

# ACROSS THE BOARD

A Publication of OPERA America for Opera Company Trustees



## From the President and CEO

Artistic vibrancy across the field — especially at so many festivals this summer — continues to win new audiences at companies nationwide.

But what will bring them back? This question has been at the core of our work for the past year. I hope you've spent time with our study into newcomer motivations, experiences, and barriers, as well as with the companion resource guide for activating research at your company. (You'll find links inside.)

The feature article in this issue offers a view of how Central City Opera, the historic festival company in the mountains outside Denver, is thinking about connecting research to practice. Keep in mind: This is written from the staff perspective. Your responsibility as trustees is to ask questions through a governance lens, so I've included an accompanying piece to help you appreciate your role.

As you chart out your calendars for the year, I hope you will join us for webinars this fall, the National Trustee Forum in March, and Opera Conference 2026 in May.

*Marc A. Scorca*

MARC A. SCORCA  
OPERA AMERICA

## Strike Gold by Starting Simple BY ADAM SCURTO

*Since OPERA America released its landmark Understanding Opera's New Audiences report last fall, administrators and trustees across North America have been digging through the research and getting creative about how to enhance audience building strategies at their companies. In this essay, Adam Scurto, managing director of external affairs at Central City Opera, shares the thinking and dialogue that is informing his new strategy at the 93-year-old mining town opera festival.*

When OPERA America's *Understanding Opera's New Audiences* study was released, I had already been thinking a lot about "new." My wife and I had a new baby at home, only six weeks old, when I read the report on family leave over my kitchen counter. Despite my family's background in music and decades of experience in arts and culture, I'm "new" to opera and had only been working at Central City Opera for four months when the study was published. "New" was all around me.

Meanwhile, Central City Opera is a 93-year-old company in a 150-year-old venue. "New" is tricky for us at CCO. Our instinct — usually for good reason — is to lean into the past, to tap into the rich history of our venue, stretching back to the gold miners of Colorado who built our beautiful opera house in 1878. I felt a lot like those miners as I cracked open this massive study — there was an almost overwhelming amount of treasure in the 60+ pages of findings. The instincts I built up over a decade spent at TRG Arts before coming to CCO guided me at first: "What is actionable?"

Because of research I had already conducted, I knew that 37% of our 2024 ticket buyers were attending CCO for the first time. Of those first-time buyers, 42% were Gen X, Millennial, or Gen Z (compared to just 20% of our returning audiences). So, while it was interesting to compare our first-timers to the field's, I merely skimmed until I hit section 4: "What would bring them back?"

I relish the fact that this study is not just about the attraction of new audiences, because as the numbers above suggest, our art form does that very well. As much as we feel afraid that the stigma of opera is too intimidating, or "turns audiences off," there are interested audiences willing to take the leap into opera for the first time — as evidenced by the group chat a group of my friends started a few weeks after I began working at CCO to plan an outing to the opera. As I read the study, I was reminded of the questions raised in this group chat: "So do we need to dress black tie?" (New-to-Opera attendees are 13% more likely to want an excuse to get dressed up.) "Is it gonna be in English?" (New-to-Opera attendees are 9% less likely to know translations will be available.) "The balcony is going to be a bit more relaxed, right?" (New-to-Opera attendees are 7%

less likely to feel like they fit in at the performance.) But, despite these uncertainties, the allure of the opera was strong. Why, I thought?

This study points to an answer: 59% of New-to-Opera attendees say that their motivation to attend was driven by the desire to "try something new." Another fact from the research: 82% of New-to-Opera buyers cited "seeing a famous or well-known opera" as having the highest impact on their interest to attend.

This last point was met with dismay and challenged by many in the field, but to me, it was a shining beacon, a huge "green light." Despite the fact that inside the industry we may be tired of doing *Barber* and *Bohème*, centuries of fame and momentum keep those works alluring to new audiences. Of course someone who is new to opera is interested in "inherited repertoire" — their entry into our world is naturally going to start with some of the most famous and enduring music in human history. Why would they roll the dice on something that — however artfully done — hasn't passed the litmus test of time?



*The Barber of Seville*  
at Central City Opera

Amber Tipton Photography

## Central City Opera

Amanda Tipton Photography



Reading this study, along with my experience playing “concierge” for my friends’ group chat, left me with this question: Once a new customer has “gotten their opera on,” what will leave them wanting more?

My desperate hope is that every first-timer who comes to Central City Opera would answer that question by saying “the magic of the intimate jewel-box theater” or “breathing in the rich history of Colorado’s past while enjoying world-class performances” or quoting any piece of brilliantly written copy from our website.

But the truth is, compared to the amount of effort we spend on our existing audiences, we haven’t done much of anything to cater to our first-time audiences. We invited them, and they came, but what did we do to curate the experience for newcomers before, during, and after the show?

This question drove me to conversations internally, crossing every department at our organization, because the findings are clear: This is not just a marketing problem. This requires us to rethink how we wield our resources, expertise, and time across every team. I held conversations about budget, hiring, and resources with our leadership team and board (especially the chair of our External Affairs Committee). I had strategy sessions with our development team tapping their experience in receptions and events; wide-ranging reflections with our box office about the

kinds of conversations we have with customers who have never been before; and with our artistic director, data- and passion-fueled debates about what kind of programming attracts new audiences — but more importantly, what kind of programming gets audiences to stick. Not all of these conversations stemmed directly from the research, but the report got us started. The findings were always there in the back of my head, and sprinkled into the conversations, pushing us toward progress.

The commitment I’m making to fostering our relationship with New-to-Company attendees has three pillars:

- We will listen. Our post-show survey includes two simple questions (a 0-10 satisfaction ranking and an open text box to describe your score) and has an incredible response rate — upwards of 20%, which I’m continually gobsmacked by and grateful for. Our customers provide us with invaluable feedback and findings. But I’m embarrassed to say, we do zero segmentation of this survey. This season, we will segment our first-time attendees out and weigh their feedback appropriately.
- We will bring our A-game, before and after the curtain. One thing I know in my bones, even without a post-show survey, is that audiences love what we do

on stage. Ninety-three percent of New-to-Opera attendees in the study found the musical performances to be outstanding. We throw incredible receptions for long-time supporters and deep-pocket donors before and after shows. We make sure traveling artists and faculty are oriented to our campus and venues before they arrive. That same care and attention must be applied to our new audiences, setting them up for a positive experience before they arrive and as they depart, and fostering the relationship thoughtfully after their night at the opera is over.

- We will “date” before marrying. The old adage “date your patrons before you marry them” is one we’ve likely all heard. But despite that obvious wisdom, it requires constant effort to avoid falling into the trap of immediately sending a fundraising ask to a first-time attendee. Anecdotal evidence suggests that we have sometimes asked patrons for money before they’re even aware we’re a nonprofit. Our

follow-up to new audiences will experiment with and measure what kind of follow-up leads to a second date and what efforts turn new audiences off. We need to give ourselves permission to try, measure, and learn from failure.

When gold was first discovered in Central City in 1859, some 20 years before the construction of the Opera House, it wasn’t found in a mine deep under the earth. John Gregory found it simply panning in the gulch where he could see it with his naked eye. Similarly, we can strike gold by starting simple. In reading this research study, I encourage you to start simple. Find one data point that excites you, or scares you, or moves you, and from that data point, talk to your team. Make a plan to change. Start small. Like the gold in Central City, the next generation of support for our art form is all around us. We just need to stick our pans in the creek. ■

*This essay was commissioned with support from the Dr. M. Lee Pearce Foundation.*

## Getting Board Members Engaged

BY MARC A. SCORCA

I’m always encouraged when trustees bring thoughtful questions to the boardroom. Sometimes I notice that many of these questions, while important, are more about management than governance. For example: “How do we get newcomers to subscribe?” or “How do we attract new audiences?” These are operational questions that fall under the staff’s purview.

The role of the board is not to solve these tactical problems but to ask strategic questions that guide and support staff efforts. Instead of “How do we do it?” a governance-minded question might be: “What are other companies doing to attract new audiences?” or “Is there research from OPERA America or peer organizations about effective strategies?” You might also ask, “Are we engaged with local arts groups to address shared audience challenges?” or “Are we allocating resources to learn from others’ successes and failures?”

It’s perfectly appropriate — and encouraged — for trustees to be concerned about these topics. But the governance role is about oversight and learning, not implementation. Trustees should ensure the organization is referencing successful practices, investing in professional development, and actively engaging in sector-wide conversations.

I’d encourage you to ask your staff whether they’re participating in OPERA America’s marketing or development Zooms, or attending the annual conference, where they can exchange ideas with peers. These are governance-level inquiries that demonstrate board leadership and support.

Ultimately, trustees and staff can be concerned about the same issues, but the lens through which each addresses them is different. Boards must provide thoughtful oversight, ensure institutional learning, and empower staff to deliver results. ■





## UNDERSTANDING OPERA'S NEW AUDIENCES

### Understanding Opera's New Audiences: Research Report

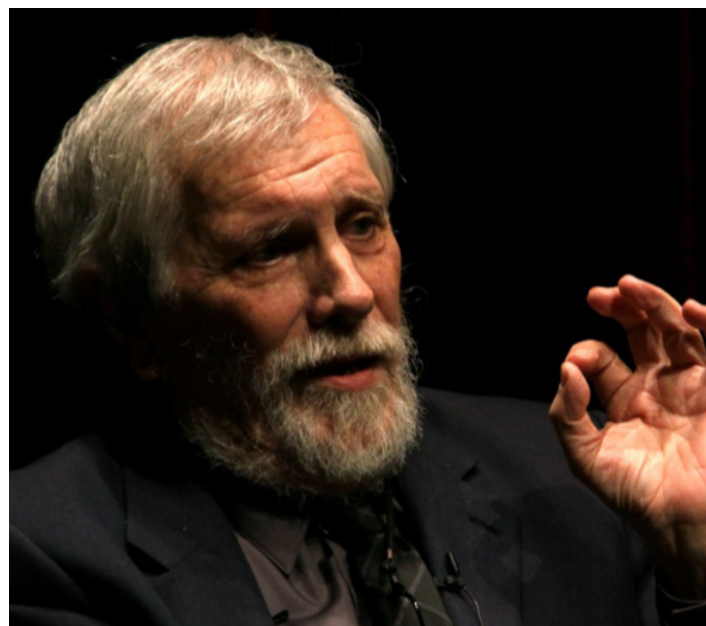
Read the national research study into the motivations, experiences, and barriers of new opera audiences.

[operaamerica.org/NewAudiences](https://operaamerica.org/NewAudiences)

### Engaging Opera's New Audiences: Turning Research into Action

Read the companion resource guide with insights and tactics on how to turn first-time operagoers into loyal fans.

[operaamerica.org/EngagingAudiences](https://operaamerica.org/EngagingAudiences)



## Oral History Project: Designer John Conklin

*The acclaimed scenic and costume designer John Conklin, who passed away this summer after a seven-decade career, reflected on his relationship with new work.*

I treat any opera as a new opera, in a way — to be explored as if it had never been performed. To say, "What is this, really?" So I haven't had much experience working with composers. Although one experience I did have was a very interesting parable or lesson about this.

I'd done work with Dominick Argento. Mark Lamos and I were hired to do *The Voyage of Edgar Allan Poe* for its European premiere. We completely ignored the physical ambience Argento had carefully expressed in the libretto. It was all set on a boat going between New York and Richmond, but we didn't do any of that. No boat at all.

At the dress rehearsal, we were told, "Mr. Argento's coming!" And we thought, "Oh, great. He's going to hate all of this." We talked it over with Dominick, at all times a total gentleman, and then he said, "You know, I have learned more about myself from this production than any production of my opera that I've ever seen." I thought, "Okay, guys, this is what you want to hear, and this is what, very possibly, Mr. Puccini or Mr. Verdi would say to somebody." ■

*Adapted from an Oral History Project conversation recorded on August 22, 2019. Explore the full story and others at [operaamerica.org/OralHistory](https://operaamerica.org/OralHistory).*

## OA Trustee Resources

### TRUSTEE RESOURCE PAGE

For a listing of the resources available to you as a company trustee, visit [operaamerica.org/Trustees](https://operaamerica.org/Trustees) or download the 2025–2026 Trustee Quick Guide at [operaamerica.org/TrusteeQuickGuide](https://operaamerica.org/TrusteeQuickGuide).

### NEW TRUSTEE ORIENTATION

You can learn about current field trends as context for informing your board service in this annual webinar — on September 26. Free to all company trustees.

[operaamerica.org/NewTrustee](https://operaamerica.org/NewTrustee)

### ESSENTIALS OF OPERA GOVERNANCE

You can register for a year-long webinar series on the fundamentals of opera company governance. New sessions on October 16 and November 13. Free for OA members.

[operaamerica.org/Essentials](https://operaamerica.org/Essentials)

## 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.

You can subscribe to *Opera America Magazine* by joining OPERA America as a member for as little as \$75 at [operaamerica.org/Join](https://operaamerica.org/Join).



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**Ideas for the Future from  
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**In the Wings: Artists to Watch**

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### Spring/Summer 2025 Issue

Letter from the President/CEO

Retaining Newcomers at Central City Opera

Framing Governance Questions

Oral History Project: John Conklin

### Future Trustee Meetings

NEW TRUSTEE ORIENTATION | SEPTEMBER 26 | ONLINE

ESSENTIALS OF OPERA GOVERNANCE | OCTOBER 16 & NOVEMBER 13 | ONLINE

NATIONAL TRUSTEE FORUM 2026 | MARCH 18–20 | NEW YORK, NY

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20  
26 | OPERA  
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