

T H E

YEAR

I N R E V I E W
• T H E F I E L D •



PHILIP GROSHONG

Aaron Blake in Cincinnati Opera's *Fellow Travelers*



JAMES GILL

Madison Opera's *Little Women*,
with Eric Neuville and Courtney Miller



NICHOLAS KORKOS

Kiera Duffy in *Breaking the Waves*
at Opera Philadelphia

"Today's operatic repertoire shows tectonic change beyond established classics," Robert Marx wrote in the spring issue of *Opera America*, and this year's bumper crop of world premieres definitely bears out his observation.

Marx's essay notes that in the 1983–1984 season, OPERA America's constituent companies offered but one world premiere. Compare that to the years 2010–2016, in which the organization's members offered no fewer than 225 new North American works in their debut productions.

But numbers alone don't tell the whole story. The field's attitude toward contemporary opera has also changed. No longer does the presentation of a new work feel like a dutiful chore, tangential to the real business of mounting the standard repertoire. On the contrary, operas like *Breaking the Waves* (Opera Philadelphia), *Fellow Travelers* (Cincinnati Opera), *The Scarlet Letter* (Opera Colorado), *The Shining* (Minnesota Opera) and *Sister Carrie* (Florentine Opera Company) — among many others — served as flagship productions in their companies' seasons: generating outsize



Micaela Aldridge in
Central City Opera's
Later that Same Evening



Jennifer Rivera, Dennis Jesse and Amy Pfrimmer
in *Dead Man Walking* at New Orleans Opera



Cellist Joshua Roman, composer/pianist Gregg
Kallor and mezzo-soprano Elizabeth Pojanowski in
On Site Opera's *The Tell-Tale Heart*

media attention, attracting donor dollars and bringing new audiences to the art form.

The vitality of contemporary opera can be seen not only in world premieres, but also in myriad revivals of recent works. A common complaint of the not-so-distant past cited the tendency of new operas to disappear from view after their premieres. All the prestige, the thinking went, clung to first productions; after that, the works themselves languished. No longer. In 2016, companies presented second, third — or 47th — mountings of numerous works from recent decades. OPERA America's accounting of the most-performed

operas during the 2015–2016 season included (alongside the expected *Madama Butterfly*, *La bohème* and *Carmen*) Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking* (nine productions) and his *Three Decembers* (eight productions). In the past year, Mark Adamo's *Little Women* has been staged by Eugene Opera, Madison Opera and Pittsburgh Opera. Kevin Puts' *Silent Night* showed up at The Atlanta Opera and Michigan Opera Theatre, and his *Manchurian Candidate* at Austin Opera. Des Moines Metro Opera staged Philip Glass' *Galileo Galilei* and Los Angeles Opera, his *Akhnaten*.

Of the three works in Opera Saratoga's summer 2016



Brenda Harris in Austin Opera's *The Manchurian Candidate*



Florentine Opera's *Three Decembers*,
with Lucy Schauffer and Rena Harms



Yijie Shie with a dancer in San Francisco Opera's world premiere of *Dream of the Red Chamber* by Bright Sheng and David Henry Hwang



Chanmee Jeong and Dominick Corbacio in *The Witches of Venice* at Opera Saratoga

season, two were of recent vintage: Daniel Catán's *Il Postino* and Glass' *The Witches of Venice*. "New works can speak to audiences in a visceral way," says Lawrence Edelson, the company's artistic and general director. The box office validated his instincts: The season saw a 35 percent uptick in ticket revenue.

The need for opera organizations to strengthen bonds with their communities has never been more strongly felt — or more thoroughly addressed. Opera is no longer confined to the opera house: This past year it could be found in schools, community centers, libraries, farmers' markets, and even a basketball court. Companies are proving the art form's



CORY WEAVER

Greer Grimsley and Katharine Goeldner
in Minnesota Opera's *Das Rheingold*



CURTIS BROWN

Das Rheingold at North Carolina Opera,
with Michaela Martens and Hailey Clark

relevance by grappling with urgent local issues: In the wake of the Pulse nightclub tragedy, Opera Orlando staged a benefit concert, "One Voice Orlando." Addressing the effect of the energy downturn on its community, Houston Grand Opera offered free subscription renewals to laid-off energy-company employees. Lyric Opera of Chicago, in partnership

with the Chicago Urban League, is developing a new musical theater work to be written by local youths, based on the city's epidemic of gun violence.

These trends in no way spell the end of the standard repertoire. The great works of the period between Mozart and Puccini still form the core of the repertoire, often in



ROD MILLINGTON

Sarasota Opera's *La battaglia di Legnano*, with Martin Nusspaumer, Jennifer Black and Todd Thomas



"One Voice Orlando" concert, with Jennifer Johnson Cano, Cecilia Violetta López, Alex Mansoori and Mark Walters



Andriana Chuchman and Sean Panikkar in OperaTheatre of Saint Louis' world premiere of *Shalimar the Clown* by Jack Perla and Rajiv Joseph



Seattle Opera's Spring Break Camp for children

fresh, inventive stagings that serve as reminders of why these masterpieces endure. Wagner's *Ring* continues to serve as the ultimate test of an opera company's mettle: Washington National Opera mounted Francesca Zambello's familiar *Ring* production this past spring, and Lyric Opera

of Chicago launched a new David Pountney *Ring* cycle with *Das Rheingold*. But the *Ring* is no longer the exclusive provenance of the biggest companies: Both Minnesota Opera and North Carolina Opera offered *Das Rheingold* as trial balloons for potential complete cycles, to critical



KAREN ALMOND

Houston Grand Opera's world premiere of *It's a Wonderful Life* by Jake Heggie and Gene Scheer



JACLYN SIMPSON

Lyric Unlimited presented Gregory Spears' *Jason and the Argonauts* as part of its Opera in the Neighborhoods series.

plaudits and box-office success. Meanwhile, Sarasota Opera closed out its complete Verdi cycle — a monumental, 28-year effort — with *Aida* and the rarely heard *La battaglia di Legnano*. Innovative approaches to repertoire, along with the ever-increasing role of community engagement

in company endeavors, reveal a field no longer willing to settle for business as usual — and one that's connected to the world at large. ● — Fred Cohn

THE YEAR IN REVIEW OPERA AMERICA

Lucy Fitz Gibbon in the New Opera Showcase, a concert of excerpts from five operas in development

Vira Slywotzky and Aleksandra Romano
in the New Opera Showcase

Stage director Alison Moritz speaks with OPERA America President/CEO Marc A. Scorca
at an event benefitting the Women's Opera Network.

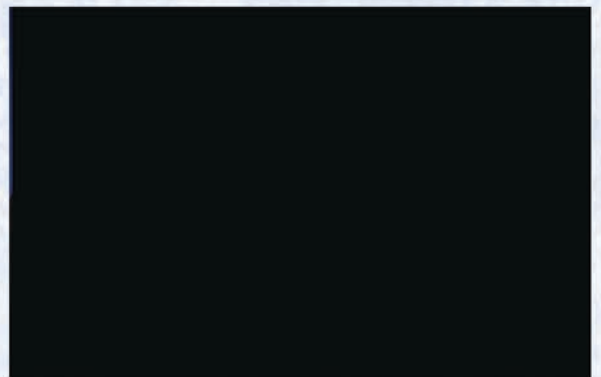
In what was a banner year for world premieres at its member companies, OPERA America saw the dividends of its sustained investment in new work and in audience engagement. At Fort Worth Opera, an Audience Development Grant yielded a six-month-long symposium series on John F. Kennedy's legacy, leading up to the premiere of David T. Little and Royce Vavrek's *JFK*; Opera Philadelphia raised the curtain on Missy Mazzoli's *Breaking the Waves*, funded in part by the Opera Grants for Female Composers program; and New York's Opera on Tap embarked on an episodic virtual-reality opera

by Kamala Sankara and Jerre Dye, *The Parkville Murders*, with support from a Building Opera Audiences Grant.

Dozens of other companies premiered new works, experimented with audience-building techniques, and established new educational programs thanks to OPERA America grants. The organization administered \$1 million in grant money, awarded to opera companies and individual composers, with funds coming from OPERA America's own granting endowment, The Opera Fund, as well from the Ann and Gordon Getty Foundation, The Andrew W. Mellon



The 2016–2017 class of the Leadership Intensive



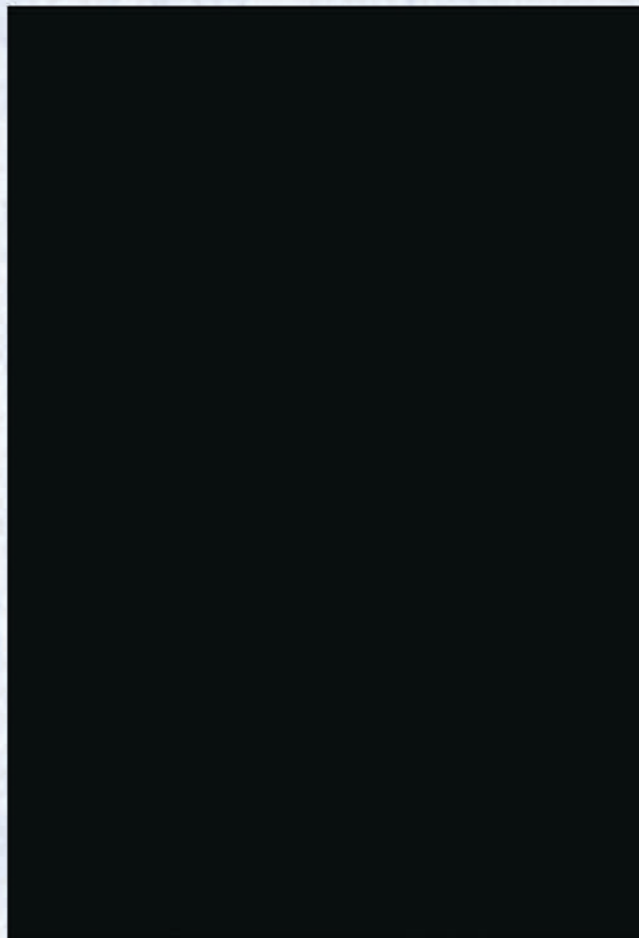
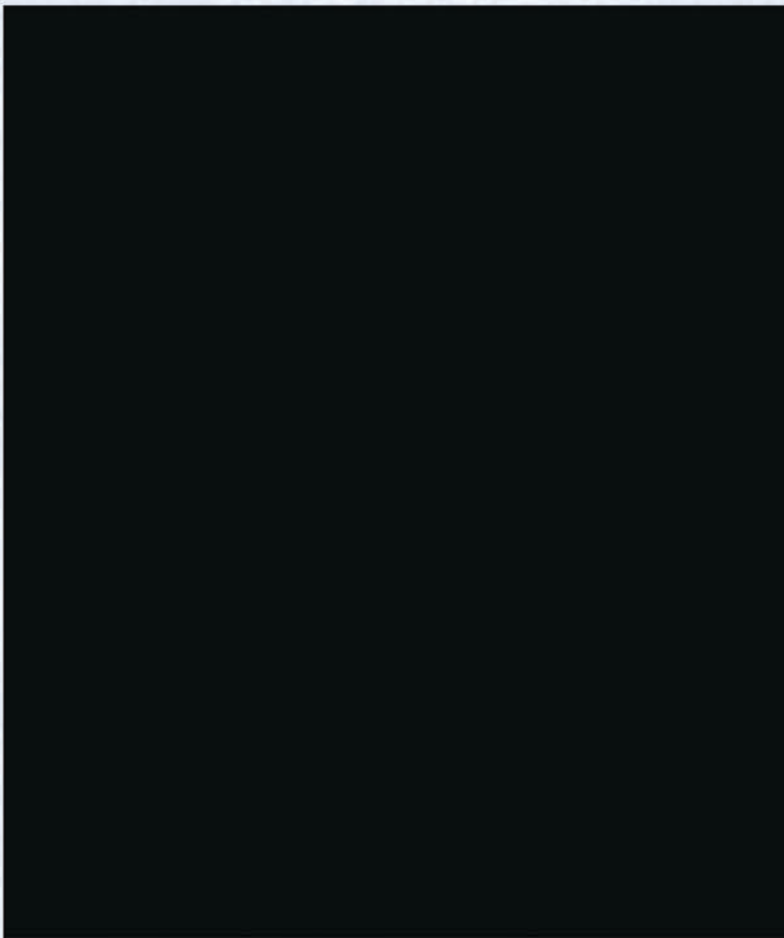
Soprano Alaysha Fox has headshots taken as part of the Career Blueprints for Singers program.

Foundation and the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation. That number is set to rise dramatically next year with the recently launched Innovation Grants, funded by the Getty Foundation to invest some \$1.5 million annually in OPERA America's member companies (see p. 30).

OPERA America has long coupled institutional support with a promise to develop the careers of both administrators and artists. Leadership Intensive, a program that identifies promising emerging opera leaders and provides them with specialized training, remains a cornerstone of OA's service to

administrators. The newest Leadership Intensive class came together in August at the National Opera Center, OPERA America's headquarters, for a week of discussions and seminars designed to address strategic issues, build essential skills and foster strong professional connections. This group will convene again in May at Opera Conference 2017.

For singers, OPERA America provides a suite of services to help bridge the gap between conservatory and career. One such program, offered in September, is Career Blueprints for Singers: a three-day intensive workshop that equips young singers with



YVES RENAUD

Blythe Gaissert and Kelly Markgraf in the New Works Sampler, part of Opera Conference 2016



ANDREW MICHAEL PRINZ

Greg Emetaz (far left) films fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi, honorary chairman of National Opera Week 2016.

key career-building tools, including professional headshots, audio and video recordings, and websites. Throughout the year, singers also took advantage of Recording Days, providing discounted recording sessions, and Feedback Auditions, which gather industry experts for practice-run auditions.

Artists, administrators and devotees of the art form alike could turn to OPERA America's *Onstage at the Opera Center* season for insights and inspiration from industry leaders. This series of public events featured conversations with such figures as mezzo-soprano Jamie Barton, librettist/playwright David Henry Hwang and soprano Sondra Radvanovsky, reflecting on crucial moments in their career development. Composers Jake Heggie and Matthew Aucoin, meanwhile, presented excerpts

from their latest works and explained their creative processes.

OPERA America continued its crucial task in 2016 of bringing together opera professionals. The organization hosted forums for various disciplines within the opera field — marketing, technical/production, education, singer training — allowing staffers from opera companies across North America to share strategies and discuss common issues. The annual opera conference, hosted in May by Opéra de Montréal, convened over 500 key players — company staff members, trustees and volunteers — to meet and discuss the state of the art form. The National Opera Center continued to serve as a hub for the field. Buzzing with activity, it welcomed a more than 75,000 people through its doors in 2016 for



Soprano Hyesang Park performs at the National Opera Trustee Recognition Awards Dinner.

recordings, auditions and rehearsals.

Two new OPERA America initiatives in the coming year will help to strengthen the role of opera in communities and to ensure the industry's long-term health. The first is the Civic Action Group, a two-year program, launched in December, that engages a group of U.S. and Canadian opera companies — and later the field at large — to strategize methods for addressing local civic priorities and forging community partnerships (see p. 32).

The other is OPERA America's latest strategic planning process, which will set the course of the organization through its 50th anniversary in 2020. Beginning last summer, OPERA America's staff and board began consulting with member

companies to help set priorities for the organization and the field as a whole — and to ensure the vibrancy of the art form in years ahead. Meetings are scheduled to continue through the winter, leading to the spring announcement of the strategic plan, which will include a strong emphasis on diversity. "Diversity of board members, staff members, artists and the stories that are being told on the opera stage will allow the art form to be seen as more fully resonant with the broader communities that we serve," says OPERA America President/CEO Marc A. Scorca. "We're creating a holistic approach to moving opera forward as a valuable cultural asset in cities large and small." ● — *Nicholas Wise*