

ACROSS THE BOARD

A Publication of OPERA America for Opera Company Trustees



From the President and CEO

You may already have begun to explore our expansive Oral History Project. If you have, you know I've spent the past two years capturing the stories of some of our field's most distinguished leaders — artists and administrators, alike. Over the last half-century, they forged the American opera industry we enjoy today.

Their stories are inspiring and help us look to the future with a sense of possibility. As they did, we have to move forward with confidence we can restore, refresh, and reinvent opera for the decades ahead.

This issue of Across the Board — and the 2023 Opera Conference in Pittsburgh in May — will question the status quo: How can we engage audiences, raise funds, serve communities, and respect everyone whose talent and effort contribute to the success of opera in America? We will work toward answers here, in our Governance Essentials webinars, and in Pittsburgh. Join us!

Marc A. Scorca

MARC A. SCORCA
OPERA AMERICA

The Value of Values in Fundraising

Last spring, OPERA America published “Community-Centric Fundraising for Opera Companies,” a new resource to help companies align their fundraising practices with their core organizational values. This values-based approach acknowledges the ways that traditional fundraising practices often perpetuate opera's elitism. It offers alternatives that make philanthropy more welcoming to all.

Dan Cooperman, OPERA America's chief advancement officer, spoke with the fundraising team at Pacific Opera Victoria — Yvette Guigueno, director of development; Ian Rye, chief executive officer; and Bob Milne, past board president — about their take on values-based fundraising.

Dan Cooperman: Yvette, you were part of the group of fundraisers that developed the concepts of values-based fundraising for the “Community-Centric Fundraising” report. Why is it important to you?

Yvette Guigueno: I think a lot of fundraisers, including myself, get into the field because we care about justice and equity. I came to the opera field after five years in academic fundraising. I saw how we lean into a lot of activities that center elitism in order to groom donors. I was uncomfortable with it. Within the company, in marketing and our civic practice, we were talking about bringing in different types of audiences: having younger people and having people of color. But when we hold up our elitist, exclusive fundraising practices to those priorities, I realized that we fundraisers are often complicit in perpetuating barriers.

Values-based fundraising is an opportunity for us to be part of the change we all want. We're planning a special gala-like event at the end of this year to celebrate our outgoing artistic director. Instead of doing a dinner and concert with \$500 tickets, we're purposely looking at doing an event that will be more inclusive. There will be an after-show reception for higher-level contributors, but the event should welcome everyone. That is where we want to be going with this.

Dan: Ian and Bob, did you first learn of values-based fundraising from Yvette? I know that it can feel like a real threat to the way we've always done fundraising.



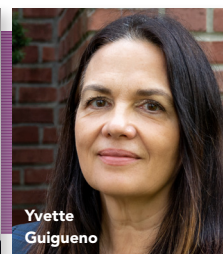
Ian Rye: Yes, I saw it as a threat. Absolutely. I mean, the status quo was working very well. A growing organization with growing philanthropy, and any threat to that success is a threat to the organization.

Bob Milne: I first heard of it through discussion with one of our consultants. And frankly, I found it quite threatening, too. What I was hearing — eliminating giving tiers in the program, listing donors in a different way, and such — I was very concerned. My immediate thought was, what is this going to do to the incentives for our donor base to write the checks they've always written?

Dan: What changed for you in your thinking?

Bob: What brought me around was this: We were doing a strategic plan, and of course, you start with your values and principles. We spent a lot of time on that because, as a board, we were doing so much work around equity, diversity, inclusion, and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.

Once we had a rough idea of what our strategic plan was going to look like, we got down to the more granular level. By that point, we were applying values to



everything. So, when we started thinking about fundraising, applying our values made sense. It made sense to spend the time to do more to make our organization available to everyone and to invite everyone in the community to help us in our work.

Ian: We realized that our values needed not only to end up on the stage; our values needed to permeate throughout the organization. We've further refined what our values and our guiding principles are. Now, every decision, including fundraising decisions, is tested against our values.

I also came to understand that implementing values-based fundraising was going to be incremental change. It was going to be change that responded to feedback in the community and from learning. You have to move at the pace of change that your community can handle and that can be successful. As long as we maintain that pace of change in relation to the donor family, in relation to the community, I now see it as an opportunity.

Dan: Yvette, can you tell us about how else you're putting values-based fundraising into practice? Bob mentioned donor levels and benefits, for instance, *continued >*

which can create transactional giving rather than cultivating sustainable philanthropy. How are you making changes to that at Pacific Opera Victoria?

Yvette: As soon as values-based fundraising started being discussed at OPERA America, I took it to my development committee. From there, I took it to a board meeting. We started to look at every single activity that we do, whether it's an event or a communication or a donor listing: How is this activity upholding the old system or how is it moving us forward? As Ian was saying, we are being incremental in our changes, including with our donor levels. We used to have 16 giving levels, each with unique benefits and special events! These benefits excluded lower-level donors and were very difficult for us to fulfill. We've gone down now to three levels, and we've had almost no reaction to that change. The things we really thought mattered a lot — things we've been afraid to touch — don't seem to matter very much at all.

Bob: I have to say that COVID helped an awful lot, because when Yvette says we haven't had a lot of blowback, it's because almost everything disappeared. All those donor events? We didn't have them. Nobody asked why we weren't having the big party before opening night for the big donors; there was no opening event. We have yet to see what some of the fallout may be as we work our way back into what will be the new normal, which of course will be a different normal than what it was.

Dan: I understand you've already been trying out some new takes on donor events with great success.

Yvette: One of the things that I told my development committee when we started this whole thing



was, just because we're moving toward values-based fundraising doesn't mean that we're going to be drinking less champagne or celebrating less frequently.

During COVID, of course, we couldn't do that; but now that we're back together, we're trying to do our events a little bit differently. For example, we used to have a pre-show, opening night celebration at the theater. We would invite our higher-level donors and have a nice spread of food with champagne. Instead of that, we're doing post-show receptions — after every show, and we're inviting all donors, no matter how much they donated. We've kept the champagne but skipped the food, so it costs us about the same amount. Yet we're probably meeting and greeting four times as many donors now, and we get to celebrate them all.

Last night I was there at the theater until midnight celebrating with artists and musicians and donors. It was extremely well received. Sure, a few of our people wanted that old reception back. But this new approach was really successful, and it met with the goals of values-based fundraising in expanding the scope of our donor appreciation.

Dan: Do you still do special events for your higher-level donors?

Yvette: Yes, sometimes we do still need to do events with our higher-tier donors. So we're asking, if we have to have this event for this more elite group of donors, what can we do to make this event something that contributes to our values of anti-racism and equity? Maybe we'll invite a speaker or have some of our community engagement work profiled at that event. I think that's something that moves us a step in the right direction.

Community-Centric Fundraising for Opera Companies
Read the full report and action steps at operaamerica.org/CCF

Dan: Ian, why have you given a greenlight to these changes?

Ian: I think it's in our self-interest. The opportunity to celebrate philanthropy at all levels, whether it's with events, in donor listings, or wherever. We've come to realize that those small donors giving \$75 a year often make the biggest bequests to Pacific Opera Victoria. If we only celebrate the big donors, we're missing the potential impact of everyone else. So, enlightened self-interest allows me as a fundraiser to feel very comfortable that these changes align with my personal values and

the organizational values that guide us. They're an opportunity.

It's also important to staff, and staff have to stay motivated. As we've heard from our peers, fundraising staff are leaving organizations every 18 months. If this work is of interest to staff, then it behooves the organization to try to integrate it.

The last thing I would say is that the practices of values-based fundraising align with our organizational culture, which has been for many years about the partnership of artists, administrators, and philanthropy. The more we can integrate the work of artists, the work of philanthropists, and the work of the administrative team in community building, the better.

That all said, I'll emphasize what I said earlier: This is about incremental change. I won't risk — neither will the board, neither will Yvette — our success in being able to support artmaking through our fundraising practices.

Dan: Bob, what's the opportunity that you see in this?

Bob: I have to say that our board hasn't totally bought into this yet; our strategic plan has not been finally adopted. But we are committed to doing this in a thoughtful process, piece by piece. I think we are all concerned about diversifying our audiences. If we really are serious about making our opera something that everyone in our community can see themselves in and can enjoy, we have to make space for them in our fundraising efforts, too. We're giving them the opportunity to help with this wonderful organization and the wonderful work we're doing in the community. ■

Adapted from the session "Values-Based Fundraising" at the National Trustee Forum on October 21, 2022.

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OA Trustee Resources

Trustee Resource Page

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

Company Workshops

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

Opera America Magazine

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



In the Winter 2023 edition:

- Winning New Audiences
- Unpacking Blackface in Opera
- Opera for Disabled Communities
- Family-Friendly Programming
- Patron Codes of Conduct
- "My First Opera" with Dame Zandra Rhodes

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

The True Life of Artists By Heather Johnson

The COVID-19 pandemic has made workers in all industries demand better conditions, and artists are among them. For decades, love of the art form has been thought to compensate for long hours, low pay, and challenging workplaces. It's time opera companies think differently. Mezzo-soprano Heather Johnson shares her experience.

The thing about being an artist is that it's a little bit like a drug. We as artists have to feed that addiction. And we'll bend a lot of our own standards to do it. Unfortunately, that has been exploited over the years.

I'm not saying that the treatment is all bad. But I like to use this analogy: You are a lawyer and you have to litigate a really important case in another town. You must perform at your peak level. All of this pressure is on you — and you're going to have to stay in somebody else's house! You may or may not have to share the bathroom; you definitely have to share the kitchen. You're not set up for success.

This is what we go through as artists, and there's not much we can do about it. There is a fear of saying, this isn't going to work for me. Because then you're labeled as difficult. As performers, we're so dependent on the next job that we will do almost anything to keep a job and be rehired back.

And then there's the financial roller coaster. Let's say you're doing a job and getting \$2,500 a show for three shows — and that's a generous fee for many houses. So, you get \$7,500 total at the end of the run. You're gone for a month. You have to pay all of your expenses. You have to pay your health insurance, your manager, your publicist. You have to pay all of your bills. By the end, if you break even, you're lucky.

There are companies that treat us right. As a mother, do you know how mind-blowing it is to me if a company asks if I'll need a pack-and-play? Do I need a stroller? Babysitters? You know, those are small things that take half an hour of somebody's time to put together but mean the world to mothers like me. Because we arrive and realize, wow, they value me as a family person.

The pandemic forced artists to take a true look at what they're capable of financially and emotionally. It's been really difficult. When I'm teaching young singers, I always say, if this is what you have to do, with your body and your soul, do it. But if there's anything else that gives you the same sort of dopamine hit, there are easier paths. ■



Heather Johnson in Boston Lyric Opera's *Trouble in Tahiti*

Adapted from the session "The Life of the Artist" at the National Trustee Forum on October 20, 2022.



Oral History Project: Director Peter Sellars

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

Explore the stories at operaamerica.org/OralHistory

“I apprenticed at a marionette theater, the Lovelace Marionettes, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, starting at the age of 10. And for most puppet shows, the kids wanted to hear music. ... So I was brought up in this atmosphere where music itself was theatrical. Public theater was all about miracles and surprising transformations and people flying or descending from the sky — all those phenomenal things that, of course, opera is about.

Opera is where all the art forms meet. And so it was this logical meeting place for working with painters, for working with architects, for working with great writers, for working with musicians and working with dancers. [It] had that thrilling anthropological root system that was going back to African villages and Korean rituals for the dead and Aboriginal gatherings in the desert, in the middle of a solstice for a dawn. Opera's that place that is so deep for what it means to be alive and be human.

The Greeks invented it as a maintenance system for democracy, realizing that democracy needs to be maintained and attended to every day, like feeding your kids. How do you keep democracy alive and healthy? Opera. And so the Greeks realized you had to tell stories that were tragic, that were unbearable. ... You need to face those things with music, poetry, dance, and beauty, because that's the only way we can deal with this stuff. And if you don't deal with it, you're in trouble. And so opera is this urgent life support system — this urgent maintenance system for democracy.” ■

JUST PUBLISHED
Annual Field Report 2022



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 2022 ANNUAL FIELD REPORT AT
[OPERAAMERICA.ORG/AFR](https://operaamerica.org/AFR)

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Spring/Summer 2023

Letter from the President/CEO

Values-Based Fundraising

The True Life of Artists

Oral History Project: Peter Sellars

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