

# ACROSS THE BOARD

A Publication of OPERA America for Opera Company Trustees



## From the President and CEO of OPERA America

This fall is a very important moment in the work of opera company trustees. As we return cautiously to live performances and begin to imagine our world after the disruption, making strategic decisions about the future of our companies is essential — and critical for partnership between boards and staff.

What have we learned during the pandemic about alternative venues, digital programming, and Zoom meetings, to name just a few? What have we learned in the ongoing fight for racial justice about community service, partnerships, and listening?

This is an optimal time to reflect on our work, learn from successes at other companies, embrace changes in the world around us, and take advantage of this unique opportunity. Let's resume our public service in ways that are more creative, equitable, accessible, and sustainable — in ways that are of, for, and by our communities.

*Marc A. Scorca*

MARC A. SCORCA

## Advocating for Opera

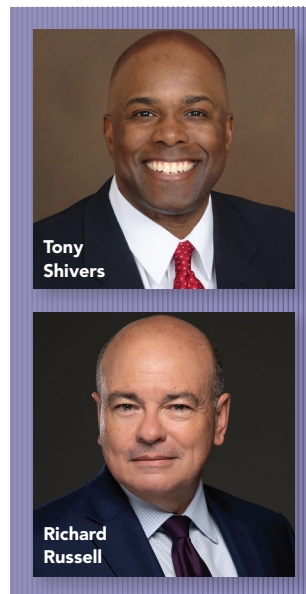
Sarasota Opera was one of the first American opera companies to return to the stage for indoor performances. Like so many others, the company owes much of its rebound to the federal relief that Congress made available over the past year and a half.

Tony Shivers, director of government affairs at OPERA America, called Sarasota Opera's general director, Richard Russell, to talk about the impact of that funding on what the company has been able to do — and how it shapes their outlook on the future.

**TONY SHIVERS:** Opera Sarasota is lucky to have you, Richard. You've been fighting hard for the company since day one of the pandemic. Let's look back to March 2020: How was Sarasota Opera first affected?

**RICHARD RUSSELL:** I will never forget the date: Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>. We normally have a two-month winter festival season in February and March, and we were 11 performances away from the end. We had seen decreasing ticket sales and smaller audiences in the weeks preceding. Early that morning I was on a conference call with the city manager of Sarasota and the other arts leaders. He informed us that any venue that was larger than 500 seats was going to need to close. We had to shut down.

We informed our company, most of whom came in from out of town and were living in either our apartments or local housing. We told them we were not going to be able to continue to perform, but we made the commitment that we would pay them their entire contracts. We had been hemorrhaging money for a couple weeks as ticket sales began to



Tony Shivers

Richard Russell

decrease; we probably lost in the neighborhood of \$1.5 million. But we were not going to withhold the rest of their money.

Financially it was a very difficult time, and there was so much uncertainty. We didn't know what kind of help we would get. We didn't know if our donors would stay with us. We asked donors if

they would donate their unused tickets rather than ask for a refund. But it was a really unsettling time. Those two months were probably the worst of my professional life.

**TONY:** It's good of you to carry through on paying your artists. Were they able to take advantage of the federally enhanced unemployment benefits available to them in the CARES Act? Congress was quick to pass relief in March 2020, and it was the first time that gig workers qualified for unemployment.

**RICHARD:** Most of our artists come from out of town, even our orchestra in our winter festival. We encouraged all our freelance artists to avail themselves of federal relief funding that was available to them in Florida and elsewhere.

We did our best, what little we could, to employ people. A number of artists stayed on for a couple of weeks. We did some virtual programming. We had some singers do performances outside. When gathering outdoors was discouraged, we encouraged our singers to film themselves back in their homes, in their driveways, or on their balconies. It actually received some news coverage in Rochester and Pittsburgh.

**TONY:** The CARES Act was the first pandemic relief legislation for businesses and nonprofit organizations, and there have been a series of other packages since, including the American Rescue Plan from earlier this year. How were you able to leverage that support for Sarasota Opera? *continued >*



Red Millington

Sarasota Opera's spring 2021 production of *Dido and Aeneas*

**RICHARD:** I kept a very close eye on what was going on in Congress and read more legislation than I'd ever thought I would. I have a new awareness of what goes into putting together a bill. It was great to have OPERA America as a resource in navigating those waters. I don't think we would have gotten a Shuttered Venue Operators Grant this year without your guidance, Tony!

I'm grateful to say that our donors were very supportive and stayed with us. And our ticket buyers were responsive. But it was the legislation — the relief funds — that came in spurts over the last 18 months that were so vital. The first, the Paycheck Protection Program, provided liquidity so that we could pay our full-time staff and save some other money to pay off the rest of the artists' contracts.

We were also very lucky that we were able to lobby locally for CARES Act funding that flowed down to the state and county levels. It was a concerted effort among our local arts organizations and small businesses: Sarasota is a huge arts community, and the performing arts are the second-largest employer in the area. We made the case that we're a huge economic driver and employ a lot of people, and ultimately our county legislature set aside \$5 million to support the arts. We were able to get about \$250,000, and it was very important to keep us afloat.

**TONY:** Did getting those public funds affect your outlook on how you moved forward as a company? It was taxpayer dollars, after all. How did it guide your priorities?

**RICHARD:** Our first priority was to get people working. We had furloughed some people at the beginning of the pandemic and did a salary cut for others. We were able to bring everybody back and, in time, restore salaries with the back pay.

Then our focus turned to how we could serve our community. We had a unique situation in Florida, in that we were one of the most open states over the last year. We shut down in April for maybe six weeks, then there was a phased reopening, and by September we were completely open again. But it was not high on people's list at that time to come together in a theater. Still, we had a little bit more flexibility than our colleagues in other places.

Many organizations went to streaming live. We didn't have a big archive of things that we could give to our audiences, so we did some talks with artists. As we got into the fall, we decided to do some live performances: two outdoor concerts and one inside in November 2020. Because we own our opera house, we could do a socially distanced concert without breaking the bank. We could employ our artists and serve our audience.

**TONY:** Were you doing fully staged performances?

**RICHARD:** We reconfigured our 2021 winter season of four operas to two smaller seasons with shorter works that were under an hour and a half long with only a few performers. Our audiences really appreciated our ingenuity in pulling this together. I think we recognized that the shorter performances were attractive to a part of our audience — and that's going to become part of our programming going forward.

I must say, there was a real sense of community — that we were all in this together. That's been a big talking point of ours for the company, and it will be going forward: We're not just a place people come to for nice performances; we're part of this community. The people in our audience make up the community, as do our community of people who work here.

**TONY:** You've been really determined in advocating for support and for ensuring the arts and cultural sector continues to thrive, in Florida and across the country. How has your experience over the past year and a half changed your outlook on advocacy?

**RICHARD:** Advocacy is really important. I think our county got \$83 million in CARES

Act funding, and when they first started to talk about how they were going to allocate it, they forgot the arts. It was the consortium of our arts organizations that got together and started talking about all the people who work in our sector. We had that same conversation around the Save Our Stages program, too. We made the case to our local federal officials that we are an important economic driver in this community

As an arts community here in Sarasota, we have recognized that we need to do a better job of making the case to our legislature and our community about our value. If our community doesn't recognize it, they're not going to participate, and they're not going to encourage our elected officials to help us.

The onus is on us to make the case within our community of the value we bring. We're not just an elitist institution for rich people to see opera. We permeate our communities. We do education programs. We employ people. We bring business to restaurants and hotels. It's incumbent upon us to make that case.

That's something I've taken from this. We need to do more as an industry — on the local, state, and federal levels — to make people aware that we're not elite institutions. We are integral parts of our communities. ■



## National Trustee Forum 2022

**G**ain insight into the most important governance challenges and opportunities as the opera field looks beyond COVID-19. Participate in OPERA America's multiday symposium for opera company board members virtually, in person, or both.

**VIRTUAL FORUM | FEBRUARY 24–25, 2022**

**NEW YORK CITY FORUM | MARCH 2–4, 2022**

**Plus:** A special dinner celebration on March 4 to bestow the National Opera Trustee Recognition Awards and induct the inaugural classes of the Opera Hall of Fame.

For full details and to register, visit [operaamerica.org/NTF](https://operaamerica.org/NTF).



## Essentials of Opera Governance

In this webinar series, president/CEO Marc A. Scorca offers insights into key topics that are essential to a strong board.

**THURSDAYS, 4:30 P.M. – 5:15 P.M. ET**

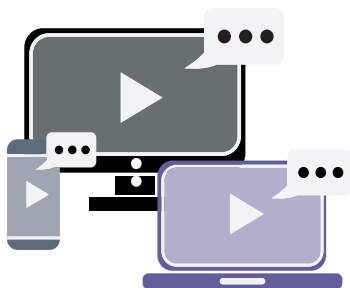
**OCTOBER 28 BOARD-GENERAL DIRECTOR RELATIONSHIP**

**NOVEMBER 11 STRATEGIC PLANNING**

**DECEMBER 2 MEASURING SUCCESS**

Register at [operaamerica.org/Essentials](https://operaamerica.org/Essentials). Free to OPERA America Trustee Members.

# 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 2022 Trustee Quick Guide at [operaamerica.org/TrusteeQuickGuide](https://operaamerica.org/TrusteeQuickGuide).

## Company Workshops

OPERA America's Marc A. Scorca is available to lead virtual and in-person workshops on topics including governance, civic practice, and financial health. Consult your general director and call **212.796.8623** for details.

# OPERA America Trustee Council

**Graham Berwind, III**  
The Metropolitan Opera

**Jessica Burton**  
Opera Columbus

**Robert Dean**  
The Atlanta Opera

**Liz Grubow**  
Cincinnati Opera

**Julie Grady Heard**  
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**Evan J. Hazell**  
Pacific Opera Victoria

**Woody Kuehn**  
Opera Southwest

**Ruth Orth**  
Pensacola Opera

**Gloria Portela**  
Houston Grand Opera

**Brian Powell**  
Austin Opera

**Nadege Souvenir**  
Minnesota Opera

# The Two Hats of Board Members

EXCERPTED FROM THE ESSENTIALS OF OPERA GOVERNANCE WITH MARC A. SCORCA

**B**oard members exist at both the top and the bottom of an hourglass. At the top, you perform the traditional roles of trustees: governance, fiduciary responsibilities, and policy development. You work with the staff to develop dashboards that enable you to monitor performance. And, of course, you hire and manage the general director/CEO.

At the bottom of the hourglass, you are community ambassadors. You help recruit volunteers, donors, and ticket buyers. You not only contribute, but you help build the donor base. And you participate actively by going to performances, lectures, and workshops.

Every trustee must recognize that between these two modalities on the hourglass, your company's staff occupy an uncomfortable position. They report to you as their boss in your top-role, while having to manage you in your bottom-role: Have you thanked recent donors? Are you ready to host the cast party? Will you meet with a community partner?

Imagine how delicate and diplomatic the staff must be to manage your work while you are, at the same time, overseeing theirs. Companies are most productive when both board members and staff respect the two hats that trustees wear — and acknowledge when its time to take one off and put the other on. ■



Download Marc's "Board-Staff Hourglass" slide at [operaamerica.org/Hourglass](https://operaamerica.org/Hourglass).

# From Opera Conference 2021



**T**he 2021 conference, held virtually in May, brought administrators, artists, and trustees together to address key opportunities for the field as it rebuilds.

## Why Artists Must Be at the Center

"[Artists can be] fierce advocates for the art around the [board] table — to preserve the very thing that inspired board members to support opera in the first place. They can remind us of the intrinsic value of our work and make sure it's at the very core of everything we do."

**LARRY BROWNLEE** | Tenor; Board Member and Artistic Advisor, Opera Philadelphia



## Why Companies Must Be Community Leaders

"For Aristotle, humans are fundamentally social; we will develop our capacities and flourish only if we are responsible to those around us... Aristotle's views can be taken to imply that the health and well-being of every single one of us is dependent on our community, and that the health of our community is dependent on us."

**CHRISTIA MERCER** | Professor of Philosophy, Columbia University

Watch the full conference discussions at [operaamerica.org/OC21](https://operaamerica.org/OC21).

Save the dates for **OPERA CONFERENCE 2022** — with both in-person and virtual options: **MAY 18–21, 2022 MINNEAPOLIS** | **JUNE 8–9, 2022 ONLINE**

# Opera America Magazine

**O**PERA America's quarterly magazine addresses the issues most important to industry professionals, from marketing strategies and governance practices to exciting new repertoire.

## IN THE FALL 2021 EDITION:

- Opera as a Political Art Form
- Community-Centric Fundraising
- Pandemic-Era Triumphs
- "My First Opera" with John Holiday
- Q&A with Houston's New GD

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



# OPERA AMERICA

MOVING OPERA FORWARD

NATIONAL OPERA CENTER  
330 SEVENTH AVENUE  
NEW YORK, NY 10001

OPERA America is the national advocate for opera, dedicated to supporting the creation, presentation, and enjoyment of the art form for artists, administrators, trustees, and audiences since 1970.

#meetopera



FIND YOUR NEXT OPERA IN THE NATIONAL OPERA CALENDAR.  
[OPERAAMERICA.ORG/CALENDAR](https://operaamerica.org/calendar)

Above: Joshua Blue and Elena Villalón in *Gianni Schicchi* at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis

YOU ARE RECEIVING THIS PUBLICATION BECAUSE YOU ARE A TRUSTEE AT A PROFESSIONAL COMPANY MEMBER OF OPERA AMERICA. TO CHANGE YOUR ADDRESS OR RECEIVE THIS AT HOME, CONTACT [MEMBERSHIP@OPERAAMERICA.ORG](mailto:MEMBERSHIP@OPERAAMERICA.ORG).

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## Fall/Winter 2021 Issue

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## Future Trustee Meetings

**ESSENTIALS OF OPERA GOVERNANCE**  
October–December 2021, Online

**NATIONAL TRUSTEE FORUM 2022**  
February 24–25, 2022, Online | March 2–4, 2022, New York City

**OPERA CONFERENCE 2022**  
May 18–21, 2022, Minneapolis | June 8–9, 2022, Online

# OPERA CONFERENCE 2022

The largest convening for opera administrators, artists, and trustees—is back. [operaamerica.org/Conference](https://operaamerica.org/Conference)

**Minneapolis**  
May 18–21

**Online**  
June 8–9

