

# ACROSS THE BOARD

A Publication of OPERA America for Opera Company Trustees



## From the President and CEO

The opera field is regaining strength gradually. Artistry is flourishing, sales are increasing, and there is new effort (and pressure) to find innovative solutions to how we conduct business.

This will be the focus of our Opera Conference in Los Angeles this June 5–8, where we will have practical sessions about designing retention strategies for first-timers, developing a new generation of donors, exploring ways opera companies can partner over multiple seasons, and finding ways to make opera boards as effective as possible.

As a special prelude to the conference, the second-ever World Opera Forum from June 3–5 will take a global view of our art form. Nearly 60 representatives from six continents will discuss key issues affecting opera worldwide. Together, we will reframe our case for opera in the 21st century.

I hope you, as trustees and leaders at your companies, will join us for this monumental week— including performances by LA’s vibrant opera community.

*Marc A. Scorca*

MARC A. SCORCA  
OPERA AMERICA

## Why I’m Optimistic About the Year Ahead

BY MARC A. SCORCA

I have reason to be optimistic about the year ahead, but I also want to be realistic about the challenges that continue for companies and artists alike.

Ticket sales are building back, and many of our smaller and mid-sized companies actually have surpassed ticket sales levels from before the onset of the pandemic. In a set of recent Zoom calls with general directors, almost everyone described themselves as “optimistic.” Early subscription renewals and new acquisitions are both encouraging.

Let’s remember that full houses are a source of strength, not only because they help the bottom line, but because they generate excitement for artists, audiences, and donors who are gratified to observe public enthusiasm for the art form. Some companies



North Carolina Opera’s Barber of Seville

Eric Waters

are taking this into account with special promotional programs that prioritize attendance levels over ticket income. Bringing people into the opera house now — repeatedly, not just once — is a key to future success.

But ticket revenue is only a small share of overall income. As you can see in our recently published *Annual Field Report*, there is no avoiding the fact that contributed revenue is and will continue to be the largest source of income for all our companies (see chart at left). In this essential area, our member companies are not as optimistic as they are about ticket sales. Contributions have been generally flat over the last several years.

This is not an indictment of development staff or of opera, but the arts in general are not at the top of philanthropic priorities for many people. Very worthy social and political issues are covered regularly on the front pages of newspapers, as they should be. But when was the last time a positive arts story made it to the front page of your newspaper? Can you get a feature article before opening night? Media coverage helps generate ticket sales, and it also helps make the case for philanthropic support.

Another challenge for our members is inflation. The cost of producing opera increased tremendously over the last five years, and although inflation is moderating, costs will not decline. Increases are particularly high in the areas of set and costume construction, shipping, and staff salaries and benefits.

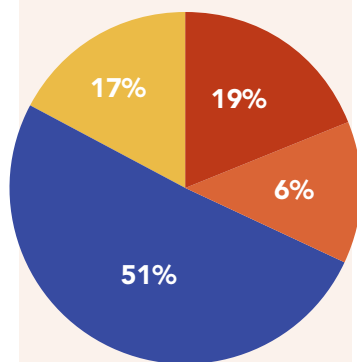
What are companies doing to balance budgets now that federal pandemic support is over? Many of them are producing fewer operas and reducing the number of performances to contain costs and achieve the highest possible level of efficiency. Over the 25 years from 1999 and 2024, the number of productions at OPERA America’s seven largest opera companies declined by nearly one-third.

That’s disappointing for opera lovers, of course, but I invite you to see the data through the lens of artists. One-third fewer productions means fewer performance fees for singers, fewer contracts for directors and designers, and fewer commissions for composers and librettists. It has an impact, too, on related businesses, like artist managers and scene shops.

Some very talented artists have

continued >

### REVENUE BREAKDOWN



- Box Office
- Other Earned
- Private Support
- Government Support\*

\* The high level of government support in 2022 reflects the influx of pandemic relief through federal programs. Pre-pandemic, government support accounted for less than 5% of all revenue.



Nikola Printz in *Balls* at Opera Parallèle

gone on to jobs in other sectors because of these diminished opportunities. The most determined and entrepreneurial artists are developing career portfolios in which they juggle different kinds of creative opportunities as performers, producers, and teachers. But making a good living, paying off student loans, having a family, and owning a home are more difficult for artists today than they have been in recent memory.

Despite these defining issues, we continue to create compelling art. I'm optimistic about the sustained and successful effort to

make opera a truly American art form. Over the past five years, the balance of new American work to inherited European repertoire has shifted from 30–70 to nearly 50–50. This shift has attracted global admiration and legions of first-time attenders. How we curate a blend between our inheritance and our creative future is among the most important decision points for company staff and trustees. ■

*Adapted from OPERA America's Report from the Field, which aired on April 26, 2024.*

#### LATEST TICKET DATA



OPERA America recently conducted a survey of its Professional Company Members to understand how tickets sales in fall 2023 (September–December) compared to the same period in fall 2019. Seventy companies responded, evenly distributed across all five budget groups.

One good-news finding is that companies sold nearly the same percentage of their available seats in 2023 as in 2019. Most companies were within 1–7% of their prior capacities, with Budget 5 companies often exceeding 2019 rates.

That said, the average number of performances was down for many companies, especially larger ones. Budget 1 and 2 companies averaged 18–24% fewer performances, which meant they sold about 20% fewer tickets. Budget 3–5 companies appeared to be closer to their 2019 productivity and ticket sales levels.

Continuing a trend of the past three years, the percentage of new-to-file ticket buyers continues to increase for many companies.

## 2024 OPERA CONFERENCE · WORLD OPERA FORUM · JUNE 3–8 LOS ANGELES, CA

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Join more than 550 attendees!

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**JUNE 3–5**

### World Opera Forum

The second-ever convening of the global opera community — addressing today's key issues worldwide

**JUNE 5–8**

### Opera Conference 2024

Four days of sessions, discussions, and networking focused on advancing the North American industry

PLUS: A Weeklong Festival of Performances by LA Opera, Beth Morrison Projects, Long Beach Opera, Mission Opera, Overtone Industries, Pacific Opera Project, and Synchrony

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

## Board Members and the Fundraising Process

**A** strong board relies on every member pitching in when it comes to fundraising. With as much as 80% of budgets coming from contributed revenue, it can't fall to just the staff or the development committee. So how can you take part in different steps of the fundraising process?

**1 IDENTIFICATION & RESEARCH:** Review lists of recent ticket buyers and let staff know who you know personally and professionally.

**2 CULTIVATION:** Invite prospective donors to performances or events. As you engage them in conversation, listen to learn about their interests.

**3 SOLICITATION:** If you're not comfortable asking, that's okay. Help staff with making asks by accompanying them on a visit or sending a note of support to the prospect before or after the meeting.

**4 ACKNOWLEDGMENT:** Send personal notes or make phone calls of thanks to recent donors. And express your gratitude when you see them at performances.

**5 STEWARDSHIP:** At performances, visit the seats of recent donors to say hello. After performances, send recent reviews or articles about the company with notes of appreciation.

*Adapted from Marc A. Scorca's Essentials of Opera Governance webinar on March 14, 2024.*

## OA Trustee Resources

### TRUSTEE RESOURCE PAGE

For a listing of the resources available to you as a company trustee, visit [operaamerica.org/Trustees](https://operaamerica.org/Trustees) or download the 2023–2024 Trustee Quick Guide at [operaamerica.org/TrusteeQuickGuide](https://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 646.699.5266 for details.

## Opera America Magazine

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



### IN THE SPRING 2024 EDITION:

- The Los Angeles Opera Ecosystem
- Companies with Record Ticket Sales
- The Potential of AI in Opera
- Benefits of "One-Truck Shows"
- "My First Opera" with Russell Thomas

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

## Oral History Project: Soprano Diana Soviero



**T**he acclaimed soprano Diana Soviero reflects on her childhood dream of becoming an opera singer.

“My father and mother took me to my first opera when I was nine years old. I went to see *Tosca* with Renata Tebaldi and Franco Corelli. We were up in the peanut gallery, and I had this long ponytail, and I kept leaning over to try to get on the stage. My father kept pulling my ponytail back

and said, 'If you don't stop it, Diana, you're gonna fall over.' I wanted to be on stage so bad.

One day, I was in my living room at the piano, and my father put on the Met broadcast. It was *Rigoletto*, and I started singing. My father said, 'Boy, that soprano on the broadcast sounds like you.' And I said, 'Dad, it is me. I'm singing with the soprano.' He says, 'You what? Are you serious? Do you wanna do this?'

Sometime later, I was a student at Juilliard, and I got a call from my dean to come down to Lincoln Center, which was still under construction. My father was in the theater. His company was chosen to do all the ornamental plastering in the Metropolitan Opera, Avery Fisher Hall, and other venues. I came off the subway into the hole that was going to be the Met. At first, I couldn't find my father because he was in his plastering outfit. But then he said to me, 'Put on that hard hat and stand over there where I put that barrel. I want you to sing something.' I said, 'Dad, I'm embarrassed. You have all these people watching. I'm not singing.' He said, 'Diana, just sing la la la la.' So I sang 'Un bel di, vedremo' from *Madama Butterfly*. After I finished, he said to me, 'You were the first person to sing at Lincoln Center in the Metropolitan Opera. My daughter.'

Years later, when I made my Met debut, my father was no longer alive. Joe Volpe walked me out, and he said, 'Diana, you have tears in your eyes.' I said, 'Yeah, I do. My father's dream came true.' And he said, 'Di, what about yours?' And I said, 'Well, mine too.' ■

*Adapted from Diana Soviero's Oral History Project conversation recorded on May 24, 2022. Explore the full story and others at [operaamerica.org/OralHistory](https://operaamerica.org/OralHistory).*

## National Trustee Weekend New York, NY | March 5–8, 2025



National  
Trustee Forum



OPERA America  
Salutes Awards  
Dinner



Outings and  
Performances

MARK YOUR CALENDAR!



# JUST PUBLISHED: Annual Field Report 2023



OPERA America's annual snapshot report of the field's financial health, with comparative charts of opera companies by size and listings of member companies.

READ THE 2023 ANNUAL FIELD REPORT AT  
[OPERAAMERICA.ORG/AFR](https://operaamerica.org/AFR)

## OPERA AMERICA

MOVING OPERA FORWARD

NATIONAL OPERA CENTER  
330 SEVENTH AVENUE  
NEW YORK, NY 10001

OPERA America is the national champion 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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## A Publication of OPERA America for Opera Company Trustees

### Spring/Summer 2024 Issue

Letter from the President/CEO

Update on the State of Opera

Recent Ticket Sales Trends

Board's Role in Fundraising

Oral History Project: Diana Soviero

### Future Trustee Meetings

OPERA CONFERENCE 2024 & WORLD OPERA FORUM | JUNE 3-8, 2024 | LOS ANGELES

ESSENTIALS OF OPERA GOVERNANCE | FALL 2024 | ONLINE

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

**2024** | OPERA CONFERENCE  
• WORLD OPERA FORUM •  
JUNE 3-8 LOS ANGELES, CA

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HOLLYWOOD