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STICK TO THE CLASSICS? MAYBE NOT.

**AN IMPORTANT CORRECTION TO
*UNDERSTANDING OPERA'S NEW AUDIENCES***

DECEMBER 2025

**OPERA
AMERICA**

New audiences want to see repertoire they've heard of, which includes classics and new works.

 PERA America's 2024 *Understanding Opera's New Audiences* study of opera newcomers rattled the field when it concluded that first-timers "tend to stick to the classics."

After decades of industry-wide investment in new work, the research suggested that only inherited repertoire mattered.

Fortunately, that's not quite right. When we returned to the data this year, here's what we realized: New audiences want to see repertoire they've heard of, which includes classics and new works.

Rest assured, across the national data set, interest in repertoire is more balanced than we originally thought. What seems to matter most is whether the work's title is recognizable, either a product of its source material or of sufficient community buzz.

Of course, different audiences have different tastes, and different companies make different programming choices. The research doesn't propose a one-size-fits-all strategy, but it does invite local conversations about the implications of repertoire on newcomers' decisions.

CORRECTION 1:

IT'S TITLE RECOGNITION THAT MATTERS

The original report suggested that new audiences gravitate toward "the classics." However, in reaching that conclusion, we interpreted the survey language too narrowly.

When we designed the study, we wanted to know if audiences came for inherited repertoire or new work. But the average first-timer wouldn't necessarily know that distinction. So, we used proxies. We asked if works were "famous or well-known" to signify inherited repertoire, and we asked about works by living creators, diverse artists, premieres, or pieces addressing contemporary themes to encompass new work.

In hindsight, this was a flawed alignment. For example, *Alice in Wonderland* (2007) by Unsuk Chin and David Henry Hwang, or *The Shining* (2016) by Paul Moravec and Mark Campbell, might be considered "new" from an industry standpoint, but audience members might classify them as "famous or

well-known" because of their recognizable titles. A first-timer who attended *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* by Terence Blanchard and Kasi Lemmons after hearing about it in the news might have also considered that "famous or well-known."

In reality, it is a work's name recognition, rather than the age or status of the work, that appears to drive interest. During exploratory interviews held prior to the research survey, some newcomers spoke about how they were attracted to more well-known operas because they had some familiarity with them — if only with the title — which gave them the sense that it would be a good place to start.

That creates opportunities for all kinds of opera. Classics like *Carmen* and *Aida* certainly have name recognition, but so do new works like *Moby-Dick* (Jake Heggie and Gene Scheer) and *The Scarlet Letter* (Lori Laitman and David Mason).

CORRECTION 2:

INTEREST IN NEW WORK IS ROBUST

The original report suggested a wide divide in newcomers' appetite for inherited repertoire and new work. But we overlooked an important dimension of the data that narrows the gap.

Interest in "famous or well-known opera," the proxy for inherited repertoire, was at 82%, while interest in the new work proxies — premieres, contemporary issues, diverse artists, and living creators — ranged from just 17% to 41%.

As noted above, the 82% "famous or well-known" is more about name recognition than being inherited repertoire. Many new works qualify under that heading, even if the proxies for new work were individually so much lower.

But another way to look at the proxies for new work is to analyze them together: What percentage

of newcomers were interested in at least one of the following?

- *Attending a world or local premiere*
- *Seeing a work that addresses contemporary issues*
- *Seeing a work by a living composer or librettist*
- *Seeing a work by a woman, LGBTQIA+, or BIPOC creator*

When the respondents to these four are uniquely combined, the number is much higher: 61% of newcomers expressed interest in at least one of them.

That significantly narrows the divide with the 82% who selected "famous or well-known." And since the 82% encompasses a mixture of name-recognizable repertoire, the interest gap between inherited repertoire and new work is likely even smaller.

MOTIVATIONS TO ATTEND AN OPERA GENERALLY

Q12: When deciding to attend an opera, how do each of the following impact your interest in attending?

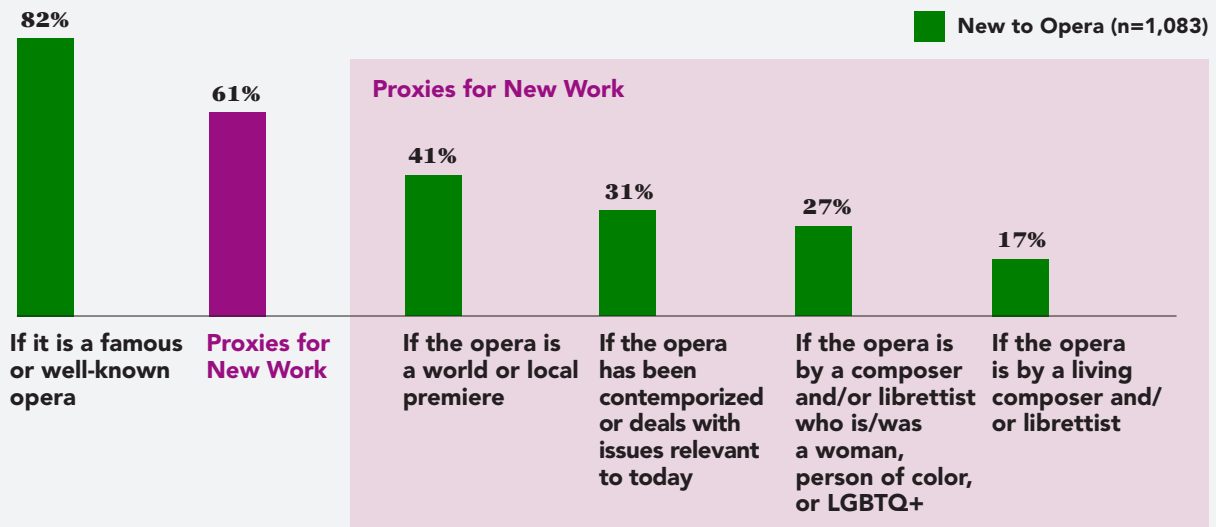


Chart presents those who answered "agree" or "strongly agree."

Excerpted from p. 38 of *Understanding Opera's New Audiences*

CORRECTION 3:

NEWCOMERS WENT TO WHAT WAS AVAILABLE

The original report suggested that “the classics” got people in the door. However, our conclusion was skewed by an availability bias.

One argument for “sticking to the classics” in the original report was that was that 81% of newcomers described the first opera they attended — between March 2020 and May 2024 — as “famous or well-known.” Since this includes some new work, the true number for inherited repertoire is likely slightly lower.

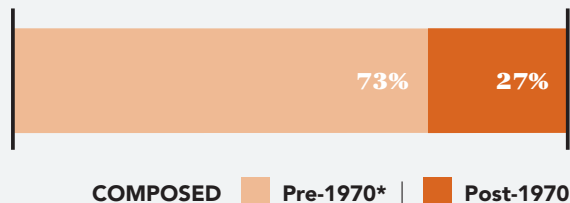
Meanwhile, the proxies for new work were selected by just 9% to 21% of respondents. Even analyzed together, as described above, these new work proxies account for just 32%.

Interestingly, that distribution matches the distribution of what was available. In the 2022–2023 season, 73% of productions were composed before 1970 and 27% were composed after.

The predominance of “classics” is simply what their

opera companies offered at the time, not necessarily a matter of preference. What first-timers reported seeing matched the volume of what was available. ■

PRODUCTIONS IN 2022–2023 SEASON

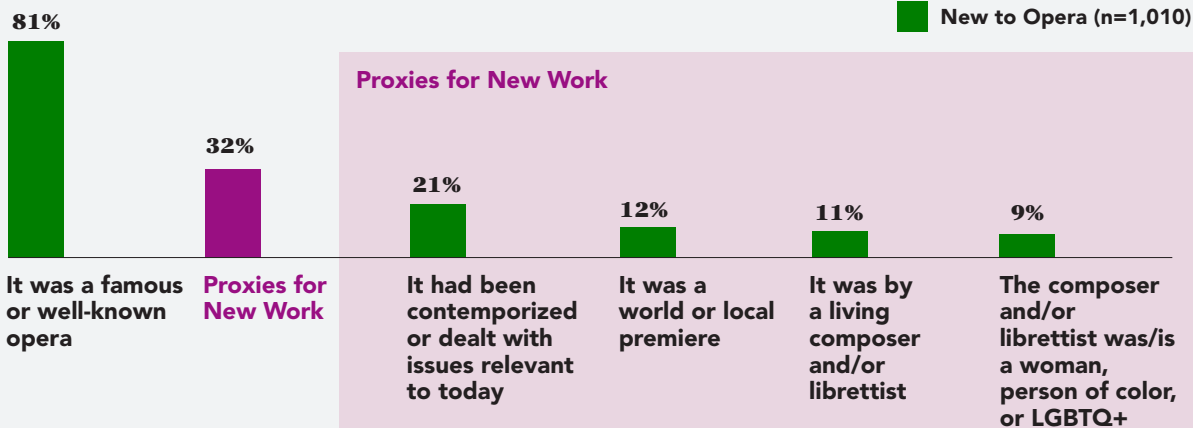


*OPERA America uses 1970, the year of its founding, as a general inflection point to distinguish inherited repertoire from new work.

Excerpted from p. 3 of the 2024 Annual Field Report

TYPE OF THE FIRST LIVE OPERA ATTENDED SINCE MARCH 2020

Q24: To the best of your knowledge, which of the following was true about the opera you saw?
Please select all that apply.



Excerpted from p. 42 of *Understanding Opera's New Audiences*

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