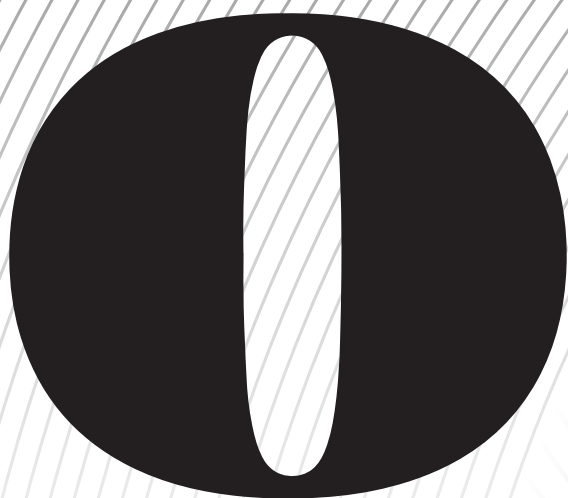




# WORLD OPERA FORUM

— 2024 —

## A SUMMARY

June 3–5, 2024  
Los Angeles, CA

HOSTED BY

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AMERICA

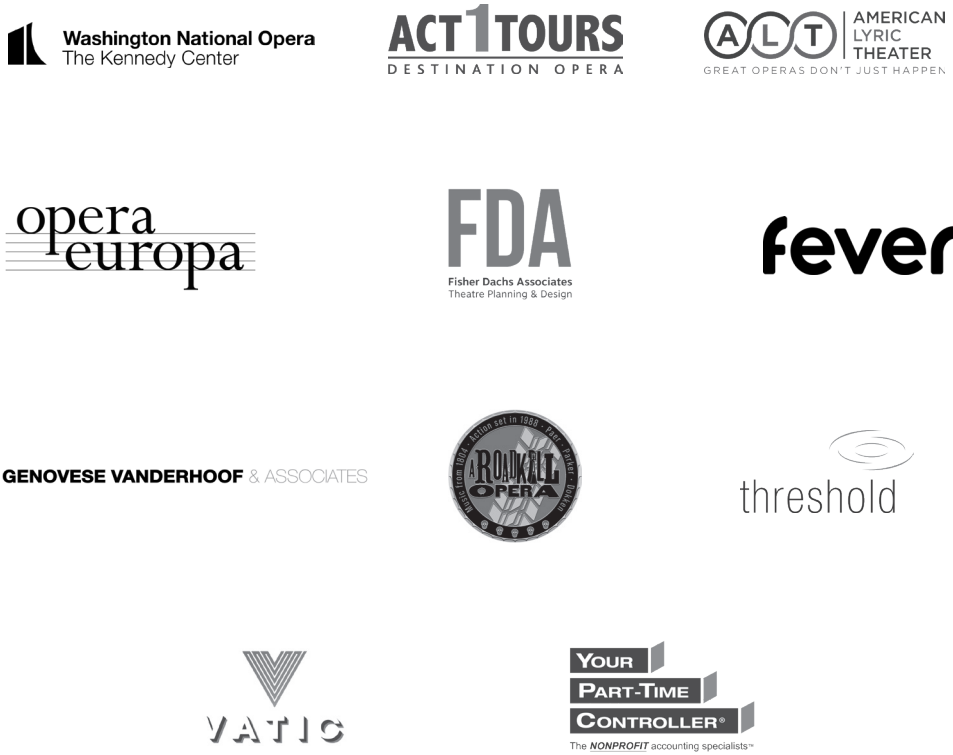
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# FORUM SPONSORS

The World Opera Forum was made possible by a generous leadership gift from C. Graham Berwind, III, with additional deeply appreciated support from Barbara Teichert, Nanette and Keith Leonard, Carol F. Henry, Susan F. Morris, Susan G. Marineau, and John G. Turner and Jerry G. Fisher.



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# FROM THE FORUM HOSTS

**OPERA AMERICA** It was an honor and pleasure to greet opera colleagues from around the world at the second World Opera Forum. The convening extended our effort to make the discussion about the future of opera a global conversation that reflects the global nature of the art form. Although our deep appreciation was earned by Christopher Koelsch and our colleagues at Los Angeles Opera who served as official hosts of the forum, special thanks are due to Ignacio García-Belenguer, general director of the Teatro Real in Madrid and host of the first World Opera Forum, for his warm and unwavering encouragement to overcome the challenges inherent in a meeting of this international dimension.

Planning for the key themes of the 2024 forum was enriched by members of OPERA America, Opera Europa, Ópera Latinoamérica, and the Association for Opera in Canada who attended the 2018 forum and who are deeply connected to the artistic and socio-political trends shaping our world. I am grateful to all of them, and to Karen Stone and Audrey Jungers, Alejandra Martí, and Christina Loewen, who helped assemble an extraordinary group of official delegates. Beyond the official delegation, hundreds of opera leaders from across the globe attended the meeting as active listeners and contributors to the discourse during sessions and at the many events that filled the days in Los Angeles.

As you will read in the summary that follows, everyone agreed that the rate of change in the world around us has accelerated since 2018. Everyone agreed, too, that opera retains its unique power to enlighten and inspire established audiences and those who are new to the art form. But the global pandemic, climate change and its consequences, new technologies that expand and challenge our human abilities, immigration and demographic shifts, and socio-political tensions including Russia’s war on Ukraine place tremendous pressure on opera and opera companies to deliver demonstrable public value outside the walls of the theater as the basis for earning public and private support. Despite abundant challenges, participants retained the essential optimism that is fundamental to success in the complex practice of producing opera.

The 2024 World Opera Forum would not have been possible without the leadership contribution of C. Graham Berwind, III, whose generosity made it possible to commit to this historic event and inspired other members of OPERA America’s cherished donor community to step forward. Thank you, all.

**MARC A. SCORCA**  
PRESIDENT/CEO, OPERA AMERICA



The World Opera Forum provided a dynamic platform for the exchange of experiences and information. A central theme that emerged was the vital importance of meeting face to face to fully appreciate how opera resonates across the globe and the diverse roles it plays in different societies.

Networking was a cornerstone of the forum, with its impact being nothing short of extraordinary. One of our Opera Europa delegates, Laura Canning, general director and CEO of Opera North in the U.K., captured her reflections beautifully:

“What a gift to step out of the day-to-day and begin building the future we want to see for the art form we all love so much. I met extraordinary colleagues, each from communities at different stages of their journey with opera. ‘We’ve only really had opera for 15 years,’ said Paolo Petrocelli from Dubai, ‘so we’re not worrying about refreshing the canon just yet!’ But the message that resonated with me the most came from Bibian Kalinde, an inspirational music educator from Zambia: ‘You keep talking about opera as a Western classical art form, but really, is there anything more universal than singing with an open heart?’ Long may we continue to do so.”

As we now move forward, having forged new relationships and shared invaluable knowledge, our members return to their companies with renewed energy and creativity. We are already eagerly anticipating the next World Opera Forum in 2028.

**KAREN STONE**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
OPERA EUROPA



Building trust between human beings is the fundamental basis for collaboration and networking — which in the long term generates a more sustainable, empathetic, and resilient society.

Theater associations, through their conferences and face-to-face meetings, provide platforms for these relationships to be lasting and fertile and to contribute to a greater impact.

The second World Opera Forum in Los Angeles was an example of communication that transcends borders, cultures, and generations. By meeting and exchanging views from different regions of the world, we can realize that we share problems and challenges and that, by joining forces, we can find solutions together.

The Latin American delegation, through its speakers and participants, was able to highlight the tremendous creative work our region produces as well as its professionalism, capacity for innovation, artistic contribution, and talent.

At Ópera Latinoamérica, we are proud to have contributed to the realization of such an important event and to continue building collaboration between networks. And thus build a better ecosystem for our theaters, artists, and managers.

**ALEJANDRA MARTÍ OLBRICH**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
ÓPERA LATINOAMÉRICA



The World Opera Forum in Los Angeles in June 2024 was a stimulating and enriching event both for me and for the members of the Association for Opera in Canada.

The World Opera Forum is an important stage for cultural diplomacy and international exchange. It fosters global understanding, dialogue, and collaboration and offers a space where we can learn from our similarities as well as our differences. The theme may be opera, but it’s a model for societal cohesion itself.

From my perspective as a co-facilitator, I was heartened to see the conversations grow and advance from the first World Opera Forum in Madrid in 2018 to reflect the imperatives of representation, equity, and contemporary resonance for opera in North America.

In particular, I was grateful that, through the participation of official Canadian delegates, Canadian values and perspectives were reflected and shared in the discussions around cultural citizenship and values. The work being done across Canada to engage

deeply in the lives of local communities through opera ensures that the art form evolves into an accessible and relevant experience for future audiences.

As we continue to explore how opera can serve as a bridge between different continents and diverse cultures, Canadian contributions to these global dialogues are crucial in highlighting how the arts can contribute to meaningful social change at both local and international levels.

I look forward to the next World Opera Forum and our continued collaboration.

**CHRISTINA LOEWEN**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
ASSOCIATION FOR OPERA IN CANADA

# PARTICIPANTS

## Speakers

Ignacio García-Belenguer Laita, general manager, Teatro Real  
Marc A. Scorca, president/CEO, OPERA America

## Delegates

### Argentina

Jorge Telerman, general director, Teatro Colón

### Australia

Jo Davies, artistic director, Opera Australia  
Mark Taylor, executive director, State Opera South Australia

### Brazil

Flavia Furtado, executive director, Amazonas Opera Festival  
Andrea Caruso Saturnino, general director, Theatro Municipal de São Paulo

### Canada

Larry Desrochers, general director and CEO, Manitoba Opera  
Rebecca Hass, director of engagement programs and partnerships, Pacific Opera Victoria  
Michael Hidetoshi Mori, artistic and general director, Tapestry Opera  
Jean-Pierre Primiani, director of development, Opéra de Montréal  
Robin Whiffen, executive director, Against the Grain Theatre

### Chile

Paolo Bortolameolli, music director, Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional Esperanza Azteca  
Carmen Gloria Larenas, general director, Teatro Municipal de Santiago

### China

Iris Lanfen Wei, director of production and artistic administration, National Centre for the Performing Arts

### Colombia

Pedro Salazar, stage director, La Compañía Estable

### Croatia

Iva Hraste-Sočo, general manager and artistic director, Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb

### France

Louis Langrée, conductor, general director, Théâtre national de l’Opéra-Comique

### Germany

Laura Berman, intendant, Staatsoper Hannover

### India

Asad Lalljee, curator, Royal Opera House Mumbai

### Italy

Ilaria Lanzino, director, librettist  
Barbara Minghetti, artistic director, Teatro Sociale di Como, Teatro Regio di Parma  
Sebastian F. Schwarz, artistic director, Festival della Valle d’Itria

### Japan

Reiko Ishikawa, senior artistic administrator of opera, New National Theater Tokyo

### Malaysia

Danny Chen, executive producer, Kuala Lumpur City Opera

### New Zealand

Joanne Cole, director, artistic planning and participation, New Zealand Opera

### Poland

Renata Borowska-Juszczyńska, general director, Grand Theatre, Poznań

### South Africa

Magdalene Minnaar, artistic director, Cape Town Opera

### South Korea

Kounee Suh, general director, Seoul Arts Center

### Spain

Joan Matabosch, artistic director, Teatro Real  
Javier Menéndez, director general, Teatro de la Maestranza

### Sweden

Henning Ruhe, artistic director, GöteborgsOperan

### Switzerland

Aviel Cahn, general manager, Grand Théâtre de Genève  
Jan Henric Bogen, general and artistic director, Konzert und Theater St. Gallen

### Ukraine

Galyna Grygorenko, cofounder, Open Opera Ukraine

### United Arab Emirates

Paolo Petrocelli, head, Dubai Opera

### United Kingdom

Laura Canning, general director and CEO, Opera North  
Elena Langer, composer

### United States

Afton Battle, vice president of Lyric Unlimited and artistic operations, Lyric Opera of Chicago  
Deborah Brevoort, librettist  
Antonio C. Cuyler, professor of music in entrepreneurship and leadership, University of Michigan; consultant, Cuyler Consulting LLC  
James Darrah, artistic director and chief creative officer, Long Beach Opera

PARTICIPANTS

United States, continued

- Khori Dastoor, general director and CEO, Houston Grand Opera
- Gabriela Lena Frank, pianist and composer
- Andréa Fuentes, Ed.D., vice president, LA Opera
- Christopher Koelsch, president and CEO, LA Opera
- Timothy Long, artistic and music director of opera, Eastman School of Music
- Missy Mazzoli, composer; professor, Bard College Conservatory; co-founder, Luna Composition Lab
- Beth Morrison, president and creative producer, Beth Morrison Projects; founding co-director, PROTOTYPE Festival
- Julia Noulín-Mérat, general director and CEO, Opera Columbus
- Timothy O’Leary, general director, Washington National Opera
- Matthew Ozawa, chief artistic administration officer, Lyric Opera of Chicago
- Morris Robinson, bass
- Yuval Sharon, director; founder and artistic co-director, The Industry; artistic director, Detroit Opera
- Nadege Souvenir, chief executive officer, San Antonio Area Foundation; board member, OPERA America

Zambia

- Bibian Kalinde, president, Pan African Society for Musical Arts Education

Facilitators

- Rebecca Diaz, director of community engagement and IDEA initiatives, Pittsburgh Opera
- Susan Feder, former program officer, arts and culture, Mellon Foundation
- Ed Harsh, vice president and director of strategic initiatives, Kurt Weill Foundation
- Ed Yim, chief content officer and senior vice president, WQXR

Co-Facilitators

- Dan Cooperman, chief advancement officer, OPERA America
- Audrey Jungers, general manager, Opera Europa
- Christina Loewen, executive director, Association for Opera in Canada
- Vincent Rutter-Covatto, director of learning and leadership, OPERA America

Rapporteurs

- Tim Brock, individual membership manager, OPERA America
- Jenny Fornoff, senior institutional giving manager, OPERA America
- Quodesia D. Johnson, social justice advisor, OPERA America
- Pamela Jones, senior artist development manager, OPERA America
- Joel Klein, general manager, Association for Opera in Canada
- Jaclyn Randazzo, learning and leadership coordinator, OPERA America
- Clint Walker, director of development and membership, OPERA America

Note: Participants’ titles and affiliations, as listed above, were those at the time of the forum.

Revenue & Repertoire: A Global Comparison

What do 56 companies from 26 countries across 6 continents have in common, and how do they differ? OPERA America analyzed data from the companies in the North American delegation, collected information from Opera Europa about a cluster of member theaters, and researched the repertoires of all the global delegates. The data was from fiscal year 2022.

- Among the European theaters in the study group, 15% of overall revenue was derived from ticket sales, on average. This is very close to the U.S. average among delegate companies of 17% for FY2022.
- In the U.S., public support (from combined federal, state, and local government sources) in FY2022 was 12% of overall budgets. Among the European theaters, that number was an average of 68%. It must be noted that the U.S. level actually was higher than in normal years due to the last funds received from pandemic relief programs in FY2022.
- In terms of private support, the numbers are reversed. In the European cohort, 10% of theater budgets was derived from private sources, generally from corporate sponsorships. In the U.S., private support among delegate companies was, on average, 60% of company budgets, and the majority of this revenue was derived from individual donors.

The funding structures are very different, but in relation to the repertoire performed on stage, global delegate companies were remarkably similar.

- Around the world, the most performed operas by far are works of Puccini, Verdi, and Mozart. *Madama Butterfly*, *Tosca*, and *La bohème* topped the list, followed by *Carmen*, *La traviata*, *Rigoletto*, *Così fan tutte*, *Le nozze di Figaro*, and *Don Giovanni*. There are productions of the masterpieces of Wagner and Strauss, too, but they are not as common. Rossini is well-represented by *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and Donizetti by *L’elisir d’amore*, but the operas of Puccini, Verdi, and Mozart dominate opera stages around the world.
- Some masterpieces of the musical theater repertoire are global, too, including *My Fair Lady*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, *A Little Night Music*, *Sunset Boulevard*, and *Into the Woods*.
- Quite a few operas that have specific national meaning in their countries are performed frequently, but do not cross borders very often.
- New works are produced most frequently in the United States.

The interplay of similarities and differences among the companies in the official delegation gave rise to intense discussion. Even in relation to the inherited European repertoire, significant differences arose about how these works are interpreted for contemporary audiences who may be seeing them for the first time in some countries but that are well-known in other countries.

— Marc A. Scorca, president/CEO, OPERA America

# KEY THEMES

Over three days, delegates and members from the global opera community investigated the following key themes:

## MAKING A CASE FOR OPERA IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

Opera has benefitted for decades from the support of cultural agencies and private philanthropists for different reasons. In much of Europe, governments have been motivated by a sense of obligation to their national culture and cultural infrastructure. In North America, the grandeur and exclusivity of opera has been an allure to many social and business leaders. Many countries exhibit a mix of these motivations, but in a world of competing priorities and limited resources, support structures for opera companies in their current form are weakening.

Making a case for opera today cannot be a simple narrative exercise in which different language is found to change the public perception and value of the art form. Superficial changes will not be sufficient to overcome barriers to opera participation. Making a case for opera requires new organizational and artistic strategies that make theaters welcoming to more diverse audiences and convey the importance of the arts, artists, and arts workers to healthy communities and thriving economies.

What is the government’s responsibility to support the arts in a world that is becoming increasingly multicultural? Are commitments to overcome the elitism of opera and increase diversity authentic and sustained? Is the tempo of evolution too slow; is disruption a necessary precursor to reinvention?

## WHAT WE PRODUCE, HOW WE PRODUCE IT, AND FOR WHOM

Through the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup>, opera has been defined by a 19<sup>th</sup>-century European repertoire that extended Europe’s cultural sensibilities around the world, including some works that promote cultural stereotyping and depict the mistreatment of women. Some of these works have enduring musical importance but require careful consideration in light of contemporary awareness.

At the same time, an increasing number of new works tell new stories in different styles that connect opera to life today. Composers and librettists entering the opera sphere are helping the art form evolve as a contemporary cultural expression. New collaborative, cooperative, and devised models of creation are expanding the creative diversity of the art form. Co-production among companies leverages resources and promotes sustainability.

The incorporation of film, video, and other new technologies amplifies the scope of production design and composition. Technology also expands the reach of opera outside the walls of the opera house through live transmission, recordings, and work developed specifically for the screen.

Enlarging the palette of opera increases the potential to attract new audiences, and while most companies report record-setting first-time attendance, many newcomers are not yet returning frequently. Some long-standing audiences are unenthusiastic about new works and new interpretations of their favorite operas. Many people have incorporated new forms and formats of entertainment and cultural consumption into their lives, intensifying competition for their time and attention.

How can the intersection of the old and new enrich the entire opera experience? What is the right balance between stories with local impact and universal appeal? Can stewardship of the operatic inheritance and encouragement of new creation be woven into an appealing continuum? Should continuity be the goal, or is discontinuity the more appropriate path to progress?

## ELEVATING HUMAN VALUES

The worldwide pandemic shined the light on the urgency to reassess opera’s relationship with the people who bring the art form to life. Opera leaders have a history of inspiring audiences with transporting productions and virtuosic performances, but this success has taken place too often without sufficient regard for the well-being of the artists and artisans who make the work possible.

Opera leaders are called upon to examine and adjust long-standing policies and practices to retain and recruit staff in critical areas of operation and provide a responsible level of job security. The training of artists must prepare them to exercise agency in the progress of their own multifaceted careers. A sustained commitment to embrace new attitudes and values and create workplaces that affirm individual identities, promote social and racial justice, and assure safe and respectful work conditions is an essential basis for extending service to the public.

How can producers overcome inherited attitudes and adjust ingrained practices to improve conditions for artists and arts workers? How can artists be empowered as full partners in the opera enterprise? How can artists and arts workers thrive in the context of reduced productivity? Will changed values reshape the structure and operation of opera companies?

## BECOMING ENGAGED CULTURAL CITIZENS

Opera cannot thrive without a demonstrable connection to the social and political dynamics of the communities that are home to companies. In an age defined by war and migration, climate change, cultural and economic inequities, political polarization, and increasing diversity, the mission of opera must expand beyond the narrow purview of the arts.

With a shared, multi-national repertoire, every opera company will be enriched by its unique relationship to its place and the qualities that shape it. Opera’s inherent capacity to convene, communicate, educate, and bridge divides must be shared broadly to improve the lives and lift the spirits of people who may never enter the opera house in addition to those who enjoy the art form.

How can the demands of producing opera be integrated into a larger commitment to addressing varied and changing civic priorities? Can the aesthetics of public service be appreciated equally with the aesthetics of production and performance? Do expanded civic responsibilities require changes in organizational missions?

# AGENDA

## MONDAY, JUNE 3

### Opening Session & Discussion: What’s Changed Since 2018?

2:00 p.m. – 3:15 p.m. | The Colburn School, Zipper Hall

*Featuring:* Renata Borowska-Juszczyńska (Poland), Christopher Koelsch (U.S.), Ignacio García-Belenguer Laita (Spain), Carmen Gloria Larenas (Chile), Missy Mazzoli (U.S.), Michael Hidetoshi Mori (Canada), Marc A. Scorca (U.S.), Yuval Sharon (U.S.), Nadege Souvenir (U.S.)

### Introduction: Making a Case for Opera in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

3:45 p.m. – 5:00 p.m. | The Colburn School, Zipper Hall

*Featuring:* Laura Berman (Germany), Laura Canning (United Kingdom), James Darrah (U.S.), Flavia Furtado (Brazil), Galyna Grygorenko (Ukraine), Bibian Kalinde (Zambia), Elena Langer (United Kingdom), Louis Langrée (France), Missy Mazzoli (U.S.), Magdalene Minnaar (South Africa), Michael Hidetoshi Mori (Canada), Julia Noulin-Mérat (U.S.), Morris Robinson (U.S.), Kounee Suh (South Korea), Mark Taylor (Australia), Jorge Telerman (Argentina)

### World Opera Forum Opening Reception

5:30 p.m. – 6:30 p.m. | Walt Disney Concert Hall, Blue Ribbon Garden

## TUESDAY, JUNE 4

### What We Produce, How We Produce It, and for Whom

Framing Debate: 9:00 a.m. – 10:15 a.m. | Omni Los Angeles Hotel, Bunker Hill Ballroom  
Discussion Groups: 10:45 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. | Omni Los Angeles Hotel, Various

*Featuring:* Afton Battle (U.S.), Renata Borowska-Juszczyńska (Poland), Aviel Cahn (Switzerland), Jo Davies (Australia), Andréa Fuentes (U.S.), Rebecca Hass (Canada), Iva Hraste-Sočo (Croatia), Reiko Ishikawa (Japan), Christopher Koelsch (U.S.), Ilaria Lanzino (Italy), Joan Matabosch (Spain), Beth Morrison (U.S.), Matthew Ozawa (U.S.), Pedro Salazar (Colombia), Iris Lanfen Wei (China)

### Elevating Human Values

Framing Debate: 2:00 p.m. – 3:15 p.m. | Omni Los Angeles Hotel, Bunker Hill Ballroom  
Discussion Groups: 3:45 p.m. – 5:00 p.m. | Omni Los Angeles Hotel, Various

*Featuring:* Paolo Bortolameolli (Chile), Deborah Brevoort (U.S.), Danny Chen (Malaysia), Joanne Cole (New Zealand), Timothy Long (U.S.), Timothy O’Leary (U.S.), Paolo Petrocelli (United Arab Emirates), Jean-Pierre Primiani (Canada), Henning Ruhe (Sweden), Yuval Sharon (U.S.), Robin Whiffen (Canada)

### World Opera Forum Reception

5:30 p.m. – 6:30 p.m. | The Colburn School, South Plaza

## A Festival of Opera

Attendees of the World Opera Forum experienced the full breadth of Los Angeles’ varied and vibrant opera scene thanks to the OperaFest LA, a weeklong festival showcasing productions at seven LA-area companies. Operagoers were able to take in everything from LA Opera’s grand-scale *Turandot*, with its famed David Hockney-designed sets, to Beth Morrison Projects’ *Magdalene*, a chamber opera by 14 women composers.

“Los Angeles is one of only a few cities in North America that benefits from the creative variety of so many opera companies, large and small,” says Marc A. Scorca, president and CEO of OPERA America. “This is why we chose LA for the site of the second-ever World Opera Forum.”

In collaboration with OPERA America, seven companies joined forces to present the festival from June 1–8, 2024. The featured companies and works were:

### BETH MORRISON PROJECTS

- *Magdalene* (14 composers; Marie Howe, librettist)

### LA OPERA

- *Fire and Blue Sky* (Joel Thompson, composer; Imani Tolliver, librettist)
- *Turandot* (Giacomo Puccini, composer; Giuseppe Adami and Renato Simoni, librettists)

### LONG BEACH OPERA

- *Ipsa Dixit* (Kate Soper, composer and librettist)

### MISSION OPERA

- *The Merry Widow* (Franz Lehár, composer; Joshua Wentz, librettist)

### PACIFIC OPERA PROJECT

- *Madama Butterfly* (Giacomo Puccini, composer; Japanese and English libretto by Eiki Isomura and Josh Shaw; original Italian libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa)

### OVERTONE INDUSTRIES

- *Songs and Dances of Imaginary Lands* (11 composers; 21 librettists)

### SYNCHROMY

- *The Double* (Vera Ivanova, composer; Sarah LaBrie, librettist)
- *Minute to Midnight* (Dante De Silva, composer; Alan Olejniczak, librettist)
- *My Wings Burned Off* (Jason Barabba, composer; June Carryl, librettist)

The festival garnered significant press attention, demonstrating the potential of what companies can achieve when they work collectively. “OperaFest LA is enough to keep our [city’s] visitors busy and, one hopes, intrigued,” wrote Mark Swed of the *Los Angeles Times*, “The expected grandeur, the time and space business, the big emotions, big ideas and big voices, we’ve got it all.”

AGENDA

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 5

Becoming Engaged Cultural Citizens

Framing Debate: 9:00 a.m. – 10:15 a.m. | Omni Los Angeles Hotel, Bunker Hill Ballroom  
Discussion Groups: 10:45 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. | Omni Los Angeles Hotel, Various

*Featuring:* Jan Henric Bogen (Switzerland), Antonio C. Cuyler (U.S.), Khorī Dastoor (U.S.), Larry Desrochers (Canada), Gabriela Lena Frank (U.S.), Asad Lalljee (India), Carmen Gloria Larenas (Chile), Javier Menéndez (Spain), Barbara Minghetti (Italy), Andrea Caruso Saturnino (Brazil), Sebastian F. Schwarz (Italy)

Closing/Relay Session: Making a Case for Opera in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

1:45 p.m. – 2:30 p.m. | Omni Hotel, Bunker Hill Ballroom

*Featuring:* Deborah Brevoort (U.S.), Larry Desrochers (Canada), Flavia Furtado (Brazil), Bibian Kalinde (Zambia), Christopher Koelsch (U.S.), Ilaria Lanzino (Italy), Barbara Minghetti (Italy), Missy Mazzoli (U.S.), Henning Ruhe (Sweden), Marc A. Scorca (U.S.)

WATCH THE WORLD OPERA FORUM SESSIONS



Watch videos of all the World Opera Forum’s framing debates at [operaamerica.org/WOFVideos](https://operaamerica.org/WOFVideos)

SUMMARY REPORT:  
THE WORLD OPERA FORUM  
RECONVENES By Fred Cohn

“We’re all here to talk about the art form we love, and the challenges and opportunities we face as we work to enrich the world around us and the communities we serve,” said Marc A. Scorca, president and CEO of OPERA America, as he kicked off the 2024 World Opera Forum, a three-day international discussion of the state of opera and the paths it might follow as it moves forward.

This was the second assembly of the forum: The first had been held in Madrid in 2018. The initial objective was to stage the World Opera Forum on a quadrennial basis, with a reconvening in 2022. But the coronavirus intervened, and the present forum arrived two years late. The 2024 forum brought together 56 delegates from 26 countries, and from all of the world’s six inhabited continents. In his opening comments, Scorca noted that the LA locale made participation easier for delegates to attend from Asia and Oceania; among them were representatives from Australia, China, Japan, India, Malaysia, New Zealand, and South Korea. The city’s status as a hub of global entertainment made it a fitting setting for a convocation of arts leaders.

The crux of the forum consisted of three “framing debates,” in which all participants gathered to hear panels of roughly 10 to 15 delegates address a particular theme. The topics were:

- What We Produce, How We Produce It, and for Whom
- Elevating Human Values
- Becoming Engaged Cultural Citizens

Audience members were encouraged to offer their own input via a digital platform that allowed them to pose questions and make comments, supplementing the onstage discourse. After each framing debate, participants broke into three smaller discussion groups, each featuring a panel of about a dozen delegates who further explored the issues raised in the preceding forum-wide session.

The conversations continued outside of the formal events, at receptions, performances, and chance encounters at the Omni Los Angeles Hotel, where most of the forum’s sessions took place. Participants also had the opportunity to see a handful of local performances thanks to OperaFest LA, a weeklong festival showcasing the productions of seven LA-area companies. (See “A Festival of Opera,” p. 12.)

WHAT’S CHANGED SINCE 2018?

It is hard to imagine a more disruptive six-year span than the one between the first World Opera Forum, in 2018, and the forum’s 2024 edition. In the interim between the two gatherings, the pandemic wreaked havoc on the industry’s operations, shutting down theaters worldwide and impelling companies to develop new strategies for producing opera and reaching audiences. The current opera landscape, although it has in some respects returned to its pre-pandemic contours, has inevitably been shaped by the coronavirus’ disruptions.

# SUMMARY REPORT

The industry, too, has felt the profound impact of many other global developments — including new technologies like AI, the effects of climate change, and war and migration — which have reshaped the ways artists and audiences relate to the world around them.

Another industry-shaping event in the U.S. was the 2020 murder of George Floyd and the protest movement that erupted in its wake. Although the field had grappled with the issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion for some time already, these topics have taken on a special urgency over the past four years.

In this context, the topic of the World Opera Forum’s first session was an apt one: “What has changed since 2018?” One thing that nobody could argue with is that the change has been significant. In many cases, the pre-pandemic status quo is now reasserting itself, dampening the sense of exploration, innovation, and progress that emerged during the height of the pandemic.

One development during this period has been the emergence of digital opera. To be sure, some companies, now that they have returned to live performance, are expending less effort in the digital realm than they did during the pandemic. But at the same time, digital offerings have brought a whole new audience to the art form.

No question that COVID brought notable transformation to opera’s workplaces. The pandemic has made employees and their managers alike more sensitive to how they spend their time, and to separate the essential from the extraneous. Similarly, the work on stage must reflect a new sense of necessity and urgency, rather than serving as a mere recapitulation of past practices.

- Among the points the discussion touched upon:
- Audiences have become more discriminating in deciding how to spend their time and money. With so many media and leisure options at the public’s disposal, opera producers must make special efforts to retain their existing audiences and attract new ones.
  - “Participation” is now a buzzword internationally. Hot-button events, like the war in Ukraine and the murder of George Floyd, have increased expectations that the arts will engage with the world around them.
  - For all the disruptions that the pandemic caused, it has also forced opera professionals to exercise their creativity to achieve a new degree of nimbleness.

## From the Delegates:

“The pandemic changed everything about the way we think about opera. It gave us a moment to think about our professions, our lives, and our artistic creations. For a brief moment, we were exploring what it looks like to do things that were hyper-local, that were not in the opera house, that invited new voices to the table.”

— **Yuval Sharon, founder and artistic co-director, The Industry; artistic director, Detroit Opera**

“A different kind of audience is coming to opera. The public wants to be more participative. The idea of having an opera on the stage, and just watching that opera — for some, it’s not enough.”

— **Carmen Gloria Larenas, general director, Teatro Municipal de Santiago**

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“We were having conversations that a majority of us would have agreed with in principle, but they weren’t in practice — conversations about equity, about gender parity, about leadership being reflective of the communities we work in. Because of the pandemic, these conversations have been bumped into practice. We’re not just six years ahead of where we would have been: We’ve gone much further.”

— **Michael Hidetoshi Mori, artistic and general director, Tapestry Opera**

“The murder of George Floyd was a pivot point — a moment when everyone was paying attention to race and equity in a different way than before. But what I’m seeing now is a slap-back. It’s a little sad to see specific challenges to work that has been making the field better — the diversity of artists, the diversity in administrative staff, the diversity of the board — all of which has been bringing new thought to the field.”

— **Nadege Souvenir, chief executive officer, San Antonio Area Foundation; board member, OPERA America**

## MAKING A CASE FOR OPERA IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

While the opening session of the World Opera Forum explored the changes of the recent past, the second discussion of the opening day, “Making a Case for Opera in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” took a broader look at the issues and challenges facing the industry in our era and beyond. The session, labeled an “Introduction,” set up the issues that would be discussed over the next two days.

The discussion reflected the reality of opera in our century. It is no longer enough for companies to make their “case” solely through producing the great works of the past, no matter how outstanding these efforts might be. Instead, a company must justify its existence — to funders, to audiences, and to its community — through its engagement with the culture at large.

One way that the art form may adapt to our present time is through expanding the very definition of opera. It can encompass more than the inherited, mainly European repertoire. Bibian Kalinde, of the Pan African Society for Musical Arts Education, spoke of the ways that Africa’s music and performing traditions, while not necessarily corresponding to received notions of “opera,” still incorporate many of the same elements. “Opera is closest to what music is in Africa,” she said.

Two participants discussed opera’s potential for healing. Galyna Grygorenko of Open Opera Ukraine spoke of her theater as a “shelter” — both literal and metaphorical — in the midst of war. Flavia Furtado of Brazil’s Amazonas Opera Festival spoke of a puppet version of *L’enfant et les sortilèges* that her company brought to a small Indigenous community. People in the audience were so moved by the performance they danced for the troupe, as an exchange of culture.

Of course, the voice lies at the center of opera. The bass Morris Robinson suggested that the universal appeal of the human voice is the element that makes opera speak across time and cultures.

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From the Delegates:

“Opera is a relatively new genre in South Africa. But the grandeur of opera has a lot of appeal. It’s a tool to draw more audiences”

— Magdalene Minnaar, artistic director, Cape Town Opera

“When the opera theater is still working, that means that life is going on. People can go there to see that we still celebrate life. We are not hiding; we are not in fear.”

— Galyna Grygorenko, cofounder, Open Opera Ukraine

“Opera is not one thing, but many art forms.”

— Bibian Kalinde, president, Pan African Society for Musical Arts Education

“What does opera do that other art forms can’t? It’s a complex psychological layering — more than film, more so than straight theater. The text can be saying one thing; the music can be saying something different.”

— Missy Mazzoli, composer

“The one thing that makes opera unique is the human voice and the emotions the human voice conjures up in other people. You can read poetry about going to sleep and having a good night, but it doesn’t feel the same way as when your mother says it to you.”

— Morris Robinson, bass

“We are rightly determined to be a living and thriving artistic experience. It’s laughable to suggest that a museum could entertain my teenage kids the same way it engaged my parents 50 years ago. They’ve learned to tell different stories in different ways.”

— Laura Canning, general director and CEO, Opera North

“The thrill of a sublime cast, orchestra, and production is why this art form becomes integral to so many people’s lives. We just have to expand the vessel.”

— Mark Taylor, executive director, State Opera South Australia

WHAT WE PRODUCE, HOW WE PRODUCE IT, AND FOR WHOM

Following Monday’s introduction of the themes and concerns of the 2024 World Opera Forum, Tuesday’s sessions delved more fully into specific issues. The day’s first framing debate, “What We Produce, How We Produce It, and for Whom,” looked at repertoire. Panelists explored the sometimes conflicting demands of honoring the inherited opera tradition and presenting offerings that speak to our own time.

Geographic differences asserted themselves during the session. In general, panelists from countries where opera is a native art form — that is, much of the European contingent — argued for protecting its heritage, while those from countries that have imported opera sought to find new forms of community connection. Joan Matabosch, the artistic director of Madrid’s Teatro Real, spoke of his allegiance to the “established code” of opera. “You cannot ignore tradition,” he said. Americans were more likely to see “inclusion” as a core principle in their operations and hiring, while Europeans tended to regard onstage results as the expression of a company’s values.

“There are audience members who prefer the inherited rep, but they’re shrinking,” said Afton Battle, vice president of Lyric Unlimited and artistic operations at Lyric Opera of

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Chicago. “We have a responsibility in the opera business to diversify and create a safe space for new audiences.”

A big part of creating that “safe space,” Battle explained, was drawing the community into production decisions. The task was to offer “not the programming we think people need; it’s what the community tells us they want. The idea is ‘Don’t talk about us without us.’”

Rebecca Hass, director of engagement programs and partnerships at Pacific Opera Victoria, endorsed the sentiment with a Native American saying: “Don’t walk in front of us; don’t walk behind us. Walk with us.”

Answering the prompt “How can opera change and remain itself?,” producer Beth Morrison referenced the contemporary chamber operas that make up her bread-and-butter. “We’re living in a black-box moment,” she said. She nonetheless paid tribute to the variety of the operatic experience, citing two of the operas that participants were attending that week: “There’s room for both *Magdalene* and *Turandot*,” Morrison said.

In countries where opera is a relatively recent introduction, producers showed a preference for the European classics. For instance, the first post-pandemic offering of Colombia’s La Compañía Estable was *Tosca*. “Colombia is not part of the bigger operatic map,” said Pedro Salazar, the company’s director: The Puccini classic was a bid to involve his audiences in an art form that was largely unfamiliar to them. And Iris Lanfen Wei, director of production and artistic administration of China’s National Centre for the Performing Arts, explained her rationale for producing Gounod’s *Roméo et Juliette*. “We have no opera tradition,” she said, “but [audiences] know the story.”

The toxic nature of some pieces in the inherited repertoire also came into focus. “Some pieces don’t allow access for all people,” said Matthew Ozawa, chief artistic administration officer at Lyric Opera of Chicago. “I don’t see myself in *Turandot* or *Butterfly*.”

Director Ilaria Lanzino spoke of a production she staged of Stanisław Moniuszko’s 1860 *Jawnuta* at Poznań Opera. The composer is a central figure in Polish musical history, but *Jawnuta* presents a view of Romany people that smacks of racism. “My job was to challenge the composer,” Lanzino said.

In the ensuing breakout discussions, delegates further explored the topics raised in the framing debate. Laura Canning, general director and CEO of the U.K.’s Opera North, questioned the assumption that works of the operatic canon were by their nature out of sync with contemporary concerns, drawing an analogy to her country’s long-established tradition of reinterpretations of Shakespeare. “Nobody questions the relevance of Shakespeare,” she said.

“We are opposing tradition and innovation,” said Louis Langrée, general director of Paris’ Théâtre National de l’Opéra-Comique. “But remember, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, every composer was writing contemporary pieces.”

From the Delegates:

“We risk becoming a club for the initiated that will become smaller and smaller as the years go on. If we are to survive at all, we must galvanize new audiences and meet them where they are.”

— Beth Morrison, president and creative producer, Beth Morrison Projects

“Diversified storytelling matters. Many of today’s audiences are hungry for stories told in new ways and in new spaces. We need practitioners able to give life to these operas, often hundreds of years old, and make them live as if they’d been written yesterday.”

— Jo Davies, artistic director, Opera Australia

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“It’s always struck me that part of the pleasure of opera is the prognostication of its imminent demise, and this has been true since its inception. We build the scaffolding in order to be able to hold up a mirror to talk about ourselves, to ourselves. Our most solemn duty is to invite each other to have a conversation about what our past is, what our current state is, and what we want the future to be. Opera is one of the last arenas we have left in which we can reasonably contemplate the idea of a common humanity. It is the arena of extreme expression. We seem to be more afraid than I think we should be. Opera is resilient and it is capacious, and we should lean into that.”

— Christopher Koelsch, president and CEO, LA Opera

“What I witness in our discussions in-house, is ‘We want you, the new audience, to come and love our thing the way we love our thing.’ Why can’t we build audiences for things as they are instead of how they used to be?”

— Rebecca Hass, director of engagement programs and partnerships, Pacific Opera Victoria

“At the moment, contemporary politics is driving us toward a polemic. What we have [in opera] is an arena where we can make space for really difficult conversations, where we can have two people with totally contradictory opinions sit next to each other experiencing the same story. So, it’s our responsibility to not be afraid that, to not accept the polemic, but to actually keep making space for broader conversations.”

— Jo Davies, artistic director, Opera Australia

## ELEVATING HUMAN VALUES

If Tuesday morning’s “What We Produce” sessions focused on the face opera organizations present to the world, the afternoon sessions invited them to look inward toward their own operations. “Elevating Human Values” invited opera leaders to examine their dealings with staff and freelance personnel and reflect on how these relationships demonstrate a company’s core values.

A company’s values may be embodied in its dealings with BIPOC populations. Timothy Long of the Eastman School of Music talked about the need for American organizations to address the Native American population. Joanne Cole, director of artistic planning and participation at New Zealand Opera, talked about “offering space” for the acknowledgment of her country’s Maori population in a manner that went beyond mere “virtue-signaling.” Paolo Petrocelli of Dubai Opera discussed the challenges of building consensus within a culturally diverse staff, many of its members having no previous exposure to opera.

A consensus emerged about the importance of building concurrence within organizations and showing respect to everyone involved in a company’s operations — artists, creators, crew, administrative staff. Henning Ruhe, artistic director of Sweden’s Göteborg Opera, described how his company put a priority on inclusion, group decisions, and consensus. This creates a situation where all stakeholders are on board with company decisions. The downside: It may take months to finalize a decision.

Yuval Sharon, artistic director of Detroit Opera, pointed to his company’s policy of paying singers on a per-performance basis — a practice that implies that artists are only as valuable

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as the results they eventually deliver and takes no note of the myriad sacrifices they make when they leave their homes for extended periods to devote themselves to the chore at hand. He is trying to institute a system of compensating the cast for a production’s entire rehearsal. Of course, Sharon’s proposed shift in operations would require a commensurate financial adjustment. “The way that organizations express their values is in their budgets,” he said.

Session participants acknowledged that the field makes it difficult for its practitioners to raise families. Librettist Deborah Brevoort said that she felt, early in her career, that she had to choose between pursuing her art and having children.

Among the panelists, only Washington National Opera’s Timothy O’Leary — a husband and a father — talked of his family life. He mentioned WNO’s implementation of a post-season week of “rest and reflection” for its staff, with a moratorium on meetings and emails, as an acknowledgment of the need for work-life balance.

Still, Robin Whiffen, executive director of Toronto’s Against the Grain Theatre, cautioned against the paternalism implicit in describing employees as making up a company’s “family.” “They’re not our other families,” she said. “In order to ensure efficiency, you have to build relationships and trust. It doesn’t have to be huge. It’s about knowing that people are people.”

### From the Delegates:

“America does not educate Americans on Native Americans — at all.”

— Timothy Long, artistic and music director of opera, Eastman School of Music

“The budget is a moral document.”

— Timothy O’Leary, general director, Washington National Opera

“You’re never going to establish trust by saying, ‘This is the best culture I can offer you guys.’ Take the time to listen and absorb.”

— Paolo Petrocelli, head, Dubai Opera

## BECOMING ENGAGED CULTURAL CITIZENS

“Becoming Engaged Cultural Citizens” was the topic for the morning of Wednesday, June 5 — the last day of the World Opera Forum. The discussion centered on the need for the field to reach beyond itself. It encouraged opera professionals to look at their work not just through the prism of the art form alone, but through their role in the community at large. The field’s capacity to communicate can help forge connections with its established audience and with people who have not — and may never — end up setting foot in an opera house. At the crux was the potential tension between public service and aesthetics: Does a commitment to one of those elements come at the expense of the other?

Composer Gabriela Lena Frank noted that as a music student, when she volunteered at a correctional facility, her efforts were regarded with suspicion. “The messaging that we musicians get is that you can be a music-ed person, you can be a civic volunteer, or you can be good at your craft,” she said. “And this is an awful, self-defeating, persistent message.”

Still, the general consensus at the panel discussion was that opera has a mandate to engage with its communities. Larry Desrochers of Manitoba Opera offered as an example

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his company’s decision, for its 2014 production of *Fidelio*, to include in the cast recent refugees: victims of political oppression, just like Beethoven’s protagonists. “Empathy is the currency of art,” he explained.

Once again, a disparity emerged between the attitudes of European organizations and those in other parts of the world. European leaders on the panel placed a priority on the “quality” of their offerings, as manifest in the preservation of the inherited repertory. “There is nobody else to produce opera if it’s not us,” said Sebastian F. Schwarz, artistic director of Italy’s Festival della Valle d’Itria. “We need to keep alive the huge cultural heritage that has been given to us.”

Elsewhere, the “heritage” holds less sway. Carmen Gloria Larenas, general director of Chile’s Teatro Municipal de Santiago, said that her company avoids mentioning “opera” in its marketing materials. “The word ‘opera’ is complicated in some countries — it means too many things,” she said. Asad Lalljee, curator of the Royal Opera House in Mumbai, spoke of the challenges of offering opera in a country with no established operatic tradition.

Leaders from North American companies, more than their European counterparts, testified to the risk of being seen as nonessential. The reliance on private funding creates a mandate to look past the inherited repertory in order to attract corporate and individual donors, and to justify their worth to the community. But community engagement has its own pitfalls, as Antonio C. Cuyler, professor of music in entrepreneurship and leadership at the University of Michigan, pointed out. He issued a caution against paternalism — or, as he put it, “White saviorism — the idea that we’re taking culture to people who don’t have culture.”

“We need to serve everybody,” said Khorī Dastoor of Houston Grand Opera. “We’re more adept at playing in the pool with people like ourselves. We need to humble ourselves, and say to our communities, ‘We don’t know how to do this.’”

From the Delegates:

“The theater has the responsibility of engaging with the lives of the people in our community — and not only the people who come to the opera.”

— Javier Menéndez, director general, Teatro de la Maestranza

“Art has always been a political act; an act of resistance; an act of commentary. Communicating its immense power — cultivating not just shared experience but revelation, intellectual curiosity, empathy, and the unrivaled power of collective purpose and pursuit — is at the essence of what we do.”

— Khorī Dastoor, general director and CEO, Houston Grand Opera

“To broaden opera’s reach and social impact, companies can reinterpret classic operas through a modern lens, highlighting the harsh realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century by addressing real-life issues — from climate change to misinformation in the post-truth era. The operatic performances built around these themes will spark conversations, cultivate empathy, and foster a deeper connection with the community.”

— Asad Lalljee, curator, Royal Opera House Mumbai

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“Imagine a sustained effort on a grander scale on the part of a company — if there were a commitment to producing 25 to 50 percent of the season’s repertory as high-quality operas that connect especially with local communities. Imagine a commitment to tell one Asian story a year, one story from Latin America, one from Europe, one of the Black experience, and so forth. This would indeed mean reducing the number of standard operas. This is a scary thought for many, but we simply have to move into the future.”

— Gabriela Lena Frank, composer

“Isn’t it really about what moves human beings? If you live in a diverse society, and you put out art that talks about the issues that concern the majority of people in that society, it’s going to move them more.”

— Laura Berman, intendant, Staatsoper Hannover

MAKING A CASE FOR OPERA IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY — RECONSIDERED

The closing session of the World Opera Forum also served as the launch of OPERA America’s annual conference, Opera Conference 2024, which followed the forum. It returned to a topic from the first day of the World Opera Forum: “Making a Case for Opera in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” The process of circling back allowed forum participants to take stock of the issues that had been raised over the previous days.

The panel was unanimous in its fundamental optimism about the art form, its sense of key virtues that the art form must continue to embody, and its belief in opera’s transformative power. One point of contention emerged, though, about the emphasis on the “social project” of effecting change: Would an emphasis on the “social project” of opera impede the long-standing goal of achieving quality?

Despite areas of disagreement among the participants, all shared a commitment to their communities and a passion for the art form. A fundamental optimism prevailed — perhaps because of belief in the transformative power of opera.

From the Delegates:

“We’ve been challenged to get out of our own bubbles.”

— Henning Ruhe, artistic director, GöteborgsOperan

“Opera people crazy love opera.”

— Deborah Brevoort, librettist

“I’ve heard a lot of measured optimism around the power of the art form to unite.”

— Christopher Koelsch, president and CEO, LA Opera

# FINAL REFLECTIONS

By Marc A. Scorca, president/CEO, OPERA America

This report provides only a summary of the rich discussions that filled the days in Los Angeles. Individual comments and connections made during formal sessions, at performances, and during social events contributed to constant learning and increased camaraderie on a global scale.

I came away with several additional observations that are entirely personal but have left a lasting memory from the second World Opera Forum. First, there is a fundamental difference between members who come from countries where opera is a native art form and those who come from countries to which opera has been imported.

In the former, making the case for opera is animated by a commitment to preserving and promoting part of a national heritage — a key element of European culture with various national iterations. The arts in Europe have enjoyed tremendous government support to sustain and advance centuries of artistic inheritance. In recent years, however, this support has been eroding under the pressure of economic and geopolitical tensions. Opera leaders are searching for new approaches to defending the primacy of supporting culture as a government responsibility.

In countries to which opera is imported, opera advocates fight for legitimacy. They work to find an audience for an art form that is performed in “foreign” languages, is rooted in a European view of the world and its people, and for many years has been promoted as an entertainment for an elite slice of the population. Lacking a consistent commitment from public agencies, companies outside of Europe develop strategies to increase private support from corporations and individual patrons. Finding alignment with defining civic priorities and developing new works that resonate with the world around us — in our own languages — are central elements of this effort.

My second observation brings together two seemingly disparate lines of thinking. In the course of the opening and closing sessions when panelists explored the nuances of making a case for opera in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I noted a distinction among their comments. Some made arguments for supporting the relevance and value of works from the inherited repertoire (mostly of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They noted universal themes that, treated thoughtfully, can make even old works relevant to the world around us. Other panelists argued that new works of the 21<sup>st</sup> century were essential to making the case for opera in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Although it was unspoken, there seemed to be agreement that understanding and appreciating works from the past should complement and inform a steady flow of new work to create a vibrant interplay of tradition and innovation. Important, however, was an urgent request that artists who are encouraged to enter the world of opera should be resourced generously to give them a chance to experiment, learn, and succeed.

Different perspectives are valuable. They offer points of learning for all of us and sharpen our understanding of our unique position in the spectrum of opera’s creation, production, and enjoyment.

This leads me to my final observation. The 2024 World Opera Forum differed from the 2018 forum in Madrid in a way that reflects the almost universal polarization of today’s public discourse. In Los Angeles, participants seemed more fixed in their perspectives and less willing to enter into debate with people with different points of view rooted in their own socio-political histories. Participants appeared more ready to dispute and criticize those with whom they disagreed than to listen and learn about others. They missed an opportunity to hear how different lived experiences can result in different opinions. They also may have missed an opportunity to refine and crystalize their own points of view through the crucible of engaged discourse. I look forward to a future convening at which there is general acknowledgment that differences actually enrich and strengthen the entire opera community.

The 2024 World Opera Forum demonstrated that opera is animated by people across the globe who feel passionately about the art form and its ability to elevate human stories and inspire audiences with the virtuosity of great performances. This foundational commitment to opera assures me that we will discover many and varied ways to support its evolution and vibrancy into the future.



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