

OPERA AMERICA

Increases in New Attendees P.24 | Details of Intimacy Directing P.28 | Investing in Young Professionals P.10

Magazine

WINTER 2023

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Retiring
Blackface
P.20



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CONTENTS



Lincoln Center's "An Evening of Access Magic"

16

Silent Applause

Opera connects with disabled communities

By Hannah Edgar

3 The Human Dimension
By Marc A. Scorca

UP FRONT

5 Fresh Faces
Opera companies welcome the entire family
By Peter Feher

8 People Protocols
Codes of conduct for opera attendees
By Piper Starnes

10 Graduated Interest
Young professional programs build new audiences
By Rebecca Spiess

12 People

FEATURES

20 Retiring Blackface
Putting an end to the harmful practice
By Naveen Kumar

24 Their First Time
Companies report a swell of newcomers
By Jeremy Reynolds

28 Sex, Power & Dynamics
A conversation with two intimacy directors

OA NEWS

32 OPERA America Salutes

34 Director-Designer Prize Winners

36 A New Take on Orfeo

38 Digital Opera Award Winners

48 My First Opera
By Dame Zandra Rhodes

ON THE COVER Jacqueline Ko in Opera Mariposa's Benefit + Awareness event (photo: Stephanie Ko)

Introducing Editor Jeremy Reynolds



» After years writing about opera and classical music in various publications, I've discovered a few trends. Readers respond to stories about how the art form connects to the world at large. They appreciate quantifiable data, and they like actionable examples of successful practices in the field.

These trends are guideposts that will help inform my tenure as *Opera America Magazine's* editor.

A bit about my background: I earned a pair of degrees in clarinet performance and English at Oberlin, where I had my first interactions with live opera as a musician in the pit. I spent a summer in Italy playing Puccini in Tuscan opera houses before earning a master's in journalism with from Syracuse University. Currently, I'm the classical music critic at the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, and I've earned numerous local, state, and national press awards for articles about opera and music.

Art and opera don't exist in a vacuum. Here at the magazine, we'll be digging into conversations and research occurring at the conjunction of music and mental health. Of music and education. Music and technology. Music and identity. These are all data-rich topics that resonate within the opera community and beyond — and topics that will appear in the industry-focused coverage you'll find in these pages.

Reach out anytime at JReynolds@operaamerica.org.

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The Human Dimension



» **It's difficult to keep up** with the passage of time; typing the year 2023 feels like a science fiction exercise! Remarkable as it may seem, we are approaching the third anniversary of the onset of the COVID pandemic and the seismic changes it engendered — changes to every aspect of the creation, production, and enjoyment of art. Even as we hunger for a year of calmer progress, we know that uncertainty will continue to define the immediate future.

The Great Resignation has challenged every sector — including opera — to recruit and retain talented staff who can manage, innovate, and lead. I continue to hear across my travels and from our continuing member Zoom meetings that companies struggled through fall seasons with numerous open positions and constant recruitment for new staff at every level of all departments. But

recent conversations have been particularly revealing.

The general director of a major company shared with me that his company was searching for a senior-level position at what seems to be a very generous salary. In his city, however, he's competing with the for-profit sector, which offers stock options, bonuses, and profit sharing, as well as the opportunity to work in facilities that feature food courts, health clubs, and other amenities that are unimaginable in an opera context. In a recent visit to a healthy mid-sized company, a roundtable discussion with staff revealed that the most common issues among them were containing their hours, rationalizing their workflow, and managing remote work.

OPERA America's most recent comprehensive Human Resources Survey was revealing. More than one-third of OPERA America's Professional Company Members do not offer health insurance plans for employees. More than two-thirds do not offer any kind of retirement plan. With nonprofit arts salaries as the basis, how can young people with a desire to build careers in opera take care of themselves? Do they work without health insurance? Do they delay long-term savings until later in their lives, despite the advice from investment pundits to begin saving for retirement while young? Regrettably, their answer all too often is to find work in another field. And let's not forget, artists in our field work under the same conditions, although they don't even enjoy the benefit of paid vacations and holidays. These and other topics about the human dimension of opera will be at the center of discussion at Opera Conference 2023; join the conversation in Pittsburgh this May.

The Great Resignation has been a tremendous equalizer across American industry. How the opera field recovers from it will require improved conditions that contribute to retention and fulfillment in the workplace. Over the last years of the pandemic, artists and arts workers have been first responders who provided solace and inspiration during long days of isolation. Let's reward them by working to eliminate the expectation that a life in the arts requires unsustainable sacrifice.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marc A. Scorca".

Marc A. Scorca
President/CEO



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UP FRONT

NEW THINKING FOR TOMORROW'S OPERA



San Francisco Opera's Community Open House

Fresh Faces

Companies large and small are trying to tempt youngsters into the opera house with a variety of community-minded programs.

By PETER FEHER

» San Francisco Opera has its youngest fans to thank for selling out its Community Open House in the fall.

"We had kids from basically babes in arms all the way up to teenagers," says Ellen Presley, the company's special project manager. On October 23, about 2,200 visitors of all ages arrived at the War Memorial Opera House. Kids

played with props in the lobby, took conducting lessons, and hopped on the operatic stage for the first time for a guided tour. "The tours were a total sellout," Presley says.

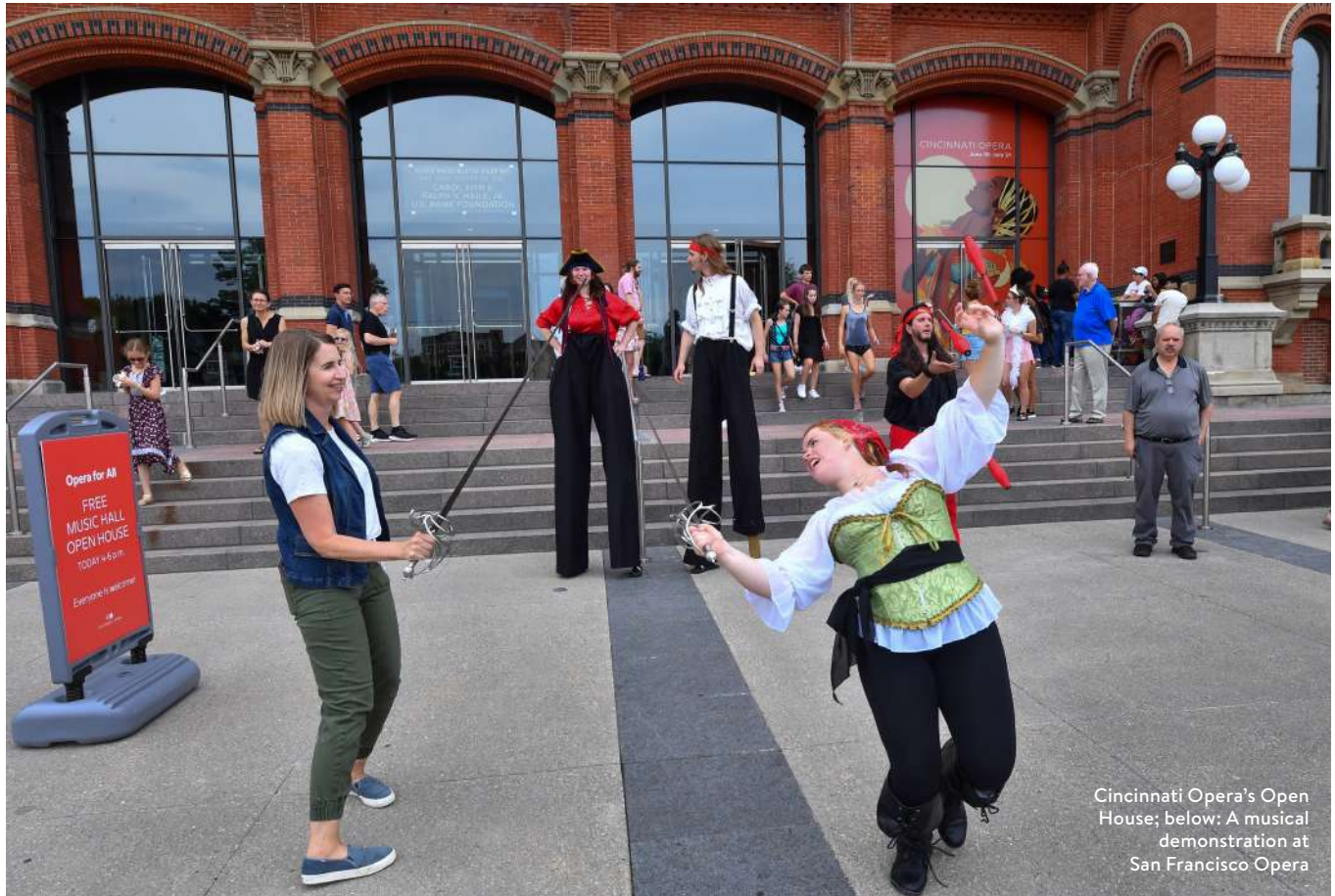
The company isn't alone in attempting to bring fresh faces to the opera. Other companies across the country have also programmed family-friendly events in recent years to entice

families with children to give the art form a try.

Some, like Colorado's Central City Opera (CCO), have made such events a part of their regular programming. Because most of its audience is made up of tourists, often with children in tow, CCO adds a family day to one of its festival productions each summer. The family-friendly Opera

Adventures program includes a range of child-friendly activities as a separately ticketed event available before a matinee performance.

It's a smaller, more intimate experience. Typically, a few dozen attend each Opera Adventures program. Margaret Ozaki Graves, CCO's associate director of education and community engagement, remembers her



Cincinnati Opera's Open House; below: A musical demonstration at San Francisco Opera

experience as a teaching artist for Opera Adventures in 2019. “It was nice to give the students a way in,” she says, explaining that hosting Opera Adventures before the matinee proved a way to help kids connect better with the performance.

Other companies are experimenting with larger-scale community day formats. In June, Cincinnati Opera organized its own free community open house for a crowd of about 500. Young people and adults could visit the costume dress-up shop or swing by a “Face the Music Mask Making Station,” in addition to onstage tours and other demos. After the open house, the crowd swelled to thousands for the opera’s annual Opera in the Park concert, a free outdoor event.

Cincinnati Opera is making a concerted effort to foster relationships with



the city that reach beyond the concert hall. Longtime partners like the Cincinnati Ballet and Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra helped make the day happen, as did less conventional partners ranging from the Cincinnati Zoo to a neighborhood ice cream chain. “Board members were like, ‘We need to do

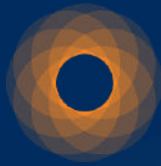
this before every opera,’” says Tracy L. Wilson, the company’s director of community engagement and education. She adds that there’s interest in reprising the event, but no concrete plans yet, as such events are pricey.

In San Francisco as well, even though the open house sold out, SFO hasn’t

pulled the trigger on deciding whether it’ll reprise the open house, which was only made possible through higher-than-usual donations for special initiatives during the opera’s centennial season. Plus, the company is continuing to evaluate how many people will continue to interact with its other offerings, whether that’s buying a ticket to a main-stage show or attending another community event.

Overall, there’s been lots of positive, anecdotal feedback. Presley recalls a particularly positive response to a survey after the open house: “Their 12-year-old now says opera is cool,” she says, laughing. ■

Peter Feher is the managing editor of San Francisco Classical Voice and also a correspondent for the website Cleveland Classical.



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Photo Credit: Top: Fort Worth Opera's *Don Giovanni* (2010), Sarasota Opera's *Of Mice and Men* (2013), and Fort Worth Opera's *Don Giovanni* (2010). Bottom: Opera Tampa's *Tales of Hoffman* (2020), Sarasota Opera's *Jerusalem* (2014), and Sarasota Opera's *Ariadne auf Naxos* (2002).

People Protocols

Several opera companies are adopting codes of conduct intended to stop offensive behaviors in their tracks.

By PIPER STARNES

» After a dress rehearsal for Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* at

Opera Philadelphia, several bystanders told staff that they'd heard an attendee confront a Black audience member to ask why he was sitting in a donors-only section. At an On Site Opera event in New York City, an externally contracted security guard attempted to stop a trans-identifying audience member from using the restroom that corresponded with their gender. At Minnesota Opera, a woman reported feeling uncomfortable because other attendees were commenting on her hair and style of dress.

"We needed to do something so that Black women are not coming to the theater and having their hair touched by strangers — that's crazy!" says Rocky Jones, Minnesota Opera's equity, diversity, and inclusion director.

In recent years, all three of these companies as well as others around the country have been experimenting with ways to prevent these sorts of negative encounters. All have implemented company codes of conduct for attendees that prohibit things like verbal and physical harassment, discrimination, and any disruption that harms another's sense of belonging.

The goal is to make opera a more inclusive space where all feel welcome. Plus, they provide the company explicit grounds for addressing or removing individuals for breaking the codes.



Code Language

These codes address a wide range of potential discriminatory behaviors. Minnesota Opera's "Shared Values of Participation," which appears on the company's website, states that the Minnesota Opera respects "the dignity, boundaries, and identities of all our patrons." The company implemented its code in 2016 but continues to revise and refine the language.

Opera Philadelphia has posted its code online and inside Verizon Hall for patrons to read on their way into the theater. The code reads in part: "Behavior that is harmful to others or disruptive to our communal sense of belonging for all will not be tolerated... [including] all forms of discrimination, harassment, and microaggressions."

Derrell Acon, a former diversity, equity, and inclusion consultant who has worked with 35 opera companies,

joined Opera Philadelphia as its vice president of people operations and inclusion at the beginning of 2022.

"I'd heard others talk about [codes], but when I got to Opera Philadelphia and was put in a position where I had the authority to get something like this on its feet, I took that opportunity."

Code Breaks

On Site Opera implemented its code in 2018 as a part of its ongoing response to the #MeToo movement, which exposed numerous incidences of sexual impropriety in the arts as well as the world at large. "[Our policy] was in reaction to what was happening very visibly in the industry," says Piper Gunnarson, executive director at On Site Opera.

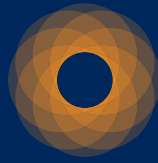
The company's code was initially about protecting artists in rehearsal rooms and at private events — places where higher-ups and

donors might be more care-free with their language and an artist's personal space.

Now, partly for liability reasons, the code applies more broadly. It appears online as a part of the company's ticket-buying process as well as on its own Values and Commitments webpage. All artists, staff, patrons, volunteers, audiences, and external affiliates are expected to comply. "Like most organizations, we have some lawyers on our board, and because it's their job, they're going to approach [conduct codes] from that perspective," Gunnarson says. After On Site Opera's aforementioned bathroom incident, the company reached an agreement with its contracted security company not to have the guard in question work at any additional events.

It's tough to measure whether the policies are having a tangible effect. "A code is not the end-all-be-all," Acon says, though he also notes that Opera Philadelphia has indeed received fewer complaints since implementing its conduct code. Then again, that's not their only aim. These policies are also a way to show attendees that the companies are at least trying to be proactive and protect patrons from offensive behaviors and to make attending an opera a comfortable experience for everyone, regardless of their backgrounds. They're another tool in the toolbox. ■

Piper Starnes has written for Syracuse.com and Rochester CITY News.



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Graduated Interest

Young professional programs are aiming to bring new audiences to opera companies with a variety of incentives.

By REBECCA SPIESS

» Across the country, opera companies are aiming to entice younger audience members with membership programs designed especially for them. While the heavy discounts and free events are an added expense, many opera companies are treating these programs as audience cultivation, with the goal of turning young professionals into season ticket holders and eventually donors. “You really have to have a vision about how this might unfold over multiple years to pursue something like this,” says Eric Broker, Minnesota Opera’s former marketing and communications director. “We’re looking at the lifetime value of a patron versus selling 80 tickets for \$20.”

As it turns out, many young professionals like to party. Besides heavily discounted tickets and subscriptions, most of the programs — which tend to have chic, upbeat names like Tempo, BRAVO!, or Crescendo — are leaning on hosting special events like happy hours and post-show soirees and backstage events. These programs have memberships of dozens or hundreds at different companies. Some, like Seattle Opera’s BRAVO!, have been around for decades and have a proven track record of leading to subscriptions and donations. Others, like The Dallas Opera’s new Crescendo program for attendees between the ages of 21 and 45, are primarily helping draw new attendees. More than half of Crescendo’s 154 members are brand new to the



Above: A kickoff event for Seattle Opera’s BRAVO! group

Left: Pittsburgh Opera’s New Guard

company, drawn in by the parties and promise of networking opportunities.

Time will tell whether Crescendo provides a short-term social club or a vehicle for driving long-term engagement and subscriptions as members age out.

First, though, who exactly are these young professionals? Chris Cox, marketing and communications director at Pittsburgh Opera, says that its club, the New Guard, is “really an engagement program more

so than a revenue generator,” and that there are two different groups in young professional programs. The first comprises established professionals who work in fields that offer stable salaries, like law, tech, or finance. They are further along in their careers and have disposable income. For them, opera is an avenue to expand their social networks. The second cohort of young professionals is made up of die-hard opera fans who just happen to be younger

than average. They are recent college grads who are missing the student discounts that were once at their disposal. For them, young professional programs offer a way to keep interacting with a medium that’s currently out of budget.

The New Guard’s two most popular annual events, a summer salon and a Pride night, record more than 100 attendees each year. These events are spearheaded by current Executive Council President and founding



the Ambassadors like to be around younger folks, and the young professionals liked to feel like they're part of a larger group," Preisser says.

Another strategy of these programs is to build more graduated steps between student discounts and full subscribership. Minnesota Opera founded its Tempo club in 2011, and before the pandemic, that club had ballooned to an impressive 450 members. Tempo is for opera-goers ages 21–45 and offers step-up price points to members who age out. The logic is simple: Attendees who suddenly lose access to the Tempo discounts altogether may stop coming, but providing a bridge may ease that transition: "We're really putting our money where our mouth is with this discount and actively undercutting our ticket sales," Broker says, noting the program's success in keeping patrons coming back.

Seattle Opera's BRAVO!, founded 1996, provides perhaps the best example of these programs' ability to forge lasting relationships. BRAVO! discounts tickets up to 50% for members between the ages of 21 and 39 and offers a variety of happy hours and social events throughout the season. It's one of the largest operatic young professional clubs in the country, and more than half of its members continue subscribing to the company after they age out of the program. Crucially, thanks to the company's efforts to consistently engage and interact with the club, members also become donors faster and more consistently than other patrons, the company notes. Non-members tend to take more than three years to make that consequential first donation. A BRAVO! member generally makes a first donation after a year of subscribing. ■

Rebecca Spiess is a reporter at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.

Clockwise from top: Minnesota Opera's Tempo members at a Pride party; Pittsburgh Opera's New Guard at opening night of *Carmen*; Tempo members at an afterparty for *Rigoletto*; Seattle Opera's BRAVO! group

member Michael Komo, who tapped his own personal network to kickstart the group's growth. The New Guard calendar also includes around six pre-show happy hours — complete with drink discounts — that are another big draw, Cox says. Pittsburgh Opera considers its program a success, as it brings in a healthy number of new attendees and is revenue-neutral thanks to its membership dues.

That isn't always the case. These young professional

programs can live or die based on the amount of resources a company can invest in the events as well as the networks that their volunteer leaders can tap into. "If it's a young company, or if it's the first time starting a group like this, you really do need a charismatic leader, a magnet who can connect you with folks," Opera Orlando's general director and CEO, Gabriel Preisser, says. That company's young profession club, the Forte Society, didn't survive

the pandemic, as maintaining engagement proved difficult for this event-oriented segment. Ultimately, Orlando Opera determined that it wasn't worth separating attendees out by age and rolled the roughly 20 club members into its Ambassadors program, which offers some of the same behind-the-scenes sorts of perks and social events for members who want to get more involved and donate. The Ambassadors program is not age-restricted. "We found

TRANSITIONS

Tehvon Fowler-Chapman has joined LA Opera as vice president of Connects, the company's education and community engagement initiative.

Spoletto Festival USA has welcomed Chief Financial Officer **Brent Dickman**, Chief Operating Office **Dexter Foxworth**, Lead Producer **Liz Keller-Tripp**, and Chief Marketing Officer **Katharine Laidlaw**.

Lesley Hunter has joined HERE as managing director, a newly created role that is part of a leadership restructuring.

Opera Theatre of Saint Louis has extended the contract of General Director **Andrew Jorgensen** through 2028.

Lakes Area Music Festival has hired **Daniel Meyers** as director of development.

IN Series has welcomed **Adrienne Starr** as its new managing director.

Reed W. Smith, general director of Anchorage Opera, announced that he will retire in May 2023.

Karen Stone, a stage director who has led companies including The Dallas Opera and Opera Graz, has been appointed director of Opera Europa, OPERA America's partner organization in Europe.

The Glimmerglass Festival has named its outgoing leader, **Francesca Zambello**, as artistic and general director emerita.

Annapolis Opera Company has hired **Jane Weaver** as director of development.

KUDOS

Yuval Sharon, artistic director of Detroit Opera and The Industry, was named to *Time* magazine's 2022 "Time100 Next List," which recognizes 100 rising figures in industries around the world.

San Francisco Opera awarded its highest honor, the San Francisco Opera Medal, to mezzo-soprano **Catherine Cook**, bass **Ferruccio Furlanetto**, and bass-baritones **Philip Skinner** and **Dale Travis**.

Soprano **Leah Hawkins** is the winner of Washington National Opera's 2022 Marian Anderson Vocal Award, which recognizes a young American singer with outstanding promise for a significant career.

The recipients of this year's Opera News Awards are soprano **Lise Davidsen**, soprano **Erin Morley**, and tenor and educator **George Shirley**.

Rebecca Hass, Pacific Opera Victoria's director of engagement programs and partnerships, received the inaugural Nada Ristich Change Maker Award at Opera Canada's annual awards ceremony. (Hass is a member of *Opera America Magazine's* Editorial Advisory Committee.)

IN MEMORIAM



Ned Rorem died on November 18 in New York. He was 99.

Rorem began his musical studies at the age of 12 with Margaret Bonds and went on to study at Northwestern University and the Curtis Institute of Music. He graduated from Juilliard with his bachelor's degree in 1946 and master's degree in 1948. That same year, he won a Gershwin Prize for his *Overture in C*, and the prize money allowed him to travel to France and Morocco, where he wrote a number of his early songs. He was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship in 1951 and studied in Paris with Arthur Honegger.

In 1959, the Philadelphia Orchestra premiered Rorem's tone poem *Eagles*, and the New York Philharmonic gave the premiere of his acclaimed Symphony No. 3. His first full-length opera, *Miss Julie*, premiered at New York City Opera in 1965. Four decades later, Rorem wrote his other full-length opera, *Our Town*, which premiered at Lake George Opera (now Opera Saratoga) in 2006. He also composed a handful of short chamber operas, including *Three Sisters Who Are Not Sisters* (1968), set to a libretto by Gertrude Stein. He was awarded the 1976 Pulitzer Prize for Music for his *Air Music: Ten Etudes* for orchestra.

Rorem is best remembered as a master of the American art song, having written over 500 songs and song cycles. His 1998 song cycle *Evidence of Things Not Seen*, consisting of 36 songs setting texts by a range of poets from Walt Whitman to Mark Doty, is considered his masterwork.

Brandon Gibson, bass-baritone and managing director of Marble City Opera, died on November 16 at the age of 36. Gibson wrote the libretto for *I Can't Breathe*, about the police murder of George Floyd, which premiered at Marble City Opera earlier this year. He performed with Knoxville Opera, the Clarence Brown Theatre, and Marble City Opera.

Mezzo-soprano **Joanna Simon**, 85, died on October 19. Simon made her debut in 1962 as Cherubino at



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People

the New York City Opera and went on to premiere several roles in 1960s and 1970s, including the title role in Pasatieri's *Black Widow* at Seattle Opera and Pelagia in Starer's *The Last Lover* at Caramoor. She also sang with the New York Philharmonic, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra, and many others.

Italian tenor **Daniele Barone** died on November 5 at the age of 92. Barone made his Metropolitan Opera debut in 1956 as Cavaradossi in *Tosca* and sang over 54 performances with the company through 1962, earning

acclaim for his interpretations of Puccini and Verdi roles. He frequently sang with the Philadelphia Grand Opera Company and Philadelphia Lyric Opera Company throughout the 1960s.

Philanthropist and opera enthusiast **Dr. John Serrage**, a long-time trustee of Opera Maine, died on October 21. An accomplished pediatrician, Serrage served as Maine's director of maternal and child health before retiring in 1988 and pursuing a second career as an archaeologist. Serrage's association with Opera Maine began with the company's

founding in 1994, and he remained an active trustee until his death. In 2018, he was awarded the National Opera Trustee Recognition Award from OPERA America.

Richard Best, a bass-baritone who sang 555 performances of 29 roles at the Metropolitan Opera for over 20 years, died on May 17 at age 87. In addition to his career at the Met, he appeared with the Santa Fe Opera, San Francisco Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, and Paris Opera. Trained as a pianist, organist, and singer, Best taught for 20 years at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

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Bizet **CARMEN**

Bartók **BLUEBEARD'S CASTLE**

Prokofiev **THE LOVE FOR THREE ORANGES**

Kander/Gumbel **dwb (driving while black)**

Redler/Dye **THE FALLING AND THE RISING**

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SILENT

New ways of connecting opera with disabled communities are resonating around North America.

By HANNAH EDGAR



APPLAUS

SE

Jacqueline Ko in
Opera Mariposa's
Benefit +
Awareness event

T

he creative team behind Opera Mariposa didn't set out to start North America's only opera company by and for disabled artists. Nor did they have lofty goals of changing the opera world. When sisters Stephanie and Jacqueline Ko, who have lived with post-viral chronic fatigue syndrome since childhood, founded Opera Mariposa in 2012, they simply wanted to support singers treading their way through a grueling industry.

Stephanie Ko, Opera Mariposa's general manager, says she was surprised when someone pointed out that the company was "disability-run and disability-led."

The end result of their efforts: a hyperflexible company that baked accessibility into its core values from the beginning. In its total commitment to access, Mariposa remains a conspicuous outlier in the opera world. (For example, the company has opted to stick to streaming for the foreseeable future to optimize audience access and safety.)

Such efforts are resonating with this community. Robin Hahn was diagnosed in adulthood with hypermobile Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (hEDS), a connective tissue disorder correlated to pain, fatigue, and joint damage. A childhood friend of the Kos, she cut her touring career short to return to Vancouver, where Opera Mariposa is based. "I tried my hand at the more traditional way of being an opera singer, and my body said no," Hahn says. "Luckily, because Mariposa existed, there was already a support space for me."

Now that the pandemic has set access needs in even greater relief, other opera companies on the more "traditional" side of things have asked themselves hard questions. Like: Was their "normal" — one-size-fits-all venue accommodations, tough rehearsal schedules, last-minute casting calls — ever accessible to begin with? To answer that question, some companies are working to reimagine the art form from the ground up.

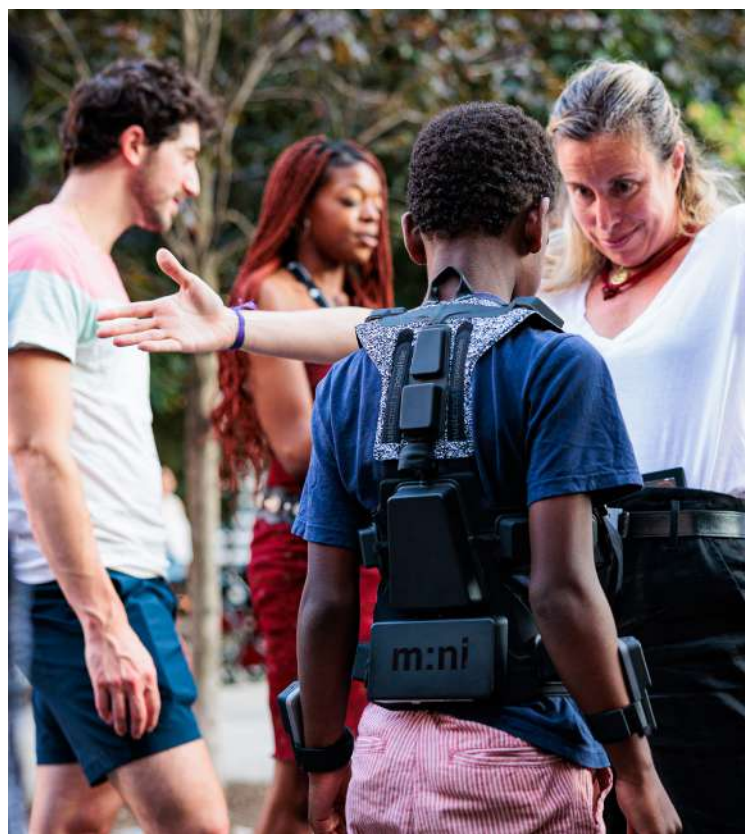
TOUCH AND TECH

Opera Birmingham addresses these challenges head-on with *Touch*, a new opera by composer Carla Lucero and librettist Marianna Mott Newirth about Helen Keller and her teacher, Anne Sullivan. The January 2024 premiere will inaugurate enhanced access accommodations for all subsequent Opera Birmingham productions. These include an ASL interpreter, personal supertitles displayable on phones and tablets, and braille program notes provided by the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB). Crucially, *Touch's* disabled characters are played by disabled actors. Keller will be portrayed by a low-vision and/or low-hearing actress onstage, with her voice embodied by a small vocal ensemble.

Keller herself grew up northwest of Birmingham, in Tuscumbia, Alabama, and is an icon at AIDB (though Keller herself attended Perkins School for the Blind outside Boston). Even so, AIDB President John Mascia, who attended workshops of *Touch* along with local d/Deaf, b/Blind, and DeafBlind community members, says the opera expanded his horizons in more ways than one.

"I left the first reading having learned something about Helen Keller, and I've been in the field a long, long time," Mascia says. "But I have to be really honest, when I first heard [about *Touch*], I wondered, 'Why would DeafBlind people go to an opera?' But that's not correct — they just experience it differently. We have to be really careful not to limit people's experiences with the arts based on stereotypes."

STEPHANIE KO



Some presenters are teaming up with high-tech collaborators to enhance those artistic experiences. For example, engineers with “Music: Not Impossible” have designed a wireless wearable system that transmutes the experience of listening to live music to accommodate d/Deaf audiences. Twenty-four different actuators — embedded on a vest and strapped to listeners’ wrists and ankles — vibrate in time to live music. The organization has previously partnered with Opera Philadelphia (with another collaboration planned for 2023), the International Brazilian Opera Company, Lincoln Center, and more.

Another example: *Sensorium Ex*, an opera by Paola Prestini and Brenda Shaughnessy set to premiere at the PROTOTYPE

Festival during the 2024–2025 season, has collaborated with Enact:Lab outside Copenhagen and AI researchers at the Georgia Institute of Technology and New York University to explore speech recognition technologies for those with non-standard speech. Real-life research will form the basis for the opera’s dystopian scenario, in which a mother’s nonverbal son has been non-consensually recruited into a dystopian science experiment. After some initial hesitation, Shaughnessy landed on the concept by basing it more directly upon her relationship with her son, Cal, who has cerebral palsy and is nonverbal.

“I’m a word person, so that was sort of a paradox. How do we

FIDEIJO: JUSTIN DOWNING; SENSORIUM EX: JEREMEO LE CORDEUR; MOSTLY MOZART: SACHYN MITAL; SILENT DISCO: KEVIN YAIROLA



Clockwise from top left: *Fidelio*, performed by the LA Philharmonic, Deaf West Theatre, the Los Angeles Master Chorale, and El Coro de Manos Blancas; A workshop of *Sensorium Ex* at Artscape in Capetown, South Africa; the *Sensorium Ex* workshop; Technology from Music: Not Impossible in use at Lincoln Center's Mostly Mozart Festival; Lincoln Center's silent disco at "An Evening of Access Magic"



relearn to communicate with our own kid?" Shaughnessy says. "We had to create a whole new communicative space, which is exactly the kind of thing that we're trying to do in the opera."

Like *Touch*, *Sensorium Ex* will feature a mixed-ability cast. Choreographer and Associate Director Jerron Herman, himself a dancer with cerebral palsy, says the opera consciously rejects past binaries about disability and ability. "The characters will share disability identities and also subvert them. That sometimes presents another layer of conflict [in the opera]," Herman says.

SILENT APPLAUSE

Touch and *Sensorium Ex*'s shared goals are not only to depict disability with dignity onstage but to reach disabled audiences. This has a hugely successful precedent in the Los Angeles Philharmonic's multilingual *Fidelio*. The brainchild of Music Director Gustavo Dudamel, this semi-staged production was first performed to a packed Walt Disney Hall last April and will be reprised and toured in the 2023–2024 season. It pairs singers with signing actors from L.A.'s Deaf West Theatre company and the Los Angeles Master Chorale with El Sistema's Coro de Manos Blancas, which performs in Venezuelan Sign Language.

Director Alberto Arvelo opted to trade all spoken recitatives for signed ones, with supertitles, ensuring that everyone in the hall would experience those silent moments together. "By the time Beethoven wrote the piece, he was deaf," Deaf West Artistic Director DJ Kurs wrote in an email. "The physicality and expressiveness of sign language lend so much to the piece and our overall impression of Beethoven's desired result."

Bass-baritone Ryan Speedo Green, who sang Rocco in the 2022 production and stars in Terence Blanchard's *Champion* at the Metropolitan Opera this spring, says working with d/Deaf actor Russell Harvard "gave me a deeper understanding of music. "I started asking him what certain words meant, like 'death,' 'love,' 'together,' 'friendship.' At some point during rehearsals, I found myself signing with him in certain parts," Green says. "It made me realize how important my body language is to the viewer."

Those in attendance at that first *Fidelio* likely carry the performance with them still, too. Between scenes and arias, about a quarter of the Walt Disney Hall audience shook their hands in the air to signal applause. By the end, hearing audiences started doing the same — music punctuated by silent ovations, and not a whit less enthusiastic. ■

Hannah Edgar is a freelance music journalist and researcher, writing most often for the Chicago Tribune as its classical and jazz critic.

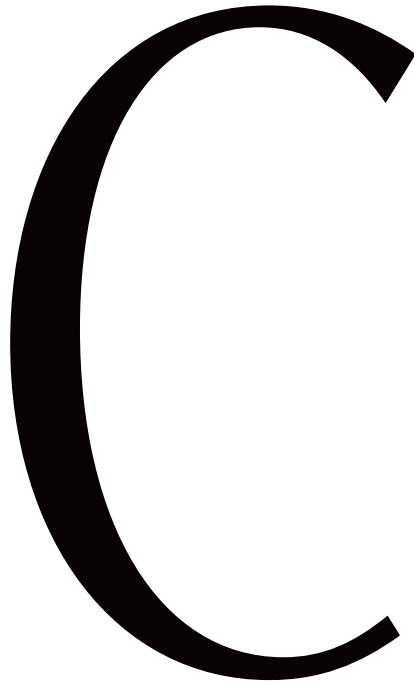


RETIRING

BLACKFACE

RECENT INSTANCES OF BLACKFACE ON THE OPERA STAGE
HAVE SPARKED DISCUSSION IN THE FIELD ABOUT MOVING
PAST THIS HARMFUL PRACTICE ONCE AND FOR ALL.

By NAVEEN KUMAR



Conventions in opera have long evolved to protect the well-being of artists and audiences alike. When the use of oil lamps on stage caused opera house fires in the early 20th century, opera companies reacted with common-sense safety codes to prevent future damage. More recently, some have been rolling out “codes of conduct” to discourage and eliminate offensive behaviors among employees and attendees. Currently, some companies are in the early stages of rolling out stronger anti-harassment guidelines to codify protections and procedures. Some harmful practices, however, have persisted far longer than they should have.

Despite the fact that other industries like theater and Hollywood abandoned the practice of Blackface and Yellowface long ago, it has stubbornly persisted on some operatic stages to this day. Still, many of the major players in opera have banned Blackface at this point, often due to negative reactions from performers or audiences. In 2015, the Met discontinued the practice following backlash over promotional materials for a production of *Otello*. Numerous other companies have followed suit, including the Paris Opera, which banned Blackface in response to a petition from artists and staff in 2021, a year after worldwide protests against anti-Black racism prompted self-reflection across numerous industries.

In summer 2022, however, a flurry of controversy over the Arena di Verona’s summer 2022 production of *Aida*, which used Blackface — as well as other incidents that prompted artists to speak out — sparked wider

George Gagnidze and Latonia Moore in
Aida at the Metropolitan Opera

recognition of the damage the practice causes to individuals and communities, and has emphasized the need for change. “We have to acknowledge the global impact of Blackface, and the responsibility we have to be more creative about how we tell stories,” says OPERA America Social Justice Advisor Quodesia Johnson. “Tradition does not outweigh people’s dignity.”

HISTORICAL TRADITIONS

The practice of changing one’s appearance through makeup in theater dates back to medieval times, when actors appeared covered in soot to portray the souls of the damned, continuing a long association of dark skin with degradation. The custom became more popular during Shakespeare’s time, when male actors donned feminine clothes to play women and dark makeup to play people with more melanated skin, particularly Africans (and people of African descent, such as Black Moors). Later, as Western European colonization advanced across Africa, Asia, and the Americas in the 17th century and beyond, Blackface took on a more distinct symbolic weight and purpose.

“Blackface was used as a propaganda tactic to dehumanize people as the enemy or as property,” says Tara A. Melvin, director of community partnerships and education at New Orleans Opera. Imagining people from other cultures as exaggerated caricatures was a way of denying their humanity and, in the case of Black Africans, justifying their enslavement. Europe exported Blackface to the U.S., where, in the 1800s, it developed into the tradition of minstrelsy, perpetuating racist stereotypes used to uphold chattel slavery and, later, Jim Crow.

Some have argued that the use of Blackface today honors opera’s performance traditions, choosing to ignore the racism inherent to them. But such arguments are, at least in the case of *Aida*, historically inaccurate. In drawings from the Cairo premiere, in 1871, and from the Milan premiere the following year — a production with which Verdi was directly involved — “the soprano Teresa Stolz is not in Blackface,” Melvin points out. The use of Blackface in *Aida* came decades later, in 1913, “when Italy had tried to colonize Ethiopia and was on its way to trying a second time,” Melvin says, thereby presenting a reason to emphasize the otherness of Ethiopians on stage through the practice of Blackface. Considering opera’s historical function in this light — as a way of influencing how people imagine the lives of others — it becomes essential to examine what messages it continues to send.

HARMFUL CONSEQUENCES

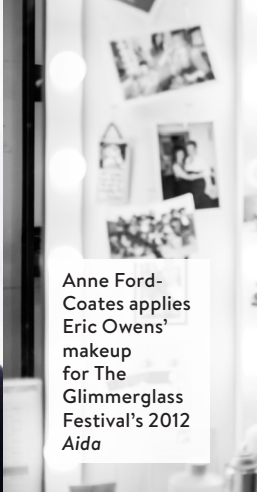
Similar to other art forms, opera shapes cultural sentiments about who is worthy to be seen as fully three-dimensional. At best, the continued use of Blackface perpetuates racist stereotypes. At worst, it contributes to the widespread, global trend of dehumanizing Black people. “If you don’t have lived experiences that challenge those negative representations, you walk



Aleksandrs Antonenko (in foreground) and Željko Lučić in the Met's 2015 *Otello*



Andrea Joy Pearson



Anne Ford-Coates applies Eric Owens' makeup for The Glimmerglass Festival's 2012 *Aida*



Tara A. Melvin

away with misunderstandings about people that are wholly untrue,” says Antonio C. Cuyler, professor of music at the University of Michigan. “Black and brown people all over the world are being murdered because they are dehumanized,” Melvin adds. A similar trend has become evident in the swell of violence against Asian Americans, he notes, pointing to how Yellowface can contribute to whether Asian people are seen as fully human in cultural narratives.

Of course, the harm of Blackface is most deeply felt by those hoping to find themselves reflected in the culture, but who are confronted with demeaning caricatures instead. “There’s a correlation between self-esteem and negative portrayals of Black people in arts and media,” Cuyler says — which includes seeing one’s cultural identity made into a mockery or reduced to a costume.

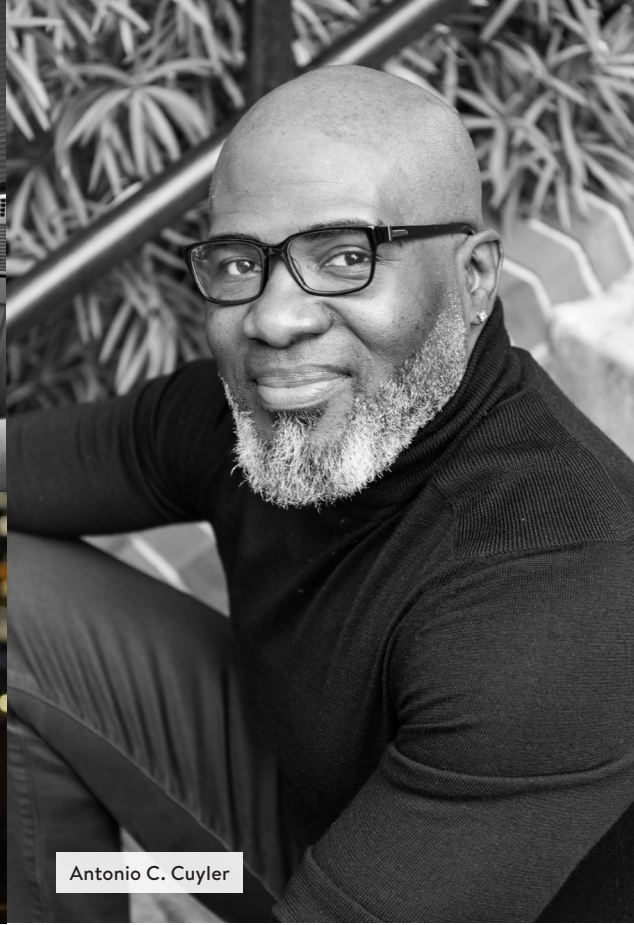
The question of whose perspectives are taken into account in creating operatic productions is becoming increasingly pressing behind the scenes, says Andrea Joy Pearson, formerly director of belonging and inclusion at Opera Omaha. “Opera is continually and willingly behind because there’s a strong sense of elitism and gatekeeping,” Pearson says. She adds that conversations about what is appropriate to put onstage need to happen proactively, in conjunction with the community and with more diverse senior leadership, rather than in reaction to criticism. “Opera has been willing to put the comfort of tradition over the discomfort and dignity of the community,” she says. “That in itself is White supremacy.”

UNDERESTIMATING AUDIENCES

Blackface has also been used to obscure the industry’s lack of progress in developing a more inclusive and expansive pool of professional artists. Using Blackface long negated the need to foster a more diverse pipeline of talent. In recent years, there’s been a stronger push in the performing arts for characters of Color on stage to be portrayed by artists who share their identities. At the same time, artists of Color should not be limited to playing a narrow selection of roles in a repertoire that has long centered White creators and narratives. This sort of pigeonholing would only further prolong the exclusionary legacy of Blackface.

Artists, both on stage and behind the scenes, may also be sensitive to the consequences of speaking out against the use of Blackface and aware of their limited say in creative decisions. That includes hair and makeup designers, who are not often included in conceptual conversations with directors and senior leadership about the overall look of a production. In fact, designers have often found themselves in difficult positions, negotiating what they’re willing to do.

“I don’t think there is any problem that Blackface solves,” says hair and makeup designer Anne Ford-Coates, whose work includes a decade at Washington National Opera and The Glimmerglass Festival. When a non-Black actor is cast as *Aida* or *Otello*, for example, the idea that Blackface is necessary for audiences to follow the story discounts the powers of attendees’ imaginations. “Opera audiences



Antonio C. Cuyler



Michelle Bradley in *Aida* at the Met

are capable of thinking figuratively, poetically, and allegorically,” Coates says. “They do not need to be spoon-fed literal Blackface to understand text, or even subtext.”

Indeed, underestimating audiences is antithetical to the art form itself. “Opera is about pushing the envelope and wanting people to have conversations,” Melvin says. “Verdi wanted people to talk. Mozart never anticipated his opera to be produced the same way twice. These people expected their art to move you.” They intended for opera to be alive in the moment and in direct conversation with attendees in the room.

NECESSARY EVOLUTION

One of opera’s foundational missions is to connect with people and bring audiences together. “We are nonprofits because we are here to serve the community,” Pearson says, adding that companies can and should invite their surrounding communities to be a part of the conversation about moving the industry forward. “Blackface is a stereotype and a simplification,” she says. “The opposite side of that is letting there be a variety of perspectives.” Since 2020, opera companies around the country have made a wave of new hires for social justice positions to address concerns around diversity and inclusion. But Pearson emphasizes that there’s much work to be done.

“Where some in the American opera community are struggling right now is, they’re willing to have a Black face in the room, but they don’t want a Black

person, and all the cultural nuances and personalities that come with a Black person,” Pearson says, likening the situation to a contemporary iteration of Blackface off stage. The onus for calling out bad practices and pushing for change has also fallen mostly on Black artists, administrators, and audiences, which places an undue burden of responsibility on those who’ve been disproportionately harmed. Pearson also says that companies need to foster an environment where artists are comfortable voicing concerns. “We need to stop seeing people who speak up as a problem, but as opportunities for improvement,” she adds.

Developing more work that authentically and accurately represents a diverse range of people is also key to opera’s ability to appeal to new audiences. “It’s so important that composers of the global majority are writing new narratives about racialized groups that are informed by their lived experiences,” Cuyler says. “By doing so, they reinvigorate art forms with the spirit of what they were designed to do, which is to connect people of all backgrounds.” Or, to put it more bluntly — “if you’re asking people to buy into an imaginary world where they don’t necessarily control the way they’re represented, why wouldn’t they just get a Netflix subscription for only \$20 a month?” Melvin asks. “Because that’s our competition.” ■

Naveen Kumar is a culture critic and journalist whose recent work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Variety*, and *The Daily Beast*.

THEIR FIRST TIME

MANY OPERA COMPANIES' SUBSCRIPTIONS AND TICKET SALES HAVE NOT BOUNCED BACK TO PRE-PANDEMIC RATES, BUT THE NUMBER OF ATTENDEES BRAND NEW TO THE ART FORM HAS JUMPED SIGNIFICANTLY.

By JEREMY REYNOLDS

Christian Sanders and
Lisa Marie Rogali in
Minnesota Opera's
Edward Tulane



The *Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* details the story of a self-obsessed porcelain rabbit learning to love someone besides himself. The children's book won Minnesota author Kate DiCamillo several awards and has remained a heartwarming staple nationwide since its publication. In October, Minnesota Opera premiered an adaptation of Edward's grand adventures with music by Paola Prestini and a libretto by Mark Campbell. "We had girl scouts from all the way out in California come to Minnesota because *Edward Tulane* was their favorite book," says Ryan Taylor, the company's president and general director. In fact, around 10% of the crowd, which ranged in age from young children to grandparents, were brand new to the company, drawn in by the popularity of the book.

Opera companies are struggling with diminished subscriptions and attendance in the wake of the pandemic. However, there is some good news: Record numbers of "new-to-file" patrons, or attendees completely new to the companies, are purchasing tickets. Finger Lakes Opera, a small summer festival company, notes that about a third of attendees were new faces at a performance of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* at Rochester's Memorial Art Gallery. About a quarter of attendees at Portland Opera's November 2022 production of *Carmen* were new to file as well. The same was true at North Carolina Opera's March 2022 premiere of *Sanctuary Road* (Paul Moravec, music; Mark Campbell, libretto). The list continues.

There are several driving causes here. First, the pandemic caused significant migration throughout the country, including among operagoers who may have found themselves attending familiar operas in unfamiliar cities. Second, companies are striking chords with new communities through stories that are well-known in other media or have more contemporary appeal, like at Minnesota Opera. Companies also formed new strategic relationships with community partners to get the word out to potential attendees who hadn't yet

been reached. And finally, it's possible that companies' digital efforts during the pandemic may have helped whet the curiosity of potential attendees.

Companies are keeping perspective — the number of new attendees isn't high enough to replace the number of regular subscribers lost during COVID. However, if opera companies can continue to draw increasing numbers of new attendees, it's certainly a step toward gaining back lost revenue. The question that has company leaders on the edge of their seats is whether they'll be able to regularly entice these new attendees back into the theater or if the field will continue to experience this higher show-to-show turnover.

NOVEL RELATIONSHIPS

Finger Lakes Opera, which doesn't have a dedicated home hall, celebrated its 10th anniversary season in July with performances at six different locations, including the Memorial Art Gallery. "We actually sold out the art museum," says Elizabeth Long, the opera's executive director. Long herself reached out to different venues to inquire about renting space and collaborating. At the gallery, about a third of that audience — around 70 people — took advantage of a discount code for museum members, suggesting some cross-pollination. Long says the gallery was pleased with the partnership and that the company will continue to work with the museum next summer.

In Nebraska, Opera Omaha shares its performing space with a Broadway-presenting organization. The opera company produces three operas a year, and during the previous season sandwiched performances of *Sweeney Todd* in March 2022 between Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* and Bellini's *The Capulets and the Montagues*. More than half of all *Sweeney* attendees were brand new to Opera Omaha, with many of the new attendees crossing over from the Broadway presenter. "This was right after Sondheim had passed away," says Audience Development Manager Howard Coffin, noting that that coincidence may have increased sales. Opera Omaha, like most companies, offers attendees discounts to return for additional productions and tracks how many attendees continue to engage with the company. Only about 1.5% of the new attendees from *Sweeney Todd* subscribed to the 2022–2023 season. That figure varies by company.

In addition to partnering with venues, some companies turned to third parties to get the word out about performances.



Finger Lakes Opera performs at Rochester's Memorial Art Gallery



Students and administrators of Shaw University at North Carolina Opera's HBCU Night at the Opera



Boston Baroque's *Amadigi di Gaula*, with Camille Ortiz and Anthony Roth Costanzo

FINGER LAKES: DAVE JONES, EMPIRE WEST PHOTO; HBCU NIGHT: KEN DEWEY; BOSTON BAROQUE: GBH PRODUCTION GROUP

Seattle Opera's marketing department reached out to the news and entertainment site Converge Media, a publication that reports on and for Seattle's Black community, to place advertisements and request coverage for the opera's February 2022 production of *Blue* (Jeanine Tesori, music; Tazewell Thompson, libretto). *Blue*, which premiered in 2019 at the Glimmerglass Festival, centers on a Black police officer and the tensions between his job and his family and community. Over the course of its seven performances in Seattle, *Blue* pulled in more than 1,500 new ticket buyers, about a sixth of the production's overall attendees. About half of those newcomers identified as Black, Indigenous, or people of color. "We're still trying to figure out what our audience five years from now is going to look like," says Kristina Murti, Seattle's director of marketing and communications. "Bringing new people into the fold was always important to us, but as we recover from the pandemic, it's more important than ever."

While the company's relationship with Converge Media began due to *Blue*'s specific narrative, it has evolved into an ongoing partnership. Converge has continued to send a correspondent, TraeAnna Holiday, to cover the opera's productions of other works from the inherited repertoire. Holiday has attended productions ranging from Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* to Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. "I didn't feel like [opera] was a space for me. ... That's changed for me since I started going to the opera," she said while being interviewed for a November Seattle Opera blog post. "I mean, when a character feels something, those emotions come across so strongly, right?" she said. "I didn't know that that was something opera could do." Seattle Opera now places paid advertisements with Converge, as well.

North Carolina Opera (NCO) in Raleigh also made overtures specifically to the Black community for its March 2022 premiere of *Sanctuary Road*, an opera based on *The Underground Railroad Records*, an 1872 book by abolitionist leader William Still. "We partnered with a couple of HBCUs in the area, primarily Shaw University," explains Angela Grant, the company's director of marketing. The opera company presented *Sanctuary Road* as an educational opportunity, with discounts for college students and talkbacks with attendees after performances. The opera sold out and drew around 700 new attendees, about 35% of the 2,000 total

attendees. Shaw also hosted a post-performance reception for students and artists alike.

Like Seattle Opera, NCO is maintaining this relationship. The company has continued working with Shaw and in the fall performed a free concert on campus as part of Shaw's Founders' Week. Leadership at Shaw University — who took great interest in *Sanctuary Road* and helped promote the opera on a volunteer basis — has also joined NCO's advisory committee, which weighs in on the company's repertoire selection and community engagement plans.

REPRISES

Most every opera company created some sort of digital content during the pandemic to keep in touch with patrons and maintain engagement. These efforts were fruitful — at many companies, even though revenue evaporated, donations increased significantly. Plus, these digital offerings actually caught the attention of significant swaths of people who hadn't engaged with opera companies before. According to Jen Benoit-Bryan, president at Slover Linett Audience Research, opera companies saw more engagement from people who hadn't been through their doors in recent years than did any other art form. "About 57% of people who hadn't previously engaged with opera companies did so through digital channels during the pandemic," she says.

This doesn't necessarily prove that digital offerings brought in more new attendees when companies got back on stage, but it's possible that they helped. Take Boston Baroque, a period instrument organization that puts on just one opera a season as well as other concerts. During the pandemic, the company partnered with GBH TV and the classical music streaming service IDAGIO to present concerts and operas for a live and virtual audience. In-person tickets to the company's April 2022 production of Handel's *Amadigi di Gaula* sold out completely. Streaming numbers were similarly strong, and the company estimates about 500 of the 1,400 total viewers were first-timers. "New people are coming, and they're buying last minute," says Emily Kirk Weddle, Boston Baroque's director of marketing and digital content. "Plus, if you are in a city that doesn't have opera, our product can fill that niche without the need to travel. It's not location-based, it's interest-based." Many companies wrestled with how to monetize digital offerings,

with a majority deciding to abandon such content once they began performing for in-person crowds once more. Boston Baroque's digital sales made up fully 30% of earned revenue during the 2021–2022 season, in part thanks to digital-only subscriptions and a pay-as-you-wish ticket sales model that Weddle says proved both popular and lucrative.

Still, the question for all of these organizations remains: Did new attendees have a good enough time that they'll want to return? At Portland Opera, *Carmen* brought in more than 1,500 new listeners and exceeded ticket revenue goals, which General Director Sue Dixon attributes to *Carmen*'s name recognition. What did the new attendees think? "Well, we're the queen of surveys," Dixon says. "As soon as someone walks out of the theater, we send them a link asking if they enjoyed the show and what they would change and whether the quality matched the price of admission," she says. First-time attendee responses to *Carmen* were all over the map, which is typical, she adds with a chuckle. Many were thrilled with the opera — some didn't think the experience was worth the price point. "We take the responses with a grain of salt," Dixon adds. "The surveys give us checks and balances."

Long before the pandemic, the most famous operas were typically the most successful at bringing new attendees out to try opera. Now, it seems that companies' ability to emphasize how a production specifically relates to their community or taps into broader culture is also driving new people to the opera house. Even the Metropolitan Opera in December announced it would begin pivoting away from inherited repertoire in favor of more contemporary work. Beyond this, though, many new attendees are returning. After *Carmen*, 10% of audience members took advantage of a discount offer sent out to new attendees. These numbers aren't enough to replace lost subscribers and ticket buyers, but it's a start. "I don't want to take away from this success, but I don't want to assume it's a trend yet — it needs to be ongoing," Dixon says. "The true test will be our next few productions." ■

Jeremy Reynolds of the editor of *Opera America Magazine*. He is also the classical music critic and reporter at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and a contributor at *Symphony magazine*, *San Francisco Classical Voice*, *Early Music America magazine*, and more.



SEX, POWER, *and* DYNAMICS

Intimacy directors
Doug Scholz-Carlson
and **Rocío Mendez**
share tips and tricks
for this profession and
why it's necessary in a
post-#MeToo world.



Doug Scholz-Carlson



Rocío Mendez



Simulating graphic rape scenes and other intimate moments on operatic stages has always required delicacy. Now, there are professionals to help navigate such difficult sequences.

In the aftermath of Hollywood’s Harvey Weinstein scandal and the ensuing #MeToo movement, the performing arts world has cast a more introspective eye toward how it handles intimate scenes on camera and on stage. This soul searching has catalyzed a budding profession: intimacy directing, a position that liaises between directors and singers or actors to ensure that everyone is comfortable during physical scenes.

Major studios like HBO and Netflix have begun employing intimacy directors and coordinators in recent years, as have some leading theatrical companies. Now, opera companies around the country are increasingly hiring these trained professionals for productions and workshops as well. Recently, *Opera America Magazine* spoke with a pair of trained intimacy coordinators who have worked together at The Metropolitan Opera, Doug Scholz-Carlson and Rocío Mendez, to discuss some of the specifics of the job.

Thank you both for speaking with us. There’s been a lot of chatter about intimacy directing in recent years, so let’s start with the big picture: What does an intimacy director actually do?

Doug Scholz-Carlson: Well, a big part of the intimacy director’s job is to be an advocate for the performers in the room, as there are a lot of power dynamics at play. Part of our work hinges on the idea that people should have the right to consent to what they’re going to do onstage. Opera has this “yes, and” culture, and you want to be the person saying yes. It’s still a freelance career, where singers want to get the next job. And if a famous singer or director is asking you to do something, you don’t want to be the person to stick out saying no.



We're watching for anything in the room that would make it difficult for people to express their boundaries and say no. You sort of have to be aware of and have techniques and ways of working around those moments — having your boundaries respected should be a part of any job.

Rocío Mendez: Right, exactly. I'm there to observe and get to know the singers and, if something comes up and they're uncomfortable, I'm going to be the person who says, "Hey, let's talk about this."

When should companies consider hiring an intimacy director?

RM: An intimacy director can be helpful with productions that have intense physical contact or nudity. Of course, if there's any type of simulated sex or intimacy, especially sexual assault. Even kissing scenes — we have some really great ways to work around it, some people just don't want to be kissed! That's where we come in. We would map it out and lock in the intensity and duration.

How does that work on a practical level?

DSC: In an ideal world, our work starts before rehearsals begin. I worked with Minnesota Opera on the opera *Flight*, which has some pretty graphic sexual content. There's a somewhat comedic scene between two of the people who work at an airport. Then there's, you know, two of the other characters have a pretty extended homosexual encounter. That was a production where the director, David Radamés Toro, and I were working hand in hand. He explained the story he was trying to tell with those scenes, and I suggested specific choreography. Then, we presented some

options to the singers before they arrived. Once the singers are in the room, it can be really hard for them to say "no" to things.

Are most directors been open to this sort of collaboration?

RM: Often yes, but that's still the biggest challenge — getting the directors accustomed to our work and how we can work together. Sometimes ego gets in the way of the work. It can be a real challenge for some directors to accept us in the room and understand how to utilize us and see the value in what we bring into the room.

How is intimacy directing in opera different from working in TV and film and theater?

DSC: One of the biggest tools we have for communicating intimacy is breath. In the theater and on film, you're very often talking about how people are breathing, because the way in which you breathe can convey sexual energy. In the opera world, the breath is taken care of by the singing, so that is really off the table as a tool. On the upside, often the music is already written in a way that has singers breathing the way you would want them to breathe.

Also, the rehearsal timetable is generally faster. In opera, we block rather long and extensive scenes. In theater, there tends to be very specific blocking. So when you're trying to go in depth into a specific moment and do really, really specific blocking, that can be a challenge

for the singers because they're not used to working that way. It feels very, very similar to fight choreography. Singers aren't all used to remembering all of this sort of specific movement and repeating it. They're not used to having as much specific attention paid moment by moment to the movement as they would normally pay to the music.

How does one get started in intimacy direction?

DSC: My background is actually as an actor, and I've sung with Minnesota Opera. I've also been a flight choreographer for 25 years now. That led to directing, which led me to intimacy directing. Twenty years ago in the opera world, fight choreographers were not as common, either.

RM: I was kind of a jack of all trades when I was younger. I studied karate and kung fu and a little bit of Taekwondo — for the last 18 years I've been practicing Muay Thai. That background led me to fight directing as well. Then, a few years ago at a university, I was asked to do a play with a sexual assault. I attended an intimacy workshop and it snowballed from there. Three years later, I became a certified intimacy director.

You have to be certified?

RM: It can take up to a couple years to get fully certified, yes.

DSC: Right, there are four different levels, and there are five organizations that are approved by SAG-AFTRA to do the training. We're still at fewer than a hundred certified people nationwide. And in terms of opera, specifically, I'd be surprised if there's even a dozen people.

Is demand increasing?

DSC: Yes, absolutely! I started intimacy directing at Minnesota Opera. I've also done productions for San Diego Opera, El Paso Opera, and OPERA San Antonio. I know Austin Opera has hired intimacy directors. Also Boston Lyric Opera, Opera Colorado, Los Angeles Opera, and Washington National Opera. It's growing at all different levels of the industry right now. ■

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Saluting Excellence

A celebration delayed by COVID for nearly three years took place on October 21 when OPERA America hosted “OPERA America Salutes,” an evening honoring the inaugural inductees to the Opera Hall of Fame and recipients of the National Opera Trustee Recognition Awards.

At a private club in New York City, OPERA America inducted 14 individuals nominated by the public into the newly created Opera Hall

in Fame in recognition of their impact on the North American opera field. They were joined by 13 winners of the annual National Opera Trustee Recognition Awards, which honor opera company trustees for their exceptional governance.

Mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves and OPERA America President/CEO Marc A. Scorca co-hosted the event, and two members of the Metropolitan Opera’s Lindemann Young Artist Development Program, soprano Amanda Batista

and tenor Matthew Cairns, also performed for guests.

“We’re thrilled to gather once again to celebrate some of the most distinguished members of the North American opera community,” said Scorca. “These artists, administrators, trustees, and advocates have shaped the landscape of opera across the United States and Canada.”

“OPERA America Salutes” marked the conclusion of OPERA America’s extended 50th anniversary celebration, which launched in fall

2019 and was dedicated to showcasing the legacy and progress of the American opera industry over the last half-century.

Support for OPERA America’s 50th Anniversary initiatives was provided by Bank of America, as well as the Arthur F. and Alice E. Adams Charitable Foundation, Theodore H. Barth Foundation, Aaron Copland Fund for Music, and Amphion Foundation. Visit operaamerica.org/50thAnniversary to learn more.



The Opera Hall of Fame inductees, top row, left to right: Alessandro Rossi Lemeni Makedon, son of honoree Virginia Zeani (not present), Camille LaBarre, Matthew Epstein, Charles MacKay, David Gockley, Gordon Getty, Dawn Upshaw, and Patricia K. Beggs. Bottom row, left to right: George Shirley, Marlana Malas, Simon Estes, Reri Grist, and Roma Wittcoff



(1) 2022 Trustee Recognition Award honorees, clockwise from top left: John Fitzgerald, Ranney Mize, Carey Newman (Ha-yalth-kingeme), Carol F. Henry (board chair), Susan G. Marineau, Arlene Ferebee, and Carol Lazier (committee chair of Trustee Awards)

(2) Reri Grist and Harolyn Blackwell



(3) Susan Graham and Marlena Malas
 (4) 2020 Trustee Recognition Award honorees, clockwise from top left: Chris Murray, Robert Ellis, Phil Meyer, Linda Koehn, Elba Haid, and Anita Murray
 (5) Patricia K. Beggs
 (6) Joyce DiDonato and Denyce Graves
 (7) Shariq Yosufzai, Pamela Zell Rigg, Carol Lazier, and Brian James

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2022

Reri Grist, soprano and teacher
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NATIONAL OPERA TRUSTEE RECOGNITION AWARDS 2020

Robert Ellis, San Francisco Opera
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2022

Gary Casagrande, MassOpera
 Arlene Ferebee, Opera Carolina
 John Fitzgerald, IN Series
 Susan G. Marineau, The Santa Fe Opera
 Ranney Mize, New Orleans Opera
 Carey Newman (Ha-yalth-kingeme), Pacific Opera Victoria

Design Paragons

OPERA America has awarded four teams of directors and designers the 2023 Robert L.B. Director-Designer Prize. Each team will receive \$2,000 to develop their unique takes on three works: *Fellow Travels*, *Salome*, and *Sweeney Todd*. Since 2009, the Director-Designer Prize has identified and rewarded the field’s most promising directors and designers. Every two years, applicant teams are invited to create production concepts for works chosen from a list of contemporary and inherited repertoire. An independent panel of experts then selects the four winning teams, awarding them funds to further develop their concepts.

Each of this year’s winning teams will present their concepts to potential producers at OPERA America’s annual Opera Conference in Pittsburgh this May. The teams’ concepts will also be featured in rotating exhibitions at OA’s National Opera Center. (Winners of the previous Director-Designer Prize, from 2021, currently have their work on view at the Opera Center; **see p. 36**). *The Robert L.B. Tobin Director-Designer Showcase is supported by the Tobin Theatre Arts Fund.*

2023 DIRECTOR-DESIGNER PRIZE WINNERS



Fellow Travelers (Spears/Pierce)
Ian Silverman, director; **James Rotondo**, set designer; **Marcella Barbeau**, lighting designer; **Travis Chinick**, costume designer; **Nora Winsler**, choreographer

This team seeks to highlight “the audacity of queer love” in their take on Gregory Spears’ and Greg Pierce’s 2016 love story, set during the Lavender Scare in 1950s Washington, D.C. They draw parallels between the opera’s socially oppressive environment and the tribulations faced by queer Americans today, such as legislature like the “Don’t Say Gay” bill.



Salome (Strauss/Lachmann)
Claire Choquette, director; **Josafath Reynoso**, set designer; **Scott Hynes**, lighting designer; **Hsiao-Wei Chen**, costume designer; **Danielle Georgiou**, choreographer

This reimagining of *Salome* transposes the work from biblical times to a modern-day cult led by Herod, whose followers explore their spirituality through psychedelic drugs and free love. Herod goes mad and moves his followers to a dilapidated factory, where the action of the opera then unfolds.



Salome (Strauss/Lachmann)
Alison Pogorelc, director; **Ember Streshinsky**, set designer; **Morgan Williams**, choreographer; **Zhang Yu**, costume designer; **Avi Sheehan**, lighting designer; **Camilla Tassi**, projection/video designer

This team reworks *Salome* into a triumphant figure who overcomes the objectification of her body and transforms herself into a divine prophetess. The production prominently features shadow play, with performers and scenic elements casting shadows on translucent screens.



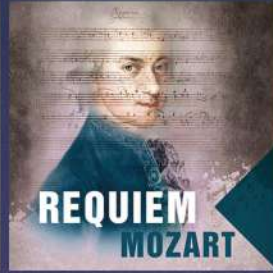
Sweeney Todd (Sondheim/Wheeler/Quentin)
Kimille Howard, director; **John D. Alexander**, lighting designer; **Kimberly V. Powers**, set designer; **Danielle Preston**, costume designer

This production places *Sweeney Todd* in London’s notorious Bedlam Asylum. The hospital’s inmates perform the musical for a voyeuristic audience — paralleling current society’s voracious consumption of the macabre and the trauma of others.

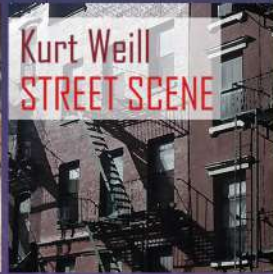
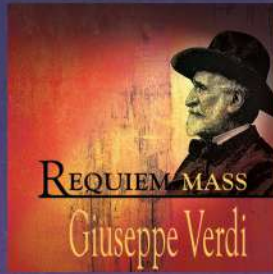


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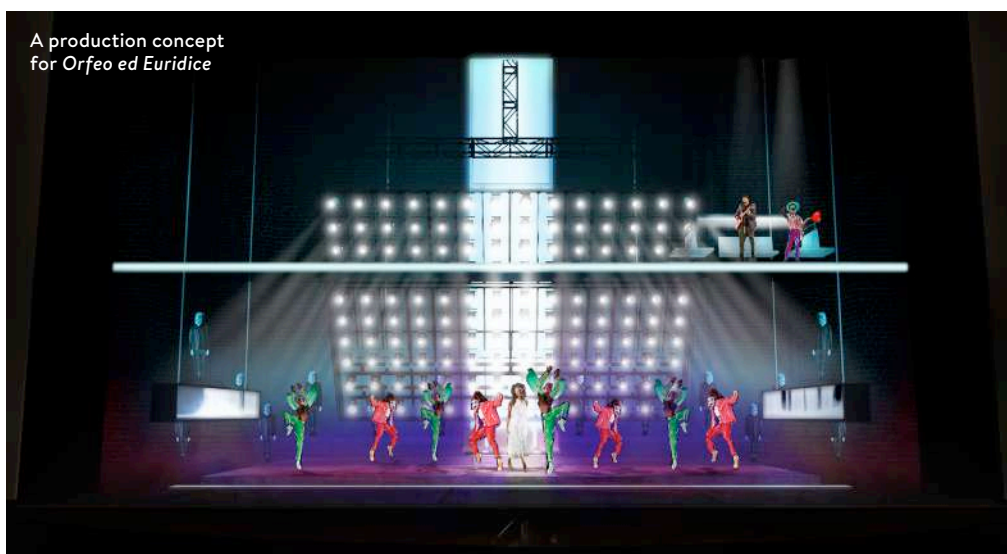
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Grief and Gender Euphoria

Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* has received a queer update in a reimagining of the opera now on view at the National Opera Center. The production concept — set in present-day America among a gender-diverse community — is the work of director Scout Davis, scenic and video designer Diggle, costume designer Amelia Bransky, lighting designer Jocelyn Girigorie, dramaturg Melory Mirashrafi, and choreographer Eamon Foley.

The team is one of four winners of OA's previous round of the Robert L.B. Tobin Director-Designer Prize, awarded in 2021. (See p. 34 for the winners of the latest round.) With funding from the prize, the group refined their production concept for presentation at Opera Conference 2022 last May and for the current exhibition at the Opera Center.

Orfeo's plot proves a potent analog for the grief, and ultimate happiness, experienced by many trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming



A production concept for *Orfeo ed Euridice*

individuals. “This community — particularly Black trans women, who live at the intersection of racism, sexism, and transphobia — embodies on a daily basis the tightrope walk of Orpheus existing in the underworld,” explains dramaturg Melory Mirashrafi. “Separated from loved ones time and again, looking backward for too long suddenly seems like a risk; however, despite carrying all that grief, there are

such moments of joy in queerness, in gender euphoria, and in finding a community that sees you for who you are.”

The team envisions Eurydice as the victim of a hate crime and her funeral as a vigil in a transit station. Amore acts a symbol of queer love, the Elysian Fields stand in for a queer utopia, and the opera's final ballet is transformed into a block-party-like celebration of both the living and the

dead. All casting is fully gender-flexible, with the aim of spotlighting trans and gender-nonconforming voices.

The *Orfeo* production will be on view at the Opera Center through this winter. The remaining two winning teams will have their work featured in rotating exhibitions later this year.

The Robert L.B. Tobin Director-Designer Prize is supported by the Tobin Theatre Arts Fund.

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Celebrating Opera on Screen

The pandemic spurred an ongoing efflorescence of opera on film, a mixture of adaptations of centuries-old works as well as new operatic creations. OPERA America recently celebrated these cinematic achievements with its new Awards for Digital Excellence in Opera, which recognize the best work created for digital platforms in the U.S. and Canada.

On November 7, at a livestreamed event at OA's National Opera Center, the organization announced the inaugural award winners in four categories intended to represent the breadth of digital output: Artistic Creation, Education/Enrichment Material, University/Conservatory Project, and Noteworthy Project.

Ninety-three organizations and 24 individuals submitted more than 100 works for consideration. An independent panel including producers, directors, creators, artists, and administrators whittled the pool down to 14 finalists and then chose the four winners.

"With the Awards for Digital Excellence in Opera, we celebrate a new vehicle for creating, distributing, and experiencing opera," said Marc A. Scorca, president and CEO of OPERA America. "Opera on digital platforms — a necessity during the COVID-19 pandemic — has proven to be an invaluable addition to the field, inviting new levels of innovation and service to audiences."

To learn more about the winners and finalists, go to operaamerica.org/DigitalAwards.

The Awards for Digital Excellence in Opera are supported by The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation.

2022 WINNERS

Soldier Songs, Submitted by David T. Little with Opera Philadelphia

Category: Artistic Creation

Baritone Johnathan McCullough directs and stars in this cinematic adaption of David T. Little's opera, filmed at the Brandywine Conservancy in Chester County, Pennsylvania, by the site of a significant Revolutionary War battle.

Verdi by Vegetables: The Movie, Submitted by Resonance Works

Category: Education/Enrichment Material

This feature-length film features over 100 vegetable puppets who guide the viewer through the life and works of Giuseppe "Joe Green" Verdi. Thirty-eight Resonance Works artists recorded the characters' voices from their homes during the pandemic.

Please Look: A Cinematic Opera Experience, Submitted by Opera ND, University of Notre Dame

Category: University/Conservatory Project

This series of conceptual music videos features Notre Dame students performing vocal works from the Minimalist repertoire, including excerpts of Glass' *Doctor Atomic* and *Nixon in China*, Adams' *Akhmatov*, and Lang's *little match girl passion*.

Messiah/Complex, Submitted by Against the Grain Theatre

Category: Noteworthy Project

This reinterpretation of Handel's *Messiah* was captured against iconic Canadian landscapes and locations. It showcases multilingual translations and a diverse cast of soloists and choirs from every province and territory across Canada.



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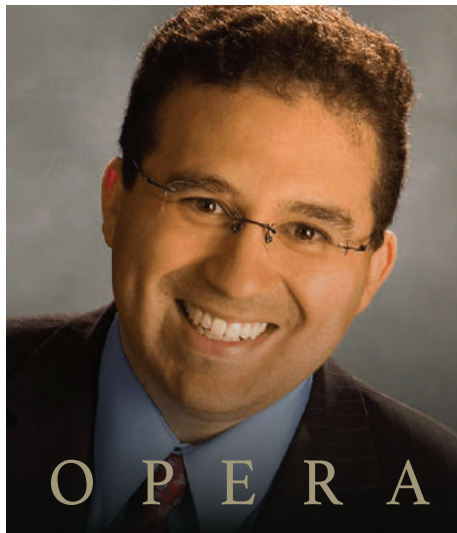
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operaamerica.org/Forums

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Intent to apply due Apr. 5, 2023

For Individual Opera Creators

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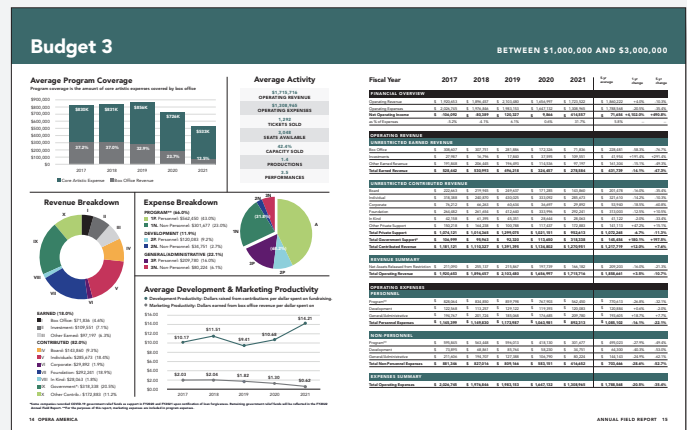
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The Annual Field Report provides a snapshot of the field's financial health and allows opera companies to compare their finances and activity with that of like-sized organizations. This year's report is based on fiscal year 2021 data from OPERA America's Professional Company Members.

Download the 2022 Annual Field Report: operaamerica.org/AFR

VIDEO CONFERENCE CALLS

OPERA America hosts periodic video conference calls for Professional Company Members in these networks:

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Professional Company Member Index

Against the Grain Theatre **38**
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 Austin Opera **30**
 Boston Lyric Opera **30**
 Central City Opera **5**
 Cincinnati Opera **6**
 The Dallas Opera **10**
 Des Moines Metro Opera **33**
 Detroit Opera **12**
 Finger Lakes Opera **25**
 The Glimmerglass Festival **12, 22, 27**
 HERE **12**

Houston Grand Opera **48**
 IN Series **12, 33**
 The Industry **12**
 Minnesota Opera **8, 10**
 Knoxville Opera **12**
 Lakes Area Music Festival **12**
 Los Angeles Opera **12, 30**
 Lyric Opera of Chicago **14**
 Manitoba Opera **33**
 Marble City Opera **12**
 The Metropolitan Opera **14, 21, 27, 29, 32**
 Minnesota Opera **25, 30, 33**

New Orleans Opera **21, 33**
 North Carolina Opera **25**
 On Site Opera **8**
 Opera Birmingham **17**
 Opera Carolina **33**
 Opera Colorado **30**
 Opera Las Vegas **33**
 Opera Maine **14**
 Opera Omaha **22, 26**
 Opera Orlando **11**
 Opera Philadelphia **8, 18, 38**
 OPERA San Antonio **30**
 Opera Saratoga **12**

Opera Theatre of Saint Louis **12**
 Pacific Opera Project **33**
 Pacific Opera Victoria **12, 33**
 Pittsburgh Opera **10**
 Portland Opera **25**
 Resonance Works **38**
 San Diego Opera **30, 48**
 San Francisco Opera **5, 12, 15, 33**
 The Santa Fe Opera **14, 33**
 Seattle Opera **10, 14, 27**
 Spoleto Festival USA **12**
 Washington National Opera **12, 22, 30**

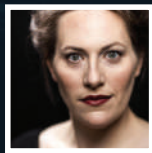
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DAME ZANDRA RHODES

My first opera might have been Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, but it was so long ago now that it's faded in my memory. I remember that it was in London, and that I also saw *Aida* and a Handel opera at some point.

I grew up in Chatham, Kent, in England, and originally I was a textile designer. When I couldn't get people to buy my textiles, I went directly to a designer to produce my prints. I started to produce printed dresses — these were my signature pieces. Then, my work was brought to America in 1969, and I was featured in *Vogue* magazine with Natalie Wood modeling my designs.

Later, my partner, Salah Hassanein, decided he wanted to live by the sea in San Diego, so I went with him and lived there part-time. I hadn't been to many operas before I moved, but my partner joined San Diego Opera, so I started going regularly. It was a wonderful

thing to do. Then, I met the head of the opera company, and he asked me if I had ever designed for opera. I said, "No, but I'd love to!" And he commissioned me to design the costumes for their 2001 *The Magic Flute*.

When I started designing, I watched tapes of different *Magic Flute* productions to see how they looked. Then, I started to work out how I could do my own version, because there's no sense in employing me if you're going to see the same thing you could see anywhere else. As I was designing the costumes, I was trying to work my way into Mozart's mind and see where it led me. I worked with a German director on that production, and he had certain points of view, and we disagreed on some things and had negotiations.

Still, the joy you get when you're lucky enough to be a designer is quite wonderful. I remember working with a person who was playing a fairy princess. Through her costume, I felt like I was able to make her feel like a fairy princess — beautiful, ethereal. It was also very magical doing the animals in that *Magic Flute*. Then you've got the singing and the orchestra going on below — it's a magical world that I don't think you fully experience unless you're lucky enough to design for it.

After that first opera, I went on to design the costumes and sets for San Diego Opera's *The Pearl Fishers*, which played in about 18 towns,

and Houston Grand Opera's *Aida*, which also played at the English National Opera and other companies. *The Pearl Fishers* was a small production that was designed to travel easily in one truck, and the set design was really great fun.

I'm always amazed that the singers can wear costumes and perform on stage while all the time, they're looking at the conductor. As I watched my *Aida* from the wings, I saw that as the singers were diving onto the stage, they were all just looking at the conductor! It really is an ultimate experience that I've been lucky enough to be part of. ■

Dame Zandra Rhodes is a decorated English designer whose colorful career spans more than five decades. She's created garments for the likes of Diana, Princess of Wales, Freddie Mercury, Barbra Streisand, and more. Rhodes left her signature stamp on high fashion and interior design and turned to the world of opera in 2001 before founding the Fashion and Textile Museum in London in 2003.

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