

**OPERA
AMERICA**

AN INTRODUCTION TO CIVIC PRACTICE

BY LEAH D. BARTO

Derived from
meetings of the
Civic Action Group

**NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT** for the **ARTS**

Made possible by the National Endowment
for the Arts through its Our Town program

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Civic Practice: A Primer	02
Key Strategies	03
Civic Practice Worksheet: Questions to Ask Your Company	10
Civic Action Group Cohort Discussions	11
Civic Action Group Participants	13
Lexicon	14
Reference Materials	16

CIVIC PRACTICE: A PRIMER

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.

Why Civic Practice Matters

There are growing sociopolitical divides, starker economic inequities and overt racial violence across modern societies. In most communities, the needs far outweigh the resources available, and the **social cohesion** among neighbors is lost. Without shared spaces to bridge divides, develop empathy and be pushed beyond the comfort zones of highly personalized newsfeeds, democracy will break down.

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.

About the Civic Action Group

The Civic Action Group is a peer-learning cohort of company representatives working to explore how opera can increase its capacity to address civic priorities. With support from the National Endowment for the Arts, OPERA America convened opera leaders and advisors in the areas of creative placemaking and community-based arts to discuss their current approaches to community engagement and partnership, and identify common challenges. The purpose of the group is to build a community of practice among companies that are developing local efforts and document successful strategies from within the opera field and beyond. The present resource shares learning from the meetings that took place at the National Opera Center in December 2016 and January 2018. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes that follow come from participants in these two meetings. ■

OVERVIEW OF KEY STRATEGIES

1 Define Your Civic Practice

There is a difference between an artist's own **studio practice** and the **social practice** of artists leading a process while working with non-artists. Alternatively, civic practice is co-designed and involves artists bringing their assets to bear on a community-defined need. Civic practice involves learning from your community and making clear what you stand for beyond your artistic practice. (Source: Michael Rohd, Sojourn Theatre)

2 Create Belonging

Opera is poised to foster social cohesion through the collaborative process of creating new works or bringing together audiences to experience performances. However, creating belonging means stopping practices that are contributing to "dis-belonging." From the high barriers of access to the attitudes of veteran ushers and patrons, how do operas help newcomers feel like they belong? (Source: Roberto Bedoya, Cultural Affairs Manager, City of Oakland, "Belonging: A Cornerstone of Placemaking in the Region")

3 Lead with Your Artistic Assets

In other disciplines, such as theater and dance, civic practice is distinctly artist-led, but in opera, the general director and producer roles have traditionally shaped the ways artists work and deliver artistic experiences. Civic practice invites leaders to think flexibly about deploying organizational and artistic assets, and encourages opera artists (from singers and directors to composers and designers) to take the lead.

4 Understand Your Context

Creative placemaking involves understanding a locale with respect for its history and cultures. The place where the opera house now stands may have a history that includes acts of gentrification and displacement, or the city where the opera company operates may be recovering from a recent crisis. Opera leaders need to gather information about a city's context, including demographic trends and arts participation habits, in order to begin to understand the area's needs and the many communities with which they might collaborate.

5 Know When You Are the Guest

Opera companies excel at being the host, whether it is welcoming thousands of audience members to performances, coordinating events for important donors or offering educational programs to community groups. However, civic practice starts with the notion of being a guest, especially when beginning relationships with communities that are new to the company or its organizational partners.

6 Build Cultural Competence

Addressing public needs will often mean working to address inequities, likely interacting with civic leaders that the opera company has not come into contact with before and people who are new to opera. Opera leaders need to build the competence to appreciate and interact with people from different cultures or belief systems in order to gain trust, especially when working with underrepresented or marginalized people. A company would need to build its reputation as a trustworthy and generous partner.

7 Facilitate Process, Not Products

In opera, companies typically focus on delivering productions and programs. Civic practice calls for leaders to facilitate a process of understanding communities and partnering to address needs. It is important to acknowledge that building relationships and developing co-created projects takes more time than typical opera operations and requires leaders themselves to change.

8 Focus on the Beneficiary

Success in civic practice is defined by the community whose needs will be addressed, not through the lens of improving an opera company's brand, ticket sales or contributed revenue. Therefore, it is important to plan and measure these efforts in agreement with community groups.

KEY STRATEGIES, EXPLAINED

1. Define Your Civic Practice

Michael Rohd is the founding artistic director of the ensemble-based Sojourn Theatre and leads the Center for Performance and Civic Practice (CPCP). He describes three types of artistic practice (see CPCP.org):

1. An artists' own studio practice, where artists make their own work and engage with neighbors and residents as an audience.
2. Social practice, where artists work with neighbors and residents on an artist-led vision in ways that may include research, process and/or content creation, with an intention of social impact outside the traditional audience experience.
3. Civic practice, a term CPCP introduced in 2012. As distinguished from social practice, civic practice projects are co-designed with residents and/or community/municipal agencies and involve artists aiming their creative practice/assets at residents' self-defined needs.

Rohd explained: "The distinction between civic practice and social practice is when artists develop a relationship with a non-arts partner, learn about those partners' needs, as defined by those partners, and bring their assets to bear on that community-defined need. It's not instead of their studio practice, and it's not morally saying studio practice is bad, civic practice is good. But we've been doing work with large not-for-profit cultural institutions and individual artists and collectives on how can your studio practice allow you also to be a positive agent of change in your community through a civic practice that's embedded in the belief that when community members define what they need, and you bring your assets to the table, powerful, creative things can happen."

Exploring the differences between studio, social and civic practice also leads to discussions of aesthetics. As Mark Valdez, also a theater practitioner and leader in community-based arts, noted: "Something [...] went wrong in the United States when we separated artistic quality and artistic merit. We said, 'You can do great

work that is in the community, and it speaks to people, but we're not going to define it as art. It's just useful and a nice thing.' Then we have high art. What we are doing here is blending those things." It may be more useful to avoid such distinctions and view these practices on more of a spectrum.

2. Create Belonging

Belonging is a basic human need, and one that the arts should strive to foster. Opera companies can provide welcoming environments in a number of ways — whether it is friendly greetings from ushers for first-time attendees, or simply windows into the rehearsal space, making it possible to see that opera can be for everyone. Even the most ephemeral experiences can provide **social cohesion**. A live performance in a park, for instance, can create a new sense of place among strangers and can evoke deep emotions rarely found in public spaces. Yet, too often people feel that "opera is not for them" or that an opera house is somewhere they don't belong.

"To acknowledge the importance of belonging, of course, is to also acknowledge the discomfort — and even violence — of dis-belonging. Dis-belonging occurs through acts of gentrification, racism and speculation culture, which often occur under the name of 'civic revitalization,' but in reality, betray the democratic ideals of a just, civil society. ... Placemaking — and the aesthetics of belonging — happens on city blocks, in schoolyards and classrooms, and at neighborhood centers and is characterized by short- and long-term relationships among individuals. [It] creates opportunities for additional experiences, ones that are deliberate and grounded in arts practices designed to engage the expressive life of the civic 'we.' Whether accidental or deliberate, this kind of creative placemaking is critical to creating a sense of belonging." — "Belonging: A Cornerstone of Placemaking in the Region" by Roberto Bedoya >

This article was shared with the Civic Action Group prior to the December 2016 meeting to foster discussion. Marc A. Scorca, president/CEO of OPERA America, responded: “I find many veteran operagoers are remarkably unwelcoming of the newcomer in terms of behavioral patterns and arrival times, of all sorts of other inherited performance practices. When we are seeking to embrace newcomers, are we prepared to embrace newcomers and their ideas and their styles of dress or other manifestations of who they are as opposed to just wanting the newcomers to immediately conform to our expectations, which are inherited expectations of **privilege**?”

Some companies have addressed this by training paid ushers (rather than volunteers) in more inclusive practices and setting new house rules around late seating and audience participation. Still, relaxing expectations around the performance norms doesn't address overarching public perception. Marketing practices perpetuate the image that opera is for the rich, urban elite. Season brochures continue to prioritize pictures of bejeweled gala attendees over images of community engagement work. In other words, what opera stands for shows up in how companies present themselves to the public. Scorca went on to say, “We are aware of the need to demonstrate the public value of an art form that is still beset by stereotypes, and those stereotypes are largely of our own perpetuation, as we have a business model that continues to pay the bills by exploiting the vanity of rich people.”

3. Lead with Your Artistic Assets

Opera has many artistic assets. As an art form of multiple virtuosity, it brings together story and song to showcase peak talents of artists and artisans. Each company attracts passionate people with the capacity to organize large-scale, transformational events in facilities that bring together hundreds and thousands of audience members each year. The field as a whole has worked to advance co-productions and new works that reflect both opera's collaborative spirit and determination to thrive.

Civic practice invites leaders to think flexibly about deploying these resources to serve community needs. Michael Rohd explained: “The conversation is not just about the artistic output that happens on main stages. There is an entire body of practice that artists and staff at opera organizations can engage in. Engaging in the system-changing work is about asking how you

can deploy the assets of the people who walk in your building every day in collaboration with a school board, in collaboration with a city council, in collaboration with a coalition of HR folks who set wages in a certain industry and therefore affect poverty in your community.” Camtrice Bexten, the Holland Community Opera Fellowship coordinator with Omaha Opera, said: “Opera is so many things. There's language, poetry, storytelling. There's visual components, vocal music. We try to break it down and ask, ‘What would you like to do? How can we create a platform for your own creative expression?’”

In other disciplines, such as theater and dance, civic practice is artist-led and often highly collaborative from the start. Rohd continued: “This is what artists in collaborative art forms do. We imagine potential futures, and we, at times, are able to bring people with different self-interests together. Anyone who directs, any performer or singer, does this for a living.” **Devised theater** is a practice where an ensemble creates new works as a collective, often developing material from improvisatory exercises. This is in stark contrast to having a script and director driving the creation of a piece, and it offers a model for civic practice in opera. Lyric Opera of Chicago's Lyric Unlimited has facilitated a devised work process with youth connected to the Chicago Urban League.

In opera, two centuries of tradition have shaped the role of the general or artistic director to be an expert curator. He or she decides on a matrix of season planning variables, informed by years of experience and academic study. With this current model, it is counterintuitive to invite artists, never mind community members, into the aesthetic decision-making process. The radical idea proposed here is for artists and communities to take the lead.

Civic practice puts artists in the position of being the frontline representatives of the company in relation to community partners. Important qualities for these **citizen artists** include flexibility, natural curiosity and a willingness to learn. Bexten noted her experience of identifying citizen artists: “I don't expect someone to know how to do this because chances are they haven't done it before. We are looking for someone who uses not so much of the ‘I’ pronoun when they talk. I want to hear concern and consciousness of other people besides them. We notice a distinction with people who have worked in volunteerism or have been civically engaged in some way.” In her program, the fellows might be in direct conversation with the head of the homeless >

shelter, or volunteering with an after-school program to learn about its needs, or attending trainings to find out about childhood trauma. When they send singers to work with community partners, sometimes it is helpful to clarify that they are not showing up to provide music, but instead a person who is an artist is arriving to have a conversation and develop ideas for programming.

In opera, there are a range of artists who can lead civic practice. Companies may find that artists such as composers, librettists and designers are particularly suited to civic practice, in addition to interpretive artists, such as singers, directors and conductors. Singers from young artist programs have often been the primary artists involved in community engagement and education programs, but we now see the need to identify artists with different skill sets. The field has already seen the power of open calls for discovering artists whom the “establishment” hadn’t realized were there. For example, OPERA America’s Opera Grants for Female Composers program has discovered more than 270 composers. There remains even more opportunity for the field to identify and support citizen artists.

4. Understand Your Context

“All of you, are in a way, guests in the city you live in.”

— Roberto Bedoya

Roberto Bedoya’s article “The Great Divide and the Pronoun ‘We’” explores the idea that a certain place has history and cultural memories. It outlines how creative placemaking should steward the authentic stories and lives of a locale with respect for a “sovereignty of context.”

The poet Logan Phillips expands on this idea further: “Beyond the actual geography and land, we sit upon the story of a place. The history and the violence of that history, and the beauty of that history. In the act of looking for import, ask, ‘What does this place mean for others who don’t look like me, who don’t have my same experience, or have my same access? How can I reposition myself in relationship to this place to be able to see it anew?’ That’s what I mean when I say ‘the ears with which to hear, the eyes with which to see.’”

Opera leaders have a responsibility to understand their community. While defining “community” may be a difficult or elusive task, knowing the demographic makeup, history of **oppression** or collective trauma, **psychosocial** preferences, and existing cultural norms that pervade

a given metro region is a foundational exercise before venturing to understand what a community might need from its opera company.

Learning about a community also means understanding what services are already in place to address a certain need and being cognizant of organizations already working in that space. For instance, there are examples of predominantly white institutions expanding programming for communities of color and attracting grant money and community resources that would have otherwise gone to longer-standing community-based entities led by people of color. It is also important for opera companies to learn what their unique capacities are in relation to other organizations to avoid overlapping services.

The location where the physical opera house stands may have a long history that includes acts of gentrification and displacement. The Opera House, a film by Susan Froemke about the building of the Metropolitan Opera, details how Lincoln Center cleared out tenements and made the Upper West Side into the cultural destination it is today. Yet to the people who used to live there, it was their neighborhood and they loved living there. Where arts leaders may speak with pride about new buildings revitalizing an area, longtime residents may be losing their homes and parts of their heritage. In Canada, many gatherings begin by honoring the First Nations who were the original inhabitants of the land. This is based on an indigenous custom, but it is now part of the relatively new effort by non-indigenous people, or settlers, to acknowledge a violent past and work toward **truth and reconciliation**.

Opera companies across North America are situated in cities where context immediately impacts how they operate and clearly points to the more urgent needs in their communities; for example, the bankruptcy and recovery in Detroit and the flooding from Hurricane Harvey in Houston. Tomorrow it might be a protest or parade directly outside the opera house. It is the responsibility of opera leaders to understand how different community groups gather and interact. Developing this nuanced understanding means looking at census data and demographic projections, finding national and regional studies on arts and culture habits, and most importantly “showing up.” This might include attending town halls to meet broader cross sections of community leaders and going to events held by other organizations that are closer to those in need.

Camtrice Bexten of Opera Omaha said: “Our job as an engagement team is showing up to things that we’re not >

completely involved in. We have a list of partners and go to their events, whether or not we are already involved — community dialogues on race, transportation issues, voter registration. That has nothing to do with the arts. It's important to get out in the community and serve in ways that have nothing to do with our art form." Mark Valdez responded: "If you show up to make sandwiches because there's been a fire and people need to eat, that matters. You show up for your community. Where do you live in the civic life of your city? It has nothing to do with opera, but everything to do with the fact that you are neighbors."

5. Know When You Are the Guest

Opera companies excel at hosting events, so it may seem unnatural at first to begin civic practice without a program in hand and a grant proposal pending. Instead, civic practice invites opera leaders to create space for exploration with potential partners, identify who is knowledgeable about the public needs and find out what capacities other organizations are already bringing to the table. In Roberto Bedoya's words, "The civic space is about social relationships, and the organizational charge is to be a steward of the civic by building relationships."

Roberto Bedoya introduced this metaphor at Opera Conference 2015: "Start with the notion of knowing when you are the guest and when you are the host. So, when you proceed with relationships with partners — the church, the school — you may start off as the guest. Then before you know it, you might be the host ... When you are a good guest, at a certain point the host will say, 'Oh go open the door, you know where it is.'"

Rebecca Hass, director of community engagement with Pacific Opera Victoria, said: "I am Métis from Canada; I have indigenous blood on my dad's side. An elder gave me a wise piece of advice. When people ask, 'How do you be a good visitor in someone else's territory?' he said, 'You never walk in front and you don't walk behind, you walk beside.'"

What makes a good guest? Mark Valdez responded: "Listen. Don't come in with answers ... Eat what's served to you, even if you don't like it. I think that's a really big one — understanding aesthetics or different practices that are just not our own." Michael Rohd added: "Start with learning their needs and figure out how we can serve those needs. And artistic output may come out of it, it may not."

6. Build Cultural Competence

Addressing public needs means building trust with organizations that are likely new to opera, or with civic leaders that the opera company has not come into contact with before. The poet Logan Phillips explains that companies can't "just parachute in and parachute out when it's sexy or cool. **Cultural competence** comes from listening, but also representation. If you have a staff member who has practiced cultural competence, or is bilingual, or has experience with a particular group that you're hoping to work with, it really helps if that's the person who's going there, who understands how to build that relationship."

Demonstrating cultural competence is particularly important with partnerships and projects with underrepresented or marginalized people. In the meeting, opera leaders shared their experiences in working with the Truth and Reconciliation efforts in Canada, refugee populations, and people of color in the U.S. Roberto Bedoya noted: "Anybody that's ever been marginalized in life knows it — whether a woman, queer, person of color, person with a disability — when you feel like your humanity is going to be capitalized on. It speaks to a sort of leadership sensitivity that you need in this work, to not avoid a hole in which you end up being disrespectful." For example, referring to predominantly European art forms as "anchor institutions," "traditional" or "mainstream" creates an artificial hierarchy among different types of cultural institutions.

This points to certain "ethics of engagement" and avoiding practices that perpetuate inequities. So many conversations around community engagement talk about "going into the community," when in fact this means the very neighborhood the opera company operates in. "We are othering the neighborhood in which we live and work," said Brandon Gryde, OPERA America's director of government affairs. A company needs to build its reputation as a trustworthy and generous partner and take on a new type of leadership role that supports the work of others.

7. Facilitate Process, Not Products

"In engagement work, it's not a noun, it's a verb."

— Roberto Bedoya

Civic practice asks opera companies to make their resources available to others and puts opera leaders in >

a role that nurtures, coordinates or amplifies stories and issues that are of importance to a given community. Roberto Bedoya said: “Engagement is really the dialogue and collaboration that goes into the development of the product. The product might be the dialogue itself, not something staged.”

At the end, a stronger relationship in and of itself might be the outcome. Musicians are familiar with the idea of practice, and it is much the same with civic practice. “When you go into a practice room, you are not trying to be perfect,” said Rebecca Hass of Pacific Opera Victoria. “When you are trying to engage in a craft, it takes a lot of time. The whole attitude of practice gets us away from focusing on product.”

In opera, we are used to focusing on the product, whether it is a production or a community engagement program. A typical project might start with an idea developed by an administrator, perhaps with sign-off from the board. The company comes up with a plan, secures a grant and markets the program. This reflects a way of working that is customary in opera — the control and ownership that makes it possible for a stage director to get a cast of 80 singers ready for opening night in just three weeks. “There is a level of control involved in being the host,” said Carleen Graham of Houston Grand Opera. Cayenne Harris of Lyric Opera of Chicago responded, “We own [the project] in a way that gives us a kind of death grip on it that might not be healthy for the collaborative relationship or really listening and understanding that we are a guest in a space.”

This way of working puts the opera company in a position of delivering on a promise — to the board, to funders, to the marketing department — all according to a proposal for a set event on a specific date, where partners are receiving a product rather than participating in a process. Michael Rohd of Sojourn Theatre makes the distinction between “leadership” and “authorship” in community-engaged projects, where leadership means facilitating the efforts to move the process forward, and authorship is making the decisions that determine the results. He also explains a continuum of collaboration where artists and community members start with a process based on consensus and may move into more hierarchical decision-making as the project continues. This way of leading means facilitating a process of understanding context, building new relationships, discovering needs and identifying opportunities for collaboration. It puts the opera company in the position

of leaving enough space for conversations to unfold and letting projects evolve on their own terms.

It involves facilitating regular check-ins, taking detailed notes and allowing for reflection at the end of the process. Important components are making sure the timelines are not too tight and reconciling this way of working with the company’s other operations. This might mean creating internal incentives to make time and space for co-creation among departments and becoming more comfortable as a staff in having difficult conversations.

Asking opera companies to focus on process implies changing the way they operate. This level of change means executives and boards will need to allow for methods and timelines for reporting on progress that will be entirely different from the usual fundraising and ticket sales updates. It also requires a personal change. Christina Loewen, executive director of Opera.ca, said: “We’re talking about organizational change, but in order to really make change, we’re talking about some deeply personal and individual change. We have to be able to acknowledge our privilege in the positions that we have when we’re seeking these connections.”

8. Focus on the Beneficiary

If civic practice brings art to bear on a community-defined need, the goals cannot be defined by the opera company. Success has to be defined by the community whose needs will be addressed. Those community needs may or may not have anything to do with the current season, the art form’s range of artistic assets or the company’s core capacities. It is up to the organization to choose to engage in partnerships (that may or may not be reciprocal) and determine if it has something authentic to offer.

Anh Le of Opera Theatre of Saint Louis said: “Promoting our art form is not civic action. We like to say every city deserves an opera house, but does every opera deserve its community? We have so many resources, we attract the richest audiences. If we say that all we’re here to do is opera, and that we can’t do more, that makes zero sense.”

This approach will be entirely new to many companies whose current community engagement and education programs seek to increase opera appreciation, build audiences over time or draw immediate results at the box office. While these are worthy goals, the primary beneficiary in this case is the opera company. Too often programs are tied to a given production or season, and >

the opera company is not positioned to sustain the relationship in the future. Companies will need to be strategic about the communities they choose to work with and be ready to sustain relationships over time. Marc Scorca of OPERA America said: “Civic practice isn’t putting a check in the box: this year the Latino community, next year the black community. It is choosing communities in your city with whom you want to work most closely.”

Roberto Bedoya explained that civic practice is about “advancing the aesthetic agency of the public.” The benefits of empowering others can range from individual to collective. Some companies are working with veterans to help them share their stories of trauma for the first time, or fostering dialogue between groups with different

values. Others are creating city-wide moments of celebration to foster civic pride. At either end of the depth or breadth spectrum, the focus on the beneficiary is still the same.

As opera companies undertake civic practice with new partners, it is useful to look at examples and resources. In real estate development, cities are adopting **community benefit agreements**, which are legally binding contracts between private building developers who receive public investments and community groups to ensure that a project will truly contribute to the public good. In Detroit, this has been extended to include a resource on Cultural Community Benefit Principles that guides institutions toward more equitable practices. ■

CIVIC PRACTICE WORKSHEET: QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR COMPANY

1. On Defining Your Civic Practice

- What do you want to learn from your communities in the next three years?
- What and whom are you responsible for beyond the quality of your product, those you pay and those who pay you? What do you stand for beyond excellent artistic practice?

2. On Creating Belonging

- How can opera companies make people feel that they belong in a country and in a city?
- How do we make sure newcomers feel they belong in our opera houses and in our rows of seats?
- What practices should we discontinue because they contribute to “dis-belonging”?

3. On Leading with Your Assets

- How will you deploy the organizational and artistic assets of your opera company to change an inequitable system?
- How can opera companies foster artist-led, rather than general director/producer-led, civic practice?

4. On Understanding Your Context

- What core competencies and resources are distinctive to your organization in your community?
- Whose land are you on?
- Which long-ago and recent events still shape how your community groups gather and interact?
- In five years, what will be the racial/ethnic makeup of the entering class of kindergartners?
- Where do people go on Sunday mornings?
- What is the history of each neighborhood? How are those memories celebrated/honored, or are they forgotten? How is music already a part of our community's everyday life?

5. On Knowing When You Are the Guest

- Although our tendency is to be a host, what are the occasions where we should start by being a good guest?
- When beginning a new relationship with a community, what does it mean for an opera company to be a good guest?

6. On Building Cultural Competence

- How can opera companies be more culturally sensitive and trustworthy?
- What does it take for others to feel comfortable and empowered to approach your company?

7. On Facilitating Process, Not Products

- How can companies become more accustomed to giving up control and ownership?
- What skills do opera leaders need to become better leaders in facilitating process, rather than authoring plans for set programming?
- How can opera leaders allow the time needed for civic practice?

8. On Focusing on the Beneficiary

- Who is the beneficiary? What is it they need most? What organizations are already knowledgeable on this issue or effective in addressing it?
- What can opera's inherent assets or our company's core capacities contribute?
- How are we addressing a need in a sustained way over time?

CIVIC ACTION GROUP COHORT DISCUSSIONS

Politics of Storytelling in Opera

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.

In reality, opera producers are weighing the costs and benefits of audiences and donors with differing political viewpoints. The field may see “time travel opera” and works that are less risky at the box office as apolitical, but in fact this curation is a form of political choice. Marc Scorca explained: “What you stage is always political. The stories you are telling are political. There is no non-political work. There are passive choices. If your season is *La bohème*, *Così fan tutte* and *Faust*, you are choosing not to overtly engage in more challenging, and perhaps relevant, discussions.”

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 of civic practice. This includes misogynist and racist narratives, as well as cultural appropriation. Michael Bolton from Opera Philadelphia said: “We hold every project that comes up to the director, the designer, the composer, the librettist and ask, ‘Is this progressive? Does it resonate with the community and time we live in? Is it worth being put out there? How can we deconstruct the stereotypes?’ We are interested in the holistic approach as to how opera can be part of the living ecology and not just a pillar or museum.”

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 this issues, allowing the works to speak for themselves. Chris Milligan from 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.” Their marketing materials show enough about the topic, without warning or apology, but allow someone to decide for themselves whether to attend. Despite a neutral stance and clear information about the nature of a production, at some point, an audience member may get upset. Logan Phillips added: “It’s the resilience of being able to deal with these anxieties and animosities. This is a proactive posture. We are in a political climate in which we will be pushed to make these decisions.”

Civic practice goes beyond simply programming a work and adding community engagement programming that stimulates 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 who expressed their need to be heard in their own voice. Camtrice Bexten 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 of OPERA America 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.’”

Mark Valdez responded: “As you get deeper and deeper into the work, the partners and people you collaborate with are going to want to know what you stand for. If I’m going to partner with you, it’s not enough for me to get visibility. I need to know that we share some kind of values. If you are not going to show up for me when I need you at that march, why would I show up for you when you do this show?” ■

Performance Spaces and Audiences

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.

In inviting community members to attend performances, it is important to ensure that the space is welcoming and that the brand association with the opera company is clear, even at alternate venues. This posed a challenge at Opera Philadelphia's O17 Festival, of which David Levy said: "We performed in five different venues. How do we create our own identity in each of these places which isn't our regular home? Part of the solution was ambassadors in each of those spaces — greeters wearing the T-shirts for the company and having a consistent message."

Welcoming audiences from differing cultural backgrounds is an opportunity for the opera company to demonstrate cultural competence and foster mutual understanding. Lyric Unlimited worked with different community groups to produce original opera works through its Chicago Voices program. Three groups performed their pieces at the Harris Theater for friends and family. Cayenne Harris explained: "Some of the performers were Croatian immigrants, and they ended the piece by coming into the audience and dancing. They invited people to get up and dance as the music was playing. The people who came to see 'Harmony, Hope and Healing,' a group coming out of homelessness and drug

addiction, were part of that group that was dancing to the Croatian folk music."

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. Dictating that there is no late seating, and cheering only during historically approved pauses, contributes to a white supremacist view of how artistic experiences should be enjoyed. Mark Valdez 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. As a result of Hurricane Harvey, Houston Grand Opera was forced to produce its season in the local convention center. At first, it was a challenge for staff to make sure the lobbies were welcoming and that ushers knew the layout. The space, which is often shared with other conferences, was named HGO's Resilience Theater, and it created an opportunity to foster belonging. "We created a station where they can talk to us about what 'home' means to them," said Carleen Graham. "We're doing a project based around home, and how do people view home?" ■

CIVIC ACTION GROUP PARTICIPANTS

U.S. OPERA COMPANIES

ANCHORAGE OPERA

Judy Berry, Marketing and Development Director
Reed Smith, General Director

CINCINNATI OPERA

Marcus Kuchle, Director of Artistic Operations and New Works Development
Christopher Milligan, Managing Director

HOUSTON GRAND OPERA

Carleen Graham, Director HGOco

LYRIC OPERA OF CHICAGO

Alejandra Valarino Boyer, Director of Community Programs, Lyric Unlimited
Cayenne Harris, Vice President, Lyric Unlimited

OPERA MEMPHIS

Ned Canty, General Director
Jason Hardy, Director of Development
Sarah Squire, Director of Operations

MICHIGAN OPERA THEATRE

Wayne Brown, President and CEO
Andrea Scobie, Manager of Education and Community Programs

OPERA OMAHA

Camtrice Bexten, Holland Community Opera Fellowship Coordinator
Bradley Vernatter, Director of Operations

OPERA PHILADELPHIA

Michael Bolton, Vice President of Community Programs
David Levy, Vice President of Artistic Operations

OPERA THEATRE OF SAINT LOUIS

Allison Felter, Director of Education and Community Engagement
Anh Le, Publications and Brand Manager
Robert McNichols Jr., Manager of Community Events and Engagement

CANADIAN OPERA COMPANIES

MANITOBA OPERA

Larry Desrochers, General Director and CEO
Darlene Ronald, Director of Marketing

OPÉRA DE MONTRÉAL

Patrick Corrigan, General Director
Pierre Vachon, Director of Education and Community Engagement

PACIFIC OPERA VICTORIA

Rebecca Hass, Director of Community Engagement
Ereca Hassell, Director of Production and Artistic Administration
Ian Rye, CEO

TAPESTRY OPERA

Jaime Martino, Executive Director
Michael Mori, General Director

FACULTY

LEAD CONSULTANT

Roberto Bedoya, Cultural Affairs Manager, City of Oakland

ADVISORS

Logan Phillips, poet
Michael Rohd, executive director, Center for Performance and Civic Practice
Mark Valdez, President, ArtsValdez Consulting

MEETING REPORTER

Leah D. Barto, consultant

STAFF

OPERA AMERICA

Marc A. Scorca, President and CEO
Kurt Howard, Director of Programs and Services
Claire Gohorel, Grantmaking Manager
Brandon Gryde, Director of Government Affairs

OPERA.CA

Christina Loewen, Executive Director

LEXICON

- **Authorship:** The key decisions made in community-engaged arts projects that determine the results of a co-created piece. Collaborative authorship is distinct from the leadership needed to facilitate the process of developing the piece. (See “The Continuum of Collaboration, Explained” and <http://www.thecpcp.org/field-notes/>.)
- **Citizen Artist:** (1) Individuals who reimagine the traditional notions of art-making, and who contribute to society either through the transformative power of their artistic abilities, or through proactive social engagement with the arts in realms including education, community-building, diplomacy and health care (The Aspen Institute). (2) Initiatives are artistically excellent and impact driven, employing artistic innovation to create social or civic impact. (See Yo-Yo Ma on Citizen Artists.)
- **Civic Practice:** Efforts that draw on opera’s creative assets in authentic ways to address public priorities, often through sustained partnership (OPERA America).
- **Civic Practice:** Projects that are co-designed with residents and/or community/municipal agencies and involve artists aiming their creative practice/assets at residents’ self-defined needs (CPCP.org). (See also Studio Practice and Social Practice.)
- **Community-Based Arts:** Art made by and intended for members of a community to express the values, interests and concerns of those communities created through collaborations between professional artists and community members. (See the Australia Council for the Arts resource page.)
- **Community Benefit Agreement:** (1) A project-specific agreement between a developer and a broad community coalition that details the project’s contributions to the community and ensures community support for the project. (Community Benefits 101). (2) Agreements that seek accountability from private developers who receive public support for large-scale development projects (Cultural Community Benefit Principles).
- **Community Engagement:** The process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people. (A common definition used in public health, environment, corporate and social sectors.) In the arts, “community” describes the people and organizations that are related to a provider’s mission: audiences, students, artists, partner organizations and so on. “Engagement” describes an active, two-way process in which one party motivates another to get involved or take action — and both parties experience change. Mutual activity and involvement are the keys to community engagement (adapted from the National Guild for Community Arts Education resource page).
- **Creative Placemaking:** Public, private, nonprofit and community sectors partnering to strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, tribe, city or region around arts and cultural activities. Creative placemaking animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire and be inspired (National Endowment for the Arts).
- **Cultural Competence:** The ability to understand, appreciate and interact with people from cultures or belief systems different from one’s own (American Psychological Association). (See also resources specific to the nonprofit sector here.)
- **Devised Theater:** A process in which an ensemble of creative artists develops a performance collaboratively, often evolving from improvisatory exercises and source material, such as news reports and interviews. (See John Walton’s definition and the TDF Theater Dictionary.)
- **Oppression:** Systemic devaluing, undermining, marginalizing and disadvantaging of certain social identities in contrast to the privileged norm; when some people are denied something of value, while others have ready access. (See Racial Equity Tools.)

-
- **Outreach:** Programs or efforts that are more accurately equated with audience engagement goals of deepening relationships with current stakeholders or extending an organization's reach to achieve increased earned revenue. Outreach, as opposed to community engagement or civic practice, lacks reciprocity and implies a dynamic that keeps the institution in a position of power. (See Doug Borwick's exploration.)
 - **Privilege:** Unearned access to resources (social power) only readily available to some people as a result of their advantaged social group membership. (See the racialequitytools.org glossary.)
 - **Psychosocial:** The psychosocial approach looks at individuals in the context of the combined influence that psychological factors and the surrounding social environment have on their physical and mental wellness and their ability to function (common definition). In many sectors, including market research and public health, psychosocial characteristics are used to segment consumers or constituents.
 - **Public Good:** A commodity or service that is provided without profit to benefit all members of a society, either by the government or a private individual or organization, as opposed to a commercial commodity. Economists refer to public goods as "nonrivalrous" and "nonexcludable." (See Planet Money's podcast exploring this concept.)
 - **Social Cohesion:** A cohesive society can be described as one that "works toward the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalization, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward social mobility" (OECD.org). Social cohesion is demonstrated by levels of trusting neighbors, talking to and helping neighbors, and socializing with family and friends. (See key findings from the National Conference on Citizenship's Study of Social Cohesion.)
 - **Social Practice:** Artists work with neighbors and residents on an artist-led vision in ways that may include research, process and/or content creation with an intention of social impact outside traditional audience experience (CPCP.org). (See also Studio Practice and Civic Practice.)
 - **Studio Practice:** Artists make their own work and engage with neighbors and residents as an audience. (CPCP.org). (See also Social Practice and Civic Practice.)
 - **Truth and Reconciliation:** A concept, used extensively in Africa and Latin America, that has developed into an effective global strategy for dealing with war crimes and other human rights abuses. The approach is one of "restorative justice," and the process seeks to heal relations between opposing sides by uncovering all pertinent facts, distinguishing truth from lies, and allowing for acknowledgment, appropriate public mourning, forgiveness and healing. (See this U.S.-based Commission and the Commission of Canada.)

REFERENCE MATERIALS

Recommended Reading

- Beyond the Building: Performing Arts and Transforming Place (convening), <https://www.arts.gov/partnerships/beyond-the-building-performing-arts-and-transforming-place>
- *Art of Relevance* by Nina Simon (book), <http://www.artofrelevance.org>
- Animating Democracy (website), <http://www.animatingdemocracy.org/>
- Createquity Archive — Cultural Equity (website), <http://createquity.com/2017/10/cultural-equity/>
- Howlround (website), <http://howlround.com/translations-the-distinction-between-social-civic-practice-and-why-i-find-it-useful>
- “The Great Divide and the Pronoun ‘We’” (article), <http://www.abladeofgrass.org/fertile-ground/the-great-divide-and-the-pronoun-we-2/>
- “Belonging: A Cornerstone of Placemaking in the Region” (article), <http://springboardexchange.org/belongingrobertobedoya/>
- Arts and Democracy (newsletter), <http://artsanddemocracy.org/what-we-do/briefing-calls/>
- *The Opera House* (film), https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7659110/plotsummary?ref_=tt_ov_pl
- *Engaging Matters* by Doug Borwick (blog), <https://www.artsjournal.com/engage/doug-borwick/>

Noteworthy Organizations

- Sojourn Theatre, <http://www.sojourntheatre.org/>
- Center for Performance and Civic Practice, <http://www.thecpcp.org/>
- Cornerstone Theater Company, <http://cornerstonetheater.org/>
- Urban Bush Women, <https://www.urbanbushwomen.org/>
- Campus Compact (see the compiled list of civic action plans from higher education institutions), <https://compact.org/actionstatement/civic-action-plans/>
- National Conference on Citizenship, <https://ncoc.org/>

OPERA America Resources

- Opera Conference 2015 Opening Session (at minute 29), <https://youtu.be/gECAV6TJxuA?t=29m28s>
- Opera Conference 2015 Opening Session (at 1 hour, 23 minutes), <https://youtu.be/gECAV6TJxuA?t=1h23m7s>
- Opera Conference 2015 Closing Session: (at minute 25) <https://youtu.be/9nVSIybJti8?t=25m21s>
- Opera Conference 2017 Creating Change: Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, <https://youtu.be/JMKLv4IMXaU>