

# ACROSS THE BOARD

A Publication of OPERA America for Opera Company Trustees

## From the President and CEO of OPERA America

Over the past year, civic practice has been a focus of our conference in San Francisco, the National Trustee Forum in New York, workshops in Austin, Orlando and Memphis, and countless other board consultations and convenings.

And it is now the focus of this issue of *Across the Board*. What does civic practice mean? Why is it important? What questions must we ask of our company leaders — and ourselves — to increase the public value of opera in our communities?

We at OPERA America are looking ahead to 2020 — our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary — and hope you will join us as we celebrate 50 years of opera in America. Tune in on October 18 to learn how you can take part, and mark your calendars for a special Trustee Forum this March in Washington, D.C.



MARC A. SCORCA

## Why Civic Practice Matters BY LEAH D. BARTO



Opera companies that are nonprofits under the U.S. tax code or registered charities in Canada have established missions that serve the public good. Yet, the general public too often perceives opera as a white European art form. The reality is that the art form is beset by stereotypes, and many opera activities (including season programming, artist rosters, donor lists and marketing materials) reinforce the perception. In truth, the business model of producing opera oftentimes promotes exclusivity.

Nonetheless, opera has extraordinary capabilities and strengths. As an art form, it is a demonstration of the power of

collaboration, and it is one of the few live multimedia disciplines in an increasingly multimedia world. Opera companies regularly convene some of the top civic leaders and richest people in their cities. The opera house and other spaces used for productions offer a meeting place for a community's creative expression. All of the artists, technicians and administrators are treasure troves of talents with proven capacities for partnership, coordination on a large scale and learning new skills.

In the past, the opera field has come together at annual conferences and convenings to discuss strategies that build audiences, address barriers

to participation and secure philanthropy. Civic practice, however, represents a shift away from such topics of self-preservation. Instead, civic practice calls on leaders to harness inherent assets of the art form, leverage the influence and privileged position that the organizations hold, and utilize core capacities of opera companies to address the urgent and prevalent needs in society. Civic practice is not an added program or department. It's not a new buzzword that simply replaces "outreach" or "engagement" in the next grant proposal. This calls for a systemic change in how a company operates and what opera leadership means in communities.

### The Stories We Tell

Opera leaders make choices about the stories that are shared with audiences. These programming choices do not happen in a vacuum; there are opportunities to foster important discussions and build mutual understanding. There are stories that certain communities will identify with on a very personal level, and others that will challenge the sensibilities of longtime opera lovers. The fact is that many "traditional" opera works that are still programmed today deal with subject matter that is problematic in modern times and, in many ways, work against the principles

*continued >*

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**WHAT IS CIVIC PRACTICE?** Civic practice draws on the art form's authentic creative assets to address public priorities and community needs. The leaders who undertake this work have a deep respect and nuanced understanding of a community's historical context and existing cultural norms, are strong partners with organizations from different sectors, and focus on stewarding a process of relationship-building and co-creation.

of civic practice. This includes misogynist and racist narratives, as well as cultural appropriation.

Many companies now produce new works that chronicle the experience of contemporary lives, such as veterans and transgender individuals, or program productions that deal with divisive modern issues, such as the death penalty and immigration. On the whole, companies are taking postures that don't convey specific perspectives on these issues, allowing the works to speak for themselves. Christopher Milligan, managing director and chief marketing officer of Cincinnati Opera, said: "We are opening a dialogue. We live in a society that is siloed and divided. We want to be a gathering place for everyone."

Civic practice goes beyond simply programming a work and adding community engagement

activities that stimulate discussion or learning. Civic practice's focus on process and co-creation calls for elevating stories that are meaningful to the communities and partners. New works might give voice to narratives that haven't made it to the mainstream and serve as a platform to celebrate artists working in different cultural traditions. Artists from Opera Omaha met with community groups that expressed their need to be heard in their own voices. Camtrice Bexten, former community opera fellowship coordinator at Opera Omaha, explained: "Meeting after meeting, we kept hearing that there needs to be a place for people to tell their own stories instead of somebody else telling their story for them, whether it's the Latino community, youth, homeless. We don't jump in and say, 'This is what we are bringing to you.'"

This process raises new questions for opera companies and pushes leaders into taking a stand. Brandon Gryde, OPERA America's director of government affairs and equity, diversity and inclusion officer, explained, "When we're telling the stories from our community, we are saying, 'We're going to be allies for you in getting your stories out there.'"

### The Places We Perform

The location at which an opera company chooses to perform sends a signal to the performers and audiences about the nature of the work and type of experience to expect. As many companies are producing works in venues beyond the opera house — in community centers and found spaces for site-specific works — these spaces have implications for civic practice, particularly in creating belonging, cultural competence and developing co-created works.

Welcoming audiences from differing cultural backgrounds is an opportunity for the opera company to demonstrate cultural competence and foster mutual understanding. The reality,

however, is that opera patrons and ushers (no matter the venue) have expectations about audience behavior, from arrival times to modes of audience reactions. Mark Valdez, an LA-based artist and creative placemaking consultant, mused: "We are striving to bring together these diverse audiences to sit side by side. As somebody pointed out that, at best, we mildly tolerate each other — just because we're polite. Really, we're annoyed that they're making noise, or we're annoyed that they're silent. Or we're annoyed that I can't go to the bathroom and come back, or that I can't check my voicemail or text."

Animating belonging within these spaces takes some strategic interventions and conscious effort. In Cincinnati, the artistic director prompts audience members to turn to someone they don't know and ask them about their first opera during the curtain speech. The response has been surprisingly lively and it gives audience members an understanding of how their neighbors may respond differently during the performance.

EXCERPTED FROM OPERA AMERICA'S "INTRODUCTION TO CIVIC PRACTICE," A SUMMARY OF LEARNING FROM OPERA AMERICA'S CIVIC ACTION GROUP, SUPPORTED BY THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT OF THE ARTS. READ THE FULL DOCUMENT AT OPERAAMERICA.ORG/CIVICPRACTICE.

## 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. On the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, special content will chronicle the progress of opera in America over the past half-century.



### IN THE FALL 2019 EDITION:

- Development of the Modern Opera Company
- First-Timers at the Opera
- New Operas Addressing Social Justice
- In-Depth at Opera Conference 2019
- "My First Opera" by Tazewell Thompson

YOU CAN SUBSCRIBE TO OPERA AMERICA MAGAZINE BY JOINING OPERA AMERICA AS AN INDIVIDUAL MEMBER FOR \$75 AT OPERAAMERICA.ORG/JOIN.

## National Trustee Forum March 18–20, 2020 Washington, D.C.



It's my pleasure to invite you and your fellow board members to join OPERA America in Washington, D.C., this March for a special iteration of the National Trustee Forum.

The Trustee Forum is a three-day symposium for opera company trustees. It's an occasion to connect

with fellow board members, share successful practices and gain insight into the complexities of opera management. Our companies might differ in size and location, but we're all facing the same challenges and opportunities as we strive to produce the art form we love.

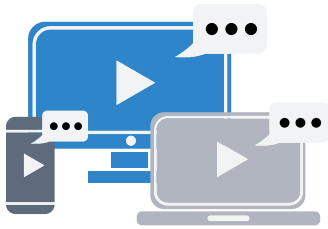
Washington National Opera is a founding member of OPERA America, and — as part of OPERA America's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary and celebration of 50 years of opera in America — we're delighted to host you for a first-rate lineup of performances during your stay.

Speak to your general director about participating in the forum. We hope to see you!

### TIMOTHY O'LEARY

GENERAL DIRECTOR, WASHINGTON NATIONAL OPERA  
CHAIR, OPERA AMERICA

# OPERA America Resources for Trustees



## Trustee Resource Page

For resources available to you as a company trustee, visit [operaamerica.org/Trustees](http://operaamerica.org/Trustees) or download the 2020 Trustee Quick Guide at [operaamerica.org/TrusteeQuickGuide](http://operaamerica.org/TrusteeQuickGuide).

## Company Workshops

OPERA America's Marc A. Scorca is available to lead board and staff workshops on topics including governance, civic engagement and financial health. Consult your general director or call 212.796.8623 for details.



## Special Announcement: 50 Year Celebration of Opera in America

Friday, Oct. 18, 2019  
4:00 p.m. – 4:30 p.m. EDT

LIVE STREAM  
[operaamerica.org/October18](http://operaamerica.org/October18)

Join OPERA America for a special live-streamed, national announcement from the National Opera Center. Marc A. Scorca will introduce several new programs and invite you to take part in a national promotional campaign to showcase the vibrancy of opera.

# Opera Conference 2019: The Big Topics



**Examining Traditions** How can we balance tradition and innovation? Philip Kennicott of *The Washington Post* invited field leaders from across the country and around the world to weigh in.



**Deeping Civic Practice** How can we build opera's public value in our communities? Jane Chu, former chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, explored the intersection of studio practice, social practice and civic practice.



**Exploring Business Innovation** How can we ensure our business practices are adapting to the world around us? Robert Marx of the Fan Fox and Leslie R. Samuels Foundation challenged panelists to reflect.

WATCH THESE SESSION IN FULL AT  
[YOUTUBE.COM/OPERAAMERICA.ORG](http://YOUTUBE.COM/OPERAAMERICA.ORG)

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

OPERA 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL  
CONFERENCE

MAY 13–16, 2020 • SEATTLE

REGISTRATION OPENS NOVEMBER 1, 2019  
AT [CONFERENCE.OPERAAMERICA.ORG](http://CONFERENCE.OPERAAMERICA.ORG)

## Transitioning to a New Role BY MARC A. SCORCA



**A** number of general director positions are open across the country, and board committees are at work to find dynamic leaders to guide their companies into the future. When the chairs of these “search committees” contact me to get advice, I am quick to suggest new terminology: Change “search” to “transition.”

Why a “transition committee”? Selecting the new head of the company is one thing. But board members should devote just as much time to welcoming, orienting, introducing and settling the new general director in his or her new position. Even if the person who gains the top position is local, trustees should take the lead in making appointments to introduce the new general director to community leaders, corporate CEOs and major patrons. If the appointee is new to town, has she or he found a suitable apartment or house, a convenient health club, good restaurants and, if appropriate, a school for children or house of worship? Being introduced and integrated into the community, professionally and personally, can be as important to success as the skillset the new general director brings to the job.

This level of attention to the well-being of the general director should carry forward beyond the inaugural year of service. The position is a demanding one, and board members should monitor the condition of their general directors beyond the immediate business imperatives that define success. Retention and performance will go up when board members exhibit sincere interest in the overall happiness and health of the company's leader.

OPERA America is the national advocate for opera, dedicated to supporting the creation, presentation and enjoyment of the art form for artists, administrators, trustees and audiences.

## SAVE THE DATE

FOR A SPECIAL LIVE-STREAMED ANNOUNCEMENT



FRIDAY, OCTOBER 18, 4:00 P.M. ET  
[OPERAAMERICA.ORG/OCTOBER18](http://OPERAAMERICA.ORG/OCTOBER18)

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

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### Fall/Winter 2019 Issue

- Why Civic Practice Matters
- Transitioning to a New Role
- Recap of Opera Conference 2019
- Invitation to 2020 National Trustee Forum
- Special Announcement: October 18

### Future Trustee Meetings

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**NATIONAL TRUSTEE FORUM 2020** | MARCH 18–20, 2020 | WASHINGTON, D.C.

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**OPERA CONFERENCE 2020** | MAY 13–16, 2020 | SEATTLE | **50<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference**

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**NATIONAL TRUSTEE FORUM 2021** | FEBRUARY 17–19, 2021 | NEW YORK CITY

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## NATIONAL TRUSTEE FORUM MARCH 18–20, 2020 | WASHINGTON, D.C.

**PERFORMANCES** at Washington National Opera  
**VISITS** to Capitol Hill and the National Museum of Women in the Arts  
**CONTACT** [DCooperman@operaamerica.org](mailto:DCooperman@operaamerica.org) for details.