

**SMALL OPERA, BIG VOICE**  
**The Role of Small Opera Companies in**  
**Eliminating Elitism in Modern Opera Ecology**

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*"The opera house, a union grand of capital and labor! Long may this stately structure stand, a monument to Tabor."*

*"So fleet the works of men/Back to the earth again;/Ancient and holy things/Fade like a dream."*

Inscriptions at the Tabor Grand Opera House in Denver, CO, quoted in Douglas Moore and John LaTouche's *The Ballad of Baby Doe*.

*"It is our right and responsibility to create a new world."*

adrienne maree brown

## INTRODUCTION

In the United States, small opera companies are the veins that carry fresh blood throughout the American opera world, and their work benefits both their communities and the American opera ecology at large. Their size gives them organizational agility, making them more flexible and faster to act. They often serve as proving grounds for young singers, directors, conductors, and designers, and as conduits to the larger opera stage. Where larger companies battle the perception and reality of elitism, lack of diversity, entrenchment, colonialism, racism, and inaccessibility, smaller companies enjoy deeper engagement with their communities and serve a broader range of people in their mainstage programs. For these reasons and others, grassroots and experimental opera organizations are pivotal to eliminating elitism in the twenty-first-century opera ecology.

Ask the average citizen to describe opera, and they are likely to invoke a child star from a televised national talent show, allude to a fat woman in a horned helmet, or mention the Broadway musical *The Phantom of the Opera*. They likely will never have attended a live opera, but perhaps have heard snippets on the radio or chanced upon a late-night showing on their local PBS channel. Opera in contemporary America is not entirely unknown. Still, it suffers from a challenging perceptual problem, including its reputation as an elitist art form rife with racism, colonialism, and misogyny both onstage and off, complicated by dwindling funding and attendance. In response to

the #MeToo movement, George Floyd's murder, and the Black Lives Matter movement, the American opera industry began to address its problems in more meaningful and substantive ways than it had previously done: hiring diversity officers, deliberately populating the stage and administrative offices with more people of color, programming the works of nonwhite, non-cisgender-male composers, revisiting sexual harassment policies and firing high-profile offenders. Yet, there is a very long way to go before American opera can truly divest itself of its elitist aura. Opera must fundamentally change to survive the realities of the twenty-first century. Small opera companies<sup>1</sup> are well-equipped and positioned to lead the necessary changes, and in many cases, have been engaging in work for positive change for many years.

Opera in America was not always so elitist. Carried to the U.S. in the hearts of immigrants who brought precious pieces of home with them to the wilderness, it quickly gained popularity in places like New Orleans, where the first documented performance was a piece called *Sylvain*, premiering in 1796 (Andersson). It thrived throughout the colonization of the American West as small-town opera houses, far from the Puritan East Coast, sprang up across the country. They were accessible to everyone (although people of color were not granted equal access), and opera in this period was an art form that could be enjoyed by people of many different backgrounds. It was

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for a definition of opera company budget classes.

perhaps more sophisticated than the music hall, but no segment of society was unwelcome to attend. Still, there was always something that set opera apart from other entertainments. The presence of an opera house was a symbol of sophistication and advancement in a community.

As an enduring symbol of sophistication, it was only natural that as new communication technology developed, opera was chosen to demonstrate and popularize that technology. In 1904, tenor Enrico Caruso became the world's first recording star on the newly-invented Gramophone ("History"). Stars like the soprano Mary Garden appeared in silent films. A "sound film" of opera singers was presented at the Paris Exposition of 1900, and by 1908, such films were the rage in the U.S. as well (Parker 371). Later, popular radio and early television shows such as *The Voice of Firestone* regularly featured opera. In fact, from 1949 to 1964, the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) had its own Peabody Award-winning opera company which promoted opera in English, commissioned new works to be performed on television, and toured live (Hadley). Opera stars like Risè Stevens, Mario Lanza, and Richard Tauber enjoyed careers on the silver screen and the stage. Warner Brothers' cartoon rascal Bugs Bunny taught thousands of young fans about opera through beloved shorts such as "The Bunny of Seville" and "What's Opera, Doc?" Opera stars of the 70s, 80s and 90s sang on the enduring children's show *Sesame Street* (there is even an operatic Muppet, Placido Flamingo, named after the famous tenor Placido

Domingo). The Metropolitan Opera has been radio broadcasting its offerings since 1910 and now offers high-definition broadcasts in movie theaters. These efforts and many others have served to keep opera accessible to the average American home.

However, over the decades, the American opera establishment began to separate from its community roots. There were many contributors to this change. Nineteenth-century New York opera houses built by and for the elite, who advertised fancy dress in their program books, instituted strict dress codes and marketed their houses as a higher class of establishment where the unwashed masses were not welcome. The original Metropolitan Opera House, often referred to as "the Old Met," was one of these, built in 1883 by wealthy businessmen who preferred to experience opera free of the hoi polloi who frequented the other big opera house, the Academy of Music ("Our Story"). Other factors include the advent of technology that introduced more inexpensive, plentiful entertainment choices, and a series of financial disasters that reduced donations, such as the Enron disaster of the 90s, the stock market crash following 9/11, and the 2008 stock and housing market crash. As a result of financial challenges and political pressure casting arts education as a luxury schools could no longer afford, many arts and culture programs began to be cut from public schools. Eliminating arts programs continues to be an option for struggling school districts, although it increases inequity in arts access (Peralta). As arts and culture education continue to

fade from schools, fewer young people have easy access to the classical arts. A basic music education is no longer readily available, and in some places, students no longer have access to choir and band programs that help cultivate young talent and music appreciation. Additionally, throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries, the American opera industry has alienated potential new audiences through its failure to promptly address problematic inherited repertoire, abusive working conditions, gatekeeping, sexual harassment and abuse within its ranks, and lack of diversity on stage, in the administrative offices, and in the board room. Caitlin Vincent, exploring the challenges of inherited repertoire and opera traditions, wrote

... when a work's score and staging traditions are at odds with modern-day cultural norms, traditionalists may find themselves defending aspects of works that, in any other context, would be classified as racist and/or sexist.

Despite the challenges that besiege it, pioneer opera lives on. The true descendants of the American small town opera house are today's small, grassroots, and experimental opera companies. Over one hundred have spread across the U.S., outnumbering their larger cousins (Sadler and Frick). Like their predecessors, they welcome everyone, offering accessible repertoire in unintimidating venues in the hearts of their communities. Small American opera companies currently define opera "by, of, and for the

people” and in doing so, are leading the way for opera’s rehabilitation and relevance for opera in the realm of contemporary art.

### **PIONEER OPERA PAVED THE WAY**

A few miles from the famous Round Top Festival grounds in rural Central Texas is a tiny unincorporated town called Shelby. Settled in 1841 by German immigrants, Shelby soon boasted a singing society of statewide prominence (Long) and an opera house. This country opera house, a large rectangular building with living quarters downstairs and a sort of ballroom on the second floor, was probably used as often for town meetings, dances, and wedding receptions as it was for performances of any kind. It still stands, and a short walk down the town's single remaining street is a 1914 marble obelisk commemorating Confederate war heroes, erected by members of the Shelby Opera Troupe and Cemetery Association. Clearly, it was important to these German settlers to bring art and culture, and specifically, opera, with them into the wilderness.

Similar community opera houses dot the U.S. At one time, there were thousands, built as the American West was colonized. Many were constructed by immigrants importing their culture to new lands. Others were points of civic pride, called for by society mavens and businessmen to represent that the town had outgrown its frontier roots and now possessed some style, society, and other trappings of sophisticated civilization.



Although not intended primarily to house or produce opera, opera and classical music were regular features, and the buildings were purposely titled "opera house" to invoke the wealth and refinement of Europe. "In fact, an opera house became the barometer of the economic and social life of a town," writes Ann Satterthwaite in her book *Local Glories: Opera Houses on Main Street Where Art and Community Meet*. "It meant the town had advanced beyond the survival stage of development." (10)

America's nineteenth-century opera houses were home to a wide variety of entertainments and gatherings, but they also hosted famous touring singers and troupes. Tombstone, AZ was a popular stop, hosting superstar tenor Enrico Caruso at its infamous Bird Cage Theater (Wells 387), doubtlessly to the chagrin of the rival Schieffelin Opera House. In Denver, CO, the Tabor Grand Opera House opened with a two-week run by American star soprano and impresario Emma Abbott and her troupe. It later featured luminaries like Adelina Patti ("Tabor Grand Opera House"). Well-established tours visited towns throughout the Rockies in the late 1880s (Satterthwaite 72). The Metropolitan Opera played Leadville, CO and Lincoln, NB (109).

According to Satterthwaite:

"Opera is the rage," the *Spirit* reported in February 1853. Opera troupes, many foreign, were all over the country ... And opera, often called "grand opera," did take place in small-town opera houses...Early

opera in the United States was considered appropriate for more than the musical and social elite." (111)

These nineteenth-century community opera houses were quite different from our big modern theaters. Although they were often beautifully decorated and bore the title "Grand" in their names, the allusion was to civic pride and was not intended to exclude certain classes of people. Consider, for example, the gemlike Calumet Theater (also called the Calumet Opera House) in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, with its row of hooks on the back wall of the mezzanine for the local copper miners to hang their hard hats. The white working class had their place in community opera houses, and minorities had theirs, too. Although people of color were excluded from other community institutions such as certain churches, fraternal associations, and social clubs, they were welcome at the opera house, though they did not quite enjoy the "equality" and "neutral turf devoid of social, economic, or religious associations" that Satterthwaite applauds. She acknowledges that people of color often were relegated to the highest balcony or back row and frequently had to enter through separate entrances (162-163.)

A combination of factors intervened to displace community opera houses and transform American opera into an elite form, isolated from the general public. Opera capes and hats marketed to the rich helped kick off a trend of dressing up to attend the opera, as did exclusive dress codes to certain theaters. The orchestra level, traditionally the home to the cheap

seats, began to be segregated to the wealthier patron who wished to concentrate on the performance, while the "common" element was pushed to the upper levels and the very back of the house. Over time, transportation and technology made a greater variety of entertainments easily accessible to all. For example, people from small towns could take the train to the big city for a day's entertainment. Once so important to a town's society, the small community opera house began to die out.

The small opera company, however, did not. Touring troupes and startups flourished, even if they did not always survive for very long. To cite a single example, in the mid-1920s, no fewer than four professional troupes, all confusingly named The American Opera Company, toured the US before dates and funds evaporated after the stock market crash of 1929.

("American Opera Company")

## **AMERICAN OPERA IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

In the television age, opera remained accessible to a broader public. An opera boom in the 1950s and 60s saw the foundation of over twenty-four companies both large and small, such as the Lyric Opera of Chicago (T1)<sup>2</sup>, Houston Grand Opera (T1), Washington National Opera (T1), Minnesota Opera (T2) , Dayton (T4), and Santa Fe Opera (T1). From 1949-1964, NBC

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<sup>2</sup> (T#) after an opera company name refers to its Opera America budget category. See Appendix A. If a named company does not have a number, it is not an Opera America member or ceased to exist before the budget tier system came into use.

had its own opera theatre, which produced operas written for television and had a short-lived touring arm, and at its peak enjoyed a respectable viewership 15 million, rivaling Sunday Night Football's 18 million viewers (Hadley).

American opera expansion continued through the early 2000s. In the 1970s, thirty-two new opera companies launched. Seventeen opera companies opened during the 1980s, even as established companies grew in size (*Seismic*). New York City Opera, Houston Grand Opera's Texas Opera Theater (1974 until the late 1980s), and San Francisco Opera's Western Opera Tour (1967–2003) and others toured the nation. However, the expense of producing tours and the availability of opera even in the "hinterlands" via television and travel eventually resulted in the tours' demise ("Touring opera company").

The 2008-9 recession and September 11, 2001 attacks drastically changed the opera landscape. Attendance dropped and funding dried up. At the same time, technological advances such as high-speed internet brought plentiful entertainment options directly into the American living room. Over the ensuing two decades, many large companies were forced to radically reconsider their way of doing business or close their doors. 2008 was an especially bad year. Three major regional companies, at least two of them Tier 1, failed due to a combination of economic challenges and bad business

decisions: Opera Pacific, the fifty-eight-year-old Baltimore Opera (B.O.), and New York City Opera, "The People's Opera."

Despite the challenging economic climate, opera continues to be available in many cities. Small, homegrown opera companies have sprouted alongside their bigger cousins for decades. They have ridden out both economic turmoil and the pandemic, often thriving in the same cities where major houses rule. These include amateur light opera companies like the G&S (Gilbert and Sullivan) societies of Chicago, IL or Austin, TX, dedicated to producing operetta, primarily the works of popular Victorian satirists W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan. Others, like New York's legendary Amato Opera, are dedicated to grand opera on a smaller scale. Dubbed "The Smallest Grand Opera in the World," by its founder Tony Amato, Amato Opera was the quintessential mom-and-pop opera company. Its tenure ran from 1948 to 2009 when Amato passed the reins to Amore Opera, a startup founded by Amato alumni. Still others are new, experimental companies determined to push the boundaries of traditional opera through exploration of alternative venues, casting, and interpretations of inherited repertoire, or the creation of innovative and hybrid works. These small opera companies represent the majority of Opera America (OA) opera-producing organizations in America.

Opera may be a niche entertainment, but its fans are very determined. According to OA's 2020 Annual Report, it has 186 professional member opera organizations in North America, most in the Northeast and the rest

distributed more or less evenly throughout the remaining regions. 129 American cities have opera companies and there are 203 OA professional organizational members throughout the US and Canada (2021 Annual Field Report). A closer look reveals a significant fact: one hundred eleven of OA's professional organizational members in the US are Budget Tier 4 or lower. (Sadler and Frick). This means that the majority of Opera America professional member companies in the U.S. have budgets of \$1,000,000 or less.

Size has its advantages. The unexpected loss of a staff member, a shortfall in ticket sales, or the failure to secure an important grant might be devastating to a company with fewer resources, while a larger organization could more easily absorb similar blows. In terms of industry-wide evolution, however, small companies hold a major advantage: by design, they are more accessible and inviting to a wider variety of people. They are less elite.

## **THE PRICE OF ELITISM**

From media depictions of snobby singers and audiences to high ticket prices to years of marketing opera as a luxury product; to a decades-long industry-wide failure to substantively acknowledge and address racism, homophobia, misogyny, and colonialism, opera as an industry has shot itself in the foot when it comes to making itself genuinely welcome to all comers. "We have to acknowledge that we've built a business model in the arts that

kind of rewards exclusivity...The old-fashioned social construct that has defined old opera companies might not appeal to new people," OA President Mark Scorca told the *Seattle Times* ("Seattle Opera's *Aida*").

For many decades, the existence of an opera, symphony, or ballet in a city has signaled civic prestige. The Tier 1 national opera companies such as the Washington National Opera, San Francisco Opera, and Chicago Lyric Opera tend to occupy their own buildings, imposing temples to art. Big regional houses frequently utilize their city's performing arts centers (PACs), which are often located in an arts district or city center relatively removed from the communities where most of their constituencies live. These monuments to art look and are expensive, especially when fancy dress, transportation, parking, and dinner nearby are added to the ticket price.

There are other perceptual barriers to attending PACs. Many people who would otherwise enjoy opera may never have stepped foot inside a fancy PAC unless they were raised attending performing arts events. They may not know how to dress, behave, or what to expect. They may have lived experiences that lead them to believe they will be unwelcome and looked down on by traditional audience members. In short, the location and history of the venues in which operas are performed play a significant role in how welcome people feel.

LaPlaca Cohen's Culture Track Wave 2 survey finds that over 50% of Black people, Asians, and Pacific Islanders consider opera companies to be home to systemic racism; compared to about 35% of Hispanics, a little over 20% of whites, and about 18% of Indigenous people. One responder wrote, "Online activities can make me feel safe, and more importantly, there is no other discrimination and criticism." Clearly, this responder experiences racism when attending live theater. The same study found that over 50% of BIPOC/AAPI people<sup>3</sup> highly value having local arts and culture venues that reflect their respective cultural identities (Culture Track Wave 2). How likely are people to want to experiment with an unfamiliar art form, especially one that has the reputation of elitism, if it does not reflect their cultural identity and has little to no representation in their local community?

BIPOC/AAPI are traditionally vastly underrepresented in opera companies, whether onstage or in administrative settings. As of March 2022, 164 of the 186 American OA member opera companies are white-led (ninety-six by men, sixty-seven by women, one by a male-female team) (Sadler and Frick). This fact is unlikely to surprise, but it may be surprising to discover that as the budget category lowers, so does the likelihood of the company being run by a white man. 73% of General Directors of Tier One

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<sup>3</sup>A standard abbreviation for Black or Indigenous People of Color/Asian American or Pacific Islander



companies are white men, compared to 65% for Tier Two, 40% for Tier Three, 60% for Tier Four, and 50% for Tier Five (Sadler and Frick).<sup>4</sup>

The inequity starts with education. Access to expensive music education, summer training programs, and low-paid, full-time apprenticeships and internships impose debilitating hardship on students from underrepresented populations and make it especially difficult to pursue a career in the performing arts or arts administration. BIPOC/AAPI are also underrepresented on boards. Tenor Russell Thomas, a Black artist appointed in 2021 as Artist in Residence at Los Angeles Opera, said in a panel on race and opera

In 20 years, I've never been hired by a Black person; I've never been directed by a Black person; I've never had a Black C.E.O. of a company; I've never had a Black president of the Board; I've never had a Black conductor ... I don't even have Black stage managers. None, not ever, for 20 years (Barone).

Black people are underrepresented in both leadership and performance roles. A 2021 Black Opera Alliance survey found that Black people fill only 3% of all production roles and 10% of performance roles (U.S. Opera Company Responses).

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix C.

A lack of representation both on and offstage results in an artistic environment and product that is less than welcoming to marginalized communities. In their 2021 "Asian American Representation in Opera Panel Discussion," a chat sponsored by Minnesota Opera, Korean American tenor Andrew Stinson said

When I go into these (rehearsal) rooms, it's very, very, very, very rare to see anyone who looks like me, much less anyone who shares my experience. It's a major event to me if I'm working in a cast or a company when there might be more than a couple of Asian people who might be working in the company, much less in the show... there is very, very little Asian representation in the business ("Asian American Representation").

In the wake of the George Floyd murder and the Black Lives Matter movement, many large American opera companies are making strides to remedy centuries of inequity. In 2019–2020 the Metropolitan Opera (T1) staged a critically and popularly successful *Porgy and Bess* (which was, however, directed and conducted by white men), and in 2021 premiered the first Black-composed work to appear on its 138-year history, Terence Blanchard's *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*. That work premiered at Opera Theater of St. Louis (OTSL, T2) in 2019. OTSL is one of several large regional companies that supports BIPOC/AAPI in arts administration through the Claycomb Future Leaders Fellowship, a unique arts administration

program available only to young people from these and other underrepresented populations.

Unfortunately, tone-deafness incurs some serious missteps in large and small companies alike. In 2021, Tulsa Opera (T3) found itself entangled in controversy just before its musical commemoration of the Tulsa Race Massacre, intended to showcase works of living Black composers interpreted by well-known Black performers, took place. The mostly white Board was forced to choose between a lesser-known Black composer who refused to change a phrase in his commissioned work and the famous Black performer who felt uncomfortable singing it. It was a difficult situation for everyone involved, but the presence of more Black leadership might have changed the dialogue and media backlash considerably.

In March 2022, three Black staff members resigned from their positions at Long Beach Opera (T3) citing a “culture of misogyny” and “racial tokenism” (Jenson) and currently, a petition is circulating to stop the John Jay College/Opera Noire International/Harlem Chamber Players production of an opera about Emmett Till written from the viewpoint of a white woman by a white librettist and a Black composer. The continued centering of whiteness in the stories of BIPOC/AAPI draws ever more vocal criticism from Black artists and administrators and their supporters (Culwell-Block). Opera as an industry has run out of time to manage its image of elitism, of which racism is a large part. It is, at last, trying. However, small companies have

some distinct advantages over their big siblings when it comes to managing the perception of elitism.

## **SOMETIMES SMALLER IS BETTER**

While small opera companies are not exempt from the industry's troubles, by structure, mission, and programming, they are more egalitarian than their larger counterparts, and have their fingers on the pulse of their communities in a way large companies have yet to fully emulate.

Small opera companies' lack of grandeur makes them more welcoming to a wide variety of audience members. They are more accessible, existing in the hearts of their communities, operating from church basements, nightclubs, cafes, art galleries, museums, club halls, small local theaters, and other creatively repurposed spaces. These spaces are local, easy to reach, modest, and familiar if not common community gathering places.

Small opera companies are more personal. The intimacy of their venues allows more ticketholders to experience the power of the drama and human voice more personally. Boston Opera Collaborative's (T5) mission statement includes a mandate to perform "in spaces where audiences are in close contact with the power of the human voice" (Mission). Recent performances took place in public gardens, a cemetery, and a technical college.

The accessibility of community spaces, especially when drafted for nontraditional usage, helps invite and welcome new and different segments of the community. POP (T4) Artistic Director Josh Shaw said that its audience consists of a cross-section of Los Angeles society, including a high percentage of young people and an equal number of opera and entertainment fans (Shaw). BOC's (T5) under-thirty audience members are attracted to their venues and programming. They become converted to opera after experiencing it in an intimate setting (Weinman).

As larger companies adjust to the ongoing realities of artmaking during this era of social justice awareness and the COVID-19 global pandemic, they have caught on to the small company practice of meeting the community where it lives. It is both economical and savvy.

"They're all doing it now," said Shaw. "People are closer to the action. We're so much more in control of where the money has to go, and it brings costs down." (Shaw) For example, Florida Grand Opera (T3) is producing half of its 2021-22 season in smaller venues, including an opera about a McCarthy-era gay romance which will be produced in a PAC strategically located in the area's prominent gay neighborhood.

In 2022's polarized socio-political atmosphere, relevance is more important to opera than ever. Many smaller companies have a long history of addressing challenging topics head-on. Weinman says

Larger companies are starting to get on board with finding narratives that are more relevant today. We were always doing something that was very immediate and on people's minds ...We did a *Giovanni* just when the #MeToo movement was blowing up, and we could tell that story with a lens of people going, "Wow, right."

Some smaller companies formed with the specific concept of deconstructing operatic tradition and forms to invite nontraditional audiences to the feast in ways that make them want to participate. Washington, DC's InSeries (T4) focuses on reimagined core repertoire and contemporary, DEI-friendly topics in keeping with its mission of disruption and transformation ("Our Mission"). Its motto is Opera That Speaks, Theater That Sings. Artistic Director Timothy Nelson said

If we can start getting them (theater audiences) in the door through collaborations and get them to see that actually what we do with *Butterfly* as an opera is not what they think, then we can start having a more robust audience.

Detroit's OperaMODO (T5) is another groundbreaking company with a social justice mission, imaginative programming of inherited repertoire, and collaborative model. MODO explores the applicability of opera's classic tales to more contemporary struggles while supporting local businesses and artists (Wright).

Perhaps because smaller companies are often founded specifically to make opera more accessible, they seem less inclined to gatekeep at the organizational and programmatic level.

Any nonprofit must maintain a positive relationship with their Boards and donors, and that can make it difficult to address gatekeeping, community engagement, and any politically charged topic in a meaningful way. With their overwhelmingly white, wealthy, traditional boards and conservative donors and the financial and logistical challenges posed by COVID, many large companies may still find it risky to program works by Black composers or those centering the stories of LGBTQ folk. Others have begun to take on this work very successfully. Yet smaller companies, more likely to have female and/or BIPOC/AAPI leadership, continue to lead the way to necessary change and growth by deliberately and regularly addressing gritty topics that are current, relevant, and important to their communities. The connection to the community is key in erasing opera's elitism, both perceptual and realistic. If a company continues to center inherited repertoire without addressing its problems, what community is that company claiming? Can they claim Black, Indigenous, Asian, or other communities of color whose cultures have been appropriated, misinterpreted, and misrepresented? Can they claim women, who opera simultaneously adores and treats abominably? Can they claim LGBTQ folk, whose stories are ignored by inherited repertoire?

Ironically, opera has a long history of being subversive. From Mozart's and Rossini's settings of the anti-aristocracy Beaumarchais Trilogy plays to Verdi's thinly-disguised operatic assaults on the government and the church, opera has challenged the status quo, even while it was funded by patronage. Big American opera has embraced the same elitism and patronage in its struggle to survive and now finds it holds a tiger by the tail. Yet smaller companies are finding solutions in the flexibility their size and nature affords them.

### **THE POWER OF FLEXIBILITY**

The last twenty-odd years have been hard on opera companies. Many large companies, already struggling, were unprepared to weather the economic disasters of the early 2000s and failed to make necessary changes quickly enough. In her *Medium* article "Opera in the 2000s: Advances and Retreats", Heidi Waleson explains how, post-9/11, ticket-buying behavior changed drastically, and opera companies failed to adequately adjust. As donations dried up, so did several big companies such as Opera Pacific (Orange County, CA) and Baltimore Opera in 2008. Big Opera has never fully recovered from the ravages of the 2000s' first fifteen years.

Yet, smaller, nimbler companies continued to sprout in the furrows left by sunken giants. These companies often boasted special foci. In the aftermath of the economic crises of the early 2000s, organizations like Beth Morrison Projects (T3) in Brooklyn created an entirely new operating model,



independently commissioning new works and collaborating with companies to produce them. Dell'Arte Opera (T5, NYC) organized to provide opportunities and training to young professionals. While not all survived, many companies established in the early 2000s are flourishing in their second decade, and many other small companies have appeared. A blogger's list of opera companies established between 2000–2015 totals 260 new companies during that period ("Opera Companies"). With their bigger siblings struggling all around them, how could these operatic saplings continue to spring up and thrive?

The answer lies in the flexibility, leadership, and culture smaller organizations enjoy. While big companies are constrained by structural and organizational complexity, they can and should take cues from smaller companies' leadership diversity, fresh approach to inherited repertoire and new programming, and meaningful, steady presence in the heart of the community.

The COVID-19 pandemic provides a good example of how flexibility allows smaller companies to flourish. COVID brought the entire performing arts industry to its knees. The ongoing response thus far shows signs of great resilience on the part of companies of all size, but smaller companies have had advantages in adjusting due to their innate characteristics.

As COVID continues to endanger the population, companies of all sizes struggle to recover and make plans for an uncertain future. Despite theater re-openings and improved safety measures, sales fail to approach pre-COVID numbers. A recent DataArts report of arts organization purchase data estimated that the total pandemic-related losses for nonprofit arts organizations are likely to be over \$3.2 billion; and "If COVID case rates trend toward June 2021 levels in the first six months of 2022, predicted ticket sales will reach 46% of their most recent 4-year high by June 2022." ("When Will Arts Attendance")

Losing more than half their season's ticket sales is disastrous for any arts organization. It is especially worrisome for companies that must repeatedly fill 1500-3000 seat houses during the run of a single show and account for a substantial overhead. With lower ticket sales come fewer donations. If challenging pieces are programmed, especially in a house where traditional fare is preferred, audiences may be more reluctant to buy tickets or renew subscriptions. Board members are embarrassed and unhappy when the house is not full. Canceling shows or entire productions is expensive and awkward, and can turn public opinion against a large house. When Metropolitan Opera (T1) General Manager Peter Gelb canceled the 2020 season, there was an ongoing media furor from unions whose members were locked out and unpaid.

By contrast, Boston Opera Collaborative (BOC, T5), whose patrons expect challenging repertoire, and which typically performs to audiences of fewer than two hundred, received a 90% ticket donation back to the company in lieu of refunds and pivoted to produce their season online and outdoors (Weinman).

Small companies can pivot more easily because they are accustomed to working on a shoestring budget with small staffs. It is problematic if a staff member leaves or funding falls through, but with fewer people, organizations, and systems involved, adjustments are less complex. With a pre-COVID annual budget of \$500,000 (Gelt), Pacific Opera Project (T4) continues to stage between four and six productions each season with a full-time staff of four. OperaMODO (T5) had a pre-COVID annual budget of \$137,000 and produces three or four projects each season with two part-time co-executives and a volunteer staff of seven.

Overhead for small companies can be very manageable. They tend to hire local artists, reducing travel and lodging expenses. OperaMODO (T5) prioritizes collaboration with local singers ("About MODO"). Most small companies escape expenses associated with unions like AGMA or IATSE (if they use orchestras, they probably must negotiate with AFM)<sup>5</sup>. They may be able to rely on free or low-cost community spaces for rehearsal and

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<sup>5</sup> American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA), International Association of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), and American Federation of Musicians (AFM), respectively.

performance. For example, Opera Louisiane (T4) has offices, audition, storage, and rehearsal space in Baton Rouge's First Baptist Church.

Though Big Opera is now beginning to face its issues of racism, misogyny, colonialism, and elitism head-on, it must by design move with more caution and precision for fear of offending conservative trustees, donors, and core audiences. Mistakes are too costly. Smaller companies are nimbler and can take more risks with mission and programming. "We've always done shows where we can take chances," said BOC's (T3) Patricia Weinman. "If we want to showcase a young poet of color, we can, and the world isn't going to fall apart if it's not exactly what we were planning on. We're so flexible --- that's what's so freeing about it." (Weinman)

No matter its size, opera has much to offer arts lovers. Big Opera offers stunning production values, international stars, the option of a glamorous experience, and impressive scale. Small Opera offers intimacy, undiscovered talent, accessibility, and just as much creativity as its bigger siblings. It also pushes the boundaries of what opera has been and can be, and in doing so, offers a path forward for twenty-first century opera. "I've often said that small opera is the future of the field," wrote former Washington Post critic Anne Midgett in a 2019 article about InSeries, praising small opera for its "vital creative work that isn't always being done in conventional opera houses."

American opera needs its range of company sizes, missions, and audiences to survive, evolve, and flourish. They also need new audiences. Embedded elitism remains one of its most significant roadblocks to recruiting not only new audiences, but new talent and new voices. Here is where larger companies can take some cues from their smaller siblings.

Small American opera companies are reclaiming our culture and history by centering themselves in the communities they serve, by leadership, location, and programming. Large opera companies can look to them to learn how to better diversify their leadership and audiences. They could learn from studying small opera mission statements, especially grassroots companies that exist to embrace the artistic needs of their communities in very specific ways. They could offer more mainstage programming in more intimate, comfortable community spaces, eliminating barriers to attendance such as travel or uncertainty about fitting in via dress or behavior. They could do more to support and celebrate local artists. They can embrace a more adventurous approach to programming, even if it means starting small and training the core audience to enjoy it over time. Large and small companies could also collaborate more, which could be financially and artistically beneficial to both.

Opera has endured the centuries, sometimes embattled but always with a loud and loyal corps of fans. Twenty-first century American opera continues to redefine itself, exploring ways to stay relevant while

overcoming the problems of inherited repertoire, over a century of elitist behavior, and audience development among new generations with their own values and practices. Encompassing music, poetry, art, architecture, fashion, lighting, dance, literature, acting, and so many other disciplines, it can and should be for everybody. Without throwing out all that makes opera grand, the American opera industry can look to small opera companies' history, nature, and practices for inspiration to eliminate elitism and create a more egalitarian, community-centered, and appealing artistic product.

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**APPENDIX A**

**OPERA AMERICA BUDGET TIERS**

<b>OPERA AMERICA BUDGET TIERS</b>			
<b>TIER</b>	<b>NUMBER OF US COMPANIES IN EACH TIER</b>	<b>BUDGET</b>	<b>EXAMPLE</b>
1	11	Over \$15,000,000	Metropolitan Opera, San Francisco Opera, Chicago Lyric Opera, Houston Opera
2	23	\$3,000,000 to \$15,000,000	Atlanta Opera, Pittsburgh Opera, Austin Opera, Florida Grand Opera
3	31	\$1,000,000 to \$3,000,000	Beth Morrison Projects, Kentucky Opera, Chicago Opera Theater, Long Beach Opera
4	63	\$250,000 to \$1,000,000	OnSite Opera, UrbanArias, Opera in the Heights, Opera Roanoke
5	49	Under \$250,000	Painted Sky Opera, OperaMODO, Opera Ebony, Opera on Tap

*\*Sources: OA 2021 Annual Report, [www.operaamerica.org](http://www.operaamerica.org), A Survey of U.S. OA Professional Members*

## **APPENDIX B**

### **DEFINITIONS**

For the purposes of this paper, a **small opera company** is defined as having an annual budget of \$1,000,000 or less, mainly hiring local or regional artists, and producing one to three mainstage shows each season. A **grassroots opera company** is a small company whose mission and company culture is closely tied to its community and community values. An **experimental company** is a small opera company with an unconventional operating model, produces new or unconventional repertoire, or perhaps performs traditional works in unconventional settings or venues.

## **APPENDIX C**

### **A DEI SURVEY OF PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONAL MEMBERS OF OPERA AMERICA IN THE US**

**By Cindy Sadler and Lauren Frick**

**See attached Excel spreadsheet**