

ACROSS THE BOARD

A Publication of OPERA America for Opera Company Trustees



From the President and CEO

The depth of discussions and variety of performances on display at the World Opera Forum and Opera Conference this spring reflects the creativity and energy driving the opera field right now. It's a challenging operating environment, but our companies are looking to the future. They are working to identify their unique place in the opera ecosystem in order to convey a compelling value proposition to ticket buyers and funders.

This issue of *Across the Board* offers a window into how five companies in the Bay Area are thinking about programming and audiences. Their progress echoes the findings of two research initiatives we have undertaken recently. We offer glimpses of those takeaways here, with full detail coming soon in webinars, publications, our National Trustee Forum from March 5–7 in New York City, and our Opera Conference 2025 from May 20–23 in Memphis.

I hope you will take advantage of these resources and support your company as the most informed trustees you can be.

Marc A. Scorca

MARC A. SCORCA
OPERA AMERICA

Rebuilding Audiences: A Conversation

This past spring, OPERA America went onsite in San Francisco to host a conversation with the leaders of five Bay Area opera companies about rebuilding audiences in the years since the pandemic. From digital and immersive productions to community events and research, these companies are focused on the long game.

Dan Cooperman, Chief Advancement Officer, OPERA America: San Francisco imposed some of the strictest restrictions on in-person activity during the pandemic. Lamplighters Music Theatre was quick to jump to digital content. Cheryl, what did you learn from that work that informs the company's priorities now?

Cheryl Blalock, Former Executive Director*, Lamplighters Music Theatre:

The first thing we did was go digital, immediately. I asked our team, what if we're shut down for 12 or 18 months? So we planned out a monthly subscription series using our archival recordings. We started using our facility as a green screen studio and renting it out to partners like Pocket Opera and Ars Minerva. Later, we began live streaming productions. And we're still doing it. Not all audiences are coming back. And many of them want to stay online. Our commitment is to continue to do that.

Héctor Armienta, Artistic Director and Founder, Ópera Cultura: At Ópera Cultura, we also got into digital work. We were witnessing what was happening to the farm workers during the pandemic; no one was really taking care of them. So, between 2020 and 2021, we developed an animated opera called *Mi Camino* that I wrote. What we've learned is that there are opportunities to develop audiences online. It's

critical to develop digital content, but more so to find the threads between what you produce online and what you present live. Because that's what we're all about: live performances.

Dan Cooperman: Both San Francisco Opera and Opera Parallèle were innovative in the digital sphere. And when you were able to reopen, you both integrated immersive productions and experiences into your seasons. What was your inspiration for that?

Matthew Shilvock, General Director, San Francisco Opera: In terms of broad learnings from the pandemic, a big one was around the power of innovation, of trying new things. Originally, there was no chance to produce the normal way. Building the set of skills as a company for how we innovate is something that we've really ported over into this post-pandemic time. And I think being much more intentional about how you connect with audiences — that also came from that period, as well. You cannot take someone's attendance for granted in any way. You have to keep earning that attendance.

Nicole Paiement, General and Artistic Director, Opera Parallèle:

We spent a lot of time at Opera Parallèle thinking about our mission: What can we do right now that will help us continue on our path? We decided to go back to an idea that we had many years ago of developing a graphic-novel-style opera, but now in a digital format. Once COVID opened the door to live performance, we continued to experiment with the idea of bringing a more complete experience to our audiences. We felt our audiences wanted an intimate setting, wanted to be engaged in a very different way now that community mattered. Contemporary opera very often is dark; we wanted to give them joy and magic.

Dan Cooperman: Shawna, you came to Opera San José in the middle of the pandemic. Your predecessor had built a remarkable digital media studio, and you inherited the task of transitioning the company back to the theater. What has been your approach to audience building?



OPERA CULTURA

The animated opera *Mi Camino*, released in 2021



OPERA PARELLÈLE

The 2023 immersive production of *Everest*

Shawna Lucey, General Director and CEO, Opera San José:

Our digital arm and digital offerings continue to be a source of pride and engagement for a lot of our patrons. But we are focused on offering ways for our specific audiences to be at home in the California Theatre where we perform. During a board retreat, we agreed that one of our hallmarks is being friendly and welcoming. So, we doubled down on that. When people come into the California Theatre, they immediately feel the warmth of the atmosphere, the deliciousness of the cookies — and our community can see themselves on stage.

Dan Cooperman: What does that look like?

Shawna Lucey: We partner with a lot of San Jose organizations like Mosaic America, which is an amalgamation of different arts organizations, for dancers and children’s choruses in our productions. We’re digging into what we’re programming and asking ourselves: Is what we’re putting on stage reflective of the people of the South Bay? Can they see themselves on stage and in the audience?

We’re about to open a new production of *Florencia en el Amazonas*, our first Spanish-language opera. This evening is South First Fridays, an art walk event in downtown San Jose with a lot of arts organizations, where we’ve started presenting an immersive kind of event. This evening we’re going to have not just arias from *Florencia*, but we’re going to have folkloric dancing, a mariachi band, face painting, and butterfly making to create an installation that will be presented throughout the run of *Florencia*, and we’ll also give out free empanadas from a local business. We’re trying to really model how opera can be an art form that everyone can live in. They can feel that Opera San José belongs to them.

Dan Cooperman: Héctor, how have partnerships and community engagement helped Ópera Cultura?

Héctor Armienta: One of the fundamental anchors of Ópera Cultura is that we are an opera company and we are also in social service. We’ve always had collaborative partners. Thinking about the future,

we’re trying to extend that with relationships with organizations like SOMOS Mayfair and the San Jose Historical Society. We’re looking to find ways to be more authentic and collaborative in our relationships. There’s a composer who we are commissioning to develop a work that will be in the community, and we’re also expanding our work in arts education. Since we’re the only Latinx opera company in the country, we feel that it’s important we continue to do this kind of work.

Dan Cooperman: Nicole, you think of your community engagement initiatives as your “bullhorn” — a way to engage the community in conversations

that it’s very demanding for all companies to invest in those kinds of extracurricular activities when you’re trying to produce operas. But in the long run, it’s really creating what art is supposed to do: It’s creating engagement.

Dan Cooperman: Matthew, your company has invested substantially in audience research. Can you share some of what you’ve learned?

Matthew Shilvock: We are all seeing this great influx of new audience members, but that means there’s new things to learn about who these people are. We’re trying to make decisions as much around data as we can. We offer \$10 Dolby Family

single-ticket audience. It’s the power of data to really deflect decisions.

Dan Cooperman: Your marketing director shared with me that when Dolby ticket buyers come back, no matter what opera they came to the first time, they predominantly return for productions of inherited repertoire. How does that affect how you think about programming?

Matthew Shilvock: Certainly we have seen new pieces like *El Último Sueño de Frida y Diego* and *Omar* having extraordinary sold-out successes. If you can find pieces where there’s a sense of community trust for the work you’re putting on stage, your audience interest can go through the roof. We’ve also seen the same thing for some of the great standards, like the *Traviata* that Shawna directed for us. I think there is a great hunger for a broad spectrum of repertoire at the moment. The great beauty of the opera stage is it can tell stories that are extraordinarily relevant in the here and now.

Shawna Lucey: I think we are obviously at a very critical inflection point for all performing arts in the United States, and opera is a great leader. We are making the world anew in this moment — in thinking about creating new audiences and why people come to experience the power of music in person, and also in the digital sphere. I’m extremely optimistic for a lot of reasons. I keep thinking about ways in which we can get to know new people and make them part of our family, because it really is that experience of coming together. Even if you don’t know the person sitting next to you at the opera, it is a communal and important and deeply human experience. In terms of the practical work of audience building, thank goodness we have OPERA America and the research that Matthew and others are offering to help guide the way. Ultimately, we are the solution or the human experience. ■



David Allen

Cory Weaver

around the stories you tell on stage. Why is that important to you?

Nicole Paiement: The name Opera Parallèle comes from the idea of working in parallel with the community. As an organization, it’s very important to have an audience for our performances, but there are different entry points. We invite people to come to conversations. You don’t have to buy tickets. These events are free. It’s a way for us to authentically be part of the community. I want people to say, “I don’t like opera, but I went to this event, and now I’m going to go to the opera. I’m curious about this.” I know

Tickets, at least a hundred every night. If you are from the Bay Area and have not been to the opera in the last three years, then you can get one pair of tickets. It’s a one-time introductory offer, and they’ve been flying off the shelf. Once you’ve had the Dolby ticket, we can curate your subsequent journey. We don’t just throw you in the deep end with a regular ticket. We give you another offer, and we’ve done some A/B testing on which of those works best. We sold 9,000 Dolby tickets last year, and 22% of those people have already bought another ticket — which is a much higher retention rate than your average first-time

Adapted from an OPERA America event on April 5, 2024.

* Cheryl Blalock served as executive director of Lamplighters Music Theatre at the time of the conversation in April 2024. She stepped down from her position in August.

2025 OPERA CONFERENCE

MEMPHIS, TN MAY 20-23

Mark your calendar for the most influential gathering of North American opera producers! Four days of networking, panels, presentations, performances of *La Calisto*, and more.



REGISTER NOW AT
[OPERAAMERICA.ORG/CONFERENCE](https://operaamerica.org/conference)

OPERA AMERICA
 OPERA MEMPHIS

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 2024-2025 Trustee Quick Guide at operaamerica.org/TrusteeQuickGuide.

COMPANY WORKSHOPS

OA'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.

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 2024 EDITION:

- Tech Advancements in Opera
- Advocating for Support
- New Models for Auditions
- "My First Opera" with Competition Winners

You can subscribe to *Opera America Magazine* by joining OPERA America as a member for as little as \$75 at operaamerica.org/Join



A performance at San Francisco Opera

Cory Wenner

New Audience Research

UNDERSTANDING NEWCOMERS

With leadership support from the National Endowment for the Arts, OPERA America embarked this year on a multimodal, national research study into the record levels of first-time ticket buyers reported by opera companies since the pandemic: What brought these opera-curious over the past four years? How was their experience? What would bring them back?

The research was conducted by Slover Linett at NORC, a premier cultural research firm based at the University of Chicago. Over the summer, the survey was distributed by 36 opera companies of varying sizes, formats, and geographies to 190,000 operagoers who had attended any virtual or in-person event between 2020 and 2024. It received 10,000 responses, 30% of which were new-to-file.

Select takeaways suggest that new-to-file audiences:

- Want to check something new off their bucket list.
- Are interested in the opera "experience."
- Are more likely to be drawn to the inherited repertoire.
- Have had some introduction to opera through digital media.
- Have a largely positive experience.
- Want to know more about opera.
- Are concerned about ticket prices.
- Are younger, more diverse, and more likely to have children.

The full report will be released this fall and presented by OPERA America in an industry webinar on November 22 at 1:00 p.m. ET. Register at operaamerica.org/Webinars.

LATEST TICKET DATA

In the last issue of *Across the Board*, OPERA America reported on a survey of its Professional Company Members to understand how ticket sales in fall 2023 compared to the same period in fall 2019, before the pandemic. The main takeaway was that most companies had sold the same percent of their available seats, but with the average number of productions and performances down, the volume of tickets sold was down by a quarter.

A new follow-up survey of the months of January to December — comparing 2024 to 2019 — shows some slow progress. While capacities remain steady, the number of productions and performances has regained some lost ground, resulting in a smaller differential in the number of tickets sold: from 25% below pre-pandemic levels to now only 15% below, on average. ■

NATIONAL TRUSTEE WEEKEND

NEW YORK, NY | MARCH 5–8, 2025

OPERA AMERICA

MOVING OPERA FORWARD

NATIONAL OPERA CENTER
330 SEVENTH AVENUE
NEW YORK, NY 10001

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.



National Trustee
Forum



OPERA America Salutes
Awards Dinner



Outings and
Performances

REGISTER BY FEBRUARY 14

OPERA America invites trustees from across the country to New York City for four days of seminars, performances, and celebration — including the induction of the Opera Hall of Fame and bestowal of the National Opera Trustee Recognition Awards.

LEARN MORE & REGISTER [OPERAAMERICA.ORG/NTW](https://operaamerica.org/ntw)

YOU ARE RECEIVING THIS PUBLICATION BECAUSE YOU ARE A TRUSTEE AT A PROFESSIONAL COMPANY MEMBER OF OPERA AMERICA. TO CHANGE YOUR ADDRESS OR RECEIVE THIS AT HOME, CONTACT MEMBERSHIP@OPERAAMERICA.ORG.

ACROSS THE BOARD

A Publication of OPERA America for Opera Company Trustees

Fall/Winter 2024

Letter from the President/CEO

Rebuilding Audiences After COVID

Recent Ticket Sales Trends

Understanding Opera's Newcomers

Future Trustee Meetings

NATIONAL TRUSTEE FORUM 2025 | MARCH 5–8, 2025 | NEW YORK CITY

ESSENTIALS OF OPERA GOVERNANCE | SPRING 2025 | ONLINE

OPERA CONFERENCE | MAY 20–23, 2025 | MEMPHIS

2025 | **OPERA CONFERENCE**
MEMPHIS, TN MAY 20–23

REGISTER NOW FOR THE LOWEST PRICES | [OPERAAMERICA.ORG/CONFERENCE](https://operaamerica.org/conference)

