticket sales and contributions. During these periods, the differences among opera companies are amplified as general directors make choices from among a variety of possibilities. This year, however, the unique characteristics of every opera company were obscured by shared pressure from the economic crisis that has had impact across the entire country. Every opera company is making creative and sometimes difficult artistic decisions to reduce costs. Every opera company is reducing administrative overhead and exploring new options for generating earned and contributed revenue. *Opera Conference 2009* demonstrated a level of unified experience that enabled members to speak across budget levels and geography about common challenges and opportunities. As we climb out of the current recession — and we will — it would be beneficial to preserve the powerful sense of collegiality that enriched formal and informal discussions in Houston.

Conference attendees appreciated that *Opera Conference 2009* was smaller than recent conferences. Just as opera productions gain intensity and immediacy when experienced in smaller venues, so do opera conferences benefit from more intimate contact among participants. As OPERA America embarks next year on a new professional development program utilizing videoconferencing and webinars, meetings in person will be more important than ever to nurture virtual relationships. We will work thoughtfully to integrate new technology and meetings in ways that reduce costs, increase the exchange of expertise and build community across the field.

Professional development is a subject that runs throughout this issue. Roger Pines's interviews with several celebrated singers explore the unique developmental hurdles faced by artists with "large" voices. Collaboration among opera companies and universities is an important strategy being explored in many cities. Such partnerships not only reduce expenses, they also offer tremendous artistic, professional development and marketing advantages to participating organizations. Thomas May's article about the artistic vitality that can emerge from periods of economic stress was borne out to brilliant effect with Houston Grand Opera's world premiere of André Previn and John Caird's opera, *Brief Encounter*, that took place during *Opera Conference 2009*. Indeed, as we enter the summer festival season, let's do so with appreciation for the sense of community, dedication to building the skills of the next generation of artists and administrators, readiness to work with partners and commitment to core artistic values that are sources of strength across our field.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marc A. Scorca". The signature is fluid and cursive, written on a light-colored background.

Marc A. Scorca
President/CEO



The exterior of the new Noah Liff Opera Center. Photo by Reed Hummell/Nashville Opera.

“IN GOOD TIMES AND BAD, WE HAVE KEPT PLUGGING WITH OUR LONG-TERM STRATEGY.”

At the end of April, **Nashville Opera** celebrated the grand opening of the Noah Liff Opera Center. “Though the center is a new home for the opera, it will be an exciting new resource for the entire community with functional areas for community gatherings and a music education resource center for students, teachers and others interested in the art of opera,” says Executive Director Carol Penterman. “Much more than just a building, the Liff Center provides Nashville Opera with a solid foundation to increase our artistic offerings and continue nurturing the spirit of music and art that defines our city as a vibrant cultural center of the South.”

Although the company will continue to present its mainstage productions at the Tennessee Performing Arts Center, the Liff Center presents new artistic opportunities. A large studio will provide rehearsal space for mainstage productions. With a seating capacity of up to 300, plus a theatrical lighting and sound system, it also allows the company to consider expanding its season with recitals and other events that would not be appropriate for the larger theater.

It is expected that the studio will also be available to other groups when not in use by the opera company, according to Director of Sales and Marketing Reed Hummell: “We ultimately want this to be a community venue. We would love to have outside groups rehearse and perform here. There has also been a lot of interest from meeting planners and people who put on special events.”

Shortly after its opening, the Noah Liff Opera Center was awarded a trophy for design excellence by the Nashville Chapter of the Urban Land Institute. “Best kind of example of a nonprofit institutional adaptive reuse right in a neighborhood,” commented the judging panel. “You can already see the impact it’s having on the adjacent fragile neighborhoods. It is a catalyst for further reinvestment.”

During the long campaign to build the center, it was of course impossible to foresee that the grand opening would come at a moment of such economic uncertainty. “Nashville Opera has always had a reputation for producing quality opera in a way that is fiscally responsible,” says Hummell. “In good times and bad, we have kept plugging with our long-term strategy, with where we want to be as a company. We knew we had to have a permanent home. Having bricks and mortar helps the community feel more secure that you’re going to be with them for a long, long time. This building is not the destination, but the starting point.” 🍷

“WE UNCOVERED MORE ISSUES THAN WE IMAGINED POSSIBLE.”

At *Opera Conference 2008* in Denver, stage director Robert Swedberg was asked to moderate a panel on “Green Stages.” While many were curious to learn about environmentally-sensitive production practices, few opera companies had begun implementing such practices. “There was a lot of interest but not a lot that had been done, at least not in opera.”

As a new hire in the **University of Michigan’s** School of Music, Swedberg raised the idea of a green opera project for his Opera Studio Class. The proposal was met with enthusiasm by the opera students, as well as faculty from across the university. Swedberg collaborated with colleagues from departments including music, theater, dance, engineering, computer and environmental science, and digital media.

“It really got the students engaged,” says Swedberg. “It was also interesting how the piece — *L’Enfant et les sortilèges* — tied in. We framed it as a story about man’s inhumanity toward his environment.”

In addition to using recyclable materials for sets and costumes, and energy-efficient LED lights, Swedberg and his students considered how to be energy efficient in rehearsal. Not only did they strive for a paper-free process, the students pledged to forego the elevators to the second-floor rehearsal hall, where they kept the lights at a lower setting.

“Along the way, we uncovered more issues that we imagined possible,” says Swedberg. “Not printing schedules and rehearsal notes means you’re firing up 25 computers to look at the message. What is the impact of that? At one point we were going to work with another faculty member to build an alternative power generator, but the LED lights used so little energy that it didn’t make sense to create a new means of generation.”

The school’s engineering department is working on a carbon calculation for the production, comparing it to another production in a venue of the same size. Swedberg sees the project as a first step in an ongoing educational process. “The development department has let me know that there are donors particularly interested in supporting this kind of thing. I think everything we do after this will be informed by this production. We’re just beginning to build awareness and understand the implications of some of the choices.” 🍷

“POLITICIANS PAY ATTENTION TO PEOPLE WHO VOTE.”

On April 1, **Austin Lyric Opera** (ALO) joined with 14 other local arts organizations to host a public forum for candidates running for mayor and city council. ALO General Director Kevin Patterson, who had been inspired by the level of cooperation among Pittsburgh arts organizations when he attended the first *National Performing Arts Convention* in 2004, has been working to lay the groundwork for shared services in Austin. The forum, in addition to educating voters, served as a test case for collaboration.

“The biggest challenge was getting everyone comfortable with the idea of a public forum,” says Patterson. “People kept asking, ‘Can we legally do this? Is this lobbying?’ We made it very clear that we would not be endorsing a candidate. We did ask our patrons to hold off making political contributions until after the event. We said, ‘It’s not that we don’t want you to give, but we want you to have the facts before you make your choice.’”

Betty Dunkerley, the recently retired Mayor Pro Tem and an enthusiastic arts supporter, was enlisted to moderate the discussion. “Having Betty on board meant that we could count on all the candidates’ participation,” says Patterson. “She has tremendous influence. No one wants to make Betty mad.”

The Paramount Theatre offered to host the event, and each participating organization invited its patrons via e-mail. The event drew over 400 people from the arts community, making it one of the largest voter forums attended by these candidates.

Prior to the event, the arts organizations had worked to put together information and questions for the candidates. “It was interesting to see them react to the fact that the arts contribute two billion dollars a year to the Austin economy.” In addition to discussing the feasibility of a department of cultural arts and the continuation of a “bed tax” to support the arts, the candidates addressed other issues that impacted cultural institutions, such as downtown infrastructure.

“Politicians pay attention to people who vote,” says Patterson, who feels that the event was an important step in educating both the candidates and the voters. “We feel that everyone came away feeling really informed about where the candidates stood on the issues.” 🗳️



Emily Pulley as Blanche in Austin Lyric Opera's production of Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites*. Photo by Mark Matson.



DuPage Opera Theatre's production of Puccini's *La bohème*. Photo by Rich Malec.

"THERE IS ROOM FOR ALL OF US."

DuPage Opera Theatre is one of five resident professional ensembles at the College of DuPage, a community college that is home to The McAninch Arts Center. This association puts the company at a distinct intellectual and operational advantage: "It is wonderful to be surrounded on a daily basis with the many talented professors who teach here. It comes in handy when you are stuck for a translation and can call upon the Italian professor for a quick and reliable answer!" says General Manager Paula Cebula. "We are also able to use the services of the theater tech crew, properties department, costume department, box office, marketing department and security department." However, the company must work hard to make clear that it is a fully professional company, rather than a student endeavor.

The McAninch Arts Center is in Glen Ellyn, IL, just outside Chicago, a city rich in operatic opportunity. "Having this level of competition is a very healthy thing, both for us and the operagoers in the Chicago-land area," says Cebula. "We have a larger pool of people interested in opera and consequently the level of quality that any of us put out there for the public must be of the highest level. Chicago has a population of over nine million people when you include its suburbs, so there is room for all of us! The directors and staff at both Lyric Opera of Chicago and Chicago Opera Theater are always willing to help, whether it is a question about music editions, costumes, stage managers or recent graduates of their young artist programs."

The company has cultivated a real community spirit at its performances. Artistic Director and Conductor Kirk Muspratt, who has been with the company for five years, introduced "Interactive Intermissions," where members of the orchestra and chorus come out in character to greet the patrons and ask about their opera experience. In addition, Muspratt and cast members mingle with the audience in the lobby immediately following each performance.

DuPage Opera Theatre, which became a professional company member of OPERA America earlier this year, presents a range of repertoire: the 2008-2009 season included *L'elisir d'amore* and *The Beggar's Opera*. Cebula has appreciated being able to take advantage OPERA America's resources, particularly the production database, which has allowed the company "to bring in fabulous sets that we are unable to build here because of our space constraints. Our audience reaction has been most gratifying, since this has made a marked difference in our overall aesthetics." 🍷



Delaware Valley Opera's production of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Photo by Benita Abrams.

“GOOD HEAVENS, THEY’VE GOT AN OPERA COMPANY UP HERE!”

“Good heavens, they’ve got an opera company up here!” That’s what James Blanton thought when he first moved to the Delaware Valley. “It’s a very rural area, but it was clear to me that they did some ambitious and interesting things.” Blanton, who is artistic director of **Delaware Valley Opera** (Narrowsburg, NY), succeeded local legend Gloria Krause. “Everybody who has lived here for any length of time knows Gloria,” says Blanton. “Most of them had her as their music teacher in school. She had the vision of starting an opera company in this area and kept it going almost single-handedly. She was also the bassoonist. Even though she is not as hands-on as she used to be, we are benefiting from all her years of hard work.”

Delaware Valley Opera, one of OPERA America’s newest Professional Company Members, presents three to four productions each season, and its primary venue is the Tusten Theater, a former movie theater that hosts cultural events throughout the year. “It’s very charming and has an old-world feel,” says Blanton. “In this country we’re used to seeing opera in these huge arena-like venues. The audience loves this because they’re very close, and the singers like it because they don’t feel they have to scream to be heard. I feel like we can pay attention to the subtleties that get lost in bigger theaters. Most operas were not written for huge venues, so we can observe the musical things that the composer had in mind.” Of course, the intimate space is not without its challenges: the stage barely accommodates big ensemble scenes, and performers sometimes have to exit the building to make an entrance.

Education is an important part of the company’s mission. Last year, the administrative director of the opera led a composing workshop for high school students, leading to the creation of a short student work for chamber orchestra that was featured in the Delaware Valley Chamber Orchestra’s annual new music festival. In addition, the company works to recruit young people to participate in the chorus.

Narrowsburg is about a two-hour drive from Manhattan, and according to Blanton, the company’s core audience frequently travels to the city to attend opera. “But in addition to those experienced operagoers, we also have a lot of newcomers. Since we involve so many local people — not just as singers, but stage crews and costumers — their friends come out to support them.” 🍷

“WE HAVE A LITTLE MORE FLEXIBILITY THAN WE WOULD IN A BIG CITY.”

“Opera Circle has always been interested in first-rate music that is not given enough credit,” says Dorota Sobieska, the company’s executive director. “*L’isola disabitata* was Hadyn’s favorite of his operas, and it’s a fantastic, innovative work.” Opera Circle (Cleveland, OH), a new Professional Company Member of OPERA America, will open its 2009-2010 season with a production of Haydn’s opera, followed by Bellini’s *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* (part of an ongoing Bellini series) and Donizetti’s *Don Pasquale*.

This season concludes with a one-act comic opera by Josef Elsner, who once taught Chopin. To round out the evening, 17 Chopin songs have been organized with a narrative arc for staged performance. This kind of presentation — Sobieska calls it “original spectacle” — is a specialty of Opera Circle, often working in collaboration with other local organizations. Sobieska is particularly proud of *Poetics of Szymanowski*, a program that celebrated Karol Szymanowski’s 125th birthday with a collage of music and ballet, presented with Verlezza Dance and the Ray Vargas Dancers. To celebrate its 10th anniversary, the company commissioned American-Egyptian composer Halim El-Dabh to rework and expand Mozart’s incidental music for *Thamos, King of Egypt* into a large-scale opera with a libretto by Sobieska.

Sobieska and her husband, the company’s artistic director, moved to the United States from Poland, where Jacek Sobieski had been the musical director at the National Theatre in Warsaw for almost 20 years. The couple finds Cleveland a wonderful place to produce opera: “There are so many music schools, so many orchestras, so many musicians. And we have a little more flexibility than we would in a big city. People will flock to whatever is happening.” 🍷



Opera Circle's production of Rameau's *Pygmalion*. Photo by Chris Holley-Starling.

“WE WANT TO DEMONSTRATE OUR ABILITY TO BE A LEADER IN OUR COMMUNITY.”

Opera on the James (Lynchburg, VA) was launched in 2005 with a concert entitled *Three Terrific Tenors*. “That sold out and gave us the confidence to keep going,” says David Neumeyer, who is president of the organization. “Central Virginia has never had its own opera company, though it hosted touring companies in the past. Our first season convinced us there was an audience for opera. We’ve gotten terrific response from the community.”

And that response hasn’t just come in the form of applause: “It was a great public vote of confidence when we received an anonymous donation of \$1 million.” The company plans to invest 80 percent of the donation to serve as a long-term source of income. “We are investing the other 20 percent in increasing staffing, working with a marketing firm, getting better software and enhancing productions.”

Opera on the James now presents two operas each season under the leadership of Artistic Director Craig Fields. “The real key has been Craig’s artistic vision. Our view is that we will be most successful if we can bring high quality singers and design to our stage,” says Neumeyer, who notes that Lynchburg is already rich in cultural resources: “There is a symphony that is 30 years old, and the historic Academy of Music is now being renovated. Virginia School of the Arts is one of three private dance high schools in the country; when kids graduate they go straight into professional companies.” Opera on the James has collaborated with the dance school for productions of *Roméo et Juliette*, *La traviata* and *Don Giovanni*. Such collaborations offer benefits that go beyond enriching productions: “The more you reach into the community to create partnerships, the more you create interest.”

Last season, after a strategic planning retreat, the board of directors adopted a detailed three-year plan. “For the next three years we are really going to be working on growing our audience, reaching more people in the area,” says Neumeyer. “It was particularly helpful, at the OPERA America conference, to learn more about how Houston Grand Opera is making opera part of the daily life of Houstonians. We want to demonstrate our ability to be a leader in our community.”



Marc Schapman as Alfredo and Penelope Shumate as Violetta in Opera on the James's production of Verdi's *La traviata*. Photo by Keith Thienemann.

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The 21st annual **Dallas Opera** Guild Vocal Competition awarded 10 Texas-based singers \$19,000 in prize monies. Baritones Steven LaBrie and Michael Sumuel tied for first place — a first in the history of this competition — and each will receive a \$6,500 cash prize. There was no award given for second place. Mezzo-soprano Catherine Martin took third place, an honor which includes \$3,000, and soprano Icy Simpson was voted this year's "People's Choice Award," carrying a \$1,000 dollar prize. Two \$500 "Encouragement Awards" were presented to tenor Juan José De León and soprano Mary-Jane Lee. The remaining finalists, baritone Thomas Cannon, and sopranos Dee Donasco, Evelyn Nelson and Julia Snyder, were each presented with a check for \$200 by The Dallas Opera Guild.

David Grabarkewitz has been appointed **El Paso Opera's** new director. Grabarkewitz most recently staged El Paso Opera's production of *The Magic Flute* in March. He will split his time between El Paso and New York, where he serves as a resident director at the New York City Opera. Since his appointment, Grabarkewitz has been working very closely with the board to design a three- to five-year strategic plan for El Paso Opera that is mindful of today's economic climate.

Madison Opera General Director **Allan Naplan** has been named one of Madison's "40 Under 40" honorees for 2009 by *In Business* magazine. The publication cited Naplan's accomplishments with Madison Opera since his arrival in

2005. *In Business* notes that Naplan has "led Madison Opera's growth" by overseeing "record ticket sales, a successful expansion to three main-stage productions, increased fundraising, new and thriving initiatives in education and community outreach, as well as a consistent track record of fiscal health and responsible management."

The Bonfils-Stanton Foundation has named **Greg Carpenter**, general director of **Opera Colorado** as one of five 2009 Livingston Fellows. This program intends to strengthen the state's nonprofit sector by investing in the advanced learning and development of promising nonprofit leaders. As a Livingston Fellow, Carpenter will be awarded up to \$25,000 to undertake activities that will enhance his leadership abilities and enable him to explore new ways to increase his impact in their organization and the broader community. With his fellowship he plans to create mentorships with opera industry leaders, participate in an executive education program and study best practices from other successful performing arts organizations.

Opera Columbus Executive Director **Press Southworth III** received the 2009 Pace Setter Executive Award. The annual Executive Award is one of Ohio State University (OSU) Fisher College of Business's most important awards, as it recognizes the ideals that the school strives to instill in its students. Southworth, a 1975 OSU graduate and a Vietnam veteran, has been Opera Columbus's executive director since 2006. During this time, he has helped the

organization achieve a significant turnaround in its operation and financial well-being.

More than 100 entries were received from young singers throughout the country for the annual Irma M. Cooper **Opera Columbus** International Vocal Competition. Winners included bass-baritone Joseph Barron (first place), soprano Jennifer Forni (second place and Audience Choice Award winner), mezzo-soprano Katherine Lerner (third place) and mezzo-soprano Catherine Martin (honorable mention).

David B. Devan, who has served as managing director since January 2006, has been appointed to the post of executive director **Opera Company of Philadelphia**. Under this new structure, General and Artistic director Robert B. Driver will return to his post as artistic director, which he held from 2001 to 2004. Since his arrival, Devan has worked on strategic planning initiatives and building partnerships within the community. Prior to coming to Philadelphia, Devan's posts included executive director of Pacific Opera Victoria for nine years, and positions as director of marketing for Opera Ontario, the Canadian Opera Company and Toronto's Harbourfront Centre. Devan is a graduate of Brock University in Ontario and Stanford University's Business Executive Program.

The 40th Annual **Palm Beach Opera** Vocal Competition featured \$85,000 in prize money. As the first place winner in the Advanced Division,

Yannick-Muriel Noah won the \$8,500 Hallock, Bryan, Cooper Memorial Award. Elliot Madore won the \$5,500 Arthur W. Silvester Memorial Award as the first place finisher in the Junior Division. Other prize winners in the Advanced Division included: Anthony Roth Costanzo, second prize; Jussica Julin, third prize; Rie Miyake, fourth prize; Scott Quinn, fifth prize; Joëlle Harvey, sixth prize winner of the David and Ingrid Kosowsky Award of \$4,500; Joshua Kohl, seventh prize; and Sung Eun Lee, eighth prize. Junior Division winners included Simone Osborne, Betsy Diaz, Michael Sumuel, Andrea Shokery and Mary Jane Lee.

After 25 years with **Pittsburgh Opera**, Chief Financial Officer **Ken Tarasi** has moved on to accept the director of financial operations position with **Sarasota Opera**. **Jennie Brock Leghart** will join Pittsburgh Opera as the director of finance. Leghart comes to the company from Manchester Bidwell Corporation of Pittsburgh, where she held the position of director of finance. She has also been the senior accounting manager for Habitat for Humanity International, controller for the Institute for Shipboard Education, and operations manager and bookkeeper for Pittsburgh Habitat for Humanity. Leghart holds an M.B.A. from Joseph M. Katz Graduate School of Business at the University of Pittsburgh and a B.M. in vocal performance from the Boston Conservatory.

Matias Tarnopolsky has been appointed director of **Cal Performances**, effective August 10, 2009. Tarnopolsky is currently vice-president for artistic planning at the New York Philharmonic. In this role, he has worked extensively with pre-eminent conductors and artists in creating the artistic profile of the New York Philharmonic. From 1999 to 2006, he was director of programming, and later, senior director of artistic planning, at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (CSO) where he was responsible for Symphony Center Presents, the CSO's prominent presenting series. Tarnopolsky received early training in piano, later studied conducting and devoted serious instrumental study to the clarinet.

Leigh Holman, stage director and director of the Opera Colorado Ensemble Artists, has been appointed Director of CU Opera at the **University of Colorado at Boulder** beginning in August 2009. Holman will leave her position at Opera Colorado in June 2009. Holman was previously chair of voice and opera studies at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. She has been a frequent opera lecturer, including presentations of the pre-curtain lectures at the Ellie Caulkins Opera House and Opera 101 presentations on KVOD. She received her B.M. from the University of Southern California, holds a graduate opera performance degree from the Eastman School of Music and a D.M.A. from the University of Colorado at Boulder. ☺




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OPERA FOR YOUTH

The newly launched *Opera for Youth Directory*, housed on www.operaamerica.org, provides comprehensive information about operas that can be performed for or by young people. It contains over 300 titles that can be browsed and searched in a number of ways. Members who wish to list works in the *Directory* can log in to the site and follow the instructions to submit a work. 



UPCOMING WORKSHOPS FOR SINGERS


OPERA America has scheduled two workshops for singers in fall 2009. The first, to be held in collaboration with Lyric Opera of Kansas City, will take place on September 26. On October 3, another workshop will be held in collaboration with Ithaca College. These workshops, which feature experts who train, cast and manage singers, focus on the business aspects of a career, including building a professional network. To hear a podcast from a previous workshop, visit the artist section of www.operaamerica.org. 

ANNUAL BUSINESS MEETING

At the 2009 Annual Business Meeting, held in conjunction with *Opera Conference 2009*, it was announced that the contract for OPERA America President/CEO **Marc A. Scorca** will be extended through 2016. In 2010, OPERA America will celebrate 40 years of service to the opera community and Scorca's 20th anniversary with the organization.

Under Scorca's leadership, OPERA America launched *The Opera Fund*, a \$20 million endowment effort, to create a permanent fund dedicated to supporting new works and audience development activities. Scorca also led the organization's relocation from Washington, D.C. to New York City in 2005 as the first step in the creation of an Opera Center.

Scorca and Freud also announced the creating of a Strategy Committee that will guide OPERA America staff and members through a planning process in conjunction with the organization's 40th anniversary year. The final objective is the creation of strategic priorities for the field and for OPERA America that will guide the association from 2010 to 2020, OPERA America's 50th Anniversary. While the current economic uncertainty may result in future changes to the plan, it is especially important to position OPERA America to take advantage of opportunities that may arise when the economy improves. It is anticipated that the final plan will be presented for review to members in association with the Annual Business Meeting in Los Angeles in June 2010.

Two new members were elected to OPERA America's board of directors. **Darren K. Woods**, a former operatic tenor who now leads Fort Worth Opera and Seagle Music Colony, will provide significant understanding of the needs of both performers and companies. **Gregory C. Swinehart**, United States and North American Managing Partner of Deloitte's Forensic and Dispute Services practice, as well as a trustee of The Minnesota Opera, brings legal experience and a fresh perspective to the board. In addition, **James W. Wright**, general director of Vancouver Opera, has been elected as secretary, replacing Dennis Hanthorn, who has completed his term of service. 

NEW DISCOUNT PROGRAM FOR MEMBERS

OPERA America has partnered with Staples Business Advantage to offer a procurement program that provides impressive savings on office supplies, furniture, promotional products, janitorial supplies, coffee and more. All OPERA America members are eligible to sign up for this program and receive a catalog with over 4,000 significantly discounted items.

To take advantage of the newest benefit of membership, log in to www.operaamerica.org.

NEA OPERA HONORS/NATIONAL OPERA OPEN HOUSE

National Opera Week, scheduled for November 13 through 22, will celebrate the vitality of opera in America as a contemporary cultural expression. The strength and diversity of established opera companies, community opera ensembles and opera training programs across the United States will be shared through a variety of free and accessible activities for opera lovers and newcomers to the art form. Launched with the presentation of the 2009 NEA Opera Honors in Washington, D.C., the celebration will reach from coast to coast as opera companies offer a range of free programs for the public that demonstrate the allure and accessibility of this most multi-media of the arts. Included within National Opera Week will be other noteworthy events including the annual *Opera News Awards* and the annual Richard Tucker Music Foundation gala, which showcases promising young singers. From open houses, lecture/demonstrations and community performances to the presentation of the nation's highest award in the field, National Opera Week will bring the inventiveness and excitement of opera to a national audience.

OPERA America is working with a steering committee to develop informative materials for member companies. Those who sign up to participate in National Opera Week will benefit from inclusion in national publicity efforts, including a dedicated page on OPERA America's Web site. For more information, contact Patricia Kiernan Johnson at PKJohnson@operaamerica.org.

SAVE THE DATE: OPERA CONFERENCE 2010

Mark your calendars now! *Opera Conference 2010* will be held June 9-13 in Los Angeles, CA. The conference, hosted by Los Angeles Opera, will coincide with the company's presentation of the complete *Ring Cycle*.



Anja Kampe as Sieglinde and Linda Watson as Brunnhilde in Los Angeles Opera's 2008-2009 production of Wagner's *Die Walküre*. Photo by Monika Rittershaus.



Learning to Work Together: Opera Companies and Academic Institutions



Universities and conservatories play an important role in today's opera industry. In addition to offering specialized training for performing artists and other opera professionals, many have developed synergistic relationships with nearby opera companies. These collaborations vary from city to city, and can offer a range of benefits.

A Richer Experience for Audiences

In some cities, collaboration means local opera patrons experience a greater range of repertoire than they might otherwise. **Opera Company of Philadelphia** has developed a partnership with **The Curtis Institute of Music** to co-present one production each season, beginning with Golijov's *Ainadamar* in 2008. "We have always had a very strong relationship with Curtis," says David B. Devan, executive director of Opera Company of Philadelphia. "We learned there were certain pieces they wanted to produce for their singers, but the school didn't have the resources. It dawned on me that conservatories don't have a lot of marketing horsepower, but we were in a position to provide them with a substantially larger audience. We came up with an arrangement whereby Curtis would produce the show and we would market it as part of our season and then hand over the revenue, allowing them to pay their bills."

It is a win-win arrangement, according to Devan: "Curtis gets to produce at a top-notch facility, with full houses. We get a piece of repertoire we wouldn't otherwise produce. This year, with *Wozzeck*, we were able to put a great 20th century masterpiece in front of our audience, which helped take them on a journey through the canon." In 2010, Philadelphia audiences will enjoy a production of Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Mississippi Opera (Jackson, MS) and the **University of Southern Mississippi** (Hattiesburg, MS) have developed a different strategy for getting more bang from their producing buck. Maryann Kyle, who is director of the university's Southern Opera and Music Theatre, was looking for a way to improve production quality and create opportunities for her students. "Our production resources are less than spectacular, but our singers and orchestra are really strong." Kyle, who has sung several roles with Mississippi Opera, invited Mississippi Opera Artistic Director Alan Mann to hear her students in audition, after which the two agreed to move forward with a joint production of *La traviata* — as a trial. Mississippi Opera hired guest artists for leading roles; university students were invited to audition for smaller roles and to join with the Mississippi Opera chorus for the production. Costs were shared equally between the two organizations.

The experiment was a success, and the organizations have now produced three operas together, with performances in both Hattiesburg and Jackson. In addition to providing opportunities for the students, the initiative has helped build opera audiences in both locations. "Because of the quality of the singers and the production, we're able to bring in a more well-rounded audience," says Kyle. "And in Jackson, the students attract a ticket base of parents and friends."

The university also benefits from having Mississippi Opera guest artists in residence as they prepare for the production. "In addition to rehearsing for the opera, they are available to give a masterclass or an acting workshop," says Kyle.

"Contributors look really favorably on the collaboration," says Elizabeth Buyan, executive director of Mississippi Opera, who notes that alumni in and around Jackson are particularly interested in how the organizations work together. "You find more and more these days that people want to support educational opportunities. Every time one of those students goes to an audition for graduate school or an apprentice program, they have a role with Mississippi Opera on their resume. It is just huge for them. They get to perform on stage with professionals. It's not like a university production, where they have three months to rehearse an opera. They have to show up prepared and get it staged in our three-week schedule.

Sometimes, organizations are able to offer local opera-goers a richer experience simply by sharing information and planning ahead. **Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music** (CCM) planned a production of Daniel Catàn's *Rappacini's Daughter* the same season as **Cincinnati Opera's** production of the same composer's *Florencia en el Amazonas*. This season, the drama department of CCM is producing Lorca's *Blood Wedding*, while Cincinnati Opera is producing *Ainadamar*, an opera inspired by the life of Lorca.

More Opportunities for Artists

Complementary programming is only one of the ways in which the two Cincinnati organizations work together. Their long-standing partnership, which developed over a number of years, was recently strengthened by a three-year grant from the Corbett Foundation, intended to formalize the existing

relationship with collaborative academic programming, as well as enhanced young artist and internship opportunities.

“We complement each other in a number of ways,” says Cincinnati Opera Director of Artistic Operations Marcus Küchle. “We’ve done several new works that we’ve been able to workshop with CCM students. Almost the entire cast for our workshop of *Rise for Freedom: The John P. Parker Story* came from there.”

According to Robin Guarino, the chair of the opera program at CCM, opportunities like the workshop are invaluable for students: “They go into an interactive process where they are having to work with a composer. The other benefit is going into the community; they feel like they’re making a difference.”

Cincinnati Opera does not maintain a full-time singer training program, in part because of their schedule: “We are in production for only 10 weeks,” says Küchle. “Really shaping artists takes a longer time.” When the company needs singers for events outside the festival season, it relies on CCM talent. “They allow me to attend their auditions at the beginning of the semester. I also go to all

their performances, so I am very familiar with the talent pool. When we have any kind of performance opportunity, I know who is there.”

“I love the fact that the students do hit-and-run donor performances,” says Guarino. “They need performance opportunities. In school, we’re always micromanaging their technique, their craft, their presentation. When they have an audition, they will spend a week thinking about what they’re going to wear. We want them to get in the habit of just going out there and doing it.”

Similarly, Opera Company of Philadelphia relies on students from Curtis and the **Academy of Vocal Arts** (AVA) for the events and small mainstage assignments that other companies might cast from a young artist program. “Artistic Director Robert Driver and I go to all their productions, and our music staff hears the students twice each year in the Academy,” says Devan. “It is great for the students to be able to sing in this amazing opera house. When we plan our seasons, we make sure we have an opportunity for AVA students and alumni to be in our productions. We also cast some Curtis students, and from time to time also from Temple University.”

Vancouver Opera has a formal agreement with the **University of British Columbia** whereby two students understudy roles for the company’s school touring program each season. According to Director of Education Michael Grice, the understudies have three to four performing opportunities each year. They also get a taste of the peripatetic life of a working singer: “British Columbia is about the size of France, Germany and the Netherlands combined. It’s larger than the total combined areas of Washington, Oregon and California. Our singers get very used to life on the road!” The company also hears local university students in audition, “resulting, when appropriate, in recommendations for scholarships and grants, and for possible employment in our professional chorus.”

In some cases, opera companies and academic programs have joined forces for formal, degree-granting programs. **Kentucky Opera** partners with both the **University of Louisville** and the **University of Kentucky** for its Studio Artist program, in which graduate students cover mainstage roles, perform comprimario roles, and have access to coachings and masterclasses.



Hilary Ginther as Cherubino and Sarah Callinan as Susanna in *The Mississippi Opera* and the University of Southern Mississippi’s co-production of Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro*. Photo courtesy of The Mississippi Opera.

Opera Theater offers a two-year Professional Diploma Program that couples advanced training with full scholarship support and professional experience. Other joint programs include those of **Tri-Cities Opera/Binghamton University** and **Lyric Opera of Kansas City/University of Missouri, Kansas City**. **Juilliard Opera** and the **Metropolitan Opera's** Lindemann Young Artist Program share two key people: Brian Zeger, who is artistic director of Juilliard's Department of Vocal Arts and also executive director of the Lindemann program, and stage director Stephen Wadsworth, who, in addition to teaching for the Lindemann program, is director of opera studies at Juilliard. Beginning in the 2010-2011 season, the two organizations will present an annual joint production.

Mutual Benefits Offstage

Universities supply talent behind the scenes, too. Glenn Plott, director of production at Cincinnati Opera, says, "We're blessed with having several good academic institutions locally. CCM is the primary one, but I also have Wright State University (Dayton, OH), Thomas More (Cincinnati) and Northern Kentucky University."

"I've been pulling interns from CCM for several years," he continues. "It's nothing formal, but they do funnel their better students our way. We bring them in for the rehearsal department, technical, stage management." The students provide vitally needed support for the opera's professional staff, and Plott is vigilant about providing something of equal value in return.

"I take this very seriously," he says. "It is not about me getting cheap labor. Our interns work with professionals in the discipline in which they are hired. They don't park cars and they don't clean toilets. I try to keep it between 40 and 60 hours per week. I give them a stipend and important experience. It's a fair exchange. They are exposed to other departments, too, and if they want to

work in marketing for a couple of days, they can. I have expectations they need to fulfill, but it takes both of us to hold up an agreement."

In addition to staffing his season, Plott is concerned about providing for the future of the field. For him, the application and interview process is an important exercise in professional development. "We get hundreds of applications, and we will communicate back to each one of them. Each one will have the opportunity for an interview. I believe that's part of the education process. If they're local, we'll give them a chance to come in and spend 20-30 minutes with us. For those that come through successfully, I want their allegiance. I want them to come back and work for me when they're pros."

For the past five years, **Edmonton Opera** has collaborated with **The University of Alberta's** stage management program. The company has an agreement with Canadian Actors Equity that allows them to hire apprentice assistant stage managers from the university. The collaboration began with a conversation between Production Manager Tim Yakimec and an instructor from the university's stage management program, who was looking for a way to give his students more practical experience in opera. The apprentices, who receive credit for their work, observe and assist the professional stage management staff. Yakimec says that several former apprentices are now regular Equity stage managers, and he is more than happy to hire these emerging professionals "who already know the routine."

Juggling academic and production schedules can be tricky, though. While Yakimec is flexible early in the process, allowing students to miss an occasional rehearsal that conflicts with a class, students and faculty understand that tech week responsibilities are non-negotiable. At Cincinnati Opera, Plott, who is responsible for the company's rehearsal schedule, makes sure that important rehearsals do not conflict with university

productions or commencement. "We're always pushing the schedule around, dancing around the CCM projects."

Finding appropriate opportunities for students within a company's season is an obvious place to begin, but collaboration doesn't stop there. Kentucky Opera put together a composer workshop in which Jake Heggie coached students from University of Louisville, the Academy of Music at St. Francis in the Fields and Kentucky Opera Studio Artists.

A Continuum of Collaboration

Houston Grand Opera (HGO) has collaborated with local universities on a number of different programs. The Britten Folk Song Project was a three-part collaboration with HGO's High School Voice Studio, HGO Studio and the **University of Houston**. "We put together a series of workshops using Britten folk songs to learn story telling techniques, song techniques, and create a community in song," says HGOco Director Sandra Bernhard. "The project included acting workshops, mentoring discussions, character studies and a creation project." Tracey Satterfield, director of the High School Voice Studio, observed many positive outcomes of the project. In addition to studying the songs in their lessons, students coached them with HGO's Kathleen Kelly. "This was their first experience of having a voice training team," says Satterfield. "I observed some of the coachings, so we could go back and reinforce or clarify ideas as needed." The experience of sharing the stage with more experienced artists was particularly inspiring for the students, according to Satterfield. "There was something very cool about them being on stage with other singers *as soloists*. It raised the emotional energy in a real and immediate way."

Lazaro Estrada, a voice major at University of Houston, as well as a former member of the High School Voice Studio, also participated in the Britten Folk Song Project. Having

recently worked with a specific approach to developing character in an acting class, he particularly enjoyed a workshop with Bernhard: “She was very much interested in who the person is and what their gestures would be.”

Ethan Greene participated in a project with HGOco in which composition students at **Shepherd School of Music at Rice University** set poetry written by members of the community. “This poem was written by a Katrina survivor, and it really struck me.” Greene’s setting, in turn, struck HGO Music Director Patrick Summers, and Greene has been commissioned to write a short opera for middle school students. “It’s my first real commission.” While opera — and vocal music in general — had not really been on Greene’s radar, he says his experience with HGO has had a strong influence on his writing. “It gave me this opportunity to work with the concept of melody in a way I never had. It opened me up to a new way of thinking.”

Houston Grand Opera also collaborated with the University of Houston and Shepherd School of Music to produce the *New Works Sampler* for *Opera*

Conference 2009. Richard Bado, who is beginning his fifth season as director of the opera studies program at the Shepherd School, has had a 25-year association with Houston Grand Opera, making collaboration between the two organizations very easy. “If we want to bring in some kind of specialized coach, we can sometimes split the cost with the Studio. [Artistic Administrator] Diane Zola comes every year to opera workshop class to hear auditions and give feedback. The people at HGO have also been very helpful when we need the odd prop or costume, or even supertitles.”

When Bado learned that HGO would be hosting *Opera Conference 2009*, he immediately let his colleagues know he would like to involve his students. The *New Works Sampler* was a great opportunity for students from both schools; not only did they have an opportunity to shine before a distinguished audience of opera professionals, according to Bado, they had to learn music for which “they couldn’t just go out and buy a recording.”

Buck Ross, director and founder of the Moores Opera Center at University of

Houston, believes that learning new music is an essential part of a young singer’s development. “The reality is that students need to learn how to learn music. Voices at that age change so much — today’s Barbarina is tomorrow’s Susanna is the next year’s Countess. I don’t worry about whether students are learning a role that they will be hired for in the future, because the chances of us landing on that are slim. I want them to learn style and a process. I also think we have to send the message that doing new pieces is very rewarding.”

Creating a Culture of Arts Supporters

Not all successful partnerships involve young performers. **Arizona Opera** worked with **Arizona State University** (ASU) to create Business 4 Arts, a collaboration that offers alumni, faculty and staff of the W.P. Carey Executive M.B.A. at Arizona State University the opportunity to sample one performance at each of four of Phoenix’s nonprofit arts organizations at a discounted rate. The package also included important networking and learning opportunities.

“It is important that our students learn different orientations to business,” says



Shuler Hensley as Wozzeck and Joshua Stewart as The Captain in the Curtis Opera Theatre’s production of Berg’s *Wozzeck*. Photo courtesy of The Curtis Institute of Music.

Ajay Vinze, director of the school's Center for Advancing Business through Information Technology. Throughout the school year, he brings in thought leaders from diverse fields to speak with students. Program graduate Diana Hossack, who has a long history in the opera field, proposed the idea of bringing students together with local nonprofit arts organizations.

Leaders of the organizations recognized that the collaboration offered an opportunity to address short- and long-term goals. "I'd been wanting to do something with the other classical arts organizations, looking for the thing that could pull us together," says Debra Harrison, former executive director of Arizona Opera. "Working with ASU gave us a shared purpose: here's an audience, let's sell to them. The key was having the four chiefs of the arts organizations committed to the big picture, rather than seeing each other as competitors."

More than 60 ASU students, alumni and faculty bought the package of performances and events. But the goals of the project went far beyond selling tickets. "An important component was that the students were not just coming to see an opera or a play," says Harrison. "We wanted them to recognize that arts and culture are critical to the vitality of a city. If a city doesn't have arts, it's not going to be livable. We also wanted these people to realize the importance of serving on boards, the importance of philanthropy. When they came to the opera, we not only gave them a backstage tour, we brought in the president of our board and a high-end donor to speak with them."

"It was very educational for us," says Vinze. "When you serve on the board of an arts organization, it is a very different orientation than in a traditional corporate board. When you think about how you source your product and fund

it and logistically make it real, there is a whole different vocabulary. I'd like to institutionalize Business 4 Arts, make it a permanent part of the executive M.B.A. program." Regardless of how Business 4 Arts evolves, he says, "I expect I'm going to see more opera. The richness of the performance really amazed me."

Communication Is Key

Whether collaborations are one-off or ongoing, formal or informal, the most successful partnerships are those built on frequent, frank communication.

"It has to be collegial," says Plott. "We don't always agree, and sometimes I've had to go down and say, 'What do I have to do to get your best students?' You have to keep refreshing the relationship. We are happy to share resources. We share lighting equipment. I just let CCM use a trailer — I had an empty one, so here you go. I'm happy to do that. Next month I might call them and ask if they have someone who can help with video editing. Anytime you want something done with a computer, you hire a college student. You have to stay in touch, to talk, to e-mail, to have dinner. You have to include them in your decision-making process."

"In recent years we've formalized our relationship, but that was only possible because of the relationship that has been fostered for many years," says Opera Company of Philadelphia's Devan. "Robert Driver, our artistic director, has been working with Mikael Eliassen, head of the Curtis Vocal Studies Department, for many years. Where it starts is taking an interest, developing a sense of trust. AVA appointed me to their board two years ago. All these things add up to increasing the connective tissue between the institutions. When OPERA America worked with TRG to study the effect of having so many opera providers in one city, it was a big a-ha moment for us. We are complementary, not competitive." 🍷



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MAKING OPERA MATTER

OPERA CONFERENCE 2009:

OPERA America's annual conference offers a range of professional development opportunities, from formal programming, such as seminars and panel discussions, to informal sharing of experiences and ideas.

Opera Conference 2009, held during a time of considerable economic uncertainty, was an important occasion for opera stakeholders to come together and wrestle with some complex questions: Does opera matter? Is it just another traditional art form competing for attention in an increasingly crowded entertainment marketplace? Does opera have the capacity to connect meaningfully to contemporary issues and social concerns? Do opera companies respond effectively to unmet community needs?

Houston Grand Opera (HGO), host of *Opera Conference 2009*, is attempting to respond to such questions through HGOco, which produces an eclectic menu of programs in collaboration with a broad range of community partners. On the last day of the conference, attendees went on location with HGOco to visit the Dow School, home of MECA (Multicultural Education and Counseling through the Arts). The day included inspiring student performances, as well as a spirited discussion among a diverse group of Houstonians: Franci Crane, HGO trustee; Anthony Freud, HGO general director; Shirin Herman, Houston Independent School District Multilingual Department; Anita Lundval, Neff Elementary School; Alice Valdez, MECA; and Andrea White, first lady of the City of Houston.

Toward the end of the conference, participants broke into working groups, where they were given an assignment: If your company was given a substantial grant to be used toward "making opera matter" in your community, how would you spend it? After an initial burst of ideas, many reached the same conclusion: It is impossible for a group of opera professionals, working alone, to design an effective program. To make opera matter, engagement with a broad range of community stakeholders is essential.

The conference also provided learning opportunities tailored to various professional specialties. At Opera Conference 2008, OPERA America brought together a group of individuals who had recently taken their first job leading an opera company. The group of new general directors reconvened in Houston, joined by a few more recent recruits. While governance issues dominated last year's conversation, this year, unsurprisingly, the economy was front and center. "Most of us felt that we were in a better place with our boards," says Kevin Patterson, general director of Austin Lyric Opera. "For me, I was still working on board issues and felt that the economy was actually helping me to do so. My a-ha moment came from someone with many years of experience as a general director. He concluded that his expectation for board members' direct participation in fundraising was unrealistic. He felt that by far the greatest value a board member can bring to fundraising is the access they provide to their social and business networks."

In addition to focused discussions around development, education, marketing, governance and production, there were plenty of opportunities to learn about new art and artists. On the first night of the conference, the *New Works Sampler*, performed by students from the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University and University of Houston Moores School of Music, featured excerpts from a number of recent premieres and works in progress. The inaugural Director-Designer Showcase, a program of *The Opera Fund*, gave talented teams an opportunity to present their concepts for productions of four important North American works. And Houston Grand Opera presented a beloved classic (*Rigoletto*) as well as the world premiere of André Previn and John Caird's *Brief Encounter*, which received a repertoire development grant through *The Opera Fund*.

OPERA America's conference has been enlivened in recent years by the participation of a growing number of individual artists. Some of their reflections on their time in Houston are included in the pages that follow.





I asked myself: What am I doing *independently* to further the education, (and thus the growth) of our art form/industry? This question can be asked by anyone from administration to creative staff and artists. Who is willing to help develop the next generation of publishers, house managers and artistic staff? We do not need to be part of an organization's education/outreach program to contribute.

— Michael Cofield



Opera companies are at a crossroads. The struggle to balance the artistic and business concerns is perennial, but the decisions in today's economy seem even more poignant. This year's conference offered an exciting and vivid glimpse of a possible answer. Several opera companies are making community partnerships a core focus. Various panels and a site visit to Houston's Dow School offered incredible insights into the process and results of these innovations. I was so encouraged to hear about the new audiences who are now involved in opera and the new donors who are attracted to the organizations. Opera is taking on new and vibrant forms, and it is exciting!

— Hope Carlson



My most significant learning experience was gaining the insights and experiences of the range of professionals involved in the production of opera. The vibrant and seasoned community seemed to be hungry for the future and what it holds. There was no fear.

— Amy Axelson



The highlight of the conference for me was the first working group on Friday afternoon. I loved being thrown together with people from all different parts of the country (and world!) and seeing how they individually — and collectively within their respective companies — approach the challenges they face in building up their companies: planning and executing a full season, organizing the budgets, increasing their education and outreach program, and generally trying to find their particular relevance in the communities they serve.

— Kala Maxym



Photo credits: Page 25 from (left to right): *Opera Conference 2009* Keynote Speaker Alex Ross. • Soprano Kaitlyn Lynch performs at the Host Company Reception. • Rice University — Shepherd School of Music students Brian Haase and Annamarie Zmolek perform a scene from Davies's *Transit of Venus* at the *New Works Sampler*. • Martin T. Lopez describes his set design for *Florencia en el Amazonas* at the Director-Designer Showcase. • Composer André Previn speaks at the Host Company Reception. • Baritone Octavio Moreno performs at the Host Company Reception. • Kevin Smith, president & CEO, The Minnesota Opera; Anthony Freud, general director, Houston Grand Opera; Wayne Brown, director of music and opera, National Endowment for the Arts; and Marc A. Scorca, president and CEO, OPERA America, speak at the Navigating Changing Times General Session. Page 26 (left to right): Houston Mayor Bill White speaks at the Opening General Session. • OPERA America members speak at the Closing General Session. • Mezzo-soprano Faith Sherman performs at the Host Company Reception. • David McIntosh speaks at the Navigating Changing Times General Session. • Houston Grand Opera Music Director Patrick Summers performs at the Host Company Reception. Page 27: Gary D. Gibbs, executive director of the Texas Commission on the Arts, speaks at the Making Opera Matter in Public Policy General Session. • A mariachi at the Dow School. • Members of Gifted and Talented perform at the Dow School. • OPERA America staff perform at the Opening General Session. • Wayne Brown, director of music and opera, National Endowment for the Arts, speaks at the Navigating Changing Times General Session.

All photos by Katherine L. Ehle/OPERA America.



A woman in a white dress is suspended from a red rope structure against a blue background with falling white petals. The scene is lit with a warm, golden light, and a silhouette of a person is visible in the foreground.

CREATIVE PROGRAMMING IN HARD TIMES

BY THOMAS MAY

The majority of contemporary American opera companies sprang up *after* the Great Depression — which means they're now confronting the most severe economic downturn in their existence. And the performing arts are doubly vulnerable. Not only is institutional funding at risk: audiences, their very lifeblood, have also had to become more cautious about opening their wallets.

Yet it's worth recalling that opera has actually flourished during periods of economic cataclysm. Counterintuitive as it seems, the Depression years were a pivotal era in the formation of American operatic culture. As John Dizikes observes in his valuable history, *Opera in America*, "The dazzling surface prosperity of the 1920s concealed ominous operatic decline, while the hard times of the 1930s obscured emerging creativity and growth." Benjamin Britten began establishing new directions for British opera — with lessons that remain relevant today — in the climate of financial uncertainty immediately following the Second World War. Clearly we're still too early in the cycle to predict what lasting impacts the current meltdown will have. Yet despite many alarming signs — from high-profile productions that have had to be cancelled to outright bankruptcies — companies aren't necessarily retreating into a holding pattern that offers nothing but operatic comfort food. In fact, the costs associated with the warhorses of grand opera tend to make such choices less than fiscally sound in belt-tightening times, no matter how well they have done historically at the box office.

"We recently conducted focus groups as part of an audience study, in which we asked what would be the one thing we might do that would drive people away," remarks Timothy O'Leary, general director of Opera Theatre of

Saint Louis. "And the answer that repeatedly came back surprised me. It wasn't something like if the parking became difficult. It was if we ever became boring or safe."

Repertoire choices that aim beyond the tried and true don't have to be a casualty of the recession. Efforts to be fiscally prudent can go hand in hand with innovative choices and with seasons geared toward stimulating both loyal audiences and attracting newcomers to opera. The companies able to weather the storm are likely to be those which are flexible in trying out different models for different audience segments.

PARTNERING WITH PUBLISHERS

It also remains to be seen whether the economic pressure will inspire new ways of cooperating throughout the opera industry — for example, between producers and publishers, camps that are not typically perceived as having warm relations. "Music publishers are sometimes seen as terribly mercenary," notes Judith Ilika, who is director of performance promotion at Theodore Presser. "But we're all in it together. We're looking out for our composers and want to help make performances of new music happen, to keep the art alive. As publishers, we can help identify those operas that don't need a chorus and use smaller forces but that can still satisfy an opera audience. If there are no performances, we all lose; and if there are no performances of new music, we also lose. I want the standard rep to be there, but I also want to be challenged."

"One of my key goals is to help the companies we work with find a way to continue adventurous programming without taking some overly risky financial gamble," says Peggy Monastra, director of promotion at G. Schirmer. She points to underexplored possibilities of collaboration with producing partners. "Every publisher has a small handful of works that lie somewhere on the spectrum between being completed and just beginning to be workshopped. There are all sorts of dialogues I'd like to invite from companies."

Monastra refers to several scenarios: from composers who decide to forego major commission fees to finding new life for a quality piece that failed to receive an adequate first production or that needs a little revision. "There's also opportunity — particularly for companies whose mission statement is to showcase new work — to present the North American premiere of an opera from Europe, or maybe the regional premiere of a new production that exists already. Next February, for example, Opera Company of Philadelphia is giving the East Coast premiere of Tan Dun's *Tea* [with the sets and costumes from the American premiere at The Santa Fe Opera]."

GAINING THROUGH REDUCTION

Monastra points to operas from the G. Schirmer catalogue that might make sense "for the economic-stimulus era" in that they require fewer forces than those associated with grand opera. She breaks these down into such categories as one-act operas, chamber operas (e.g., Mark Adamo's *Little Women*), "pocket operas" like John Harbison's *Full Moon in March* and operas that are available in reduced orchestrations, citing versions of the Barber classic *Vanessa* and Kirke Mechem's opera *Tartuffe* (which has received some 350 performances since its San Francisco Opera premiere in 1980).

The time-honored practice of making orchestral reductions of pre-existing scores is an especially notable phenomenon that seems to be gaining new favor: It can

simultaneously help companies adhere to tighter budgets and satisfy the hunger for fresh repertory. Depending on union agreements with musicians, of course, reductions don't necessarily mean that a company needs to pay only the dozen players, say, who may be called for in the revamped version. Still, they can obviate the need for hiring extra players and, even more significantly, enable performances in smaller theaters with limited pit size.

At Peermusic — which was founded on the eve of the Depression — the director of its classical division, Todd Vunderink, thinks companies would do well to recall the flowering of music in the 1930s that took on “gritty and realistic” aspects, as in Kurt Weill’s collaborations (which do in fact seem to be enjoying a resurgence of interest). “There’s also the trend when times are tough to think in terms of a nimble, smaller and more virtuosic ensemble.” Norman Ryan, who is vice president for composers and repertoire at Schott Music, also serves on the board of American Opera Projects, an umbrella group that fosters the creation of new opera. There is a serious interest, he notes, in “productions that are easily transportable and don’t require huge forces. We often get inquiries about reductions of our standard-rep works that have had play in the past but that are not possible because of budgets or because of an alternative venue that is too small. So I’ll ask general directors if they know that there is a reduction now available, for example, of Tobias Picker’s opera *Thérèse Raquin*.” And for companies interested in new works, Ryan mentions that conversations with the composer about the size of the ensemble involved “are on the table much earlier than usual, with companies asking us to stay within a certain framework.”

From the composer’s point of view, reduced orchestrations address an obvious need. “It’s strictly for practical reasons. Puccini did this for all of



Kara Harris, Benjamin Werth, Ashley Logan, Jeffrey Nardone, Mario Arevalo, Jessica Stavros in the College of Fine Arts at Boston University’s 2009 production of Picker’s *Thérèse Raquin*. Photo by Vernon Doucette/Boston University Photo Services.

his operas, too,” remarks Tobias Picker, who has been working his way through reduced versions of his entire body of operas. New York’s Dicapò Opera Theatre (where Picker serves as artistic advisor) staged the new chamber version of *Thérèse Raquin* in 2007.

“*Thérèse* is suited for small opera houses anyway — it’s a very claustrophobic piece about sex,” Picker says. “I prefer to see my operas on a human scale. The problem in America is that we have enormous opera houses that would be unthinkable big in Europe. Operas need to find a life in other places. The experience of seeing an opera in a small European-size house is completely different from seeing it at the Met. When the audience is so close to the singers physically in space, it’s less about spectacle and more theatrical — almost like another art form.”

Along with writing his own operas, British composer Jonathan Dove has developed something of a specialty in crafting chamber versions of classic repertoire (including his famous reduction of the *Ring* cycle for 18 players). “Although the orchestra is a little less overwhelming,” observes Dove, “the experience of the singers is much more immediate, and this more than makes up for it. In the U.K., I think Benjamin Britten’s work with English Music Theatre had a huge influence: he showed that an orchestra of 15 could fill a theater with sound.”

Reduced orchestrations thus open the door to more than potential savings. “It’s a really nice trend to see operas that can exist in versions for both big and small houses,” Monastra says, referring to this summer’s premiere of John Corigliano’s *The Ghosts of Versailles* in a revised and reduced incarnation at Opera Theatre

of Saint Louis. O’Leary points out that the new *Ghosts* production, which can be accommodated to the company’s pit size of 55 to 60 players, is part of a co-producing venture with Vancouver Opera and the Wexford Festival. “I very much believe in the importance of collaborating with a variety of companies in order to sustain quality during an economically challenging time.”

OUTSIDE THE HOUSE

Operas written on a smaller scale also invite companies to think creatively about venues. Several companies have been experimenting with alternate venues outside the main house, sometimes in relation to young artist programs. Pittsburgh Opera, for example, has begun integrating performances by their young artists in the 400-seat jewel-box CAPA Theater (which has a 44-player pit) into their main-stage subscription series. “I always chafed against the idea that this might be perceived as not part of our regular season offering but an apologetic coda,” notes Christopher Hahn, who became general director in 2008. “We don’t diminish its stature, so a lot of our regular audience has discovered the joys of intimacy — the energy of young performers and also the joy of discovering unusual pieces themselves.”

The company had a resonant success with its production last year of Jonathan Dove’s 1998 opera *Flight* (which predates the Steven Spielberg film that is based on the same true story, *The Terminal*). Regarding the opera’s ability to connect so readily with audiences, Dove remarks, “People can embrace a wide range of music if they are also engaged dramatically. My operas often have at least some element of comedy, which I think was greatly undervalued in 20th-century opera. I also choose my librettists very carefully: I work with skilled dramatists who really understand theater and enjoy collaboration.”

Roberto Gomez as Emperor Überall, Jesse Merlin as Loudspeaker and Mark Bringelson as Loudspeaker in Long Beach Opera’s production of Ullmann’s *The Emperor of Atlantis*. Photo by Keith Ian Polakoff.



Darren Keith Woods, general director of Fort Worth Opera, is passionate about finding stories that will resonate with a particular community. “I like subject matter that makes people go out of the theater talking.” He mentions plans for refitting the 500-seat Scott Theater, currently used for children’s theater, and floats ideas for unusual spaces “that will appeal to audiences that need and want to be challenged.” Woods finds the example of Andreas Mitisek’s work at Long Beach Opera in playing with alternate venues particularly inspiring. Schott’s Norman Ryan agrees: “Long Beach has done amazingly inventive work, for example recently setting *The Emperor of Atlantis* on a ship in the harbor. This is bringing in new audiences.”

Despite the economic woes, Boston Lyric Opera has actually added a new production to the coming season, Britten’s *The Turn of the Screw*, which will be performed in a “found space.” Esther Nelson has just begun her tenure as the company’s general and artistic director. The primary reason to use alternate spaces as a component of the company’s seasonal offerings, she says, “is not to save money, but because opera companies have a real challenge in gaining the trust of younger audiences. They like it if you remove that high-temple approach of the opera house and use a smaller theater. We’re identifying several spaces within the community of Boston. Sometimes the space will suggest what type of opera we want to produce in it. The smaller Britten chamber works are certainly appropriate. Britten wrote in a world that was changing so drastically, after war, when everything was being questioned — and that has resonance for us. I think you need to have that sense of urgency.”

At the same time, Nelson cautions that she doesn’t want to “apologize” for presenting traditional repertoire. “*Carmen* and the top 10 operas are the top 10 for very good reason. I

don't think we should have an attitude of looking negatively at this. We should embrace the standards, too, and approach them with fresh eyes. You don't just find rentals to fit your space because the production sells but because the work itself is so powerful, in a way that speaks to people of today."

It's a point of view echoed by Alexander Neef, who took on the reins as general director at Toronto's Canadian Opera Company in 2008. While not yet ready to make any specific predictions about how the economy might eventually impact programming (the company receives some 20 percent of its funding from various levels of Canadian government), Neef stands by core principles that keep the focus on "the complete theatrical experience. It's all about carefully balancing the season with a large range of productions and styles and repertoire — not too much that is conservative, not too much in the radical direction."

ENGAGING WITH THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Along with audience connections to ensure the survival of the art, how can companies cultivate an effective rapport with opera composers of our time — instead of looking on them as a luxury? "The sink-or-swim model of how opera has been produced and developed has been crazy," says Norman Ryan. "But now I see more opera companies seeking partners that can help them with new projects." These can come from outside the opera sphere, as in the recent workshop by American Opera Projects of Kamran Ince's *Judgment of Midas*, which was commissioned by Berkeley Opera to mark the 50th anniversary of the Sardis/Lydia excavations and is being supported by partnership with Harvard and Cornell.



David S. Hogan as Puck, Megan Hart as Tyrania and Anthony Roth Costanzo as Oberon in Seattle Opera Young Artists Program's production of Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Photo by Rozarii Lynch.

"I like to be part of the process. Bringing an opera to life is as much a joy as finally seeing it on stage," according to Woods, who is especially excited about Fort Worth's world premiere scheduled for their 2010 festival season by Cuban-American composer Jorge Martín, *Before Night Falls*. "The board decided that to switch from Jorge Martín's opera to *La bohème* would be disingenuous to our mission. So we chose not to do *Aida* and instead switched to *Don Giovanni* to ensure we could produce *Before Night Falls*." Woods helped shepherd Martín's opera to the stage through workshops in 2008 at the Seagle Music Colony, a summer-training program he runs in the Adirondacks.

Jonathan Dove believes that companies wary of trying new composers in this challenging environment need to find composers "who show a flair for theater, and dramatists who are interested in sung stories, and help them to catch fire." They should cultivate this talent "away from the economic pressure of the main house: not only chamber operas, but also large-scale community projects combining amateurs and professionals."

"LESS ENABLES MORE"

For its annual spring staging, Seattle Opera's Young Artists Program this year offered Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The stripped-down production was set in a simple classroom. Yet, as directed by Peter Kazaras (who heads the Young Artists Program and is also director of opera at UCLA), the performance was utterly compelling. Such sparseness isn't just a matter of being economical for Kazaras; it's part of an overriding philosophy.

“A real premium has been placed on what is the design aesthetic of a production these days,” remarks the director. “The whole idea of ‘the look’ and what that says about a piece has become more important than the music. But in the absence of a huge design concept, you must rely on the performance and acting. This is nothing new in opera. The less you have in the way of expensive design, you must be more attentive to the words and feelings and colors. So, in the absence of huge technical add-ons, you are left with acting. And in fact, less *enables* more.”

The idea of creativity triggered by the need to downsize is echoed by a number of observers. Zizi Mueller, who serves as director of composers and repertoire for Boosey & Hawkes, notes an increase of interest in one-act operas and in works that are compatible with streamlined production values. Mueller suggests that many companies are turning away from costly productions requiring large sets and costumes. “I think it’s an interesting trend — one that will force directors, producers and set designers to come up with some creative alternatives to over-the-top stagings. It reminds me of the return to simplicity in experimental theater in the 1970s and early 1980s.”

As an example, she refers to the Chicago Opera Theater production of John Adams’s *A Flowering Tree* — which has a dual life as a concert-hall work and requires a very small cast — that was presented last year. Brian Dickie, the company’s general director, “is somebody who has been dealing with this kind of budget for years. And when it’s done well, the power of the music and of the singers as excellent actors carries it through.”

Norman Ryan believes we are in the midst of “an exciting trend, away from the model of grand opera, to create something new — whether it’s chamber opera in alternate venues or ways of attracting different audience. A production doesn’t have to be grand and last five hours but can pack a punch in less than an hour: for example, George Benjamin’s *Into the Little Hill* or *Greek* by Mark-Anthony Turnage.” “If there’s a silver lining in this crisis,” Ryan continues, “it’s a boon for the development of the art form, since people are being forced to think creatively about how to make works resonate more with audiences. ©

Thomas May writes frequently for Opera America and other music publications.

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Letting the Lion Roar —

Singers with dramatic voices — those who will someday sing heavy Verdi and Wagner roles — present a special challenge for both academic and professional training programs. At meetings of OPERA America’s Singer Training Forum, challenges related to the nurturing of these rare artists are a frequent topic of conversation.

How can professionals work together to better serve these singers? OPERA America, with the assistance of professionals in the field, has put together an online resource with information about fostering young dramatic voices and career paths of dramatic voices through history. This information is collected in the artists section of www.operaamerica.org.

With the proliferation of young artist programs at opera companies across the country, the process of building an opera career has been streamlined for many singers; participation in a young artist program offers not only a “finishing school” but a chance to be heard by artistic directors and managers. However, emerging artists with dramatic voices are not often appropriate for typical young artist assignments (outreach tours, small roles and chorus on the mainstage), and thus must forge their own path. In the article that follows, five established professionals share stories and advice for these singers and those who work with them.

Clifton Forbis as Tristan in Lyric Opera of Chicago’s 2009 production of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*. Photo by Dan Rest.

Words of wisdom on developing and maintaining the dramatic voice

Compiled and edited by Roger Pines

A few years ago, when judging a vocal competition, I heard a very young, big-voiced mezzo scream her way through Santuzza's aria. During the deliberation, one of my fellow judges (the head of a major university's opera department) declared passionately, "She's got a monster in her throat, and no idea what to do with it."

Today this is, alas, an all-too-familiar situation. A true dramatic voice requires immensely skillful guidance on every level (from teachers, managers, young-artist programs) to fulfill its potential. I recently addressed significant issues facing the dramatic voice with five highly knowledgeable interviewees. Each one followed an atypical career path, and each boasts significant experience on the national and international scene. They are:

Christine Brewer, soprano

Clifton Forbis, tenor

Eugenie Grunewald, mezzo-soprano

Jason Stearns, baritone

Diane Zola, former dramatic soprano and artist manager, now artistic administrator of Houston Grand Opera

Knowing what you've got

STEARNS: When I was 15, people said, "You sound like Robert Merrill. You have a 35-year-old man's voice coming out of a 15-year-old's body!" Then and there, I knew what I was going to do. The only problem was that I should never have been advised to take singing lessons. I already knew how to sing! As soon as I started lessons, my voice got messed up, and it took me a long time to get back to what I did naturally.

GRUNEWALD: In college, no one knows how to train a big voice. They had me sing Mozart — they were treating me as a soprano in college, because I had coloratura. I hadn't heard of a coloratura mezzo until I got out of college! I was told to sing like a pretty little lyric soprano, but I didn't know how to manage my breath, and as a soprano I had no top. When I switched to mezzo, my top immediately came in.

FORBIS: I was a baritone in college. I tried to sing as a tenor early on and was discouraged from it by people who said "It's too big" or "You could hurt yourself that way." There was a teacher at my college during my final year who had also made the switch from baritone to tenor. I got to study with him a bit, but at that point I'd pretty much figured it out: "I'm a tenor — I just have to go find me a teacher who can *teach* it."

Teachers

STEARNS: Teachers teach *studio* singing — they don't teach opera singing for a big theater. Lessons should be taught in

at least a room the size of a recital hall, with the student far away from the teacher. This would immediately show whether or not the singer has any output of sound. So often, when students finally have to sing on a big stage, they can barely be heard!

Singing teachers in schools must stop teaching lieder and French song — it will never develop the voice. This kind of music only closes it and forces it into a little box. Students should be taught to sing oratorio, opera, even Broadway and some operetta. They graduate with a box full of music that will never earn them a nickel in the real world. Their voices are so small and limited from having been forced to sing such small, intimate music that, when faced with the real world's challenges of having to audition for opera, church work or oratorio, they don't have what they need to get hired.

GRUNEWALD: With teachers who don't know how to handle a big voice, they tend to whittle the voice down rather than teaching a really good technique and letting that voice grow the way it needs to grow.

FORBIS: It takes a big voice to teach a big voice — and for me, early on, there were missing pieces of the puzzle that only a big voice could communicate. If you don't have a teacher who knows it, understands it and has sung it, in a lot of ways you're wasting time.



Christine Brewer as Queen Elizabeth I in Opera Theatre of Saint Louis's 2005 production of Britten's *Gloriana*. Photo by Cory Weaver.

ZOLA: There isn't a plethora of great voice teachers, nor is there a real understanding of the big voice. I'd say [to academic institutions] make sure that your faculty is not only the very best it can be in teaching and nurturing all singers, but also that it has a real understanding of what it's like to be a big voice. Maybe allow students a certain type of curriculum where they learn the big repertoire — not performing it, but let them start sinking their teeth into it. Encourage them not to rush. They should be learning their languages and learning to be great musicians.

Patience is the operative word

BREWER: I started out as a very light soprano when I was 17. I was fortunate to have a great teacher at the little Methodist college where I studied. He approached everything in a really lyric way. I sing everything now with the same approach that I had when my voice as half this size. I don't try to *make* my voice sound bigger — I never feel like "I've got to cook up some sound!" It comes from the emotion, the interpretation. It's never about trying to push my voice.

FORBIS: Today you have guys who should be singing Mime but are singing Tristan! I think the basic knowledge of the big voice and what's appropriate for it is lacking. Consequently, people are getting *used* to hearing lighter voices in certain heavy repertoire, and they don't know what the correct voice should sound like. It takes longer for a bigger voice to come into line, and people aren't willing to wait anymore.

ZOLA: People want singers either to do Isolde tomorrow, or, since they're so unformed, people just think you have an unwieldy voice, no technique, so you can't sing. Instead, they have to realize that this kind of voice needs time and nurturing. Everyone wants a wunderkind — there aren't wunderkinds *per se* in dramatic repertoire.

A balance of repertoire

ZOLA: I so admire what Stephanie Blythe is doing. This is someone who had a really solid technique who was allowed to grow. There aren't many big-voiced mezzos who can sing Isabella [in *L'italiana in Algeri*] with such ease — but at the same time her Amneris in Seattle was fantastic.

BREWER: I always come back to Mozart, Handel, Haydn. Are you doing something that keeps your voice moving? The singers who are, I think, on the right track. You can get stuck in the really heavy repertoire. I like to mix it up even now, say, with Baroque things — I think that's what keeps the voice flexible.

I think recitals and concerts have helped to keep my voice healthy. One of the really helpful things I did was to audition for conductors who were doing choral things, so that I could learn the standard concert repertoire. All these years, that has been wonderful. I can still do pieces like *Elijah*, and I enjoy them. While you're waiting for everything to come together, keep building your concert repertoire.

A foot in the door

FORBIS: Two companies took chances on me. Jonathan Pell at The Dallas Opera was important in getting me started — I was in the chorus for two years while I was in graduate school, and I sang the Messenger in *Aida*. Now I'm going back to open the new house as Otello! After the

early days in Dallas came Richard Bradshaw and Phil Boswell at Canadian Opera Company in Toronto, where I did the First Armed Man in *The Magic Flute*. I've been back there quite a few times, including the *Ring* [as Siegmund] when they opened their new house. Pell and Bradshaw heard the potential, although the voice wasn't by any means finished at that time.

Don't trust every pair of ears

BREWER: After I'd gotten management in the early 1990s, I came to New York for a week to audition for different opera companies. I won't say what company it was, but they called my manager and said, "Would she sing Pamina? We're doing *The Magic Flute*." "No, I don't think so!" said my manager. "We're doing *Aida*, too — would she sing *Aida*?" It was funny! Early on, when I was auditioning, it seemed like when I auditioned for conductors, I had my best responses, because the really good conductors "got" my voice.

GRUNEWALD: A lot of "full lyric" voices are pushed by different companies, different managers, to move into dramatic repertoire. Here's my litmus test: Can you sing the fourth act of *Aida* (where you've got a whole brass section blowing their brains out) and be heard, and then have a voice at the end of it?

People will give you opportunities before you're ready, which means you could become a "five-year wonder." If you're singing in high-profile places and you fail, they don't care that you don't know what you're doing. If companies managers, or conductors get hold of someone they want to make the "next big thing" and that singer is not technically, mentally and spiritually ready and doesn't have a support system behind them, it can *destroy* what could have been a really special artist.

Waiting for it to happen

FORBIS: I'm kind of a late bloomer. I was in graduate school, I went to Juilliard for a bit, and still couldn't find any way to unlock the top. Then I finally met [teacher and former dramatic tenor] Bill Neill — I guess I was 32. We just worked on technique for one solid year. I was doing carpentry — anything to pay the bills. Then I started getting some smaller gigs.

BREWER: You have to have a Plan B. I taught K-through-12 music, and then I was a substitute teacher for eight years and taught *everything*. I was married — my husband was teaching junior high. He had an income, he had health insurance. A lot of these young kids can't afford that, they're spending their money on voice lessons. I was very fortunate.

GRUNEWALD: Find the best teacher in the world for you. Sing the heavier lyric stuff, and work on your technique like mad. And in the studio, under supervision, learn the repertoire you're eventually going to sing, but do not sing it in public for anybody who matters *until* you've mastered it — until your body and your cords catch up with your potential. 🎧

Roger Pines, dramaturg of Lyric Opera of Chicago, is lecturer and special consultant to the company's Ryan Opera Center. Earlier this year he led master classes at DePaul University and Baldwin-Wallace College Conservatory.



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A LEGACY OF LEADERSHIP

BY KELLEY ROURKE

Recipients of the 2009 Career Service Awards Share Their Wisdom

Each year, OPERA America honors leaders celebrating their 10- and 25-year anniversaries with an opera company. The recipients of this year's service awards hail from companies from across North America whose annual budgets range in size from less than \$1 million to more than \$25 million. Some of the companies dominate the opera scene in their cities, while others are part of a vibrant local opera ecology.

Running an opera company is challenging in the best of times, and today's uncertain economy makes it extraordinarily difficult to plan the seasons ahead. But with hard-won wisdom gained from many years of experience, these artistic and general directors strike a tone of cautious optimism as they share their learning and confirm their commitment to quality and creativity.

Under the leadership of **Speight Jenkins, Seattle Opera** has seen tremendous growth over the past quarter-century. Jenkins is quick to share credit for the company's success: "My staff, almost to a person, has been with me for almost 20 years. We know how we work. Their dedication to Seattle Opera is complete, and this has been a huge factor in whatever success Seattle Opera has had. Any my board, ever since I came, has been completely supportive. I came with the board's guarantee of artistic freedom, and they have supported wherever I've gone."

Seattle Opera has long had an association with the works of Richard Wagner, and under Jenkins the company has strengthened its reputation for Wagner productions. "I eagerly came to Seattle because the *Ring* tradition was here. I really wanted to present all 10 Wagner operas in new Seattle Opera productions." He also had goals for consistent quality across all repertoire: "I wanted to be as meticulous and theatrical as possible, in a way I feel one can in a stagione situation. Opera is great theater — voices are 51 percent, but there's another 49 percent that you've got to do. I also believe very strongly in balancing casts. If you have one great singer who stands out, you're not doing the right kind of opera."

As Seattle Opera entered the 2008-2009 season, Jenkins recorded a video address, posted on the company's Web site, which acknowledged the effects of the troubled economy while affirming the company's commitment to quality. "I believe we are important to Seattle," says Jenkins. "We're

going to keep producing opera, and we're going to figure out how to do it in a way that is more efficient but just as exciting. I don't want to just limp through this."

"We've balanced our budget for the past 15 or 16 years, but if your only focus is balancing your budget, it's a house of cards," he continues. "If that's your only concern, you start to drop quality, then you drop people, and the house of cards falls down all around you. We must figure out how to turn out consistently important opera while spending less money. The audience needs more than ever to be entertained. You entertain with *Parsifal* as much as with *Lelisir d'amore*. I'm very proud of what Seattle Opera has done, but I don't believe you're ever any better than your last curtain."



"This is a weird time we all live in now," says **John Bowen**, who founded **Opera Vivente** (Baltimore, MD) 10 years ago. The company has made a specialty of unusual repertory, performed in English in an intimate venue. "I don't know anyone who is not worrying. But I've been surprised at the rapidity at which we've grown. We have an ever-increasing audience and donor base to the point where we are wondering how much longer we can stay in our current venue."

Opera companies across the country have found it sobering to see established institutions go out of business, and for

Opera Vivente the hard times struck close to home when Baltimore Opera was forced to close its doors. But even though Opera Vivente was born as an “alternative” to the larger company, Bowen has no intention of changing course or attempting to fill the gap. “If we were to do *Bohèmes* and *Aidas* in the original language, in what way would that be Opera Vivente? I have always felt there is a place for both kinds of company. From the beginning, we had a clear vision of why we should exist. That self-knowledge puts you in a good position to deal with all the things you couldn’t possibly anticipate.”

“Running an opera company really tests your commitment to an art form, to an idea. And it really does, on a daily basis, force you to examine why you do what you do. It is a total life commitment.”

In these challenging times, Bowen calls on all opera lovers to demonstrate their commitment. “Around the new year, everyone sat on their money and waited to see what the Fed was going to do. I got tired of hearing this. I told people, you have to be the stimulus yourself. If you have \$50 and there is an art form you enjoy, you should buy a ticket or make a small donation. I think the solution is for people to step back and say, ‘What do I want my world to look like? What am I going to miss if it’s not around next year?’”



“There have been so many changes in the opera world in 10 years,” says **Susan Danis**, executive director of **Sarasota Opera**. “Some of them have affected us, some of them haven’t. Sarasota is a unique environment, and I am lucky to be here. It’s not that I haven’t worked hard, but we have an amazing patron base, and an amazing board that is totally committed.”

Danis describes Sarasota Opera upon her arrival as “a community-based opera company that was much more volunteer-focused.” She worked closely with all company stakeholders to reconfigure the staff and board, and to position the company for growth: “Everyone was committed to the organization moving forward, and we engaged everyone in the process. We found a place for everyone, even if it was no longer a seat at the board table.” Over the last decade, the company’s annual budget has grown from \$3.2 million to more than \$8 million, and a \$20 million renovation of the opera’s 1926 historic theater has been completed.

The company has an active education program, which includes the Sarasota Youth Opera. Members, who range from eight to 18 years old, perform in choral settings, participate in the mainstage opera season and mount their

own dedicated opera production, which is often a new work. “I’ve been committed to the ongoing commissioning of new works for the Sarasota Youth Opera,” says Danis.

Danis has also worked strategically to develop a fall season. “My first year, we did a single concert with piano, which grew to three recitals. Then we added orchestra, and last fall we finally went to fully-staged.” That production, *The Barber of Seville*, performed to 94 percent capacity, and 18 percent of the ticket buyers were new to Sarasota Opera.

Sarasota Opera is one of the few winter festival companies in America. In addition to attracting those who enjoy Florida’s temperate weather in February and March, the company has drawn opera aficionados to its Verdi Cycle, which will present the complete works of Giuseppe Verdi, and the Masterworks Revival Series, which produces neglected operas of significant artistic merit. With the Verdi cycle nearing its end, says Danis, “We are looking at what our niche is going to be next.”



“I never like to think about repertoire in terms of one season at a time,” says **Brian Dickie**. “I like to think in three- to five-year spans where you can do a body of work. It’s about curatorship, rather than just one-offs where every season you think, ‘Now, what will we do next?’ I think we are in the business of doing something more serious than that intellectually.”

When Dickie signed on to lead **Chicago Opera Theater** (COT), a promised new venue served as both enticement and challenge: “If we were going to move downtown, cheek by jowl with places like the Art Institute of Chicago and the Goodman Theater, we had to have some relevance in the big leagues, rather than just be a fringe neighborhood company.” Dickie joined the company in 1999; in 2004 productions moved from the Athenaeum Theatre to the new Harris Theater for Music and Dance in Millennium Park.

To understand the company’s place in the cultural firmament of the Windy City, one must first acknowledge that it is not the only operatic game in town: Lyric Opera of Chicago presents more than 80 performances each year. But as Dickie studied the landscape, it was clear to him that the two companies could continue to exist in a complementary, rather than competitive, arrangement. “Their core repertory was operas written between 1785 and 1925, which directed me toward the early and the modern.”

Under Dickie’s leadership, the company has produced all three of Monteverdi’s surviving operas. In the intimate Athenaeum Theatre, productions two of Britten’s chamber

operas, *The Rape of Lucretia* and *The Turn of the Screw* were well received, according to Dickie, “So I thought, let’s put a Britten opera into the opening season of the new theater. *Death in Venice* had never been done in this city, and, interestingly, we sold more single tickets to that than anything else in the season.” This spring, the company produced another Britten rarity, *Owen Wingrave*.

Dickie feels COT offers Chicagoans an alternative not just in terms of repertoire, but in terms of production style. The company recently completed a multi-season initiative that included fresh takes on *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Così fan tutte* and *Don Giovanni*. “Even though the Lyric does the Mozart-Da Ponte operas, I think it was perfectly valid for us to do them in a very different way.”



Like Chicago Opera Theater, **Opera Theatre of Pittsburgh**, which has been led by **Jonathan Eaton** for the past decade, shares a city with a larger opera company. “It is a necessity and a blessing to do alternative repertoire,” says Eaton.

Over the last four to five years the company’s work has included a focus on diversity, onstage and off. “We have presented a new jazz opera by Nathan Davis, *Carmen Jones* and *Lost in the Stars*, a Kurt Weill piece that is based on the apartheid-era novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*. This season we’re doing *Porgy and Bess*.” According to Eaton, the usual opera audience majority/minority paradigm is turned on its head for these productions.

A new Salon Series pairs unusual venues to with rarely-performed repertoire. “We produced Bizet’s *Djamileh* in a Persian rug emporium, with belly dancing. Quite a few opera fans came, because you don’t often get a chance to hear that work. But because it was such an unusual event, with food and wine served, and many of the audience lounging on great mounds of Persian carpets, we were able to attract a wider audience as well.” In addition to attracting new audiences, the Salon Series is cost-effective: since existing spaces serve as the “set,” it is possible to cover all production costs with ticket sales.

The company works with a committee for the Salon Series, which includes people with no previous opera involvement. “It is a way of bringing in people of influence who wouldn’t immediately be interested in joining an opera board, people who like the idea of creating unusual shows in non-traditional spaces.”

Like companies across the country, Opera Theater of Pittsburgh is evaluating programming very carefully in light of the uncertain economy. “Because we are small, we can be

very responsive to changes in the economic climate. We’re looking at more productions of the scale of the Salon Series. We also want to carry on with at least one opera centered in the African American community. Next year it will be a landmark revival of Duke Ellington’s version of *The Beggar’s Opera*.”

According to Eaton, the company has been very fortunate in its long-term supporters. “We’ve maintained a family in the board who have been with us through thick and thin. It is a huge compliment to our founder, Mildred Miller, that this group is still with us. I feel so closely connected to the people who preceded me.”



“When I arrived 10 years ago, **Opera Birmingham** had been dark for two years,” says General Director **John D. Jones**.

“There was one file drawer, and the things in it were not very helpful. I started on February 15, 1999, and our first performance, a concert with orchestra, was in the middle of October. That was followed by productions of *The Barber of Seville* and *Madama Butterfly*. There was no infrastructure — we had to put together a wig and make-up crew, find stage managers, accompanists. I had a part-time assistant with no background in classical music. It wasn’t a lot of time, but you do what you have to do. If you don’t have a production it is impossible to raise money. We went with the tried and true — I don’t apologize for that. If it were up to me, I’d do *Billy Budd* and *Wozzeck*, but one of the important things is to listen to the board and the people in the community and see what they are receptive to.”

The company, which celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2005, now has a staff of five. A typical season includes two major productions, one concert and a recital with emerging artists. An education program reaches 24,000 children each year. Next season, the company will move to a new performance venue and new office space. “The theater is technically better, with a bigger stage and bigger pit,” says Jones. “It is on a university campus, and the new dean is interested in having as many professional groups in the space as possible. It is also in a more suburban setting, a little bit closer to most of our patrons.”

While a stronger infrastructure and new facility positions the company for continued growth, Jones has been clear about company priorities from the beginning: “In order to have any success, you have to have a quality product. You need to have your business plan, your elevator speech ready — why people should support you, what you are going to do with the money. But the most important thing is what goes on the stage. A good production does more for you than any five-minute speech.”



Smaller opera companies face a big challenge when it comes to programming: “You have so much riding on each production,” says **Timm Rolek**, artistic director of **Sacramento Opera**. “You’re betting the house on a smaller deck of cards. It takes a lot of thought and care because we have a greater exposure in everything we do.”

When Rolek arrived in 1999, he says, the main challenge was keeping the company alive. “I came to the company just after the city lost its major symphony orchestra. There was a huge level of mistrust in nonprofits, affecting everything from the Girl Scouts on up.” In such an environment, he says, “The first step is to just do what you say you’re going to do. The next step is to do it very well.”

Rolek has been working to slowly expand the repertoire of the company, which focused on top 10 operas in its first two decades. With the addition of a third production in the 2003-2004 season, Rolek began including one company premiere each year. Given the company’s once-narrow range, this hasn’t required huge leaps — until recently. “We could do the local premiere of *The Marriage of Figaro* and say, ‘here’s something you’ve never seen.’ You can only get away with that for a certain amount of time.”

While single ticket buyers continue to gravitate toward the top 10, Rolek feels he has been successful in broadening the tastes of regular operagoers. “Our audience tends to be on the conservative side, but if properly led they will go for something off the beaten path. We’ve established a level of trust.”

“The future is really unknown. This is an amazing year for our world in many respects, with dramatic political changes as well as economic changes. We will not be able to depend as much on the old assumptions and old formulas. We just came through the most arduous budget planning session I’ve ever seen. How do you fund a season when the formula has changed in a way that you can’t even quantify? It’s frightening to some extent, but I think it’s horribly exciting.”



When **David Craig Starkey** considered starting an opera company, Asheville, NC, struck him as having all the necessary elements. These included nearby academic institutions, a vibrant downtown, a demonstrated interest in the arts and a culture of philanthropy. “It is too much for an arts organization to develop certain things singlehandedly. The community has to care about your overall success from the beginning.”

Starkey, who founded **Asheville Lyric Opera** 10 years ago, says, “We really tried to start the company at a scale that

reflected the community and its strengths. The first couple of events were recitals and concerts, with the premise that if people attended and liked them we would begin to build conservatively.” The company now presents three shows each season.

This spring, Asheville Lyric Opera was hit with a twofold challenge. Donations were down, as was the case with opera companies across the country; Starkey and his board recognized it was going to take a big push to cover costs for the third opera of the season. Then, in early February, Starkey had an accident that left him with a broken pelvis. “I was going to be recuperating at home for several weeks, with the ability to work for only a few hours each day. There was no way I could run a campaign, too, not when other aspects of the company needed attention.” Members of the board stepped in to lead a fundraising appeal that stated its purpose very clearly — to save the scheduled production of *Rigoletto*.

“We gave made a dollar request and gave a deadline. It was a strategic decision to ask for money not to save the company, but to save the show. What is an opera company, after all? We wanted money for opera, not for administration.” The campaign raised more than its goal, and the production was a sell-out. Starkey and the board plan to build on that momentum to continue raising funds. He is optimistic: “I don’t know what the next 10 years will bring, but we’ve seen that when you make an honest effort to communicate, the community is willing to pitch in. Opera has been around for hundreds of years because it speaks to the soul of each generation.”



When conductor **William Weibel** moved to Texas, he saw great potential in a fledgling opera company called **Opera in the Heights** (Houston, TX). Ten years ago, he became its artistic director. “Opera in the Heights has a dual mission,” he says. “We bring affordable opera to the public in a small venue. We also train young artists on their way up to bigger venues.”

While the company’s intimate performing venue may not require particularly powerful voices, Weibel has very specific casting priorities. “If a young singer does not show definite potential for a career, I am not interested,” he says. “I am only interested in working with singers I feel have the potential to do something. Otherwise, it is a waste of their time and the company’s time.” Weibel travels to New York each year, hearing more than 100 singers selected from an applicant pool of about 500 hopefuls. “We get a good cross-section of available talent, and the level goes up every year.”

Weibel sees the company as an important launching pad for emerging artists, and he takes great care in preparing singers for their roles. “I personally work with them from the first

day until the last. When you learn a role here, you can take it anywhere. One singer said to me that every rehearsal here is like a masterclass. It's very satisfying because practically everyone who's ever come here wants to come back."

Opera in the Heights is one of many relatively new opera companies that share a city with a larger, more established opera producer. According to Weibel, audiences appreciate being able to experience opera on a smaller scale: "The theater only seats 330 people, and this seems to be a big attraction. You don't need binoculars; you are part of what's going on. It is fun to watch a tenor sing a high B and really see the effort that goes into it."




"One of the things I have enjoyed most is seeing the organization define itself as an opera company about this place, whether we're looking at Japanese internment, woodland preservation or First Nations' culture," says **James Wright**, who this year celebrates his 10-year anniversary as general director of **Vancouver Opera**.

It is ironic that this intense local focus comes from a foreigner — Wright was born in the United States. "Maybe that was part of my motivation. When I got here, there was probably some skepticism, even though Canadians are too polite to say so. But I have always tried to learn what it means to be a part of a place, whether I was at a company in Alaska or North Carolina."

Next season, the company will present *Lillian Alling*, by Canadians John Estacio and John Murrell. "It's our first mainstage premiere and we're very excited about it," says Wright, whose enthusiasm for contemporary opera extends beyond the border: "I'm looking forward to the Canadian premiere of *Nixon in China* next spring." The company also has plans to produce Tan Dun's *Tea* and John Corigliano's *Ghosts of Versailles* in upcoming seasons.

Under Wright's leadership, the company has developed a successful strategy for creating interest in a wide range of work. "Beginning with our 2002 *Of Mice and Men*, we kicked off the idea of having a community forum and putting everything we do in a social context. For that opera, we talked about poverty, migrant workers, the differently-abled. We've continued to do this — in conjunction with *Aida*, for example, we did a series of seminars on women in wartime."

The company has been clear from the beginning that these forums are not just about selling tickets. "More sales is a wonderful thing — we'll take it — but this is about the place of the organization in the community. Community leaders and government funders who may not have an interest in opera appreciate what we're doing."

While Wright may have been a foreigner when he interviewed for the position, he says he quickly felt at home in Vancouver. "On a personal level, this is the best job I've ever had. I have the best board. It is a great relationship, a great partnership. I felt like I belonged from the moment I came, and as of June 11, I am a Canadian citizen." 

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