

ACROSS THE BOARD

A Publication of OPERA America for Opera Company Trustees



From the President and CEO

The energy at Opera Conference 2022 in Minneapolis was electric. Administrators, artists, trustees, and advocates came together for the first time in three years with optimism that opera can be an agent of positive change.

Yet, we are only at the beginning of the journey to make opera fully representative of our nation and the communities we serve. Our feature interview in this issue excerpts some of the eye-opening conversations about the work that boards must still do. We also share data about the demographics of opera boards.

I look forward to continuing these discussions at the upcoming National Trustee Forum, our first back in NYC since 2019. This year, it takes place alongside our *OPERA America Salutes* awards dinner, where we will honor opera company trustees and induct the inaugural classes of the Opera Hall of Fame.

Whether at the Trustee Forum or our Opera Conference 2023 in May, I hope we will see you this season.

MARC A. SCORCA
OPERA AMERICA

Creating Belonging

Many of our inherited practices contribute to opera's real and perceived elitism. In the boardroom, these practices often create barriers to the fruitful participation of new board members, especially those who are younger and more racially diverse. OPERA America's Marc A. Scorca spoke with Nadege Souvenir, Minnesota Opera's board chair and COO of the Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation, and Laura Kaminsky, the award-winning composer of *As One*, about how to empower new voices at the board table.

MARC A. SCORCA: Nadege, you're the board chair of Minnesota Opera. Within the governance space, what are some of the inherited practices you have dismantled or wish to dismantle?

NADEGE SOUVENIR: One of the things I'd like to dismantle is the invisible rules of being a board member. I think we have started to do that at Minnesota Opera.

Lots of boards are talking about wanting to diversify, wanting to bring in young folks, wanting to bring in all categories of people. But they tend to bring new members in one at a time and don't actually tell them all of the unwritten rules of engagement.

A board develops a culture over time, but when we bring new people in, we don't tell them anything about the culture. And then we whisper behind their back and say, "They don't really fit in" and "They should finish their first term, and maybe not return." It would be easier for new folks to find their way through and stay if we could get rid of that practice.

MARC: Would you be willing to share what your experience was when you first joined the Minnesota Opera board?

NADEGE: I've been affiliated with the Minnesota Opera board for quite some time, and I will not pretend that my first years were easy. They were hard. It was microaggression after microaggression. It was feeling as though I was not part of the group, like I was sitting in the corner. There was satisfaction in having "diversified" the board, but no real effort at inclusion. They were happy to have me in the room



saying, perhaps it would have been less daunting to shift the focus of the discussion.

NADEGE: Maybe I'm stubborn; I stuck it out on the Minnesota Opera board. I'm glad I did; I'm quite proud of how far the organization has come. But most people don't stick it out. I pay for the privilege of being a board member. Think about that: You are inviting someone into a space who is paying for the "privilege" of being handed microaggressions, being excluded, being put to the side. The reality is that as a Black woman, I have to deal with way too much bad behavior in my everyday life; why would I pay for that kind of experience on a volunteer board? Would you ever do that? Would you say, "Let me write you that \$10,000 check so that you can treat me poorly?"

Ultimately, you need to acknowledge who and what you are as a board. As you bring new people in, invite them in and make space for who they are. And you've got to give them all the rules. You can't keep an invisible set in your pocket and then say, "Eh, it didn't work."

MARC: I want to explore what you just said. We need to tell new board members how it works: what's the culture, how the rules operate. But we also don't want to perpetuate assimilation by forcing them not to be themselves. How do we make space for newcomers to be who they are within the context of our rule-bound structure?

NADEGE: While that seems like the million-dollar question that everybody needs to figure out, the reality is we know how to do this. We do this all the

because my presence checked off a few boxes — I am Black, and I was young back then! But, you know, nobody asked me for my thoughts and my opinions.

MARC: Laura, you used to work with nonprofit boards as an artistic director. Now as a full-time composer, have you served on any boards?

LAURA KAMINSKY: Everything Nadege has said rings so true. I have served on several boards, including some where I was the only artist. Often I would speak up about what artists actually needed from the institution and how the board could help with that. But my voice didn't always seem to be heard, probably because it was just me as the lone artist. If I had another peer to reinforce what I was

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time. We do this in our social networks. Your neighborhood might have some norms, but when a new neighbor moves into the neighborhood, they bring new things. Two years from now, the norms include the things they brought.

It's really fascinating to me that we completely forget how to do this in the context of the boardroom when it comes to younger and racially diverse members. When we are in other settings, we know how to do this on a person-to-person level. It might sound sort of basic or silly, but let's pretend we're kindergartners, because they do it right. When a new kid comes along, they make space in the circle and invite the new kid in as they are. It's just that simple: What you do in other aspects of your life can be done in the more structured boardroom.

LAURA: There's something underneath all of this that I'm not sure we're quite addressing. There's still an implication that if we do it right — meaning doing it as well as possible within the conventional ways that opera is presented and doing it within the established structures — then we will have more of what we still think of as opera, or that opera as we know it will be better. But the essential, in fact existential, question is: Do we want *more* and *better*, or do we want *change*?

Bringing in people to a board who may not have had board experience and teaching them what the hidden secret codes are on the board gives them the ability to be in that cult. But we don't want to be in a cult, right? We want to be in a welcoming church. So the board members, who already have their secret codes and behaviors, need to learn that some of these are really off-putting and need to go away.

NADEGE: I completely agree with you. When you go into a space, there are always some kind of rules. The courtesy is to teach the rules. But you're right — real inclusion means revising or even getting rid of some of those rules.

MARC: Nadege, is there anything you've done at Minnesota Opera or at the Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation to start breaking down these board rules? Have you found ways to give voice to people who don't normally get a voice?

NADEGE: There is a cloak of secrecy that exists around trustees. Maybe the leadership team sits in

on the board meetings. Maybe it's just the CEO or the general director. At my foundation, we've recently started opening up our board meetings to staff. Now, we obviously cannot have 80 people in a room at the same time. But using Zoom, we have some staff watch remotely.

After the board meeting, I meet with those staff members. They ask questions. They make comments and observations. I circle back to the board with those comments. I think it has been helpful both for the staff members and for the board, because they're more cognizant of the fact that they don't operate in some invisible silo at the top of a castle. They operate as a collective part of the whole. I think that's one of the biggest invisible rules we should get away from. It's a circle; everybody's got a role in that circle.

MARC: I love how you've created a space for staff to bring their voices to the board. Imagine if a board chair took the time to sit down with new board members after every meeting — to ensure that they had a space to speak up!

LAURA: Yes, there are inherited structures that we don't think about. There's a buddy system on many boards, for example, for new board members to be paired with veterans. What if there were a buddy system of one staff member to one board member? There has to be a way that everybody is invested and really belongs. That takes away the structures that exist as barriers.

And that goes also to the actual making of opera and putting it on a stage. Some of the best ideas have come from the costume designer or assistant stage manager who is watching a workshop. Their reaction or question sparks a conversation among the librettist, the composer, and the director. Their input has the potential to change the piece. Those are valid, thoughtful, impassioned professionals who care, but because of the hierarchical nature in which operas are brought to the stage, they're usually not supposed to talk — but they *should* talk, and all those involved should listen. Ultimately, for opera to be successful and vibrant as an art form, it needs to be collaborative and welcoming for all: creators, artists, administrators, board, and audiences.

Adapted from the session "Dismantling Opera's Elitism" at Opera Conference 2022 in Minneapolis. Watch online at operaamerica.org/Dismantling.



Essentials of Opera Governance 2022–2023



SEPTEMBER 22	Executive Committees
OCTOBER 13	Board Member Recruitment
NOVEMBER 3	Artistic Policies
MARCH 2	Committees, Task Forces, and Working Groups
MARCH 16	Boards and Human Resources
MARCH 30	Boards and Budgets

Register at operaamerica.org/Essentials. Free to OA Trustee Members.

OA Trustee Resources

Trustee Resource Page For a listing of the resources available to you as a company trustee, visit operaamerica.org/Trustees or download the 2022–2023 Trustee Quick Guide at operaamerica.org/TrusteeQuickGuide.

Company Workshops OPERA America's Marc A. Scorca is available to lead virtual and in-person workshops on topics including governance, civic practice, and financial health. Consult your general director and call 212.796.8623 for details.

Board Demographics

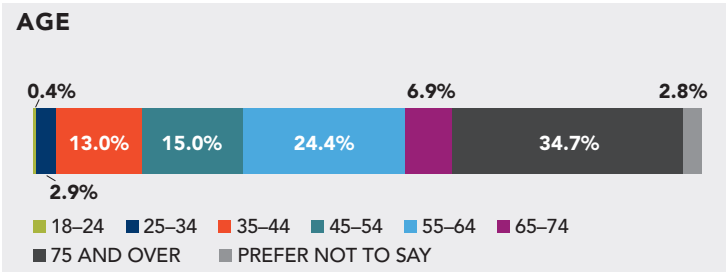
The North American opera field is far from reflective of our nation's racial and ethnic diversity. Opera companies are committing themselves to change. But how do we begin to measure that?

In spring 2021, OPERA America administered its first-ever field-wide demographic survey of Professional Company Members to establish initial benchmarks. The survey was conducted anonymously among 1,200 administrative staff and 1,500 board members, with first-person reporting about race/ethnicity, gender, and age.

What did we learn about boards in this initial study? Opera company boards are relatively even in gender parity, but they skew older and are less diverse than company administrators. Just 15% of trustees identify as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color, compared to 39% of the U.S. population

This research provides benchmarks for understanding if and how efforts taken across the industry are working to achieve diversity. Overall, there is hope: The data show that the younger generations of administrators and trustees are more diverse than their older colleagues. Our challenge is to retain their enthusiasm for opera by welcoming their voices and providing them with opportunities to shape opera's future. ■

Read the full report at operaamerica.org/DemographicReport21.



Oral History Project: Soprano Carol Vaness

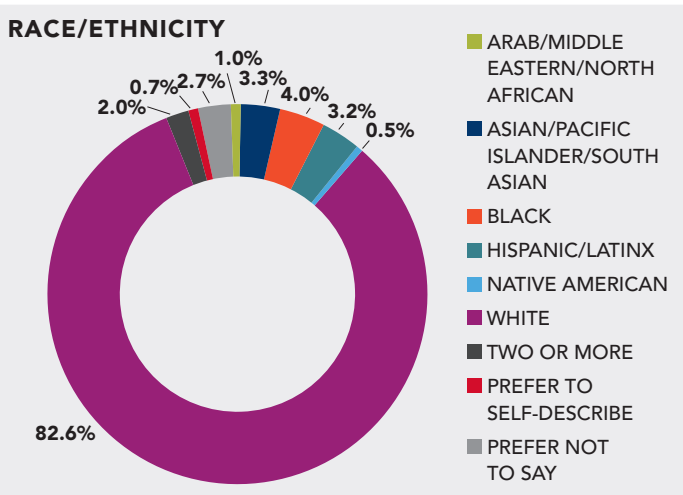
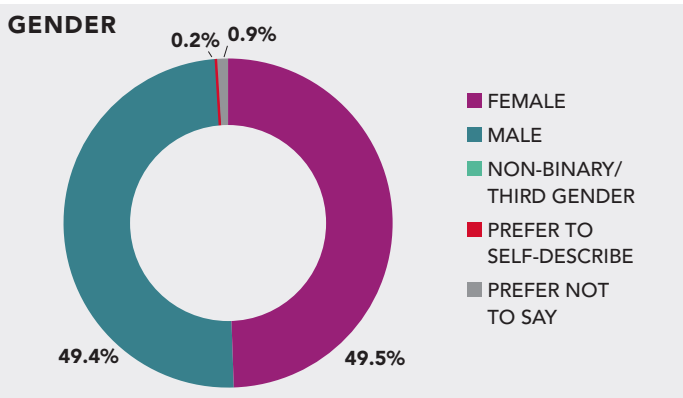
In celebration of its 50th Anniversary in 2020, OPERA America set out to record the recollections of 75 key figures who have shaped the American opera field over the past 50 years.

Explore the stories at operaamerica.org/OralHistory.

“It was kind of a wild time while I was in San Francisco, because I actually did a lot of roles, but I got really sick. I caught laryngitis and would get strep throat once every two months. There came a time when I had been asked to come to a brown bag rehearsal of *Traviata*. ... I, of course, was singing Fiordiligi. But I was sick as a dog, and I said, “I can’t come.” And they said, “You have to come.” Being a young singer and not wanting to lose my job, I went down sick.

We were doing the first act aria scene with the tenor, and I started singing. I got up on the second high C, and I felt “bang!” in my voice: I had hemorrhaged my right vocal chord. ... The first thing I was going to do when I came back from this injury, which was in two months, was *Julius Caesar* in the Spring Opera Theater. I was scared, of course. I went down to Southern California, to my teacher, David Scott, and my doctor, who was Hans von Leden, considered now the grandfather of otolaryngology. He said, “You must work slowly, slowly, slowly.” Within the next month, my voice came back inch by inch, but secure.

When I was done, I sang *Julius Caesar* to some of the greatest reviews. I see these things and I’m going, “Yeah, but what they don’t know behind this review is what was going on. In reality, in my head, was ‘Sing healthy, sing healthy, sing healthy.’” ■



Opera America Magazine

OPERA America's quarterly magazine addresses the issues most important to industry professionals, from marketing strategies and governance practices to exciting new repertoire.

IN THE FALL 2022 EDITION:

- Comedic New Works
- Opera Companies in the 2020s
- Unpacking Blackface in Opera
- Listening to the Artist Experience
- Oral History Project Highlights
- “My First Opera” with William Menefield



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OPERA AMERICA

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OPERA America is the national advocate for opera, dedicated to supporting the creation, presentation, and enjoyment of the art form for artists, administrators, trustees, and audiences since 1970.

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Fall/Winter 2022 Issue

Letter from the President/CEO

Creating Belonging on Boards

Fieldwide Demographic Report

Oral History Project: Carol Vaness

Future Trustee Meetings

ESSENTIALS OF OPERA GOVERNANCE Fall 2022 & Spring 2023 | Online

NATIONAL TRUSTEE FORUM 2022 October 19-21, 2022 | New York City

OPERA CONFERENCE 2023 May 17-20, 2023 | Pittsburgh

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OPERA CONFERENCE

PITTSBURGH MAY 17-20

Registration opens November 1
operaamerica.org/Conference