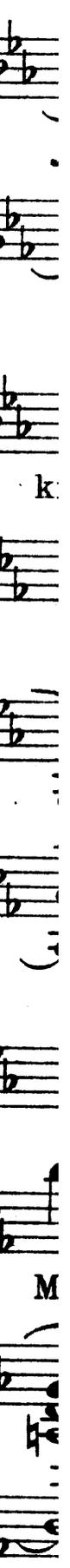




THE YEAR *in* REVIEW

THE FIELD



COMMUNITY

CONNECTIONS

TAKE

CENTER

STAGE

By Fred Cohn

Students produce and perform their own operas as part of Opera Grand Rapids' Creative Connections program



In the world of American opera 2017,

connecting to the community is no longer an elective: It's an

imperative. If in the past a company's identity rested in its staged and ticketed artistic offerings, it must now define itself as a participant in a greater civic discourse, forming connections not just to a core audience, but to the community at large, reaching constituents who may have never attended a mainstage opera — and conceivably, may never do so.

Al fresco series like Annapolis Opera's Pop-Up Opera, Nashville Opera's 30 Days of Opera and Portland Opera's Opera a la Carte bring performances to audiences who in many cases may have never before encountered live opera. Partnerships with local organizations, like Houston Grand Opera's "Seeking the Human Spirit" alliances with Houston Methodist Hospital and The Women's Home, aim at synergistic social impact. When Florida Grand Opera works with victims of human trafficking, or when Des Moines Metro Opera invites veterans to its *Soldier Songs* production, it's a sign that opera has the potential to connect with the pressing social issues of our day. Meanwhile, San Diego Opera, which in 2014 nearly ceased operations, has bounced back with a new identity, placing its civic role at the core of its mission statement. "Community engagement feels increasingly necessary to the survival and growth of opera institutions," says critic Alex Ross.

The field's ever-increasing emphasis on community connections is a response to both internal and external circumstances. With earned revenue supplying on average less than a third of companies' budgets, it becomes ever more essential for funders to understand that they aren't underwriting simply a slate of opera productions, but a community resource with far-reaching benefits. Meanwhile, the political shifts of the past year have exerted another degree of pressure on the arts in general. In particular, the proposed elimination of the National Endowment of the Arts has given new urgency to arts organizations' need to emphasize their cultural vitality.

"There's a lot of dialogue now about demonstrating civic values and civic impact," says Cayenne Harris, head of Lyric Unlimited, the community-programming arm of Lyric Opera of Chicago. "The nonprofit status of performing-arts organizations is based on the idea that we're providing a service, like food banks and social-service agencies. Since opera in particular is associated with luxury, it's important to demonstrate that as a company you're connecting the various parts of the city you live in — not just the people who buy tickets."



A young musician at Seattle Opera's Summer Fest

But for all of the civic success of programs like Lyric Unlimited, Harris notes that mainstage offerings still often leave much of the community behind. "It's not enough for an opera company to say, 'Through our work in the community, we're fulfilling our civic obligation,'" she says. "That's just one part of the equation. Canonical works by dead white men are important to our identity. But we have to look at what isn't being included — the artists who aren't included in our production teams, the additional audience members we might add to our community."

Reviewing the season-opening offerings of the Met and the New York Philharmonic in the pages of *The New Yorker*, Ross delivered a sharp rebuke to business as usual. "The implicit message is reactionary," he wrote. "As the nation contends with its racist and misogynist demons ... leading musical institutions give us canonical pieces by white males, conducted by white males, directed by white males."

The diversity problem of classical music is partly an effect of “our extreme fixation on the past,” Ross explained in a later conversation. “Without any malign agenda, it’s essentially all white men who’ve historically had dominance over music — more so than literature,” he says. “Composing music is not a purely independent act; you need to persuade others to perform it, which can be a monumentally complex exercise. For women and members of minorities it has been a closed business for a long time.”

A longtime advocate for the performance of new music, Ross notes: “If you shift your music more to the present, you automatically get a more broadly diverse repertory and audience.” Contemporary operas bear out his point. High-profile premieres of recent years have featured the music of female composers (Du Yun’s *Angel’s Bone*, Missy Mazzoli’s *Breaking the Waves*, Laura Kaminsky’s *As One*, Kamala Sankaram’s *Thumbprint*) and composers of color (Daniel Bernard Roumain’s *We Shall Not Be Moved*, Mohammed Fairouz’s *The Dictator’s Wife*, Huang Ruo’s *An American Soldier*).



THE YEAR *in* REVIEW
THE FIELD



Works like *Shalimar the Clown* and *The Summer King* provide performance opportunities for multiracial casts. “I’m thrilled that there are many more active choices being made to seek out composers and directors and performers of color,” says Cayenne Harris. “These are positive signs that make me hopeful.”

“We need to keep trying to think about what is possible, and where we can move the bar in our choices for community partnerships and what we present on the mainstage,” Harris says. “We’re seeing a clearer demand from the public, from younger generations coming up. I’m excited by the possibilities.” ■



Clockwise, from top: Conductor and composer Victoria Bond gives a pre-performance talk at the Met Opera Guild; a student performance from the Opera for All program at Chicago Opera Theater; Anchorage Opera’s dress-up photo booth for children at the city’s PrideFest; a member of the senior citizens group YOLO Boomers performs onstage as part of Lyric Unlimited’s Community Created Performances program; The Dallas Opera’s simulcast of *Moby-Dick*.

Naomi Barrettara/Met Opera Guild; Maury Bowie; Kathleen Behnke/Michael Brosilow; Karen Almond

The Top 25

THE MOST-PERFORMED
OPERAS IN THE U.S. AND
CANADA, 2016-2017

1 CARMEN



Kate Aldrich's
Carmen at Hawaii
Opera Theatre

7 TOSCA

Sondra Radvanovsky
as Tosca and
Ambrogio Maestri as
Scarpia at LA Opera

8 EUGEN ONEGIN

Svetlana
Aksenova
as Tatiana
at The
Dallas
Opera

2 MADAMA BUTTERFLY

3 DIE ZAUBERFLÖTE

4 LE NOZZE DI FIGARO

5 DON GIOVANNI



Melinda Whittington
as Donna Anna and
Joshua Hopkins as
Don Giovanni at
Utah Opera

6 LA TRAVIATA



Courtesy Hawaii Opera Theatre (Carmen); Addie Salazar/Utah Opera (Don Giovanni); Ken Howard (Tosca); Karen Almond (Eugene Onegin)

9



RIGOLETTO

THE YEAR *in* REVIEW
THE FIELD

10

ROMÉO ET JULIETTE



11

AIDA



12

LA BOHÈME

13 LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR

14 AS ONE

15 MY FAIR LADY

16 DIE ENTFÜHRUNG AUS DEM SERAIL

17 TURANDOT

18 DON PASQUALE

19 FALSTAFF

20 HÄNSEL UND GRETEL

21 NORMA

22 SWEENEY TODD

Joel Bissell (Rigoletto), Cory Weaver (Aida), Martha Benedict (La Bohème), Cory Weaver (Dead Man Walking)



23

DEAD MAN WALKING



24 OKLAHOMA!

25 IL BARBIERE DI SIVIGLIA

Modern Voices

WORLD PREMIERES AND REVIVALS OF RECENT WORKS INVIGORATED THE 2017 OPERA SCENE.



Paula Court; Karen Almond; Cory Weaver

THE YEAR *in* REVIEW
THE FIELD



Matthew Staver; Liz Lauren; Ken Howard; Chris Kakol; Philip Greshong; David Bachman Photography; Yves Dubé

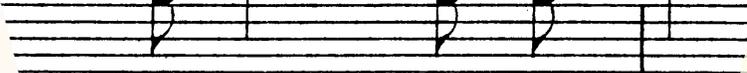
Opposite, from top: Tomás Cruz and Tina Mitchell in PROTOTYPE's *Mata Hari*, by Matt Marks and Paul Peers; Kelly Markgraf and Blythe Gaissert in *As One*, by Laura Kaminsky, Mark Campbell and Kimberly Reed, at Opera Colorado; David Lang's *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field* at Portland Opera

This page, clockwise from top left: Joby Talbot and Gene Scheer's *Everest* at The Dallas Opera, with Michael Mayes and Andrew Bidlack; Philip Glass and Rudy Wurlitzer's *The Perfect American* at Chicago Opera Theater; Tobias Greenhalgh and Katharine Goeldner in Ricky Ian Gordon and Michael Korie's *The Grapes of Wrath* at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis; Javier Abreu and Elliot Madore in *Before Night Falls*, by Jorge Martín and Dolores M. Koch, at Florida Grand Opera; Abigail Fischer in *Missy Mazzoli and Royce Vavrek's Song from the Uproar* at Cincinnati Opera; Alfred Walker in *The Summer King*, by Daniel Sonenberg and Daniel Nester, at Pittsburgh Opera; Stéphanie Lessard in *Yo soy la desintegración*, by Jean Piché and Yan Muckle, at Chants Libres

Visitors to OPERA America's
National Opera Center

KEY POWELL ELEBASH
STORE AND RECORDING LIBRARY





A — CRUCIAL — VOICE

THE YEAR *in* REVIEW
OPERA AMERICA

By Nicholas Wise

The year 2017 was a period during which the need to help opera thrive across North America — the essential mission of OPERA America — became more crucial than ever. This year, OA pursued that mission in varied, targeted ways: advocating for the arts on Capitol Hill, providing professional-development programs for artists and administrators, granting funds to opera companies and creators, and providing research on field trends to help inform opera-company leadership. Underpinning OA's activities, as always, is the organization's ingrained commitment to serve its members. At forums and the annual Opera Conference, members come together to share learning and voice common concerns; OA listens and responds. These conversations help shape OA's initiatives in ways that address the needs of all opera companies, from one-person operations to the largest opera houses in the nation.

Over the past year, women's issues have been forefront of national conversations, including those related to gender parity in the arts, and these have informed OPERA America's support activities for both administrators and artists. OA's Opera Grants for Female Composers program, established in 2014 with support from the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation, has to date given \$700,000 in support of operas by women, part of an effort to increase the visibility of works by women on opera stages. Grant recipients have seen their works gain traction across the country. One of the inaugural grant recipients, Laura Kaminsky's *As One*, made a decisive showing on the list of 2017's most-produced operas (see page 23). The membership of the Women's Opera Network, formed two years ago to support female professionals and encourage discussion about gender, has soared to include nearly 1,200 people, both women and



men. A new program launched under its aegis will pair three emerging professionals with seasoned administrators who will act as mentors, providing career support throughout the coming year.

This year saw a landmark addition to OA's portfolio of member-support initiatives: the Innovation Grants program, funded by the Ann and Gordon Getty Foundation. Providing \$1.5 million in annual funding to opera companies, the grants are designed to encourage experimentation and innovative modes of institutional thinking, and ultimately to establish successful models for conducting the business of opera. "These grants benefit not only the recipients but the entire art form," says Scorca. "Companies throughout North America will be able to borrow and adapt good ideas, spreading the learning field-wide."

Driving many of OPERA America's initiatives throughout the year has been a commitment to increasing opera's civic impact and strengthening relationships developed between opera companies and the people in their communities (see "Community Connections Take Center Stage," p. 18). The issue was a central talking point of OA's 2017 conference, "Creating Collaborative Change," hosted by The Dallas Opera last May, and the conversation will continue this June at Opera Conference 2018, "Lifting Many Voices," hosted by Opera Theatre of Saint Louis. Another OA effort — the Civic Action Group, a learning cohort composed of companies that have notable community-engagement track records — will bring in additional companies in the coming year, for a broader sharing of case studies and lessons learned.

"It's crucial for us to ensure that the stories being told on our stages — and the people telling them — speak to the communities we serve and resonate with contemporary needs," says Scorca. "We want opera to be not just a valuable community asset, but an essential one." ■

THE YEAR IN ARTS ADVOCACY

► Even though OPERA America has engaged in boots-on-the-ground arts advocacy ever since its founding nearly 50 years ago, the year 2017 has demanded its most vigorous efforts yet. The new administration proposed policies that could potentially disrupt the opera world, including the January 27 executive order prohibiting the citizens of seven countries from entering the U.S., and the March budget proposal, which called for the elimination of the National Endowment for the Arts and other cultural agencies. In addition, Congress' recent tax reform efforts could reduce charitable contributions by as much as \$20 billion in 2018, according to recent research. In each instance, OPERA America called upon its members to make their views known to local leaders and representatives in Washington. OA's government affairs office facilitated the writing of 2,500 letters, sent to members of Congress.

The worst threats have not yet come to pass. The travel ban, potentially an obstacle to cultural exchange and the hiring of guest artists, never came to full fruition; and both the House and Senate appropriations committees demonstrated bipartisan support for the NEA's budget in the 2018 fiscal year. But other issues loom in 2018: tax reform and its impact on

charitable giving, timely visa processing for guest artists, and the FCC's wireless mic regulations. (Resources and talking points on these and other issues can be found at operaamerica.org/Advocacy.) OPERA America is keeping all of these in its sights as it continues to advocate for the policies that will best advance the art form, regardless of where party lines may fall on any particular issue. "We remain vigilant in advancing the regulations that are conducive to the field's vibrancy," says Marc A. Scorca, OA's president and CEO.

In the coming year, OPERA America's director of government affairs, Brandon Gryde, will continue to send action alert e-mails to the field indicating when advocacy efforts are needed. Gryde stresses the importance of writing to members of Congress: "I've often heard comments along the lines of 'I don't need to write to my lawmakers because they always support the arts,' or 'Why should I contact my lawmakers? They never support the arts,'" he says. "But writing a letter takes just a few minutes and can make a huge impact in ensuring our collective voices are heard on Capitol Hill — sending a powerful message that the arts, and opera in particular, are essential to American life."

GLOBAL PARTNERS IN OPERA

► This year, OPERA America forged a new partnership with Ópera Latinoamérica (OLA). Based in Bogotá, Colombia, the organization serves Central and South American opera companies much in the way OA serves North American institutions. With the aim of promoting cross-organization learning, the arrangement offers free registration for Ópera Latinoamérica members to OA's annual conference, while OA members can take advantage of a reciprocal arrangement. OLA's executive director, Alejandra Martí, has also been made an ex officio OA board member. This new relationship is similar to the one that exists between OA and Opera Europa, the membership organization for European opera companies. Members of the two organizations attend each other's conferences; in January, when Opera Europa launches a new forum for artistic administrators in Naples, Laura Lee Everett, OA's director of artistic services, will join the discussion.

The international collaboration will continue this April in Madrid at the first-ever World Opera Forum, organized by Opera Europa, OA and OLA. Representatives from all three organizations, as well as members of Opera.ca (OPERA America's sister organization in Canada), will join colleagues from Africa, Asia and Australia for four days of discussions. The conference will focus on four main topics: cultural heritage, new work, diversity and audiences, and advocacy and public value. Thanks to a grant from the Spanish government, it's anticipated that more than 30 representatives from OA's board and member companies will attend the forum.

Onstage at the Opera Center

► Throughout the year, OPERA America welcomed some of the field's leading creators and artists, as well as emerging singers, for *Onstage at the Opera Center*, a series of conversations and concerts held at the National Opera Center in New York City.

THE YEAR *in* REVIEW
OPERA AMERICA

Clockwise: Arizona Opera Young Artists Katrina Galka, soprano, and Alyssa Martin, mezzo-soprano; composer Kamala Sankaram and Marc A. Scorca, president/CEO of OPERA America; mezzo-soprano Amanda Lynn Bottoms and soprano Mikaela Bennett perform the work of composer William Bolcom; countertenor Siman Chung in an Opera Index recital; Renée Fleming and Scorca; Thomas Hampson and Scorca