FINANCIAL STATISTICS: CANADIAN OPERA • NEW WORKS ON CD

OPERA CANADA

FALL 2025

Camellia Koo

Constant sharing of inspirations

Letter from Europe

Highlights from Aix-en-Provence, Bayreuth and Salzburg

NEW ON THE SCENE

JACLYN GROSSMAN

2025 RUBIES ISSUE

Jane Archibald
Larry Desrochers
Teiya Kasahara 笠原貞野
Chantal Lambert


They laughed when I sang Nessun Dorma, but...
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NOTEBOOK

BY MICHAEL JONES

Opera Canada *is just like any other small arts organization.*

At our annual general meeting over the summer, Opera Canada Publications was delighted to announce that, in 2024, we'd managed to retire almost half of our accumulated deficit. This was largely thanks to the Jackman Foundation, who offered us a matching grant to help pay off our CEBA loan from COVID times, and to our many readers and supporters, who met that challenge with extraordinary generosity.

Of course, we continue to fundraise, and over the summer *Opera Canada* sent out another individual fundraising appeal. People have once again responded generously, and we continue to be grateful to all donors – large and small – for financial support beyond your annual subscriptions. Just as companies say, "Your ticket price covers only a portion of our costs," *Opera Canada* knows that we need to rely on government support and fundraising in addition to our earned revenue.

Plus, arts councils consider the ways that people – subscribers, single copy (ticket) purchasers, donors and volunteers – support companies when they are allotting funds. Your donated dollars are something we can use to help us strengthen our case for public funding.

So, if you are able and you haven't done so already, please consider making a secure donation to *Opera Canada* online through the Canada Helps website (canadahelps.org). Through their website, you can choose to make a one-time gift, set up a monthly donation or make a donation of securities. They process everything and send your tax receipt directly to you – and they put the money directly into our bank account.

I find it hard to believe that a full year has gone by since my first issue with the magazine where we celebrated the 2024 Ruby recipients. In 2025, we're delighted to honour four more incredibly worthy individuals: Jane Archibald, Larry Desrochers, Teiya Kasahara 笠原貞野 and Chantal Lambert. As I worked with the writers on the feature articles in this issue, I was delighted to learn so much – new things about people whose work I had long admired as well as introductions to people of whom I had only heard. This issue also continues Wayne Gooding's annual tradition of looking at the finances of the 40 largest opera companies in the country – a powerful resource for the sector.

I hope you enjoy the issue as much as I do. One year after I started this work, it continues to be an honour for me to share the stories of Canadians working in this incredible art form. OC

—michael@operacanada.ca.

OPERACANADA

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COVER PHOTO
Jane Archibald in the title role of *The Cunning Little Vixen* at the Canadian Opera Company
Photo: Michael Cooper.

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ONTARIO CREATES

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OCTOBER

Staatsoper Hamburg

Ambur Braid, whom *Bachtrack* called "born to play Salome," returns to the role for one performance on October 5th in Hamburg opposite the Jochanaan of Kyle Ketelsen. **staatsoper-hamburg.de**

Edmonton Opera

On October 9th and 11th, Edmonton Opera presents *Bravi!: Opera's Greatest Hits* in partnership with the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra. Soloists include acclaimed soprano **Miriam Khalil** and rising Canadian singers Tessa Fackelmann and Zachary Rioux. **edmontonopera.com**

Lyric Opera of Chicago

Canadian superstar soprano **Sondra Radvanovsky** returns to Sir David McVicar's production of *Medea*, October 11-26 at the Lyric Opera of Chicago. **lyricopera.org**

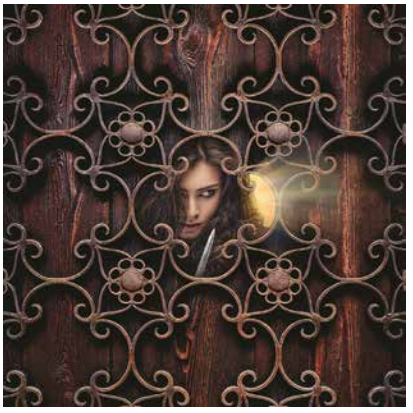
Opera Atelier, Toronto

A perennial favourite, Opera Atelier's beautiful production of *The Magic Flute* plays October 15th through 19th. Tenor Colin Ainsworth sings Tamino, and Meghan Lindsay and Douglas Williams make their role debuts as Pamina and Papageno. **operaatelier.com**

NOVEMBER

Dallas Opera

The Dallas Opera premiere of *Dialogues des Carmélites* (November 7-15) features Canadian soprano **Joyce El-Khoury** as Blanche de la Force. **dallasopera.org**



Manitoba Opera, Winnipeg

From November 22nd through 28th, American soprano Marina Costa-Jackson will be Tosca at Manitoba Opera, opposite Canadians David Pomeroy as Cavaradossi and Gregory Dahl as Scarpia. **mbopera.ca**

Opéra de Montréal

Renowned Canadian filmmaker **Atom Egoyan** directs a new production of Janáček's Jenůfa running November 22-30, conducted by Nicole Paiement and featuring many Canadian singers. **operademontreal.com**

DECEMBER

Metropolitan Opera, New York

Canadian conductor **Kwamé Ryan** makes his Met debut with this year's revival of the Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, opening December 2nd and running through the holiday season until January 24th. **metopera.org**

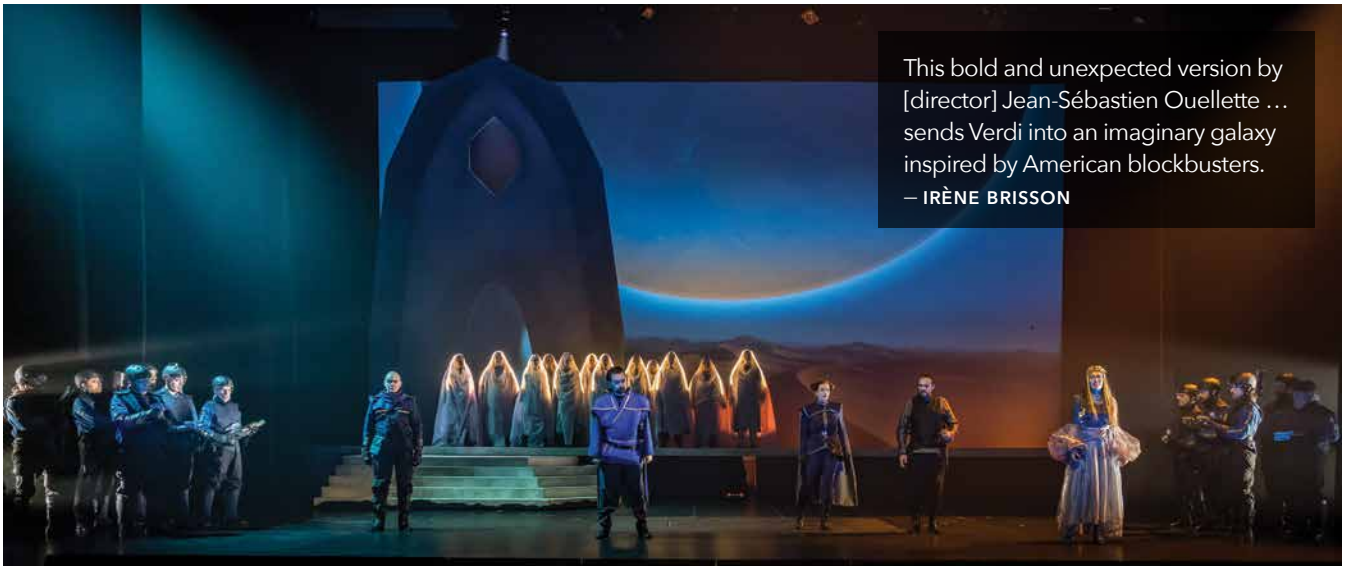
PHOTOS: (LEFT PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT) JENNIFER TOOLE, SHAYNE GRAY, CEDRIC ANGELES, BRUCE ZINGER; (RIGHT PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP) BEYOND THE IMAGE MEDIA, FAHIM KASSAM, VOLKER RENNER, MANITOBA OPERA

REVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

→ Productions that opened between **May 1, 2025** and **July 31, 2025**

Il trovatore

OPÉRA DE QUÉBEC



This bold and unexpected version by [director] Jean-Sébastien Ouellette … sends Verdi into an imaginary galaxy inspired by American blockbusters.
— **IRÈNE BRISSON**

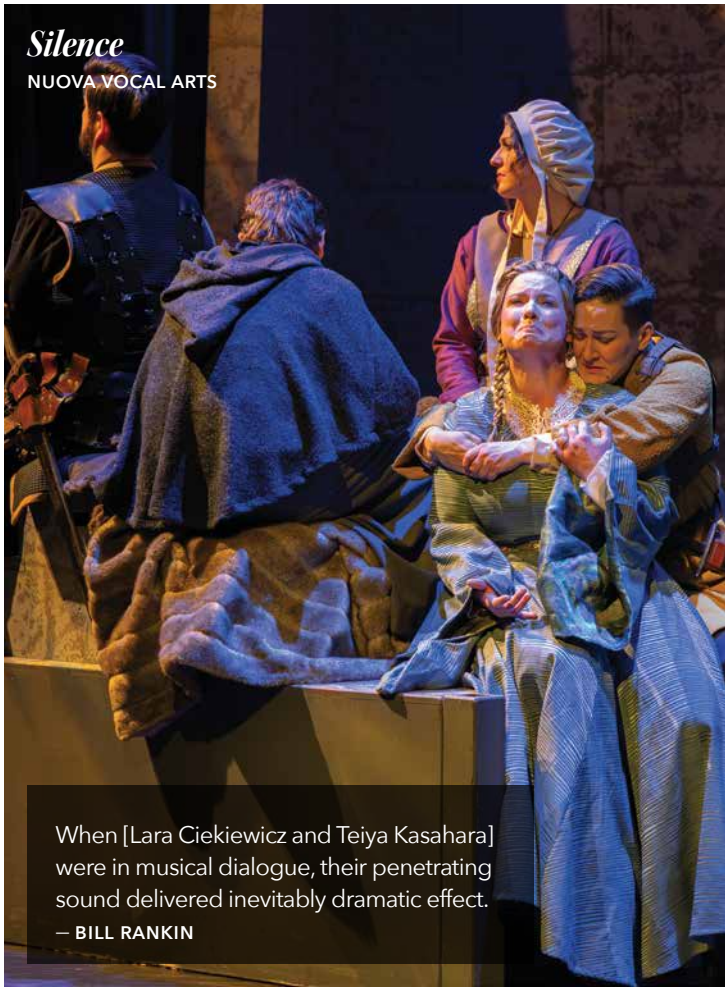
Sophia's Forest

CITY OPERA VANCOUVER

It illustrates the strength of this opera [despite] the near-impossibility of portraying such a profound subject over such a tight timeline.
— **SUZANNE STEELE**

Silence

NUOVA VOCAL ARTS



When [Lara Ciekiewicz and Teiya Kasahara] were in musical dialogue, their penetrating sound delivered inevitably dramatic effect.
— **BILL RANKIN**

PHOTOS: (LEFT PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): VIVIEN GAUMAND, NANC PRICE, MICHELLE DIAMOND; (RIGHT PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): BOB HATCHER PHOTOGRAPHY, DAHLIA KATZ, NANC PRICE

Carmen

BROTT OPERA, HAMILTON

Queen Hezumuryango was vocally strong, her low earthy tones contrasting with her more passionate, soaring notes. – **DAWN MARTENS**

Sanctuary Song

TAPESTRY OPERA, TORONTO

It is a contemporary piece that is emotionally poignant but not weighed down by the intensity of traumatic narratives.
– **JANE FORNER**

Die Walküre

EDMONTON OPERA

The singing was generally superb, and the small distance between the performers and the audience enhanced the intimate scenes. – **BILL RANKIN**

For full reviews of these productions and other performances from Canadian companies and from Canadian artists working internationally, visit **operacanada.ca.** →

JACLYN GROSSMAN

BY CATHERINE KUSTANCZY

PHOTO: JESSICA OSBER

Singing Brünnhilde is a dream come true for any dramatic soprano – especially Jaclyn Grossman.

The Canadian soprano calls her time with Edmonton Opera earlier this year "one of the most meaningful and challenging experiences I've ever had." Wagner's immense *Die Walküre* was presented in June at the Maclab Theatre at Citadel Theatre in a reduced arrangement by English composer Jonathan Dove and helmed by company artistic director Joel Ivany.

Grossman's road to the role can be traced to her teen years, when, she recalls with a laugh, "I would belt my face off trying to be Idina Menzel or Christina Aguilera."

Grossman graduated from the University of Ottawa and McGill University's opera and voice programs. It was at the former that she learned her voice type. "On the first day of my undergrad I sang a Schubert song, and my professor immediately said: you're a dramatic soprano – Brünnhilde, Tosca, Lady Macbeth – this is your future."

Those words would prove prophetic. Grossman and bass baritone Neil Craighead (as Wotan) were praised in *BroadwayWorld* for being "especially captivating to watch, particularly when Brünnhilde pleads her irate but heartbroken father to reconsider her banishment."

A work trip to Germany earlier this year – to Deutsche Oper Berlin, Staatsoper Unter den Linden (Berlin) and Oper Frankfurt – was especially helpful. "Wagner is their bread and butter," she says of the people she studied with. "They know all the secrets, all the little things that you would never know unless someone tells you."

That trip complemented over a year of preparation. "It's nerve-wracking to sing these intensely long passages that need careful pacing, to build stamina, to be able to sing this role not only once, but in back-to-back shows," she explains. "My teacher kept saying: trust your technique – you've done the work. I realized as we were rehearsing that she was right."

Grossman names Strauss's Chrysothemis (*Elektra*) as another dream role, but she is equally passionate about non-German repertoire, including the operas of Verdi. Italian music is, she says, "important for my development, growth and vocal journey. I want to dip my hands into all the pots and take as much as I can from each of them."

One of those musical "pots" is the Likht Ensemble, which Grossman co-founded with pianist Nate Ben-Hori. Does she see any contradiction between its mandate – performing the music of Jewish Holocaust-era composers – and that of the notoriously anti-Semitic Wagner? "I had a moment where I thought I was maybe a bad Jew and I had to renounce him."

She cites the challenging 2017 production of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* by Barrie Kosky (in which the Jewish director puts the composer on trial) as an inspiration. "I think it's the most brilliant thing." Through extensive study and conversation, Grossman came to feel that Wagner's music is "an opportunity to open a dialogue that we're not having yet about Jewish representation, opera and society in general." OC

Speed Round with JACLYN GROSSMAN

FAVOURITE OUTFIT?

My Oodie sweater

DOGS OR CATS?

Dogs (but only because I'm so allergic to cats)

TV SHOW YOU JUST BINGE-WATCHED?

The Office

FUNNY JOKE FOR US

What do you call an alligator in a vest? An in-vest-i-gator!

For 65 years, *Opera Canada* has been the keeper of the written history of opera in this country. In this issue, we're returning to a 1975 interview with Lois McDonall, a Canadian soprano who was a resident artist at the English National Opera from 1969 through 1984.

An Interview with *Lois McDonall*

BY RUBY MERCER
from the October 1975 issue of Opera Canada

"IT'S GREAT TO BE HOME," WERE Lois McDonall's words when we met for our CBC *Opera Time* interview in September. It was slightly more than a year since she had been in Canada to sing the role of the Countess in *The Marriage of Figaro* at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa. "I came back too soon then," she said. "I wasn't ready – I should have waited. But now I *am* ready."

She was speaking of her return to Toronto and her approaching appearance with the COC as Rosalinde in *Die Fledermaus*. And it did go well. "Most stunning of the soloists was Lois McDonall," wrote critic John Kraglund in *The Globe and Mail* after opening night, "whose warm, pure voice floated effortlessly and musically."

RM: I wonder how many people know you worked at night as a laboratory technician at the Toronto General Hospital and went to the Conservatory – and later the Opera School – during the day when you were a student. That was hard!

LM: I don't know how I did it. But I have a theory that if you want something badly enough, you'll do it somehow.

RM: When you left Toronto in 1968, you first of all went to Germany, didn't you?

LM: Yes, I went to Flensburg. It was a good experience even though I sang operas that were entirely wrong for me at that time. Luckily, I didn't ruin myself because of it. But the experience and people were marvellous.

RM: How did you happen to leave there and go to England?

LM: I received a letter practically the last moment of the season to go and sing for Charles Mackerras at Sadler's Wells in London. I did it. They offered me a contract, and I've been there ever since.

RM: You actually jumped into stardom overnight... reviewing the music of a role in your mind while making a mad dash in a taxi to the opera house one night, didn't you?

LM: Yes, and that was a never-to-be-forgotten night, because they had to take me by the hand and show me the stage. The opera was Handel's *Semele*.

RM: You've certainly sung a variety of roles in the last few years, and in March you added the Marschallin in *Der Rosenkavalier*.

LM: That was another high I'll never forget. I had two hours' notice. I was covering the role and was scheduled to sing it four performances later. But the other lady took ill, and they called me and said "Hello, you're on!" Well, we had just blocked the first act! So, on I went, and again I was lucky. But I was still walking

Opera Canada, October 1975

around my house singing at four o'clock in the morning… It had been the BBC broadcast as well, and you can imagine how I felt.

RM: Can you come up with a characterization on such short notice?

LM: Well, the human being seems to be a strange animal – he can come up with characterizations very quickly sometimes. But it's draining. You couldn't do it every night. I certainly wouldn't want to have to do it more than once a year… A radio broadcast and a full house, and you're playing to both elements. It was extremely difficult.

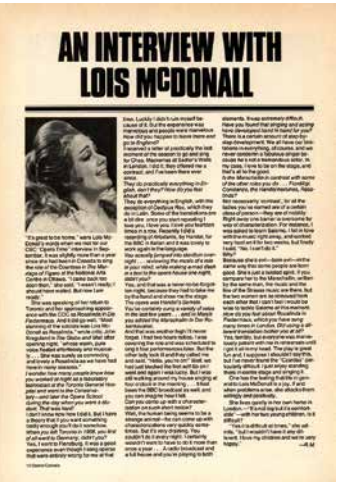
RM: Is the Marschallin a contrast with some of the other roles you do – Fiordiligi, Konstanze, the Handel heroines, Rosalinde?

LM: Not necessarily "contrast," for all the ladies you've named are of a certain class of person – they are of nobility. Right away, one barrier is overcome by way of characterization.

One has the feeling that life in general to Lois McDonall is a joy. If and when problems arise, she attacks them willingly and positively.

She lives quietly in her own home in London – "It's not big, but it's comfortable" – with her two young children. "It is difficult at times," she admits, "but I wouldn't have it any different. I love my children, and we're very happy." OC

Editor's Note: The original article has been edited for length.


AN INTERVIEW WITH LOIS McDONALL

Page from the original article, which includes Lois McDonall's 1975 publicity photograph

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF OPERA CANADA ARCHIVES

Aubrey Bergauer

Run It Like a Business

PHOTOS: WORKPLAY

BY LUCIA CESARONI

LUCIA CESARONI TALKS WITH AUBREY BERGAUER ABOUT THE CASE THAT WE SHOULDN'T HAVE TO KEEP MAKING

INTERVIEWING THE "Sandberg of the Symphony" Aubrey Bergauer was inspiring and vindicating.

Many of the issues raised in this column feature in her excellent book, *Run It Like a Business*, stuffed with strategies for retention, growth, customer experience, verticalization and diversification of revenues for the arts sector. Canadian opera companies are in dire straits. Think I'm being hyperbolic? Request their tax returns from the CRA and see for yourself, or just turn to page 28 of this issue for the data. I'll wait…

Diagnosing problems is one thing, but fixing them is far more difficult. And here's the optimistic piece – Aubrey's book has data-driven strategies with KPIs to prove they work. Her tenure as chief executive of the California Symphony was marked by a doubling of audience size and a near quadrupling of the donor base. Bergauer has championed a customer-centric, data-informed approach that delivers transformative results for performing arts organizations. We can no longer afford to continue with outmoded practices, bureaucratic mindsets and small changes rebranded as revolutions while the basic structures and culture remain the same. Bergauer has proven her big ideas work.

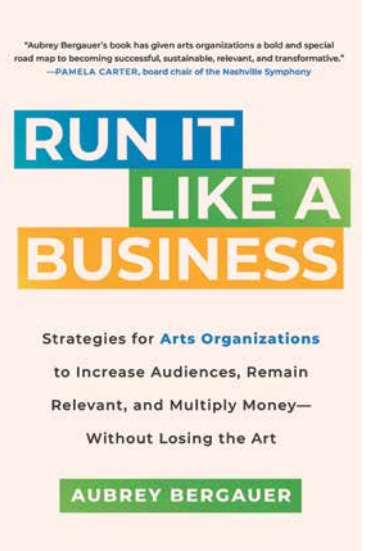
So, let's dive in.

LC: For our readers who may not have read your book yet, give us a high-level triage of the opera industry. What's broken – from mindset to data collection to customer experience?

AB: These aren't new problems. Declining audiences, dependency on major donors, and rising production costs have long been challenges. Opera is a labour-intensive art form. If we believe it should survive and thrive, we must find new ways to generate revenue that sustains our mission.

LC: Where should we start?

AB: Let's start with where *not* to start: the product. Our artists are world-class. The instinct is to fix programming – more blockbusters or more new works – but that's not the solution. We already know what sells. If we want the freedom to program boldly, revenue is what unlocks that. So, begin with a



retention plan. Every year, we get new audiences, and every year we lose most of them. Plug the holes before adding more water. Retention, along with user experience (UX), is foundational. Many pain points – confusing websites, unwelcoming environments – have nothing to do with the art itself but everything to do with why people don't return.

LC: That ties into understanding the audience. We often collect data, but we don't analyze it. Where should we focus – UX, habits, income, demographics?

AB: Great question. We overemphasize demographics and psychographics – working moms, culture lovers, etc. What's missing is behavioural segmentation. The difference between a first-timer and a 10-year subscriber is massive. Retention metrics, like first-time visitor return rates or first-year subscriber renewals, are the best predictors of future behavior and donations. Move those metrics, and you move revenue.

LC: When you say "behavioural," can you be specific?

AB: It's transactional. Who came once? Who renewed? Our industry tends to treat everyone the same – same brochure, same gala invite. But segmentation allows us to tailor messaging, get the right invitation to the right person and build more meaningful relationships.

LC: Marketing is a whole other topic, but it feels more essential than ever.

AB: Yes, and marketing has changed dramatically, especially with AI. People say, "That's for big organizations," but it's not. Tools like Tessitura offer powerful segmentation for all sizes. We have more automation tools than ever. Take Zapier, for instance – it connects systems effortlessly. Tessitura with Wordfly can trigger emails when a ticket is scanned. Yet many organizations still don't know how to talk to first-timers. It's not about fancy tech. Even basic things like mobile-friendly ticketing sites can significantly increase sales.

LC: Let's pivot to internal culture. You've talked about the need for more of a startup mindset. How do we incentivize that shift?

AB: Operational discipline is key. Artistic planning is often done years in advance – why not apply the same rigor elsewhere? Many companies don't use project management software, even though free options are available. Whether you're producing one show or seven, opera is complex. Without planning, we can't experiment or adapt. Arts administrators love the stage, but we need to be just as elite in administration.

LC: Let's go deeper into structural challenges, specifically unions. In Canada, all theatres are unionized. That's not a criticism – I'm pro-union – but the rigidity of agreements and the large number of them make innovation and real change very difficult.

AB: Agreed. Unions uphold essential values like wage equity and safety conditions, but contracts can make new ideas costly or inflexible. What helps? Better planning. If you know the rules, like the eight-hour minimum call, use every minute. Schedule marketing shoots during breaks. Maximize the space. But we also need trust and

PHOTO: WORKPLAY

courage on both sides to build in some room for experimentation. If everyone truly wants the industry to survive and thrive, we need space to try new things together.

LC: Exactly. The venues themselves, often publicly funded, are underutilized. There's demand, even from corporate clients who'd pay handsomely. But union access is a stumbling block.

AB: You're right. And often, it's about trust. Stagehands are brilliant artisans. I've had great experiences working with them. But if there's mistrust between labor and management, progress stalls. We're stuck in outdated dynamics.

LC: Let's steelman a critique you've probably heard: the arts shouldn't adopt a business mindset. It stifles creativity and doesn't align with our values.

AB: That perspective made sense once. Opera used to be society's sacred space, alongside religion. Then it became a marker of education and social status. But today, it's optional. It's entertainment. And in that category, competition is fierce. So, we have a choice: adapt and fund our work or slowly fade away. My stance isn't about abandoning values – it's about ensuring their survival. If we believe in the inherent worth of our art, we have to fund it in ways that meet today's reality.

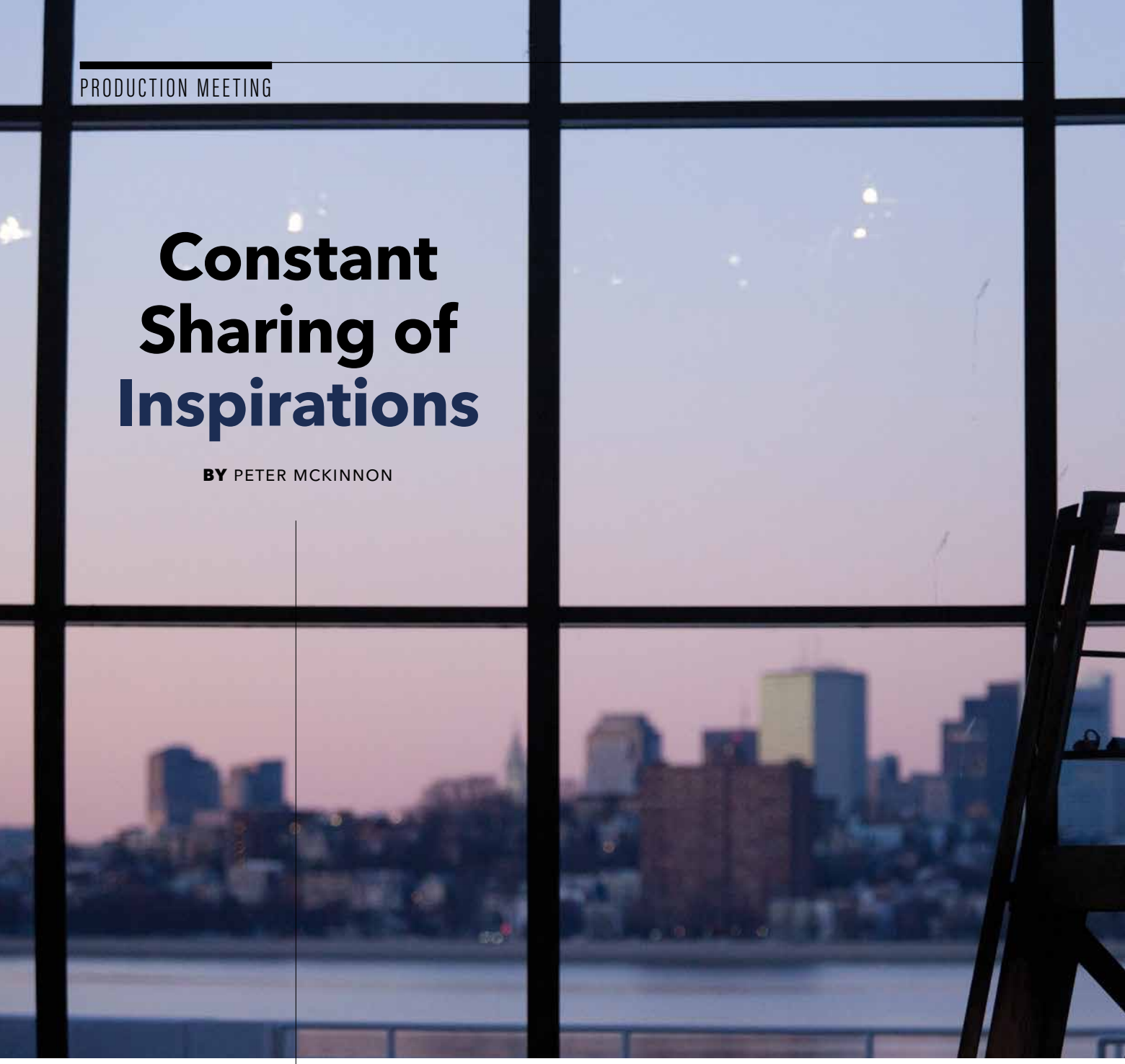
LC: And we have research on music's impact, on the collapse of the education pipeline, but we're not leveraging it.

AB: Exactly. It's not a values conflict. It's a matter of translating our values to audiences who weren't taught to appreciate this art. I'm not dismantling belief systems, I'm trying to expand them.

LC: Let's scaffold around them! Let's buttress the cathedral of our art with data, with growth and with abundance mindsets. *Run* and read this book! OC

Constant Sharing of Inspirations

BY PETER MCKINNON



SET AND COSTUME DESIGNER CAMELLIA KOO TALKS WITH PETER MCKINNON ABOUT HER CREATIVE PROCESS

I recently chatted with Camellia Koo in her studio. She brought a number of her books that we looked at – they are an academic researcher's dream, because everything is in them from early sketches and notes through to opening night tickets and brochures. We also spoke about her costume and scenic designs for *The Lighthouse* by Peter Maxwell Davies and directed by Tim Albery for Boston Lyric Opera at the JFK Presidential Library, and she shared photos of her designs, her spectacular models and the final production.

I was, however, particularly interested in speaking with her about the designer's creative process.

PM: At theatre school, I was taught that designers needed to have a reliable method to follow when creating a stage design, rather than waiting hopefully for a creative spark to strike.

CK: It depends on the show.

I tend to work very collaboratively. And instead of there being a series of individual meetings between the director and the designers, I urge the entire creative team to get together at the very beginning to share a meal. It's the best way to start sharing ideas, because a lot of ideas just come up naturally when you're chit chatting with each other, getting to know one another around a meal. I try to do this with every show. It's a great way to start with people that are new to me, and it's a great homecoming for people that I have worked with before.

We all read the script out loud when we sit down together, as we get to know each other or get caught up on our lives as human beings. We bring food in, or make it a potluck family meal, as we all talk about what the libretto means to us individually, and we all share our research. As I tell the group about images that I'm thinking about, maybe the sound designer will tell us about a colour he saw.

Colour isn't part of a sound design, although it could be, but we are not limited by each other's roles and we don't feel like we're stepping on each other's toes. It's just about a constant sharing of inspirations. Instead of waiting until much later, sometimes as late as tech week, we share from the very, very beginning. Of course, we're all busy doing other things, but this allows us to have the show in the back of our minds after our initial get-together meal.

On a more technical level, I have everything in my notebooks. I do very little sketching in my notebooks. I use them mostly for initial thoughts and ideas, as well as scene breakdowns and notes. You'll see only very rough sketches, because I do my real sketching on the models. I learned this from Michael Levine. I build the place we're going to be performing in, obviously, then I use the model as my sketching. I don't use the model as my presentation piece; I use it as a tool.

I don't tend to do white-card models. I go from my initial sketches, which I'll share with the team, directly to model building, then light the model with my Ikea lights as best I can. And we storyboard the show on the model with bits of paper and with our hands in the model, here on the table in my studio. It makes

PHOTOS: (ABOVE) ERIK JACOBS FOR BOSTON LYRIC OPERA; (RIGHT) DAVID COOPER

↑ *The Lighthouse*, performed by Boston Lyric Opera in the JFK Presidential Library actually overlooking Boston Harbor

→ Set and costume designer Camellia Koo

From her costume sketches through her intricate and beautiful models which incorporate those costume ideas, Koo's work came to life in Boston Lyric Opera's *The Lighthouse*

it tactile. Working now in TV, I know how to 3D model on a computer, but you can't get your director's hands into the screen.

For costumes, I'm not very confident about my drawing skills, so I really have to concentrate and force myself to draw. I try to delay my final drawings until I've met and seen the performers in space. In a similar way to using the model as a means of sketching the scenery, I think about the fittings the same way – as a kind of sketching the costume on the performer. I love fittings because they are so much like playing with the model. With my cutter and the head of wardrobe in the fitting, I do this thing of asking for their opinions as well, since they are all in the room as part of the creative team. I'm not precious about clutching the design to myself – I genuinely appreciate others' opinions.

"I urge the entire creative team to get together at the very beginning to share a meal."

PM: How about working with an established team, as opposed to working with people you haven't met?

CK: An existing team is like getting together with old friends. It is very comfortable and safe. I know, for example, that [lighting designer] Bonnie Beecher will always work

PHOTOS: SKETCH AND MODEL COURTESY OF THE ARTIST; PRODUCTION PHOTO: ERIK JACOBS FOR BOSTON LYRIC OPERA

wonders on the designs. But new collaborators are really exciting.

PM: Can you tell me about any opera designs that were particularly challenging? Or rewarding?

CK: *The Lighthouse* [by Peter Maxwell Davies] takes place in a deserted lighthouse, and it was being performed at the Kennedy Presidential Library, in which the back wall of the stage is a full-width window looking onto Boston Harbor. So, we decided to use the actual view as the backdrop. We built the pathway to the lighthouse up one of the aisles of the auditorium, and we even put a revolving light on the ground outside the window that tracked slowly past the window like the light from a lighthouse. It was magical.

PM: What's next for you?

CK: My debut children's picture book as author, *Yaya and the Dan-Tats*, will be published and released in September by Annick Press. Otherwise, from now until it opens in 2027, I'm working on a brand-new retelling – a new production – of a classic as set and costume designer. It hasn't officially been announced yet, so I'm not sure I'm allowed to speak about it publicly. OC

Professor Emeritus **PETER MCKINNON** taught theatre production and design at York University. He is a technical advisor for the planned rebuilding of the world's first purpose-built public opera house, the Teatro san Cassiano in Venice, built in 1637. www.teatrosancassiano.it/en

Craft becoming part of instinct

Jessica Muirhead speaks with **Tom Diamond** about his techniques and – briefly – becomes a student again

Opera singers are multidisciplinary performing artists whose job is to tell a story or convey an emotion through song, text and the embodiment of a character. Tom Diamond, an operatic acting coach based in Toronto, works with singers to help them build *craft*. When I asked what he meant by "craft," he explained it as "what I use when inspiration fails me," and "what I do unconsciously which must become conscious."

I first encountered Diamond when I was a member of the Canadian Opera Company's Ensemble Studio, and I remember his very direct yet encouraging and nurturing way of working. Twenty years later, I am still struck by how quickly but carefully he finds a way to get directly to the point.

Born and raised in Winnipeg, Diamond had exposure to all areas of the arts at a young age. By age 10, Diamond already had his ACTRA and Equity memberships and was studying classical piano, and it was clear his future would be in the arts. After his studies at the National Theatre School and Toronto's Centre for Actors' Study, Diamond worked for six years as an assistant to Canadian director Kurt Reis, who was a proponent of Lee Strasberg, the father of method acting technique in America. He soaked up as much as he could from all the experts and began directing plays and musicals in his early 20s.

Although Diamond found the 70s "park-and-bark" opera era boring, he was encouraged, with his background in classical music, to get in there and

PHOTO: *BATHROOM DIVAS*; BRAVO CANADA / KALEIDOSCOPE ENTERTAINMENT

"I think if directors had to audition, there would be more interesting opera theatre in many ways."

turn it into something more interesting. He wound up landing a spot in the COC Ensemble as a director.

He thoroughly enjoyed the audition process. "When do directors ever have to audition?" Diamond asks. "I think if directors had to audition, there would be more interesting opera theatre in many ways." As an apprentice at the COC, Diamond was really *trained* how to direct opera.

"You cannot train singers the same way you train actors," Diamond stresses, "because it's not the same nature of the beast." Singing notes and rhythms decided by a composer in a language (which is often not their native tongue) to a tempo set by a conductor – all while thinking about their technique, acting and movement – means that the singer isn't able to use 100% of their brains for interpretation. When Diamond works with singers, he tries to help them "have craft without it becoming so heavy on their brains and hearts that they can't function in the work."

Diamond has developed a strong training methodology for singers, which he has been teaching at the Royal Conservatory's Glenn Gould School for 23 years as well as in masterclasses and private coachings at the COC Ensemble Studio, the Atelier Lyrique at Opéra de Montréal, Merola Opera in San Francisco and many others.

"Singers who haven't been trained as actors just hope that it will go well" he says. "If they have natural instincts, I don't want to get in their way, but I want to help by giving them tools to organize themselves if they get into trouble." Diamond especially loves to work with singers in the early stages of their training. "If the craft goes in early, it becomes part of the instinct."

Diamond's coaching is very specific. "I teach something people can hold in their hands." One of his frequent questions is "What's in your toolbox for repeated text?" Answers can vary from changing the vocal colour to *feeling* it differently. Diamond breaks it down as "the first time you say it, you just discover it, literally... The second, third, fourth or sixth time (Mozart) and the 27th time (Handel), you change the subtext."

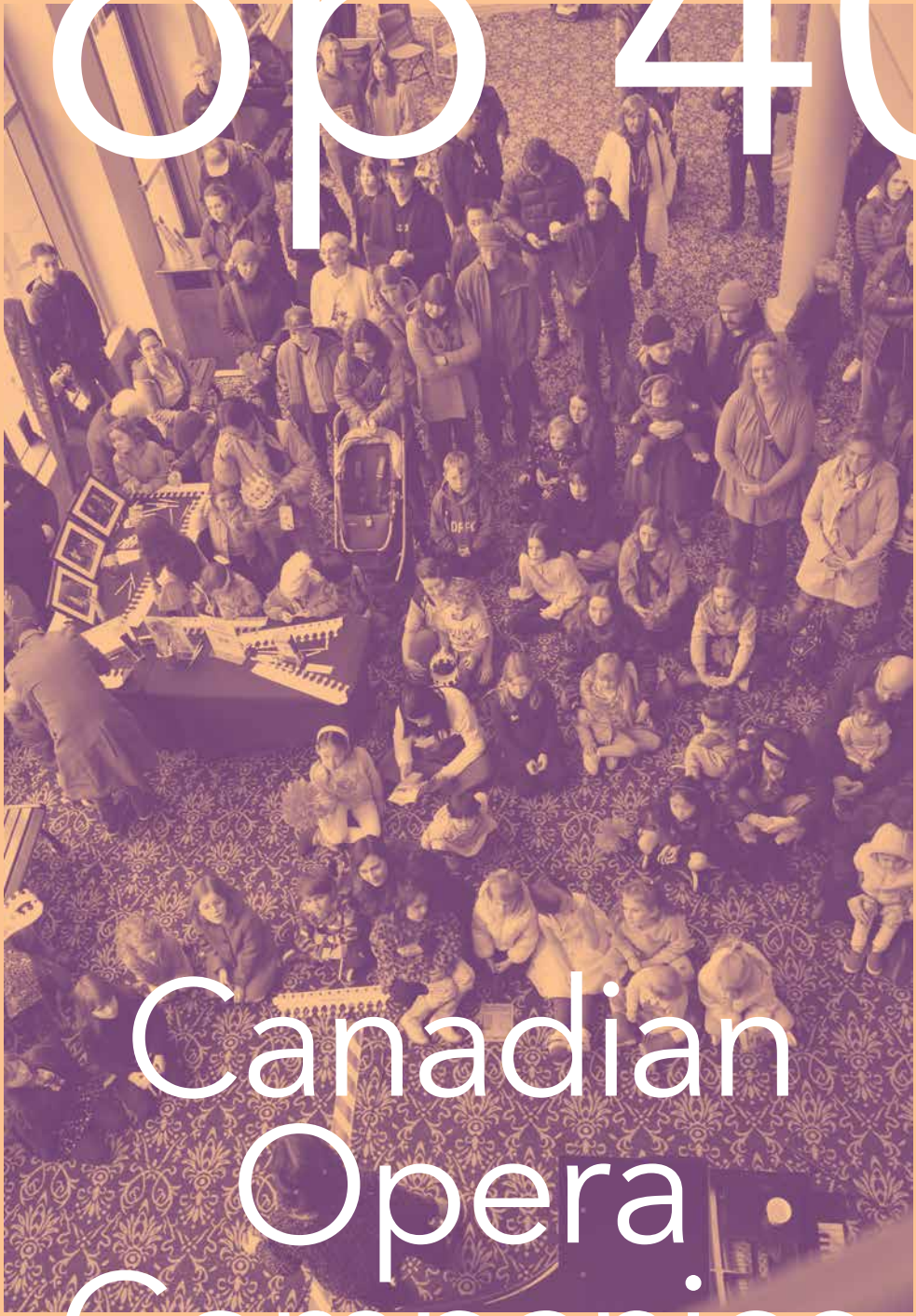
He turns the question back to me and asks, "And what is subtext, Jessica?" I freeze, wondering how I went from interviewer to student, when he saves me and chimes in with "I want to reduce everything to the simplest common denominator, so what I teach is 'Subtext is what you mean versus what you say.'"

His system for rehearsing is just as concrete. "I have them break the score down into what actors call 'beats.' What is a beat? It's a block of thought. Then, I tell them to apply the French word for rehearsal – *répétition* – and I have them repeat the beat. Next, just like the German word for rehearsal – *Probe* – I have them probe into the text and get ideas. Finally, we use the Italian term for rehearsal – *prova*, from the verb *provare* meaning to try – where they get the idea and try it out."

This systematic approach to learning a role is so succinct, it is clear he has honed it over the years. Many singers will confess that they wished they had learned to build craft earlier. As a singer myself, I can't help but feel Diamond needs to write a book on his methodology – or at the very least give a TED Talk. He started his career out as a performer, then a director of theatre and musicals and now an opera director, but it is clear to me that Diamond is a natural teacher. Maybe he has worked on the *craft* of his teaching so perfectly, he makes it seem innate. OC

JESSICA MUIRHEAD is a Bristish-Canadian soprano. She completed her bachelor's and master's degrees at McGill University and was immediately launched into a solo career on concert and opera stages across Europe and North America.

Top 40 Canadian Opera Companies



For our sixth consecutive year, *Opera Canada* tracks the financial health of the sector in Canada

BY MICHAEL JONES

In 2020, *Opera Canada*'s former editor, Wayne Gooding, began tracking the finances of the largest opera companies in the country and reporting them in an annual feature, typically in the fall.

This list includes both our largest institutions and some of our smallest, volunteer-led organizations. In the 2024 data, company revenues range from over $33.2 million to just under $10,000. This does not speak to the goals or ambitions of these differently sized companies. *Opera Canada* believes that every company on this list has the goal of producing the best art it can with the available resources, but the data does point out some differences between our largest and smallest companies, particularly in their revenue diversification and in their ability to sustain an operating deficit in any given year.

So first, the good news. Total revenues of the top 40 Canadian opera companies in 2024 was $87,218,682. This is the highest total in the six years that *Opera Canada* has undertaken the study, which makes 2024 the first year that revenues exceeded the last pre-COVID year, 2019, when it was just under $84.5 million. Unfortunately, expenses also grew last year, and total expenses of $89,497,437 left the sector with a total annual operating deficit of -$2,278,755 in 2024.

In the first three years of this report, there was always a total annual operating surplus. In 2023, the figures showed their largest operating deficit in the amount of -$5,623,418. The annual deficit is smaller this year – it went down by almost 60% compared to the losses in 2023. If that trend were to continue, this may not be an issue again next year.

While most companies appear in this list every year, there are a number that only appear some years. In many cases, that idiosyncrasy is simply about the timing of this article, since it is not always possible for companies with a December 31st fiscal year end to have all of their information submitted to the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) before our data collection.

The size of companies, particularly of the largest companies, is reasonably consistent from last year. The ten largest companies are almost identical to last year's listing, with only Manitoba Opera and Opera Atelier switching between ranks 7 and 8.

PHOTO: ARCADE PALLOT

←

A crowd enjoys a pop-up opera performance at Explore & Play Family Day Open House presented by Pacific Opera Victoria and the Victoria Symphony

The largest companies, of course, dominate this list financially. The Canadian Opera Company (COC) has revenues more than two and two-thirds times those of the second largest company, Opéra de Montréal. The COC's revenues, in fact, equal 38% of the total revenues from the top 40 companies. The three largest companies account for almost 63% of the total revenues, and the revenue from the top ten companies is more than 91% of the $87.2 million total.

Before delving deeper into the analysis of the numbers, though, it is important to make some clarifications about this data and how it was collected. Unless otherwise noted in the chart that follows, all financial information was taken from the CRA's website.

Every registered charity in Canada, which certainly includes most non-profit arts presenters and producers, must submit an annual T3010 return to the CRA. In addition to updating the list of directors in the CRA's database, the T3010 includes basic financial data about the charity's most recently completed fiscal year, and charities are required to submit a signed copy of their audited financial statements with, and as backup to, that financial information. The information from the T3010 returns is then made publicly available on the CRA's website, which allows anyone to review a charity's financial information.

There are, however, some limitations to the data available on the website.

First, it may not be the most current picture of a charity's financial status. Every organization has six months from the end of their fiscal year to submit their T3010. This allows them to close out their books for the year, have an audit conducted, present those financial statements at their annual general meeting for approval by their members, and complete their CRA submission. The most recent results on the website when this data was being collected, therefore, are for fiscal years ending in 2024, in some cases as early as May 31, 2024.

Second, Wayne himself always called the T3010 a "blunt instrument." While it accurately captures total annual revenue and expenses and the breakdown of revenues is reasonably consistent in most submissions, there is very little detail about expenses. The T3010, after all, has been designed for use by registered charities working in many different fields – health, education, social justice, religion, environment, leisure and sport, just to name a few. Accordingly, the terms used capture expenses are broad.

Even a term as simple as "total expenditure on all compensation" is open to interpretation. Certainly, most companies would include compensation for salaried staff members in that line, but what about payment for singers

contracted for specific engagements? Most opera companies appear to list artistic expenses – which could include those contracted artists – under "all other expenditures not included in the amounts above." For consistency's sake, I have taken the expenses listed in the same lines of different T3010 forms and kept them in the same expense category in the chart that follows (main activity, administration and compensation), but that information should be taken with more than a grain of salt.

Finally, of course, the CRA only tracks charities. Nascent companies that may be in the process of applying for status or well-established companies that have chosen to function under a different operating model will not be included in the list. For example, a company like Toronto's Amplified Opera – whose website says that they are "not yet a registered charity" – won't appear in this listing until they receive that status and make their first T3010 submission as much as a year later.

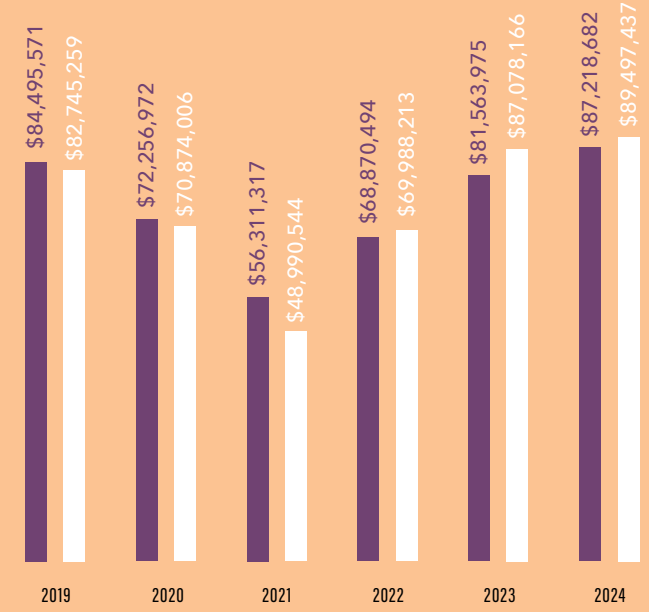
One thing that Wayne noted in last year's article was that the diversification of revenue sources had changed, unsurprisingly, as a result of the COVID pandemic. The percentage of public funding in the overall mix had increased, earned revenues had decreased during the pandemic years, and donations had fallen slightly. It is interesting, therefore, that the 2024 results are very similar to those from 2019: earned revenue constituted 29% of revenues (it was 31% in 2019), public funding was 26% in 2024 compared to 23% in 2019, and donations were 45% in 2024, almost equal to the 46% in 2019. Does this mark a return to some type of stability in companies' revenue or is it only a coincidence? Time may tell, and it will be interesting to see if the division remains the same in 2025.

There is one major difference in the data table this year from prior years. I have chosen not to include the final column that Wayne traditionally did – a calculation of the percentage of compensation compared to the total expenses at each company. The information is still available if you do the calculation yourself. I wanted to avoid inviting unfair comparisons because the ways in which reporting compensation varies on the T3010 form of different companies or even year over year by the same company.

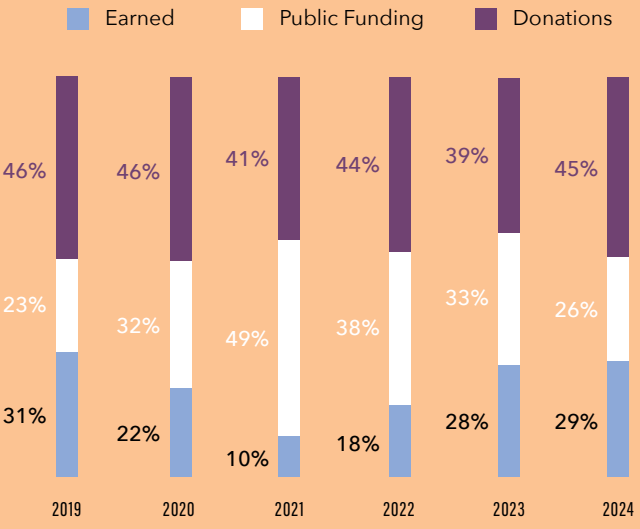
I also agree with Vu Le, an American not-for-profit blogger who runs nonprofitaf.com and who thinks we need to stop judging charities by the amount they spend on salaries or overhead. As he says, in reference to all organizations, "Stop furthering the idea that 'overhead' is bad. Operating, administrative, and fundraising expenses are necessary for us to do effective work. Our sector has for decades been underinvested in, with many staff still underpaid, overworked, lacking healthcare… Many of us continue these types of messaging. We need to stop."

2019 – 2023 STATISTICS

Top 40 Revenues vs Expenses



Breakdown of Opera Company Revenues



It is interesting, given the lack of clarity around expenses in the T3010 form, that both Wayne's analysis of expenses last year and my data from this year show almost identical percentages spent on main activities, administration and compensation. Last year, for example, 46.48% of expenses were recognized by Wayne in 2023 as being related to main activity; this year, my percentage is 47.97%.

Although both 2023 and 2024 showed annual operating deficits, there is a noticeable change in which companies are showing those deficits. In 2023, 27 of the 40 companies showed an operating loss. Although this included eight of the ten largest companies, those 27 companies were spaced throughout the entire table and included six of the ten smallest companies. In 2024, only 18 companies showed an annual operating deficit, a one-third reduction, but that reduction was not evenly distributed among companies of all sizes. Again, seven of the ten largest reported annual losses (a reduction of only 13%) while only 11 of the remaining 30 companies did (a reduction of over 42%). Of the ten smallest companies, only three showed annual deficits compared with six the prior year.

This may say something about the ways in which companies of different sizes approach their finances. It is also possible that some larger companies are choosing to "spend down" reserve funds as they work to bring audiences back after the devastation of COVID. It is certainly far more likely that the larger institutions have reserve funds, endowments and large donors that are able to support them through a period of restructuring – that option is less likely available to organizations that focus on new work development or to smaller, often community-rooted, companies.

This raises some important questions for me. It could be useful – for future editions of this report – to investigate the balance sheets of the companies showing losses. How are they managing to do so? Are those companies working in a manner that could jeopardize their long-term viability? Does the sector need to rethink how we're doing this work? Certainly, costs are likely to continue rising, as they have done over the past two years. Are we approaching a tipping point? Again, only time will likely tell. OC

MICHAEL JONES is editorial director of *Opera Canada*. Before his "retirement" in 2024, he spent almost ten years supporting and advocating for the arts sector as CEO of SK Arts, the provincial arts funding agency in Saskatchewan.

Top 40 Canadian Opera Companies

		FISCAL YEAREND	2024 REVENUES	2023 REVENUES	2024 EXPENSES	2023 EXPENSES	2024 NET	2023 NET
1	Canadian Opera Company, Toronto	6/30/24	$33,217,487	$31,900,562	$33,786,432	$32,397,799	($568,945)	($497,237)
2	Opéra de Montréal	8/31/24	$12,388,002	$10,950,294	$12,577,219	$12,699,043	($189,217)	($1,748,749)
3	Vancouver Opera	6/30/24	$9,316,557	$7,840,641	$9,788,426	$8,093,547	($471,869)	($252,816)
4	Pacific Opera Victoria	6/30/24	$6,527,632	$5,367,694	$6,609,482	$6,110,497	($81,850)	($742,803)
5	Calgary Opera	6/30/24	$5,302,060	$4,760,491	$5,632,459	$6,004,946	($330,399)	($1,244,455)
6	Edmonton Opera	6/30/24	$3,548,475	$3,394,389	$3,786,930	$3,760,536	($238,455)	($366,147)
7	Manitoba Opera, Winnipeg	5/31/24	$3,262,802	$2,461,732	$3,163,951	$2,764,343	$98,851	($302,611)
8	Opera Atelier, Toronto	6/30/24	$2,414,343	$2,520,091	$2,734,871	$2,449,103	($320,528)	$70,988
9	Opéra de Québec	6/30/24	$2,410,366	$2,214,251	$2,359,505	$2,195,757	$50,861	$18,494
10	Tapestry Opera, Toronto	6/30/24	$1,254,724	$1,969,102	$1,227,999	$2,029,097	$26,725	($59,995)
11	Soundstreams Canada, Toronto	8/31/24	$1,124,122	$1,217,601	$1,301,791	$1,280,515	($177,669)	($62,914)
12	Opera on the Avalon, St. John's*	12/31/24	$1,019,636	$1,075,330	$977,571	$1,069,271	$42,065	$6,059
13	Nuova Operatic Vocalists, Edmonton	8/31/24	$714,146	$545,332	$703,194	$598,038	$10,952	($52,706)
14	Canadian Children's Opera Company, Toronto	6/30/24	$606,511	$631,996	$608,059	$619,340	($1,548)	$12,656
15	Opera Kelowna	12/31/24	$381,105	$258,351	$356,457	$243,854	$24,648	$14,497
16	Toronto Operetta Theatre	6/30/24	$372,523	$428,531	$412,937	$432,999	($40,414)	($4,468)
17	Chants Libres, Québec	6/30/24	$305,332	$301,099	$277,742	$331,898	$27,590	($30,799)
18	Opéra du Royaume, Saguenay	6/30/24	$258,020	$307,458	$253,058	$378,684	$4,962	($71,226)
19	City Opera of Vancouver	6/30/24	$253,881	$659,848	$352,966	$653,613	($99,085)	$6,235
20	Highlands Opera Theatre, Haliburton	11/30/24	$240,830	$220,639	$244,477	$258,782	($3,647)	($38,143)

* Information from companies marked with an asterisk (*) was received directly from them and had not appeared on the CRA website as of July 1, 2025.

* Some percentages may not add up to 100% as a result of rounding.

2024 EARNED REVENUES	% OF TOTAL REVENUES	2024 PUBLIC FUNDING	% OF TOTAL REVENUES	2024 DONATIONS	% OF TOTAL REVENUES	2024 MAIN ACTIVITY EXPENSES	2024 ADMIN/ OTHER EXPENSES	2024 ALL COMPENSATION
$8,766,609	26%	$6,546,352	20%	$17,904,526	54%	$13,219,399	$6,209,641	$14,357,392
$3,452,785	28%	$3,809,040	31%	$5,126,177	41%	$7,402,721	$1,735,340	$3,439,158
$3,367,218	36%	$1,784,885	19%	$4,164,454	45%	$4,054,128	$2,437,481	$3,296,817
$1,948,289	30%	$1,389,642	21%	$3,189,701	49%	$3,127,886	$1,565,410	$1,916,186
$1,456,230	27%	$1,869,398	35%	$1,976,432	37%	$2,327,402	$1,017,336	$2,287,721
$645,154	18%	$1,177,282	33%	$1,726,039	49%	$2,862,732	$3,509	$920,689
$1,592,727	49%	$1,052,600	32%	$617,475	19%	$1,993,377	$252,174	$918,400
$407,765	17%	$512,797	21%	$1,493,781	62%	$1,344,460	$676,952	$713,459
$981,916	41%	$1,225,485	51%	$202,965	8%	$1,528,999	$221,695	$608,811
$205,076	16%	$458,237	37%	$591,411	47%	$411,423	$197,887	$618,689
$93,316	8%	$559,681	50%	$471,125	42%	$732,180	$132,326	$437,285
$155,271	15%	$747,733	73%	$116,632	11%	$828,844	$23,002	$125,725
$339,981	48%	$204,063	29%	$170,102	24%	$436,865	$179,692	$86,637
$296,170	49%	$2,760	0%	$307,581	51%	$192,655	$104,083	$311,321
$82,398	22%	$138,516	36%	$160,191	42%	$185,099	$166,428	$4,930
$186,018	50%	$64,500	17%	$122,005	33%	$302,507	$81,215	$29,215
$6,312	2%	$296,717	97%	$2,303	1%	$73,617	$27,770	$176,355
$883	0%	$139,515	54%	$117,622	46%	$228,353	$18,621	$6,084
$38,510	15%	$62,280	25%	$153,091	60%	$134,975	$45,019	$172,972
$37,432	16%	$41,200	17%	$162,198	67%	$138,705	$37,818	$67,954

Top 40 Canadian Opera Companies

		FISCAL YEAREND	2024 REVENUES	2023 REVENUES	2024 EXPENSES	2023 EXPENSES	2024 NET	2023 NET
21	Against the Grain Theatre, Toronto	8/31/24	$231,564	$533,831	$231,400	$756,012	$164	($222,181)
22	Manitoba Underground Opera, Winnipeg*	12/31/24	$220,551	$217,925	$216,612	$232,701	$3,939	($14,776)
23	Toronto City Opera	6/30/24	$213,952	$127,951	$188,682	$161,017	$25,270	($33,066)
24	Vancouver Cantonese Opera	12/31/24	$201,067	$184,702	$214,897	$160,853	($13,830)	$23,849
25	Opera York, Thornhill	6/30/24	$189,179	$155,241	$137,502	$122,062	$51,677	$33,179
26	Opéra Bouffe du Québec, Laval	12/31/24	$171,746	$137,029	$168,351	$145,721	$3,395	($8,692)
27	Voicebox: Opera in Concert, Toronto	6/30/24	$171,419	$169,439	$191,007	$207,180	($19,588)	($37,741)
28	Théâtre Lyrichorégra, Pierrefonds*	12/31/24	$120,310	$119,180	$118,185	$137,604	$2,125	($18,424)
29	Opera Five, Toronto	6/30/24	$107,312	$144,585	$276,368	$114,305	($169,056)	$30,280
30	FestivalOpéra de Saint-Eustache	9/20/24	$102,423	$98,974	$96,239	$98,152	$6,184	$822
31	Brockville Operatic Society, Brockville	5/31/24	$94,044	$121,685	$81,537	$74,305	$12,507	$47,380
32	Canadian Ukrainian Opera Association, Toronto	6/30/24	$89,921	$50,020	$74,774	$60,707	$15,147	($10,687)
33	NE. Sans Opera and Dance, Vancouver	9/30/24	$78,558	$132,873	$68,465	$149,655	$10,093	($16,782)
34	Centre for Opera Studies, York	8/31/24	$77,863	$72,036	$65,165	$63,504	$12,698	$8,532
35	Burnaby Lyric Opera Society	6/30/24	$77,517	$16,412	$60,999	$52,125	$16,518	($35,713)
36	Little Opera Company, Winnipeg	8/31/24	$70,306	$114,905	$84,053	$113,292	($13,747)	$1,613
37	North Shore Light Opera, Vancouver	6/30/24	$46,648	$24,466	$30,985	$24,694	$15,663	($228)
38	Opéra-Théâtre de Rimouski	8/31/24	$15,370	$22,876	$15,997	$29,338	($627)	($6,462)
39	Triyptych Productions Vocal Theatre, Kenora	8/31/24	$11,166	$45,196	$11,767	$61,169	($601)	($15,973)
40	Shorestring Opera, Toronto	6/30/24	$9,212	$8,413	$8,926	$10,621	$286	($2,208)

2024 EARNED REVENUES	% OF TOTAL REVENUES	2024 PUBLIC FUNDING	% OF TOTAL REVENUES	2024 DONATIONS	% OF TOTAL REVENUES	2024 MAIN ACTIVITY EXPENSES	2024 ADMIN/ OTHER EXPENSES	2024 ALL COMPENSATION
$24,404	11%	$42,381	18%	$164,779	71%	$14,579	$29,481	$187,340
$34,827	16%	$131,450	60%	$54,274	25%	$191,877	$15,235	$9,500
$55,060	26%	$77,354	36%	$81,538	38%	$163,080	$13,402	$12,200
$35,493	18%	$149,350	74%	$16,224	8%	$16,241	$40,803	$157,853
$173,149	92%	$10,400	5%	$5,630	3%	$129,029	$8,473	$0
$98,625	57%	$10,600	6%	$62,521	36%	$20,329	$37,624	$110,398
$46,419	27%	$82,270	48%	$42,730	25%	$129,750	$37,439	$23,818
$11,451	10%	$23,986	20%	$84,873	71%	$73,140	$39,364	$5,681
$21,358	20%	$0	0%	$85,954	80%	$245,215	$6,312	$24,841
$6,481	6%	$17,500	17%	$78,442	77%	$1,705	$25,881	$68,653
$82,125	87%	$0	0%	$11,919	13%	$67,593	$1,000	$12,944
$19,595	22%	$0	0%	$70,326	78%	$52,441	$9,164	$13,169
$61,252	78%	$0	0%	$17,306	22%	$54,904	$12,931	$630
$40,005	51%	$0	0%	$37,858	49%	$56,337	$6,569	$2,259
$24,947	32%	$44,000	57%	$8,570	11%	$60,499	$0	$500
$19,441	28%	$25,000	36%	$25,865	37%	$78,453	$0	$5,600
$23,648	51%	$3,000	6%	$20,000	43%	$30,985	$0	$0
$12,920	84%	$0	0%	$2,450	16%	$13,129	$0	$2,868
$250	2%	$0	0%	$10,916	98%	$5,874	$5,533	$360
$9,212	100%	$0	0%	$0	0%	$2,007	$1,119	$5,800

RUBIES 2025

The Opera Canada Ruby Awards, named in honour of *Opera Canada*'s founding editor Ruby Mercer, were first awarded in 2000. The Rubies were created to recognize and honour outstanding achievement or leadership in the realm of Canadian opera – both on stage and behind the scenes.

On **November 3rd**, we will be gathering at **Nancy & Ed Jackman Performance Centre** in Toronto to celebrate this year's honorees, and – for the first time ever – the ceremony will be available across country with a simultaneous livestream complementing the live event.

Please join us as we celebrate the 2025 Ruby Award recipients:

Jane Archibald
SOPRANO

Larry Desrochers
CEO

Teiya Kasahara 笠原貞野
CHANGE MAKER

Chantal Lambert
STUDIO PROGRAM DIRECTOR

Jane Archibald

Sweet Voice, Brave Heart

Jane Archibald shares some operatic and some life experiences with Joseph So

Among the many wonderful Canadian voices today, one of the most remarkable belongs to soprano *Jane Archibald*.

◆

Since her debut a quarter century ago, the native of Truro, Nova Scotia has sung in many of the great opera houses and concert halls in the world. Audiences and critics marvel at her sparkling high soprano and charismatic stage presence.

After graduating from Wilfrid Laurier University, her vocal journey took her to the San Francisco Opera as an Adler Fellow, followed by a Fest contract with the Wiener Staatsoper. Her gleaming soprano, with its stratospheric extension and exceptional fioritura is ideal in the great coloratura roles of Zerbinetta, Königin der Nacht and Olympia. Canadian Opera Company audiences have heard her Semele, Zerbinetta, Donna Anna, Susanna, Ginevra and Zdenka. Of her *The Cunning Little Vixen* in 2024, I wrote "Soprano Jane Archibald was a memorable

PHOTO: BO HUANG

Vixen, singing with luminous tone and acting with enviable theatricality."

Recently. Archibald has broadened her repertoire, taking on Leonore in *Fidelio*. This past winter, she was ready to take on her first Kaiserin in *Die Frau ohne Schatten*. But often life has other ideas. Instead of a musical challenge, Archibald was faced with the biggest challenge of her life. Shortly before the premiere, she found out that she has breast cancer. I learned from a Facebook video in which she appeared hairless but smiling, telling her friends about her illness.

When I contacted for this interview, she was at home in Halifax with her husband, retired tenor Kurt Streit, and their two children. "I am two weeks out from my surgery and doing remarkably well, knock on wood" said Archibald. "I expected to be largely immobile, dealing with pain and swelling, but that hasn't been the case. I look like the bride of Frankenstein, but I am feeling mostly myself! I am very lucky. It helps that I went into it in good form, and maybe my 'opera abs' helped with a quicker recovery!"

My heartfelt congratulations to you for the upcoming Rubies! What was your reaction when you found out that you're a Rubies recipient?

I got the nod from Wendy Nielsen. It's lovely, and a tiny bit of a surprise. I haven't reached 50 yet – hopefully, I still have a fair amount of singing ahead of me! It's nice to be recognized in your own country, especially this year, with the patriotism we all feel about Canada and with the world in utter turmoil. It's nice to pause, turn away from some of the chaos and think about our beautiful art form.

Let's start from the beginning. When was your professional debut?

I sang with Symphony Nova Scotia when I was still in third year university – that was my professional debut. I joined the union to do *Sirens* for Queen of Puddings back in 2000.

Do you come from a musical family?

Yes! My late father was a physician who played jazz piano and had an amazing ear. My mom's side of the family are also very artistic and creative. My siblings – one is an engineer and the other an actuary – distinguished in their professions, musical but not professional musicians.

What is your earliest memory of singing?

I sang for myself long before I sang for anyone else. I would amuse myself lying in bed, singing to myself, make up melodies, play around with the songs. I sang a lot in school. I had an amazing music teacher, Mary Shephard, the grandmother of composer Britta Johnson. We had music classes, we competed in festivals. I played the trumpet, took cello lessons and joined the girls' choir in Grade 7. I started voice lessons when I was 11.

Did you major in music at Wilfrid Laurier? Who was your teacher? When did you decide to pursue a singing career?

I majored in performance at Wilfrid Laurier. My teacher was Victor Martens. When I was in high school, I took every opportunity to sing, in local music festivals, school musicals, in a jazz choir… I knew I wanted to sing. I was 15 when I sang Cherubino's aria, "Voi che sapete."

Were you always a high soprano?

I've always had that facility at the top. In the girls' choir, I sang second soprano. Being a good musician, I was able to sing the middle harmony, but I always had the high notes. My range then? I probably never tried anything higher than a high C. My teacher was Leslie Searle. I studied with her from ages 11 to 18. She was a wonderful teacher, and I'm still close to her today. She didn't give me anything higher than that high C, so it wasn't until in university that I discovered my upper extension.

PHOTOS: (LEFT) MICHAEL COOPER; (ABOVE RIGHT) CHRIS HUTCHESON

> “It’s nice to pause, turn away from some of the chaos and think about our *beautiful art form*.”

Has your voice darkened over time?

Yes definitely, and the sound is warmer. I still have all my high notes. The voice has rounded out in the middle. It’s happening gradually. I remember reading an article about Nina Stemme and each new role she did. Every time, people would say, “Oh, it’s too big, too much of a stretch.” Stemme said that you don’t know what your voice can do until you ask it to – just give it enough time to get there. I found that so interesting!

For a long time in my early career, I thought the only reason someone would change Fach or add to their repertoire is because they can no longer sing their old rep. Or it’s so obvious that suddenly there’s this enormous voice trying to sing Handel. I thought that if I should change rep, it would be obvious to me. Then I realized that it wasn’t that way. The first time I sang “Or sai chi l’onore” as

↑ Semele at the COC is “very high” on Archibald’s list of favourite memories

← As Zerbinetta in *Ariade auf Naxos* at the COC, one of her early signature roles

Donna Anna in *Don Giovanni*, it didn't have the right feel. But as I worked it in, my voice responded. The warmth had always been there, and I was underusing it.

On your website, your schedule listed Leonore in *Fidelio* later this year, before it was cancelled.

I already did Leonore in Berlin last fall. It felt great. I think there's a lot in the lyric repertoire that suits my voice. The steelier part of my voice above the staff now allows me to do some dramatic coloratura roles. Would I ever sing Brünnhilde? No! Kaiserin, with its high extension, suits me. But I had to leave two weeks before the premiere with this diagnosis.

Do you have a favourite role?

I have so many! I love Salome for its combination of music and character. I love all the Strauss roles. I have done Zerbinetta many times. I did Sophie early on, she's so beautiful. I did Daphne six or seven years ago. Amazing! *Die schweigsame Frau* – I can't pick a favourite!

But I can pick a favourite memory: *Semele* at the COC is very high on my list. I felt so free musically, the ornamentation... my story with Jupiter. It was musically so beautiful, and my character was so fun to play. She is so real, not just flighty and stupid and selfish, not just nymphs and shepherds and poetic love, but there's a lustiness in her that's really fun. It informed my singing. The whole experience was special.

What role would you love to sing that's not in your Fach?

That's a good one! There're lots of fun mezzo roles… if I could sing Giulio Cesare, that would be fun!

For you, what's the best thing about being an opera singer?

Oh gosh… lots of good things! The feeling of allowing yourself to be swept up by euphoria when you are making music. But so much about this career is not about the music-making but about the travelling, visas, being lonely – those are the worst things.

When you get out on stage, do the first rehearsals – that's the feeling you were chasing when you were 20, in university, the feeling of "Oh my God, I am almost flying! There's an orchestra down there, playing the music that I get to sing, and my voice is working today!" That feeling of euphoria is not something that most people get in their profession.

In the past ten years, I noticed that I had fallen away from feeling that as often. You have it a lot in the beginning, and then you get a bit jaded or cynical. You have to remind yourself to tap into that feeling. Even if it's not a perfect performance, I try to at least find those moments in each performance. Sometimes it's even listening to someone else, standing in the wings and I think "How much do I love this aria. That person is killing it out there and I get to listen to it!"

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Erin Wall as Arabella with Archibald as Zdenka at the COC

As Mathilde in *Guillaume Tell* at Theater an der Wien in 2018

When you were a young, aspiring singer, did you have an idol in opera?

I wasn't one of those people who spent their teenage years listening to every singer. I remember listening to Kathleen Battle. I loved her CD with Wynton Marsalis. I listened to Cecilia Bartoli and Renee Fleming.

I want to ask you about work-life balance. Do you find that to be the most important issue?

Yes, yes, yes!!! Work-life balance affects our mental health, and this career requires you to be incredibly healthy mentally.

I haven't found the perfect solution. I am constantly tweaking things to make it easier. With my daughter Audrey, I have always said to her "It's hard for me to be away and I really miss you. I wish I could do my job and still be home, but I am also really good at what I do. I am proud to have this talent, and I work hard. It's really cool to have the success that I have, that I get to show you how to go for something that's really hard and be successful. If you really need me to be there, like if you're sick, you know I'll come home, I'll be there."

She's proud of me. She likes that my job is international and she gets to travel. Thank goodness for Skype! Every morning if I am in Europe, I would be on lunch break when Audrey would be getting ready for school. I'd be in Berlin, and I would say on Skype, "Audrey, you've five minutes to get dressed for school!"

You're still in your prime. When the time comes, would you consider teaching?

Nothing is off the table. I coach sometimes but don't teach. My technique has always been very organic and natural – not to say I did it by myself, my teacher helped. But I don't think in technical terms. I have a hard time transmitting what I am doing to another person.

If a young student says to you "I'd love to do what you do," what advice would you give?

I have a ton of advice, but I'd preface it by saying that when I was in their position, the world was a different place. There are some universal truths, though. I can talk about mental health, about being organized. You should control everything that you can control, because there's so much you can't, why would you leave that to chance? You can control being prepared and how to manage your money, staying on top of the logistics of life, which is much more complicated when you are a singer. You need to set yourself up for success by doing everything that you can.

What qualities are the most important for a singer to have?

Self-confidence is the biggest one. You can have moments of doubt, of sadness, if you didn't win or whatever. You don't have to be impervious to criticism. Fundamentally, you have to believe that you deserve to be there, that you have the talent – it's just a matter of time, energy and luck. I tell this story a lot and I tell it affectionately. I auditioned for the COC Ensemble and didn't get in, twice! One of the highest-profile young artist programs in Canada said "no" to me. A lot of people would think "Oh, I guess that's the end of the road for me." I just thought "That sucks… they should have taken me!" I auditioned for Tanglewood and Merola, and I became an Adler Fellow. You *have* to believe in yourself and see setbacks for what they are.

What's the best piece of advice that has served you in your career and your life?

The best piece of advice is from my mom, to listen to my inner voice, to trust my own instinct. I will acknowledge that doing so requires practice and trust in yourself. Get used to listening to it and following it early on. It has made so many decisions in my career easier. I have very few regrets, and I know that's down to trusting myself and my decisions. OC

JOSEPH SO is professor emeritus at Trent University. He is also a long-time contributor to *La Scena Musicale* and *Opera* (London, UK).

PHOTOS: (LEFT) MICHAEL COOPER; (ABOVE RIGHT) MORITZ SCHELL

Larry Desrochers

Practicality & Alchemy

Larry Desrochers makes full use of the resources available in service to the community

BY NOLAN KEHLER

There is perhaps no better summary of *Larry Desrochers's* tenure as general director and CEO of Manitoba Opera than the vehicles that occupy his parking spot at Centennial Concert Hall.

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On one day, it's the 2016 Lincoln MKC – good for the days when he and his wife commute together. On the days when he comes in alone, it's the 2007 Ford Ranger FX4. "It's good for hauling bush – maybe not the full tree," Desrochers chuckles.

Even if he drove a Vespa into the office, there's not a doubt that Desrochers would make full use of the wheels and resources available to ensure that everything needed to make opera in Winnipeg gets done. He has operated this way in Manitoba's theatre and arts circles since the mid 1980s, and now, as he concludes one of the longest general director terms in the North American opera industry, his reputation has turned into a legacy that is being honoured with a 2025 Ruby Award.

PHOTOS: R. TINKER

"I didn't get many awards in high school, but I did get the general proficiency award," recalls Desrochers. "And I think that's fairly accurate. I can do a lot of different things, and maybe one or two of them I can do really well." As it turns out, the key to success is not proficiency but, rather, curiosity. "All the things that I have done in my career, they could have got somebody who knew more about it than I did. But I loved to learn, and I learned whether it was directing theatre or the film group or working in opera. It was all opportunities and making a commitment to learn about it."

For someone who grew up listening to Led Zeppelin and Johnny Cash on one of the two radio stations that his '57 Chevy could pick up on the family farm outside Baldur, Manitoba, there was a lot of learning that had to be done about classical arts. Although he participated in the annual Christmas concerts and skits and went on a memorable school field trip to see *The Crucible* at the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre (Royal MTC), Desrochers's theatre education began in earnest during his first years at the University of Winnipeg, even though it came from aspirations of being a journalist.

"Theatre or opera is just the other half of journalism," Desrochers says, reflecting on his gravitation toward the subject. "Journalism seeks to tell factual truth – theatre and opera seek to tell fictional truth. It's the same. You're looking at humanity, but just from the other side of the coin: telling a factual story of what's happening with humanity or telling a fictional story of what's happening with humanity."

Regardless of what side of the coin he is tasked with addressing, Desrochers's approach to the story is the same: realistic and economical. This approach is not only informed by studying theatre crafts pioneered by Stanislavski and Chekhov, but also from another past experience – managing the hometown bar back in Baldur.

When Desrochers graduated and began his career directing at the same Royal MTC where he had his first encounter with classical arts, both studies and serving would inform his work. "It's managing people," Desrochers says of the link between giving notes to actors and pouring beers for farmers. "It's learning how to listen, it's knowing when you can push and when you can't push. It's diplomacy, it's cajoling, and then it's when to be stern, when to be direct."

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Carlisle Floyd's *Of Mice and Men*, which Manitoba Opera presented despite the risk involved in a regional company presenting lesser-known repertory

> Your job is to marshall *all the resources* – human, financial, community, national – to support the artists on the stage."

That directness earned Desrochers praise from Winnipeg's arts community in short order. At 26 years old, he became the youngest ever director of a show at the Royal MTC and soon became an associate artistic director. In this role, he created the Winnipeg Fringe Festival, now the second largest Fringe in Canada. Desrochers was then tapped to head up the Winnipeg Film Group with an eye to saving its crown jewel, the independent movie theatre in the Exchange District now known as the Dave Barber Cinematheque. Before landing at Manitoba Opera in 2000, Desrochers directed the opening and closing ceremonies at the Canada Summer Games in 1997 and at the Pan Am Games in 1999, which saw Desrochers pulling off the seemingly impossible: reuniting The Guess Who.

Desrochers acknowledges these accomplishments with humility. "In the role of general director and CEO, you're kind of a facilitator," he explains. "Your job is to marshal all the resources – human, financial, community, national – to support the artists on the stage. So, the recognition belongs to the people who actually do the work. I've been successful at shepherding, at cajoling, at twisting arms, at trying to be supportive to people."

"I've often thought it would be kind of cool to take a bar of music and then break out that bar to show all the work that has to go into it… from the crew, the costumers, the singing lessons, the stage direction and that one bar of music to, you know, get Rodolfo to sing 'Mimì!.' In that one bar, there's a pyramid of work that happens underneath to support it."

Despite all of the resources that have come together for the many bars of music that have soundtracked his career, Desrochers's mark can be seen in the way in which those resources, gathered together for both beloved opera favourites and exciting new commissions like 2007's *Transit of Venus* (which Desrochers dramaturged and directed over a period of two decades), have been deployed to best serve the community.

"All the work we do in community engagement really came after 2010," Desrochers shares, "when we could see that the music and dramatic values of the work that we do were not enough to justify the value of the organization to the community. We needed to demonstrate our value in other ways. So now, engagement activities that take those central ideas and become community conversations have created a value beyond the artistic value."

Andriana Chuchman, who Desrochers calls a "local star," in Manitoba Opera's *L'elisir d'amore*

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Carlisle Floyd's *Of Mice and Men*, directed for Manitoba Opera by 2024 Ruby recipient Michael Cavanagh

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For Manitoba Opera's 2017 production of *Werther*, they hosted a panel discussion about portrayals of suicide in the media

Desrochers highlights the 2017 production of *Werther* as an example of using community engagement to enhance music and dramatic values. Rather than present a typical breakdown of Jules Massanet's score, Manitoba Opera hosted a panel discussion with Mood Disorders of Manitoba about portrayals of suicide in the media. "A hundred people showed up, and they started sharing stories of suicide in their families," shares Desrochers. "That opened up the piece to a contemporary world. When you talk about Massanet and French opera, it's just going to go over most people's heads, and they won't be interested. But, if you say to the community, 'We're doing a piece where a character can't get over the woman he loves, and ultimately he can't cope and takes his own life,' people understand that. It makes them think of the opera company in a different way."

With the creation of conversations around opera comes the challenge of programming music with messages for the community. "It's a little bit of practicality, a little bit of alchemy," says Desrochers, a phrase that could be used to describe Desrochers's career. "There are so many things that go into planning a season and yes, the sector is changing. There is more emphasis on new work, and that's good thing. At the same time, it's challenging to do that when you only have a two-show season. If you're creating new work, that piece is taking 50% of the season."

PHOTOS: R. TINKER

Faced with these challenges, Desrochers recalls advice from another titan of the Canadian opera industry, the late Bob McPhee, former head of Calgary Opera. "One of the things Bob told me is that you have to figure out what works for your community," Desrochers shares. "The arts have always had financial challenges – I suspect they always will. There are periods of time when they get worse or maybe a little bit better, but I think that you help your organization if you can be true to yourself. Believe in your mission, use that to demonstrate your value and use that value to leverage resources."

Over the last several years, Manitoba Opera under Desrochers's leadership has leveraged resources towards Reconciliation, a mission that is felt acutely in Winnipeg, which contains the largest urban population of Indigenous peoples in Canada. This engagement has thrown Desrochers into more learning about proper protocols and best practices to invite the Indigenous community to participate in a space they have historically been excluded from.

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Tracy Dahl, another of the "local stars" admired by Desrochers, seen here with Raymond Sokalski in *Così fan tutte*

From this work, Manitoba Opera started the Building Bridges Initiative to build and strengthen relationships with Indigenous communities and signed on to the Winnipeg Indigenous Accord in 2024. On the stage, the learning resulted in the commissioning and performances of *Li Keur: Riel's Heart of the North* by librettist Dr. Suzanne Steele and composers Neil Weisensel and Alex Kusturok. The artists of *Li Keur* were honoured with the Nada Ristich Change Maker Ruby Award in 2024.

"You have to be an active learner," says Desrochers of the Reconciliation process in opera. "And it's not always easy to do, but not because people describe the work of reconciliation as being hard. It's hard because you fall back into preconceived notions you've held onto your whole life, so the important part is listening actively and with intentionality." This approach to Reconciliation aligns with the vulnerability that comes with managing an opera company and being a consistent learner. "Honestly, you can't run an opera company unless you're comfortable with uncertainty."

While Desrochers has worked in recent years to address financial uncertainties, eliminating Manitoba Opera's debts and attempting to establish an endowment fund, everything exists in a flux that, while unpredictable, is also part of the magic of creating art. "You could bankrupt the company tomorrow. That's not a hard thing to do," chuckles Desrochers. "A hard thing to do is to continue to produce every year and create as much variety and exposure to different work as we can." Desrochers points to productions like Carlisle Floyd's *Of*

PHOTOS: (ABOVE) R. TINKER; (TOP RIGHT) C. CORNEAU

> *Believe in your mission*, use that to demonstrate your value and use that value to leverage resources."

Mice and Men and *Susannah* that, while well-known to opera aficionados, represented a significant risk to a regional company.

Financial management and programming are just two of the tools that Desrochers has deployed to mitigate risk. The other strength lies in the artists that make up the Manitoba Opera family. Under Desrochers's leadership, over 90% of the performers that have graced their stage have been Canadian, with a priority on casting local artists to help launch their careers beyond Manitoba. "There's a great culture of singing in this community and that's a part of the foundation of the company," says Desrochers, pointing to local stars like Tracy Dahl, Andriana Chuchman and Lara Ciekiewicz and to the Manitoba Opera Chorus, which features performers that have over 50 productions under their belts.

"It's also the volunteers and the donors and the audiences – the whole community comes together to support the artistic work that happens here. There's an appreciation of creative expression in this community which is quite extraordinary for a city of this size."

As the operatic brush and resources are replaced in the back of the Ford Ranger in favour of golf clubs, Desrochers hopes that his successor as artistic director continues to create art that engages the community. "Keep the community at the centre of your thinking," he says of his hopes for the next person to bring whatever vehicle to that parking spot at the concert hall. "As much as you might want to have exciting projects – and you

Manitoba Opera's production of Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*

should pursue exciting projects – [remember] that you're a steward of the ship for the community and find a way to balance your artistic aspirations with connection to that community."

NOLAN KEHLER is a tenor and broadcaster from Treaty 1 Territory in Winnipeg. His work with media includes Winnipeg's Classic 107 and CBC Radio, where he hosts a weekly column about classical music.

Chantal Lambert

A Very Strong Teaching Instinct

Chantal Lambert shares what made Opéra de Montréal's Atelier lyrique special during her time there

BY SYLVIA L'ÉCUYER

With a radiant smile, unwavering kindness, and a warm speaking voice, *Chantal Lambert* led the apprenticeship of many cohorts of young artists at Opéra de Montréal's Atelier lyrique over 30 years.

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Her Ruby Award is a well-deserved recognition of the remarkable work she accomplished from 1990 to 2023 at the Atelier.

During this period, Chantal was also invited to join the board of directors of the Conseil Québécois de la musique (CQM) as the first representative of the lyrical arts. She became president of the CQM from 2008 to 2011 and was inducted into the Canadian Opera Hall of Fame in 2016. With a deep commitment to promoting young artists, she sat on the board of the Association for Opera in Canada from 2019 to 2023 and is currently director of the Réunion des opéras du Québec. She is also

president of Le Volier, an organization whose mandate is the promotion of intercultural dialogue through music.

A dedicated teacher and skilled communicator, Chantal is the co-author of three glossaries (Italian, German and English) for young opera singers and is planning a new guide for the French singing word. As artistic advisor for many organizations, including the Festival Abercorn Lyrique and the Institut Canadien d'Art Vocal, Chantal Lambert continues, animated by her quiet and radiant energy, to grace the stage and to get involved in the creation of new work. As a member of the Collectif de la Lune Rouge, she collaborated on the libretto for *Albertine en cinq temps*, set to music by Catherine Major and based on Michel Tremblay's eponymous play, and sang the role of Albertine at the age of 70 on tour from the spring 2023 through August 2024. Recognized as an accomplished "singactress," her repertoire as a soprano has no bounds.

Sitting down with her recently, I realized how much profound respect for every individual, rigorous discipline and total dedication to the art form were important factors in her own accomplishments – the same principles which guided her in making Atelier lyrique into an indisputable success.

Music was always present in Chantal's family. Her grandfather had his daughters learn music, and her mother, the eldest, was the one who started lessons first. She was quickly recognized as having a beautiful soprano voice, took singing lessons, became a teacher, and even earned a degree in Gregorian chant at Saint-Benoît-du-Lac. At home, she sang all day and, of course, religiously listened to the Metropolitan Opera on Saturday afternoons.

When she was only 18, she decided that her first daughter would be named Chantal – *chanter* was to be her talent. Indeed, singing was a natural means of expression for the young girl. "My future was mapped out when I was born, and I was immersed in it."

Chantal and her three siblings had the opportunity to take piano lessons, drama classes, ballet – everything that was available freely through the parish school in the city of LaSalle. During her youth, she formed a music group with her brother and friends, then joined the Ensemble vocal Arts-Québec. With her younger sister, Marie-France, who still pursues a brilliant career as an actress, she participated in a production of a play by Marcel Dubé at L'Avant-Scène, an amateur theater company created in 1952. Wavering between theatre and music, Chantal very much imagined herself

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Images from *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, the final production Lambert planned as head of Atelier lyrique

PHOTOS: (LEFT) JAM LAN TRUONG; (BELOW) KEVIN CALIXTE

becoming a teacher and began studying pedagogy at Université de Québec à Montréal. It was with this goal in mind that she entered the Conservatoire de musique de Montréal in 1979, more confident in her talent as a thespian than as a singer.

There, she found herself lucky to have three remarkable artists as guides.

Roland Laroche, a man of theatre and opera who had adapted several plays by classic European and avant-garde authors in the 1960s, taught acting and directing for many years. He taught first at the National Theatre School of Canada and then at Cégep Lionel-Groulx in Sainte-Thérèse. "He's the one," says Lambert, "who also made me work on acting, but I was a little bit inhibited. For an actress, that's not great!

"The one who really got me hooked was tenor André Turp, my voice teacher. He always said to me 'Go play the clarinet if you're not going to sing words.' I've always loved literature, and when I made the connection between works like Dumas's *La Dame aux camélias* and Verdi's *La traviata*, I thought, 'This is the medium that suits me: music and theatre!'"

Vocal coach and pianist Janine Lachance, a consummate artist also in love with the sung word, kept repeating, "Keep it up, Chantal, you have a message to convey. You have to tell us something."

This advice created the foundation of Lambert's artistic integrity and solid pedagogical inclination. Having entered the Conservatoire without any great career aspirations – she had been taking classical singing lessons for only a few months – the young soprano embraced her studies with enthusiasm, fell in love with the lyrical world, and received a unanimous first prize in 1987.

At the Conservatoire, Raffi Armenian had admired her work ethic and conducted her in concert performances, including a performance of *Onegin*'s letter scene. He recommended her admission to the Atelier, where she did her internship from 1987 to 1990 while beginning a professional career. One of her very first roles as a

PHOTOS: (ABOVE) VÉRONIQUE DUPLAIN; (RIGHT) BRENT CALIS

As Albertine at age 70 (centre) with the cast of *Albertine en cinq temps*

Lambert (second from left) with the Atelier lyrique 2016/17 cohort

young professional, the Polovtsian Girl in *Prince Igor* at the Festival de Lanaudière in 1989, received enthusiastic praise. More recognition came in 1992, when she triumphed in the title role of *La belle Hélène* at the Opéra de Montréal, and she confesses a particular affection for the operetta.

In the following years, she appeared in at least 17 productions with the company including *La Voix humaine* (Elle), *La bohème* (Mimì), *La Veuve joyeuse* (Nadia), *La vie parisienne* (Métella), *Carmen* (Mercédès), *La Cenerentola* (Tisbe) and *The Consul* (Anna Gomez). Equally at home in romantic and contemporary opera, she has participated in several concerts with the Orchestre Métropolitain and the Orchestre Baroque de Montréal, with repertoire ranging from Handel to Gershwin, and performed sacred music programs with organist Bernard Lagacé.

At the end of the penultimate year of her internship, there was a change in general and artistic management at the Opéra de Montréal. With the arrival of Bernard Uzan and the departure of Jean-Paul Jeannotte, Yvonne Goudreau left the Atelier and there was, in Chantal Lambert's words, a whole commotion.

Because of her musical experience and remarkable sense of organization, she found herself in charge of coordination and scheduling operations. When Maestro Antonio Tonini came from La Scala speaking only Italian, she also acted as translator. She went seamlessly from intern to de facto director of the Atelier while pursuing a singing career and redesigning the program. She embraced these new responsibilities with enthusiasm.

> "We have an *identity* at the artistic level, and we have something very special to offer."

"I really liked this. I did not have imposter syndrome. I had a very, very strong teaching instinct within me… Bernard was the master on board, we agree on that, and I was the person who executed, who found the means to make it work.

"I tried to establish things at the level of lyrical diction, acting, work ethic and the methodology of learning a role. These were strengths of mine. I say this in all modesty – I was always a good student, and I did things right. I tried to instill that in the young artists who were arriving. Some had wonderful academic careers, but they were very, very disparate depending on where they came from, their university, their conservatory. I realized that there were significant gaps in the way of organizing one's schedule. So, at the beginning, they found me a little bit annoying because I made them fill in all sorts of grids where they had to tell me every day how much time they spent learning new repertoire, memorizing and practicing music theory, doing this and that. I exerted my influence with the personality I had.

"I knew it wasn't easy, that they had growing pains. You leave your university, where you're the star of your faculty. You arrive in the ocean of a career, and you try to navigate it. Then you realize that there are people who sing well, and you feel like you're not adequate. I really saw my role as someone who is there not to 'mother,' because I don't like that term, but to supervise, to nourish, to guide, to reassure and to bring a little humanity into a journey which is very demanding."

Through their years of apprenticeship, singers, pianists and stage directors honed their skills, and the public had a chance to witness their accomplishments as they performed in minor roles with the company or starred in the productions the Atelier presented each season. What is most remarkable is that so many of them have now reached star status on the stages of major opera houses.

"When visiting international festivals and prestigious companies, I was often asked about the secret behind such a phenomenon. What was so special about Montreal? Of course, the young singers benefitted from the dedication and experience of excellent voice teachers and vocal coaches during their training, but the particular quality of management we provided at the Atelier seems to have been a major factor in the success of the program."

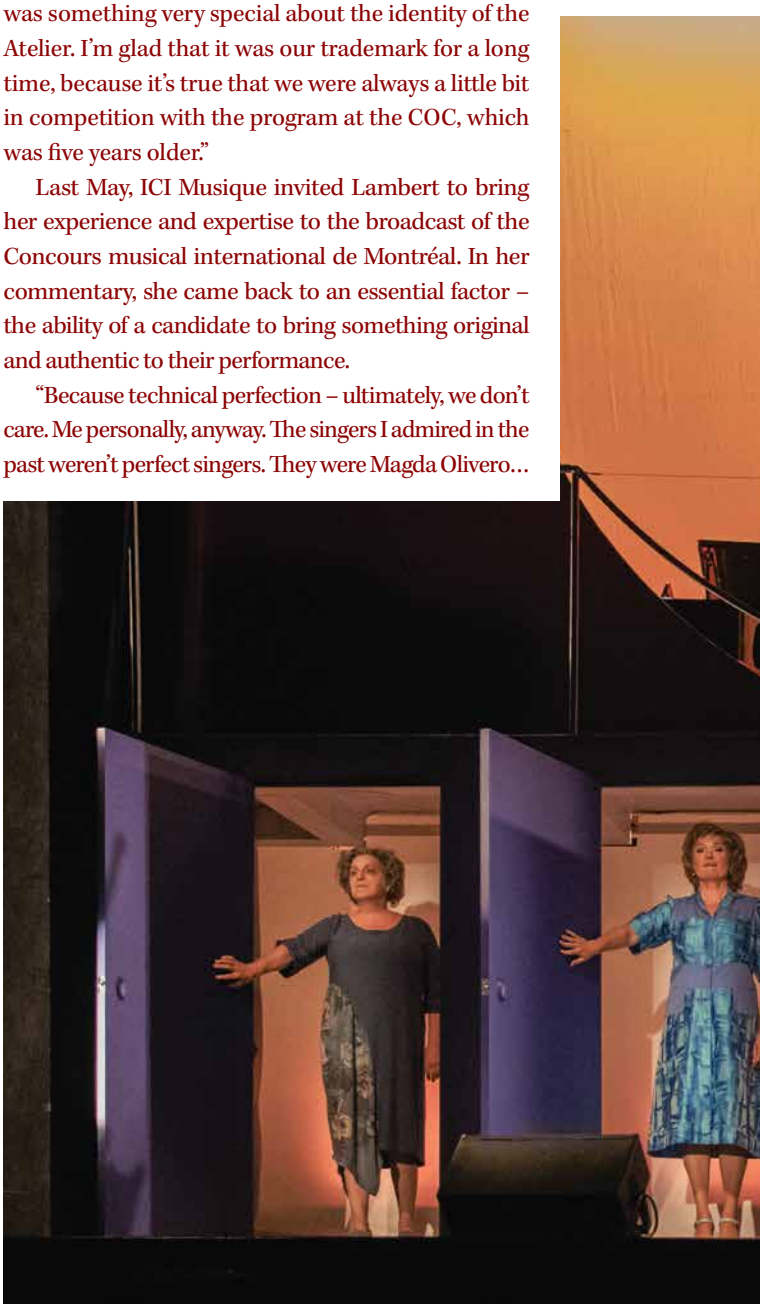
Looking back, Lambert recognized the highlights. "Yes, there were some very prosperous years – all the years of Étienne Dupuis, Philip Addis, Julie Boulianne, Michèle Losier – and there have been some great artists who didn't shine as brightly as others but who were essential to the dynamic within the group. It was like manna. We used to say 'We're in Montreal, we have less money. We're a program that's less subsidized, that has less philanthropy around it. But we have something. We have an identity at the artistic level, and we have something very special to offer.'

"And those like Phillip Addis and others, who came from other Canadian provinces, shared this unique experience. I remember Tom Diamond, who came to teach stage acting, said 'You French-Canadians are crazy!' And it's true, we had this madness, this kind of exaggeration. We don't just fit into a mold. Deep down, we're kind of pig-headed. There's something in us that we have to express, even if it's not standard.

"That produces very interesting results. There was something very special about the identity of the Atelier. I'm glad that it was our trademark for a long time, because it's true that we were always a little bit in competition with the program at the COC, which was five years older."

Last May, ICI Musique invited Lambert to bring her experience and expertise to the broadcast of the Concours musical international de Montréal. In her commentary, she came back to an essential factor – the ability of a candidate to bring something original and authentic to their performance.

"Because technical perfection – ultimately, we don't care. Me personally, anyway. The singers I admired in the past weren't perfect singers. They were Magda Olivero…



even Tebaldi, who was still pretty perfect, but who had a high note that wasn't always easy. As an actress, it was okay, but it wasn't Callas. The singers I admired all had a kind of imperfect side that I didn't really care about. What mattered was 'What are you saying to me? How are you getting at me?'

"And that's something that also gave me confidence as an artist, because even if I wasn't perfect, even though there are things in vocal technique that have remained a great mystery to me for a long, long time, I had a burning desire to carry a text, to bring an almost spiritual quality to my singing, because I felt invested with a responsibility. As a singer, I said to myself, 'You have to channel something bigger than yourself.' And that's what I still look for in an artist."

This season, Chantal is collaborating in the creation of a new opera, *Les Dévots*, with music by Christophe Lamarche-Ledoux and libretto by Félix-Antoine Boutin. She is expected to be on stage for its performance at Théâtre Espace Libre in fall 2026. OC

SYLVIA L'ÉCUYER is a musicologist, associate professor at Université de Montréal and a regular contributor to *Opera Canada*. She retired after 37 years as host and producer at Radio-Canada.

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Albertine en cinq temps with Lambert in centre, facing upstage

PHOTO: VÉRONIQUE DUPLAIN

Teiya Kasahara 笠原貞野

— *Questioning Assumptions*

Ariadne Lih listens to Teiya Kasahara talk about the changes needed to accept artists as full human beings

Teiya Kasahara 笠原貞野 (they/he): Nikkei Canadian settler, transgender opera singer, interdisciplinary theatre creator and creator-performer of the critically acclaimed operatic play *The Queen In Me*.

◆

(For more about *The Queen In Me*, see Jane Forner's article in *Opera Canada*'s winter 2024 issue.)

These descriptors are all laid out in the first paragraph of Kasahara's bio. There, like everywhere, Kasahara shares who they are as an artist with generosity and creativity and without apology.

This was immediately clear when I met them in 2022, during their keynote address for Queer History Month at McGill. That was my introduction to the story behind *The Queen In Me*. Kasahara, an incredibly gifted coloratura soprano, found themselves exhausted by the grind of Queen of the Night performances and weighed

PHOTOS: (LEFT) GAETZ PHOTOGRAPHY; (RIGHT) SEAN SOLOMON

A 2024 concert, as part of *Project T*, at ChamberQUEER in New York

down by operatic misogyny and gender norms. They were moved to create something new – a piece of experimental operatic theatre in which those frustrations and contradictions could be named and reclaimed.

This year, Kasahara is receiving the Rubies' Nada Ristich Change Maker Award. Inaugurated in 2022, the award recognizes an individual who has made an outstanding cultural contribution to the community, through their artistic practice, or to initiatives that create significant creative and social change in the field of opera in Canada.

A few weeks ago, Kasahara sat down with me over video chat to discuss life and work. Our conversation was far-reaching and, honestly, hard to summarize. Like me, and like many of us who've been deeply hurt or frustrated by the opera industry, he's in the habit of questioning assumptions and holding seemingly contradictory truths. He loves Puccini's music, but he can criticize *Madama Butterfly* for appropriating Japanese culture and perpetuating racist stereotypes. His soprano voice is deeply meaningful to him, but he's also a transmasculine person who's about to start taking testosterone. And so on.

I want to share Kasahara's words – the frank, open way they discuss their values and their process. I've included five questions and answers from our conversation, only lightly edited for length, followed by my own overview of what they're up to now.

This article alternates between he and they pronouns for Kasahara, like the bio on his website does. As a writer, it makes intuitive sense to me. Teiya Kasahara cannot be reduced to just one thing.

What does Nikkei mean, and why do you choose to include that word and the Japanese spelling of your name, in your bio?

Nikkei refers to the Japanese diaspora. It's connected to the history and lineage of the Japanese people and Japanese Canadian people within Canada, like the Nikkei Cultural Centre in Burnaby. That's where I grew up, actually, outside Vancouver.

My connection to my Japanese-ness is through my father, obviously, but also through the Nikkei community in BC. I think I want to use that word because it's a Japanese word and it's *not* the word Japanese, which is an English word. It's decentring English and colonization.

There's a typical way that people train to be opera singers, and it doesn't usually involve interdisciplinary theatre. How did you learn to become an interdisciplinary theatre creator?

It was organic. It was serendipitous. It just kind of happened, out of necessity or desire that I didn't even know how to articulate or could verbalize or was even conscious of when I started exploring theatre and music and art outside of opera and the operatic canon.

Two production photos from *The Queen In Me*, with costume by Joanna Yu and projections by Laura Warren

It's hard to pinpoint one thing as a turning point. But I was having very candid conversations with my dear friend and my colleague Aria Umezawa probably around 2014 or '15, I would say. Struggling with the limitations, the confines, of opera and being a soprano within the industry.

Also, then, another thing – being introduced to Theatre Gargantua, Jacquie Thomas and Michael Spence, and being welcomed and embraced and encouraged to explore more as an artist – to embrace the identity of an artist versus "I'm just an opera singer."

What does that mean to you – embracing the identity of an artist?

I feel like the training I received as an opera singer and how I was taught to behave in professional situations was very much "Act as a vessel to the artistry of the composer, the librettist, the director, the conductor." And that's it. *Basta*. Execute that task to the best of my ability. It's almost like it's probably more ideal to not have an opinion, to not have a brain, to not have a heart, because then those four major creatives can sculpt what they want using singers as their "vessels," their puppets, whatever name you choose.

And I think it's very discombobulating, very disconcerting, to have to turn off your humanity in an artistic room as your profession. I think it was wearing me down. Coupling that with an environment that upholds white supremacist values – just gonna say it – is really hard when you're a racialized, queer, trans person and you don't even really know it yet.

As an artist, you have agency. You're asked to bring your brain and your heart and your wealth of experience as a human into the world, to be constantly reflecting and expressing. And I felt like that's missing from being an opera singer, from how we train opera singers, and also how we treat and value them in a professional setting. There is so much more they can bring – and that they're starting to bring – to these more traditional, conventional situations. That's where I see positive change starting to happen.

How can we make more space for singers to show up as artists and human beings?

There are so many little things we can do, and I think a lot of it starts with care and respect – which often doesn't even enter the room for everyone. There's a lack of transparency, a lot of assumptions being made.

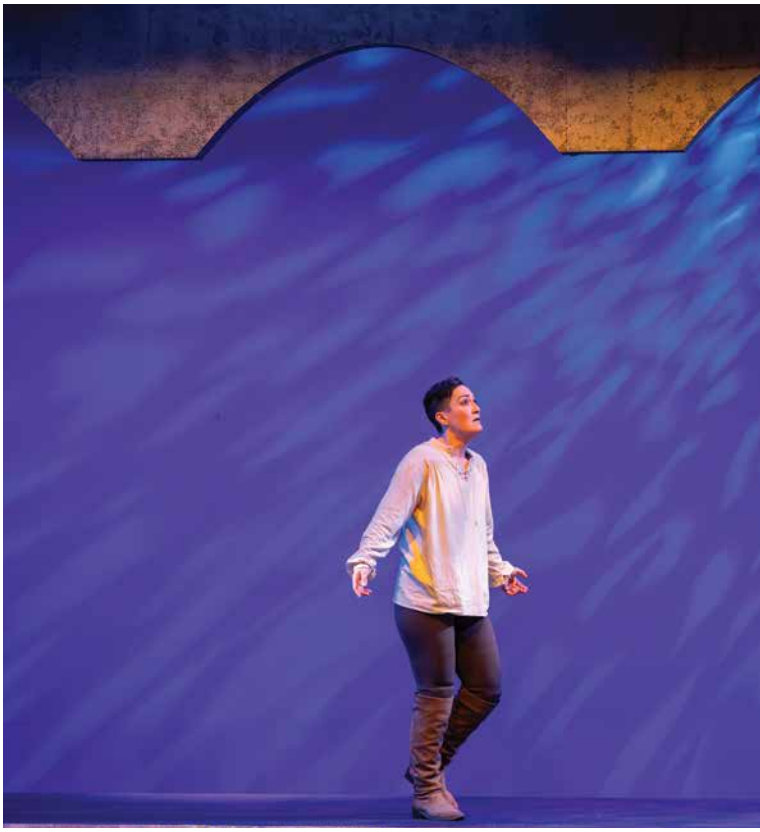
The idea of safety is very subjective, and you can't make a safe space for everyone. So, we need to try to make spaces respectful and care-centred and brave so people can feel like they have agency without it being a

PHOTOS: (LEFT) GAETZ PHOTOGRAPHY; (RIGHT) DAHLIA KATZ

threat to their career, their job, their reputation. When you can create a space that is brave, where we can all embrace the identity of the "feminist killjoy," I think it's really powerful. We can all start to cultivate the ability to say, "This doesn't feel right," or "There's something going on," or "I'm actually seeing that this is inappropriate." Let's just talk, let's just call it out and work it out.

I think it's important to name it. There is power in naming. Because when you say it, it makes it present in that moment. And then you can't unhear what you've just heard, you know? And when it's written down, then you're putting even more energy and power into it, even if it's a piece of paper that you stick to the wall and

> "… you allow the art of the work to take on its own life to be *what it's going to be*."



(left) Kasahara in the premiere of Leslie Uyeda's *Silence* at Opera Nuova

(right) *The Butterfly Project* at the 2023 Toronto Summer Music Festival

people just put "Respect of pronouns," or "Respect of time, respect of breaks," something like that.

I think we need to take even more stock with dismantling toxic hierarchies within classical music, in how we teach it, how we make it and how we produce it. I also think how we create opera is very siloed, you know, with a composer and a librettist, and that there are many more opportunities for collaboration, for expanding the canon and for expanding the definition of opera – pushing against the boxes that are inherent in opera.

How can we take full advantage of those opportunities for collaboration?

I think it's about having an honest relationship with one's ego. Ego is important, for sure, but I think we need to be striving towards healthy relationships with our egos, especially when we're working, not even just with others, but with ourselves too.

Sometimes you want the art or the story or whatever you're creating to go a certain way, but as you keep working on it, it may not want to. So, you allow the art of the work to take on its own life and to be what it's going to be. This idea of letting go is a huge thing. Letting something small go, letting something big go.

I think collaboration and co-creation can really work when you're decentring capitalism as well. Because we are so often pressured and forced by the confines of capitalism, by lack of time, lack of money, lack of resources to produce something. There's this pressure to produce, have a finished product, something that you can sell, that is consumable by audiences, right? We are so wrapped up in measuring our worth by very limited identifiers… We're so rooted in this capitalist mentality versus just having an experience. And an experience can be as simple as two people in a hallway – or witnessing something in an audience of 2,000 people, a huge spectacle with a multi-million-dollar budget. There is worth in all of those experiences and in between.

I wish I could print my entire conversation with Teiya. But I also want to talk about all the artistic experiences that they and their collaborators have created.

Teiya's constant creativity is obvious from his 2024/25 season alone. On top of covering roles at the Canadian Opera Company and premiering Leslie Uyeda's new opera *Silence*, Teiya's calendar is full of co-curated or co-created projects: digital opera with re:Naissance, a queer *Dichterliebe* program at University of Toronto, a Japanese song program called 歌曲 Kakyoku at the COC, *The Queen In Me*.

And, of course, there's *Project T* – an iterative and autobiographical account of Teiya's professional career and personal life as he documents his vocal transition in real time. T stands for testosterone, the cornerstone of hormone therapy for transmasculine people. An important part of the documentation process happens on social media, and you should absolutely be following along at @projecttdoc. There are concerts, too. The first one was at ChamberQUEER in June 2024 and the most recent one was at Confluence Concerts this May. The latest iteration is called "Project T: Home Video," and it will be released on YouTube for two weeks in October. Meanwhile, the project continues to evolve.

"I wanted to do this with intention and with gratitude to my voice," Teiya tells me. "*Project T* is very much also

about saying thank you for what my voice has done for me so far." As a result, they've been doing a lot of recording of their pre-T soprano, but they also plan to keep recording themselves as their voice changes. The goal is "to document and to share, and to not do this in isolation."

Right now, Teiya's main feeling about the transition process is impatience. "I just want to live my life. I feel like I've been waiting and holding off for everyone else except for me. So, it's a complex kind of feeling."

It's complex. It's not just one thing. The same could be said about many of Teiya's creative endeavours, from *The Queen In Me* to *The Butterfly Project* – another iterative work that grapples with the character of Cio-Cio-San from *Madama Butterfly*. Teiya's reimagining allows Chōchō-san (蝶々さん) to tell her own story starting where Puccini left off.

"It's about reconciling my relationship with opera in general, but specifically this opera, and how opera tokenizes and appropriates other cultures," says Teiya. "It's kind of a musical meditation on these concepts. And so, every time I perform it or come to it, it changes, it grows, it evolves." Although *The Butterfly Project* wasn't part of Teiya's most recent season, he's currently working on creating a recording of it with some colleagues.

Teiya's work has sent ripples across the Canadian opera community. They've connected deeply with countless audiences and artists, carving out new spaces for queer and trans singers, people of colour, and all those who feel worn down or let down by the opera industry. Subscribe to their newsletter, join their Patreon, follow them on socials (@teiyakasahara), check out their website – you'll see clearly why they've earned the Change Maker Award.

I'm thrilled to get to write about Teiya. And I also hope we don't lose sight of why an award like this is needed. When they talked about how exhausting and stressful their work can be, I felt it in my bones. It can be so tiring that, sometimes, you wonder whether you should even do it anymore. Teiya told me, "In *The Queen In Me*, I talk about loving opera so much, with my whole being. Yet, as I participate within the industry, it continues to hurt me."

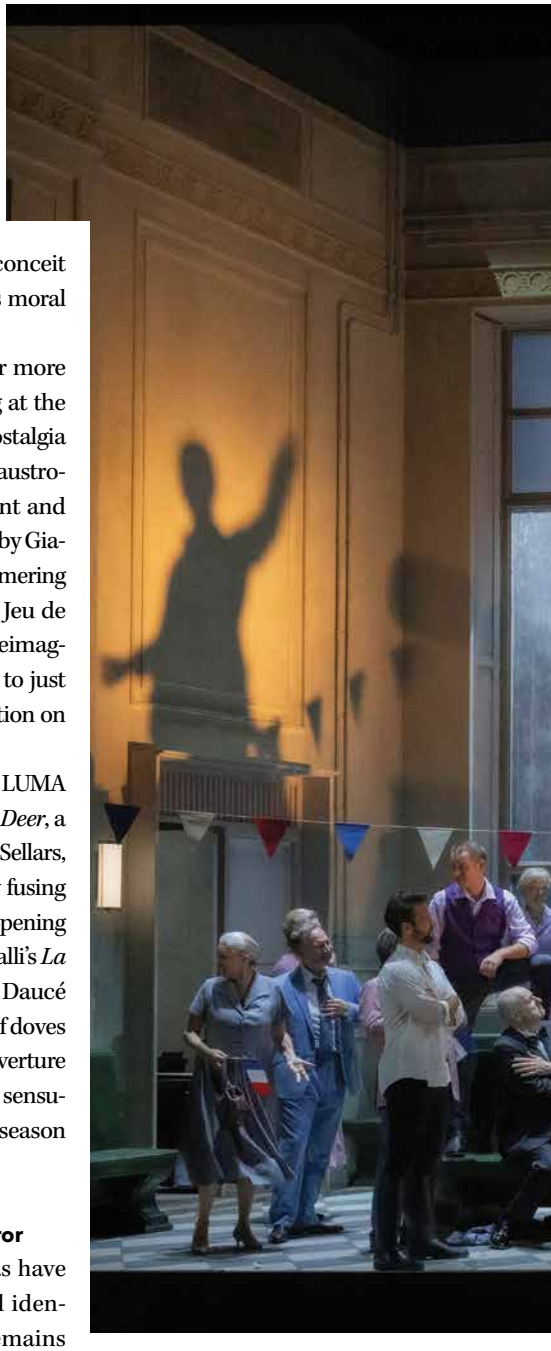
It's complex. It's not just one thing. The opera industry and the operatic art form are not the same, but they are hard to separate. "It's a continual challenge and frustration," says Teiya. "And sometimes it's a celebration. Sometimes I have really wonderful experiences, and that's where I really try to focus my energy. …It's not about where I'm singing or what I'm singing, but what is so important now is who I'm doing it with and why we're doing it. Those are the more important questions."

I'm wishing Teiya recognition, fulfillment and also rest. And I'm wishing the industry more complexity, more questions and more change. OC

ARIADNE LIH sings, translates and writes about music. Her scholarly musical translations have been appeared with Routledge and Brepols.

PHOTOS: (LEFT) NANC PRICE; (RIGHT) LUCKY TANG

Denise Wendel-Poray takes readers to summer festivals in Aix-en-Provence, Bayreuth and Salzburg



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THIS SUMMER, I ATTENDED THREE OF EUROPE'S most storied festivals – Aix-en-Provence, Bayreuth and Salzburg. Across vastly different stages and styles, a shared theme emerged: opera confronting a fractured world not through nostalgia but through reinvention, reckoning and fleeting moments of grace.

Aix-en-Provence – Mourning and Resolve

Festival d'Aix-en-Provence opened under the shadow of the sudden death of its director Pierre Audi in May. The season he had meticulously planned, however, carried forward his spirit of bold programming and interdisciplinary collaboration.

On July 4th at the Grand Théâtre de Provence, theatre director Robert Icke made his operatic debut with *Don Giovanni* conducted by Sir Simon Rattle. Visually rich but conceptually muddled, the production collapsed Don Giovanni and the Commendatore into one fractured figure, a man at war with himself. The psychological conceit – though intriguing – blurred the opera's moral contours and left many unconvinced.

The next evening, *Louise* offered a far more compelling vision. Christof Loy's staging at the Théâtre de l'Archevêché stripped away nostalgia in favour of psychological realism and claustrophobic intensity. Elsa Dreisig was radiant and deeply moving in the title role, supported by Giacomo Sagripanti's patient, emotionally simmering conducting. At the intimate Théâtre du Jeu de Paume, Oliver Leith and Ted Huffman reimagined *Billy Budd* (also July 5), pared down to just over an hour, as a spare, haunted meditation on queerness, love, shame and betrayal.

On July 6, audiences were bused to the LUMA Foundation in Arles for *The Nine Jewelled Deer*, a transcendent collaboration between Peter Sellars, Julie Mehretu, and Ganavya Doraiswamy fusing voice, myth and abstraction. The festival's opening week ended on a luminous note with Cavalli's *La Calisto* (July 7), conducted by Sébastien Daucé with Ensemble Correspondances. A pair of doves wheeling above the courtyard before the overture seemed to bless the evening, as baroque sensuality and lyrical grace brought light to a season shadowed by loss.

Bayreuth – *Meistersinger* in the Mirror

At Bayreuth, where Wagner's operas have long been central to German national identity, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* remains a lightning rod – not because of its composer alone, but because of how the work was later embraced by the Third Reich. This summer's new production, directed by Matthias Davids, sidestepped the opera's ideological freight in favour of backstage comedy, softening the work's provocations instead of confronting them. For *Meistersinger* is not just Wagner's comic opera, it is also his meditation on art, nationhood and tradition – complex themes entwined with the opera's notorious final act.

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Michael Nagy as a youthful and empathetic Beckmesser in Bayreuth's colourful *Die Meistersinger*, with Christina Nilsson as Eva hiding behind him

PHOTOS: (LEFT) ENRICO NAWRATH; (ABOVE) MONIKA RITTERSHAUS

Christof Loy's production of *Louise* in Aix-en-Provence

Davids, with roots in musical theatre, steered the work into playful territory but failed to interrogate its darker historical associations. Instead of critique or irony, the result was often glib, even trivial. Nevertheless, the cast delivered standout performances. Michael Spyres was exceptional as Walther von Stolzing – heroic and lyrical in equal measure. Christina Nilsson brought beautiful tone and finesse as Eva. Michael Nagy's Beckmesser was a revelation: youthful, sharply sung and empathetic. Georg Zeppenfeld, however, lacked the warmth and vocal power required for Hans Sachs, leaving a notable void at the opera's emotional centre. In the pit, Daniele Gatti led a broad, sometimes ponderous reading that offered little in the way of colour or contrast. The grandeur was there, but the nuance was not – phrases blurred rather than breathed, and the score's richness felt curiously muted.

In the following days, Valentin Schwarz's divisive *Ring* cycle began its final run with *Das Rheingold* (July 26) and *Die Walküre* (July 27).

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Nadezhda Karyazina and Cecilia Bartoli on Michael Levine's set for *Hotel Metamorphosis*

Schwarz imagines the gods and mortals as members of a decadent bourgeois family unraveling from within. Though opaque in places, the concept resonated under the assured baton of Simone Young. Her *Rheingold* was especially effective – dramatic yet never overwrought. *Walküre* benefited again from Spyres, this time as Siegmund, sung with strength and clarity.

Looking ahead, Bayreuth is preparing for seismic shifts. In 2026, the festival will open with *Rienzi* for the first time, breaking with its canonical focus. That same season will see the debut of an AI-generated *Ring* cycle, conducted by Christian Thielemann. Katharina Wagner's leadership is steering the festival toward experimentation – even at the risk of some in the traditional audience abandoning ship.

Salzburg – Myth, Memory and Reckoning

Under Markus Hinterhäuser's bold artistic direction, the Salzburg Festival continues to fuse excellence with inquiry, placing opera at the centre of cultural and political dialogue.

The festival began for me on July 29 at the Salzburger Marionettentheater, where *L'Histoire du Soldat* marked the famous puppeteers' first foray into 20th-century repertoire. Featuring puppets and stage design by Georg Baselitz, the production offered jagged theatrical beauty. Baselitz's figures, manipulated with virtuosic precision, amplified the sharp edges of Stravinsky's score – played here with wiry energy and rhythmic bite.

On July 30, I attended a piano dress rehearsal of Péter Eötvös's *Three Sisters* thanks to Canadian countertenor Cameron Shahbazi. The trio with Shahbazi as Masha, Dennis Orellana as Irina and Aryeh Nussbaum Cohen as Olga reimagines Chekhov's Prozorov sisters as a haunting ensemble of male falsettists. Directed by Evgeny Titov, the staging promises a piercing, unconventional portrayal of longing and inertia.

Hotel Metamorphosis, a Vivaldi pastiche directed by Barrie Kosky, drew from scenes inspired by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Conductor Gianluca Capuano and the Musiciens du Prince - Monaco wove together operatic fragments into a surreal procession of gods, lovers and victims. Canadian designer Michael Levine created a luxury-hotel set through which these figures wandered like restless spirits. Cecilia Bartoli, Philippe Jaroussky and Lea Desandre brought charisma and control, while mezzo Nadezhda Karyazina stunned with dark-hued vocal power.

PHOTO: MONIKA RITTERSHAUS

Maria Stuarda, directed by Ulrich Rasche, turned Donizetti's opera into a whirling confrontation. Two massive rotating discs underscored the collision course between queens Elizabeth and Mary. Kate Lindsey, dramatically magnetic as Elisabetta though vocally more at home in earlier music, sparred against Lisette Oropesa's Maria, who was delicate, expressive and technically precise. Bekhzod Davronov made a confident festival debut as Leicester.

The most profound evening came on August 2 at the Felsenreitschule with *One Morning Turns into an Eternity*, an austere yet moving suite of works by Schoenberg, Webern and Mahler. Directed by Peter Sellars and conducted by Esa-Pekka Salonen, the program traced a path through conflict, loss and transcendence. In this vast stone arena carved into the mountain, music echoed like memory itself – fragile and enduring. That night's second event, *Jedermann*, was Salzburg's annual morality play, reimagined by Robert Carsen with his trademark audacity and invention. Disco balls, shattered tables and swinging chandeliers met moral gravity head-on, offering joy and seriousness in equal measure.

Dmitri Tcherniakov's *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* ended my Salzburg visit – though hardly jubilantly. Set in a claustrophobic bomb shelter with realistic explosions shaking the audience, the production reimagined Handel's opera as a study in psychological and physical warfare. Christophe Dumaux, one of today's most magnetic countertenors, brought strength and charisma to Cesare, while Olga Kulchynska's radiant Cleopatra was occasionally thrown by the staging's relentlessness. Emmanuelle Haïm conducted with warmth and deep feeling, drawing out the full beauty of Handel's score amid the chaos onstage.

And Canadian voices were not on the sidelines. Cameron Shahbazi's luminous performance in *Three Sisters*, Michael Levine's haunting scenography for *Hotel Metamorphosis* and Robert Carsen's dazzling *Jedermann* were not just highlights – they were essential to the season's resonance.

The Pulse of the Present

With hindsight, what these festivals shared was a refusal to let opera stand still. Through mourning, provocation or reinvention, each treated it not as preservation but as argument, a living art still capable of risk and relevance. OC

AUDIO

Ho: Chinatown

CITY OPERA VANCOUVER
LEAF MUSIC, LM281

***"CHINATOWN*, THE OPERA,** is a story of found family. It is about intimacy and trust between two men in a world that views them as alien and expendable labour," writes librettist Madeleine Thien of her collaboration with composer Alice Ping Yee Ho and Hoisan translator and writer Paul Yee. The work premiered at City Opera Vancouver in 2022, and this recording was released in 2023.

The first act is kaleidoscopic in nature, chronicling the growing relationship between Xon Pon and Saihin between 1896 and 1948. Both Chinese workers in Canada, Saihin is saving to pay the Head Tax that would allow his wife and daughter to join him. The act ends with Saihan ill and dying, and Xon Pon travels under Saihin's name to Hong Kong to bring his orphaned granddaughters to Canada. The second act takes place in 1961 as the granddaughters Anna and Wenli, along with Anna's boyfriend Eugene, face the demolition of Chinatown and a crackdown against illegal immigrants. In the last scene, Anna and Eugene are leaving Vancouver to avoid deportation, and Wenli and Xon Pon imagine the future of their family and community.

Ho's score is mesmerizing. It is at its best in the liminal space where Western and Chinese musical styles are blended. Music from the final scene, featuring the gaohu playing in in unison with the violin, viola and cello, is particularly magical, and her writing for the male chorus is beautiful. The music of the first act feels more atmospheric, almost as though Ho is painting faint images with memories. In the second act, it feels like musical gestures are used more to amplify the onstage drama.

The cast is quite good. Tenor Spencer Britten, who sings the role of Saihin, should be particularly commended for his lyrical lines and the extraordinary ease of his top range. His aria at the end of the first act is breathtaking. Erica Iris Huang, who is billed as Hoisan Singer and serves as a sort of narrative voice, has a beautiful and unusual tone. Conductor Mary Chun maintains a nice sense of movement throughout the entire opera and leads the ten-player mixed ensemble of Western and Chinese instruments with a good sense of ensemble.

The recording is technically strong. There is good balance, and the sound quality creates a sense of intimacy appropriate to the work. The booklet includes interesting notes from Ho, Thien, Yee and Dr. Charles Barber, the founding artistic director of City Opera Vancouver. Information is provided in English, French and Chinese. Given how much of the opera is sung in Hoisan, however, it would be nice if it contained a translated libretto – or even a QR-code link to a full libretto. Some of the nuance of the first act, particularly the growing relationship between Xon Pon and Saihin, is lost in the language.

Despite that reservation, this is an important recording of a beautiful opera that deserves both future productions and a place in the CD collection of Canadian opera fans.

Erica Iris Huang as Hoisan Singer in the original production of *Chinatown*

Current: Missing

ATOM (ARTISTS OF THE OPERA *MISSING*)
BRIGHT SHINY THINGS, BSTC-0221

A 2017 CO-COMMISSION BY City Opera Vancouver and Pacific Opera Victoria, *Missing* by librettist Marie Clements and composer Brian Current has subsequently been performed in both of those cities and in Saskatchewan, and it received an American premiere in Anchorage. A concert performance as part of the Toronto Summer Musical Festival in 2025 followed the release of this recording.

The story, by Métis/Dene playwright Marie Clements, confronts Canada's ongoing Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls crisis. Ava (Caitlin Wood), a white law student, is injured in a car accident on Highway 16 in British Columbia, the infamous Highway of Tears. As she struggles to remain conscious, she "sees" the body of The Native Girl (Melody Courage), and this encounter changes her life. With the guidance of a professor (Marion Newman), Ava begins to explore Gitxsan language and culture. Woven separately through this narrative, Native Mother (Michelle Lafferty) and Angus (Evan Korbut) mourn the loss of their daughter and sister.

The libretto is beautifully constructed, using both English and Gitxsan texts in a natural and seamless manner. It raises difficult themes in a way that does not feel didactic, and important images from the opening scene carry through the entire piece in a manner that provides a coherent structure for the two-part story. Elder Vincent Gogag is noted in the liner notes for "ensuring the rhythms and tonal colours of Gitxsan speech were authentically woven into the music."

Scored for flute, clarinet, violin, viola, piano and two percussionists and beautifully played by the Continuum Ensemble under Indigenous American conductor Timothy Long, Current's music has a strong sense of propulsion, particularly in the second act nightmare scene, a duo for Ava and The Native Girl with rhythmic accompaniment of body percussion. The score is at its finest from this moment through the end, where the two stories combine in a finale that is both memorable and moving.

Melody Courage and Caitlin Wood in the Toronto Summer Music Festival concert presentation of *Missing*

Wood's high lyric soprano is richly beautiful, and her vocal performance of Ava's arc is strong enough to show the character's growth in a recording. While Courage sometimes sounds more thin vocally, she brings strong commitment to the role and, in scenes with Wood, their different soprano timbres work well together. Newman is simply a national treasure, and she brings a warm mezzo and grounded presence to her scenes. Both Lafferty and Korbut also do good work, with Korbut's voice round and lyrical and Lafferty spellbinding in both her aria and final sequence. Asitha Tennekoon brings a lovely lyric tenor voice as Ava's boyfriend, Devon, and Andrea Ludwig is strong in the thankless role of Ava's friend, Jess, the voice of White Privilege.

The CD is well recorded with good sound quality. For me, the tuned percussion is sometimes too high in the mix, but otherwise there is very strong balance. The booklet, which is only accessible through a QR-code link in the CD packaging, includes a full libretto with English translations of the Gitxsan text. Overall, this recording is highly recommended. OC

— **MICHAEL JONES**

PHOTO: (LEFT) DIAMOND'S EDGE PHOTOGRAPHY; (TOP RIGHT) LUCKY TANG

Soprano Jonelle Sills takes on a new role at Pacific Opera Victoria

PHOTO: STUART LOWE

UP NEXT

I will be singing the role of Miss Jessel in *The Turn of the Screw* by Benjamin Britten.

How are you getting ready for it?

I'm incorporating the music and story into my life through various media. Since the opera is based on a book, I will read it and listen to the audiobook. I will also save three to five reputable recordings – this allows me to hear the orchestra and explore different interpretations of the style.

When it comes to my score (digital and/or electronic), I always divide it into sections – highlighting my part and key musical markings. As I highlight, I also scan the music and place a star next to areas that may need more attention due to perceived difficulty.

I find learning Britten demanding, so I really break down my learning process. First, I speak the text and then I learn the rhythm separately. I combine rhythm and text before learning the melody, and finally, I put the text and melody together. Once I've done that, I reach out to a coach to help put all my preparation into context. I love coaching and discovering how to weave my voice into the music. Every role stretches and challenges me to grow, so it's always rewarding to feel and experience that growth in real time. For *The Turn of the Screw*, I will be working with Brahm Goldhamer as a coach, and then I'll see my teacher, Frédérique Vézina.

I also like to write out my text using a notebook and cue cards. To help me develop my character, I use the "5 and ½ Questions" by Tom Diamond to deepen my understanding of who my character is – and why.

Why are you looking forward to in this engagement?

I'm excited for this project because it's my first time singing the role of Miss Jessel, and I'm looking forward to the opportunity to discover and build this character. Miss Jessel is haunting, disturbing and problematic – adjectives not usually associated with characters I've sung in the past. This will give me the opportunity to tap into my acting and singing technique in a new way.

What excites you about Pacific Opera Victoria?

I've never worked with this company before, but I'm interested in building a new relationship with POV. I have always been inspired by the work they produce and am grateful for this opportunity to collaborate. I really love the West Coast, and I'm excited to come to Victoria for the first time! OC

JONELLE SILLS is JUNO-nominated and was named one of CBC's 30 hot Canadian musicians under 30 in 2020. She has sung with companies like the Against the Grain Theatre, the Canadian Opera Company, Edmonton Opera and Vancouver Opera.

Congratulations Larry!

Bravo to Larry Desrochers on being one of the 2025 Ruby Award recipients.

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Artistically, he knows how to put a creative team together that lifts the music off the page, making rehearsals a whole lot of fun, and bringing audiences to their feet at the final curtain."

TRACY DAHL, C.M.
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