

Carmen Giannattasio  
as Tosca and Scott  
Hendricks as Scarpia  
in San Francisco  
Opera's *Tosca*



the YEAR in  
REVIEW  
2018

# The HERITAGE LIVES ON

INNOVATION, PLUS A  
HEALTHY RESPECT FOR  
TRADITION, KEEPS THE  
REPERTOIRE BUOYANT.

By Fred Cohn

For all the vitality of contemporary opera, the standard repertory remains the backbone of the industry. This year's premieres of works like Missy Mazzoli and Royce Vavrek's *Proving Up*, Lembit Beecher and Hannah Moscovitch's *Sky on Swings* and the full-length version of Huang Ruo and David Henry Hwang's *An American Soldier* all garnered well-deserved attention, as did mountings of recent operas by composers like Ricky Ian Gordon, Jake Heggie, Laura Kaminsky and Kevin Puts. But as always, the bulk of the offerings

from most companies, large and small, consisted of the works, written between the late 1700s and the early 1900s, that have maintained a foothold in the repertory across the centuries.

"You can't give up on the standard repertory," says Heidi Waleson, opera critic for *The Wall Street Journal*. "It's the base of the industry."

A look at OPERA America's tally of the most-produced operas of 2017–2018 confirms the point (see "The Top 25," pages 24–25). Although it includes Kaminsky's 2014 *As One*, Astor Piazzolla's 1968 *María de Buenos Aires* and Leonard Bernstein's 1956 *Candide*,



Derrell Acon as Roc, Malorie Casimir as Marcy and Kelly Griffin as Leah in Heartbeat Opera's reimagined *Fidelio*



Pacific Opera Project's *La bohème*, with Katherine Giaquinto as Musetta, Alex DeSocio as Marcello, Keith Coldclough as Colline, Daria Somers as Mimi, Dane Suarez as Rodolfo and E. Scott Levin as Schaunard



Brenda Rae in the title role of *Lucia di Lammermoor* at Opera Philadelphia

the bulk of the list consists of works like *The Barber of Seville*, *La traviata*, *La bohème* and *Carmen*, most of them standard fare in past eras, and some of them mainstays virtually throughout the history of opera in America. In fact, seven of the titles were performed at the Metropolitan Opera in 1883–1884, its first season. To be sure, our companies' forays into contemporary opera are revitalizing the field. But they have largely built their reputations

and audiences on the foundation of “heritage” operas, and they still offer a steady stream of canonical works as a dominant part of the mix.

But even though the works are familiar, their interpretations may offer surprises. Waleson notes that straightforwardly traditional mountings of standard pieces (“the bohemians are in the garret, or outside in the snowstorm”) have by and large given way to “tweaked” interpretations.

“The opera is changed just enough to make it a little different, but not so much that you don’t recognize it,” she explains. She offers as an example Laurent Pelly’s production of *Lucia di Lammermoor* at Opera Philadelphia this fall, the black-and-white design stripping away the work’s romanticism and suggesting a feminist subtext. “I like it when the director has an individual take that’s still of a piece with the opera,” she says. “People seeing





hearings for Brett Kavanaugh, which made the audience especially sensitive to the barbarity of Scarpia's attempted sexual assault. "The connection was uncanny," Shilvock says. "When Tosca sang 'Vissi d'arte,' the audience felt her fear of what was about to happen to her. It gave a different sense to the storytelling."

The Lucey production forms part of an ongoing SFO project to replenish its stock of standard-repertoire productions. When Shilvock took over as general director two seasons ago, he inherited a trove of venerable productions. Some of them are in parlous condition: The beloved David Hockney *Turandot*, when it was revived early last season, turned out to have suffered extensive climate-change-related water damage in storage, and its third act had to be rebuilt entirely. Others have simply stuck around just a little too long. "Our

San Francisco Opera would be like," he says. "They want the *Pretty Woman* experience, where the intensity of the emotional rush sends tears down your face." This June, the company will offer a more traditional take on *Carmen*, in a new-to-San Francisco Francesca Zambello production that can be seen during Opera Conference 2019.

Still, a number of small independent companies have found success by playing freely with the core repertoire. Pacific Opera Project, which offers Los Angeles audiences intimately scaled stagings of (mostly) standard titles, just revived its popular *La bohème*: AKA "*The Hipsters*," set among Millennials in present-day Southern California. In 2016, Charlottesville's Victory Hall Opera presented *Someone Younger*, an updated, trimmed-down version of *Der Rosenkavalier* with a cast of six and an eight-piece orchestra.

Heartbeat Opera, the New York City-

## "THESE PIECES HELP US UNDERSTAND WHO WE ARE."

— MATTHEW SHILVOCK, SAN FRANCISCO OPERA

productions by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle and John Copley have gotten worn around the edges," Shilvock says. "Audiences have such fondness for them — but they don't want to see them again."

The type of radical reinterpretation of the classics known as *Regietheater* dominates Europe's stages, but it has found less acceptance here. Barrie Kosky's silent-movie-era revamp of *The Magic Flute*, imported from Berlin's Komische Oper, has in recent seasons proved a hit in Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Cincinnati and Philadelphia. But SFO's 2016 presentation of Calixto Bieito's production of *Carmen* — replete with telephone booths, Mercedes-Benzes and intimations of sexual exploitation — drew a decidedly mixed response. Shilvock says that younger audience members in particular were put off by the *Regie* approach. "It was not what they thought going to San

based indie opera company, specializes in reworked versions of the classics. For instance, this year's mounting of *Fidelio* was not only updated, reorchestrated and substantially cut, lasting 90 intermission-less minutes, but its scenario was altered: Florestan ("Stan") was the victim of political oppression specifically aimed at people of color; Leonore ("Leah") didn't disguise herself as a young man, but as a woman, an object of lesbian affection for Marzelline ("Marcy"). The production proved so popular this past spring that it was revived in November, drawing a diverse, youthful audience — and offering proof of the ongoing vitality of opera's heritage.

"These pieces help us understand who we are," Shilvock says about the standard repertoire. "They have stood the test of time not just as museum pieces, and not just because they have beautiful music, but because they speak to us in the here and now." ■

*Lucia* for the first time could watch this and know what the work is about."

San Francisco Opera's new production of *Tosca* this fall, directed by Shawna Lucey, took a similar approach — underlining the work's contemporary relevance, while fulfilling audience expectations for the look and feel of the Puccini opera. Matthew Shilvock, general director of San Francisco Opera, notes that the production opened in the midst of the Senate confirmation



# The TOP 25

THE MOST-PRODUCED  
OPERAS IN THE U.S. AND  
CANADA, 2017–2018



# 1

Il barbiere  
di Siviglia

Matthew Worth as  
Figaro, Boston Lyric  
Opera

2  
La traviata

3  
La  
bohème

4  
Rigoletto



# 5

Carmen

Stéphanie d'Oustrac,  
The Dallas Opera

6  
Tosca

7  
Le nozze  
di  
Figaro

8  
Madama  
Butterfly

9  
Turandot

10  
Don  
Giovanni

11  
As One

12  
Die  
Zauberflöte

# 13

Candide



Denyce Graves (at  
center) as the Old  
Lady, Washington  
National Opera

17  
Così fan  
tutte

18  
La  
Cenerentola

19  
Norma

# 20

Aida

Michelle Johnson,  
Knoxville Opera

14  
Orfeo ed  
Euridice

15  
L'elisir  
d'amore

# 16

María de Buenos Aires

Evelyn Saavedra as  
María, Pensacola Opera

21  
Lucia di  
Lammermoor

22  
The Merry  
Widow

23  
Fidelio

24  
Roméo et Juliette

25  
Don  
Pasquale



# REPERTOIRE



**1.** Andrew Stenson and Kathleen Kim in Huang Ruo and David Henry Hwang's *An American Soldier* at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis (Photo: Ken Howard)  
**2.** Andres Acosta and Hadleigh

Adams in Gregory Spears and Greg Pierce's *Fellow Travelers* at Minnesota Opera (Photo: Dan Norman) **3.** Elizabeth Caballero (center) in Daniel Catán and Marcela Fuentes-Berain's *Florencia*

*en el Amazonas* at Madison Opera (Photo: James Gill) **4.** Nico Muhly and Nicholas Wright's *Marnie* at the Metropolitan Opera, with Disella Lárusdóttir, Peabody Southwell, Isabel Leonard, Deanna

Breiwick and Rebecca Ringle Kamarei (Photo: Ken Howard) **5.** Musa Ngqungwana and Sean Panikkar (at center) in *Moby-Dick*, by Jake Heggie and Gene Scheer, at Pittsburgh Opera (Photo: David



# RENEWED

PREMIERES AND REVIVALS OF CONTEMPORARY WORKS BRING FRESH ENERGY TO THE ART FORM.



5



6



7



8



9



10

Bachman Photography) **6.** Roderick Williams and Kate Miller-Heidke (on-screen) in Michel van der Aa and David Mitchell's *Sunken Garden* at The Dallas Opera (Photo: Karen

Almond) **7.** Ryan McKinny in *Doctor Atomic*, by John Adams and Peter Sellars, at The Santa Fe Opera (Photo: Ken Howard) **8.** Christopher Burchett in David T. Little's *Soldier Songs* at

Fargo-Moorhead Opera (Photo: Courtesy Fargo-Moorhead Opera) **9.** Marietta Simpson in Opera Philadelphia's *Sky on Swings*, by Lembit Beecher and Hannah

Moscovitch (Photo: Steven Pisano) **10.** Stewart Copeland and Jonathan Moore's *The Invention of Morel* at Long Beach Opera (Photo: Keith Ian Polakoff)

The community chorus of  
On Site Opera's *Amahl  
and the Night Visitors*



trustees in the membership, it created a web page of trustee resources and began publishing *Across the Board*, a semiannual newsletter highlighting best practices in governance. And for Professional Company Members, it launched Civic Practice Grants, which fund opera companies' efforts to identify civic priorities in their communities and form partnerships with other organizations to achieve shared goals.

Another resource, available to members in every category and in fact to the public at large, is OA's new anti-harassment web page, launched in response to the field's heightened awareness of sexual harassment and assault. The resources on the page, culled from social service organizations, as well as our own member companies, can help opera companies prevent harassment and develop their own policies. They can also assist individuals who have been victims of harassment.

One of OA's most profound areas of member support is its grantmaking. OA injected more than \$1.5 million into the opera field last year, supporting new repertoire, innovative business strategies,

# GROWTH *and* DISC

*By Nicholas Wise*

**T**he year 2018 represented a high-water mark for OPERA America's membership: For the first time, its individual members topped out at over 1,600. Meanwhile, the number of organizational members — comprising opera companies, schools and businesses — grew to 457: a level of participation that hasn't been seen in more than a decade. Included in this latter membership category are 140 Professional Company Members, presenting performances in 44 states and the District of Columbia.

These figures are not only a testament to the health of the field; they speak to the value members have found in the services OA provides. In the past year, that value has increased through an expansion of our portfolio of services. For individual members, OA launched a new online directory where they can list their contact information and professional specialty, with an aim of enabling collaboration field-wide. For the 300 opera-company



Peggy Kriha  
Dye, general  
and artistic  
director  
of Opera  
Columbus,  
speaks  
at Opera  
Conference  
2018

community partnerships and more. The returns on these investments were seen throughout the year — from the much-anticipated premiere of Missy Mazzoli's *Proving Up*, for which Washington National Opera received a Commissioning Grant for Female Composers, to On Site Opera's presentation of *Amahl and the Night Visitors* at a New York City soup kitchen, supported by an Innovation Grant.

OA continued to support the professional development of industry personnel. For artists, it offered discounted recording opportunities at the National Opera Center, OA's headquarters; the Feedback Auditions program, in



Michael Fabiano and  
Marc A. Scorca at a  
*Conversations* event





Laura Kaminsky at a *Creators in Concert* event

which industry experts assess a singer's mock audition; and Career Blueprints, a three-day boot camp designed to provide valuable tools for launching a career, from headshots to branding to financial advice.

A new OA initiative offered a unique service to female administrators. The Women's Opera Network Mentorship Program, supported by the annual Backstage Brunch fundraiser, paired three promising young professionals with mentors who helped them identify advancement barriers and create plans for professional growth. "Getting advice from someone invested in your success, but not directly involved in your day-to-day employment, is invaluable," said Katie Preissner, director of production at Colorado Opera, about the mentorship of Portland Opera's Clare Burovac.

Other young administrators found opportunities for reflection and personal growth at the Leadership Intensive, the OA program that identifies emerging opera leaders and provides them with specialized training. The 2018 Leadership Intensive class gathered in August at the National Opera Center for a week of discussions and seminars that addressed strategic issues, built essential skills and fostered professional ties. Many alumni of the program moved into top leadership roles this year, among them Barbara Lynne Jamison, appointed general director of Kentucky Opera in June, and Lee Anne Myslewski, named head of Wolf Trap Opera in October.

In 2018, OA continued its role as a convener of opera professionals: a role that has been part of its institutional DNA since its beginnings. We hosted nine discipline-specific forums — for marketing, development and finance, among other specialties — allowing the field's professionals to meet, compare notes about shared challenges, and chart pathways forward (see "Seedbeds for Ideas," p. 34).

The entire opera field came together this June for our annual Opera Conference, which this year drew more than 650 opera professionals from across North America to St. Louis. With the title "Raising Many Voices," the conference zeroed in on strategies for making opera more diverse and inclusive. "Today we are much more focused on diversity, on identity and on finding alternatives to the dominant culture," said John Adams, the conference's keynote speaker. "But a change in culture — if it is to be a societal one, a refocusing on the identity and diversity of its creators, presenters and audience — will not usher in a new canon without genuine musical and dramatic revolution." OA has continued the discussion of equity, diversity and inclusion, and made it a primary lens through which it views its work (see "A Place of Learning," p. 30).

OA helped bring together an unprecedented international assembly of opera leaders and artists for the first-ever World Opera Forum, held in April in Madrid. Working with colleagues from Opera Europa and Ópera Latinoamérica, OA organized sessions on four topics: cultural heritage, new work, diversity and audiences, and advocacy and public value. The interactive, discussion-based format of the forum, which included breakout discussion groups for all participants, will serve as a model for OA's 2019 conference in San Francisco.

Back home in New York, OA's National Opera Center welcomed more than 80,000 people through its doors for auditions, performances and rehearsals, as well as for its own *Onstage at the Opera Center* series of conversation and recitals, which featured leading figures like composer Laura Kaminsky, soprano Ailyn Pérez and tenor Michael Fabiano. On April 7, the Opera Center's recital hall was named after Plácido Domingo, marked by a ceremony hosted by Stephanie Blythe and Joyce DiDonato. The naming was made possible by 45 supporters who contributed a total of \$900,000, their donations inspired by a gift from Domingo himself: a concert grand Steinway piano that is now the centerpiece of Plácido Domingo Hall.

In the year ahead, we will be beginning celebrating our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, with celebrations scheduled to kick off this



Ailyn Pérez and Plácido Domingo at the naming ceremony for Plácido Domingo Hall

summer and continue through 2020. The anniversary provides not just an occasion to look back at all the field has accomplished over the past half century, and OA's role in supporting the work of opera companies, but also an opportunity to shape the organization's strategic vision. "Throughout our anniversary year, we'll honor some of our member companies' milestones from the 1970s to the present — a remarkable period in the development of opera in America," says Marc A. Scorca, president and CEO of OA. "But we also want to use this as an opportunity for increased dialogue with our members about what role OPERA America will play in their future — and to learn how can we best serve them and our art form for decades to come." ■



Jane A. Robinson at a fundraiser for the Women's Opera Network

# OVERY



David T. Little at the World Opera Forum

the YEAR in  
REVIEW  
2018



# A PLACE OF LEARNING

*By Brandon Gryde*



**I**ncreasing equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) across the field has become a central element of OPERA America's work. At our conferences and forums, we've worked to move the conversation about EDI-related topics to the center of each agenda. We've provided support, both financial and informational, to members' efforts aimed at making authentic connections with our audiences and the communities where we live. Still, as Marc A. Scorca, our president and CEO, has repeatedly reminded us, we approach this work not from a place of knowing, but a place of learning.

One way we are learning about these issues is by addressing OPERA America's internal culture. We participated in the Racial Equity in the Arts Innovation Lab, a yearlong program run by the racial justice organization Race Forward that guided 60 New York City arts organizations toward a deeper involvement with racial equity work. Our staff has engaged in facilitated dialogue, exploring systems of oppression that affect our own lives and organizational culture.

In 2018, we created an "equity prime," a reminder to be race explicit within our work and to consider the impact of our decisions on people of color. The equity prime takes the form of a series of questions, geared toward priming the conversation around EDI: Whom are we benefitting? Who is represented in our conversations — and who is left out? These exercises, conducted several times a year at our staff meetings, are not aimed at evaluating our success, but at priming our thinking and creating a trigger around various biases we may implicitly bring to the table.

The effect has been to raise the consciousness of every employee in every department of OPERA America. Our commitment to EDI has affected the language we use in our marketing and our development communications. It has shaped the panels and discussion themes at our forums and at Opera Conference. It has guided the topics in *Opera America* magazine. Everybody in our organization has made EDI a priority.

By practicing what we preach, we hope not just to enhance our own organizational culture, but to provide

an outward-facing model. As we learn to be explicit in confronting centuries-old systems of bias in the performing arts, we hope to foster conversations throughout the field about EDI. Who is telling the stories in opera? How can we take a more inclusive approach to casting? How do we create new opportunities for underrepresented groups — particularly people of color and women?

We have constructed a values statement reflecting our vision for a more equitable culture, "OPERA America's Commitment to Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity." The statement addresses various forms of equity: racial, gender, age, economic. OPERA America has already taken great strides to address gender equity in the field through the creation of the Women's Opera Network and the launch of Opera Grants for Female Composers and the Mentorship Program for Female Administrators. As the organization's EDI officer, I have focused much of my recent work on racial justice. This is not a parallel effort, but it supports our ongoing work on gender parity, while acknowledging that intersections of identities may result in multiple barriers to success.

We recognize that it's time for change in our field. It's time to understand opera's history of privilege, and what it means for those who have not shared in that privilege. As we seek to "diversify our audiences," we can't then criticize new audiences for not understanding the art form when they raise issues about racial stereotypes, misogyny and cultural appropriation. We must always listen if we want to effect change. Equity is not easy. It requires ongoing examination of our traditions and biases.

For many, change is scary. It raises fears that may be rooted in a perceived loss of power. OPERA America firmly believes diverse representation among members' boards, staff, artists and audiences involves no sacrifice of opera's core elements; instead, it will result in new thinking, in new stories and in the overall growth of the art form.

It's also just the right thing to do.

**Brandon Gryde** is OPERA America's director of government affairs and EDI officer.

## OPERA AMERICA'S EDI EFFORTS: A TIMELINE

### 2014

- OPERA America launches Opera Grants for Female Composers, funded by the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation, to support opera compositions by women.

### 2015

- The Women's Opera Network is formed to foster gender parity in the field.

### 2016

- OA creates a new staff position: equity, diversity and inclusion officer.

### 2017

- To address racial equity within our organization, OA joins Race Forward's Racial Equity in the Arts Innovation Lab.
- OA's EDI officer attends the Urban Bush Women Summer Leadership Institute, a weeklong training on undoing racism, facilitated by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond.
- OA staff participate in two days of facilitated dialogue about racial equity and organizational culture.
- OA embeds racial equity content throughout its annual conference, including breakout and plenary sessions.
- EDI content is included in all OA convenings and forums.
- *Opera America* runs a feature about contemporary operas with racial themes.

### 2018

- OA launches a Mentorship Program for Women, pairing promising female administrators with mentors who provide career guidance.
- The total amount of Opera Grants for Female Composers awarded to date reaches nearly \$900,000.
- OA convenes composers of color for a discussion about equity and inclusion.
- OA creates and adopts its "equity prime."
- EDI content continues to be embedded in programs, including the New Works Forum, Civic Action Group and annual conference.
- OA releases an EDI values statement.
- OA launches the ALAANA Opera Network, an advisory group of people of color in opera working to support a more racially equitable field.

### 2019

- OA launches IDEA (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Access) Opera Grants, funded by the Charles and Cerise Jacobs Charitable Foundation, to support early-career composers and librettists of color.