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CULTIVATING CONNECTIONS IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AMERICAN OPERA: THE COMMISSIONING OF FOUR NEW WORKS AT PIONEERING THEATRES

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A DISSERTATION DOCUMENT APPROVED
FOR THE SCHOOL OF MUSIC

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Dedicated to

David and Albere, who are always by my side,

and my family and friends for unwavering understanding

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates selected pioneering American opera theatres and four world premieres from 2000-2019, shedding light on prodigious commissioning histories and twenty-first century new works initiatives of four institutions: Houston Grand Opera, Minnesota Opera, Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, and Santa Fe Opera. During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, non-profit opera institutions, amidst radical social and technological change, began commissioning and producing new operas at a remarkable rate. Through this increase, enthusiastic commitments by many leading companies have led to evolving commissioning practices that emphasize collaboration. To examine these trends, I employ a multimodal methodology that intersects opera studies, performance studies, reception history, and ethnographic practices. This interdisciplinary approach presents opera as a lived experience, illuminating influential cultural agents from this recent past, including directors Allison Felter, Anthony Freud, Paul Kilmer, Dale Johnson, Charles MacKay, Kevin Newbury, Timothy O'Leary, Eric Simonson, and Patrick Summers. Analysis of repertory archival data and institutional interviews indicate contemporary opera creation is concerned with impacting audiences through familiar dramaturgy.

To study commissioning and reviving practices, four case studies were selected from these theatres' new works archives for their multiple productions and cultural narratives. Spanning the two decades, the commissions are *Dream of the Pacific* (Stephen Mager/Elkhanah Pulitzer; OTSL 2004), *The Grapes of Wrath* (Ricky Ian Gordon/Michael Korie; MO 2007), *Three Decembers* (Jake Heggie/Gene Scheer; HGO 2008), and *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* (Mason Bates/Mark Campbell; SFO 2017). Four chapters of the dissertation recount the genesis of each

new opera and its collaborative processes. Moreover, notable scenes, reception, and revivals are evaluated to discern what dramatic, aural, social, and economic elements culminate in a new opera's cultural resonance and sustained success. The four case studies consist of memorable motives and polystylistic idioms to enhance the dramaturgy. Though they vary in content and creation, each follows a transhistorical journey that exemplifies the notion of opera that is timely yet timeless. My study, therefore, asserts revived twenty-first century new works consist of socially-relevant stories in the hopes of cultivating meaningful connections with prospective operagoers.

Keywords:

commission trends, industry practices, operas > twenty-first century or contemporary opera, operas > individual composer, American opera companies, dramaturgy, collaboration

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

This study centers on commissions and revivals of twenty-first century opera at pioneering American theatres. Though a recent past, the early 2000s were defined by devastating historical events alongside massive technological advancements impacting social behaviors, mass communication, and interpersonal relationships. The advent of streaming, applications, and social media continued to shift culture into the 2010s. Stemming from these economic and technological permutations, audience attendance for opera — and engagement with the performing arts on the whole — changed too. American opera companies, situated amidst this ever-evolving social milieu, strove to connect to their communities and programming the top-sellers of the European canon was no longer the sole strategy for attracting potential operagoers. Thus, under the umbrella of an overarching question, this study asks, "Who was responsible for the shaping of twenty-first century American opera?"

To ascertain the answer, this document investigates selected American pioneering opera theatres and world premieres from 2000-2019. Through this lens, I seek to shed light on operatic institutions dedicated to producing new works and illuminate trending practices in opera commission, composition, production, and consumption in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. The featured four theatres boast prodigious commissioning histories and active twenty-first century impact: Houston Grand Opera, Opera Minnesota Opera, Theatre of Saint Louis, and Santa Fe Opera. Through analysis of repertory archives, economic reports, and institutional interviews, I reveal the creation of contemporary opera is concerned with impacting audiences through familiar, cultural dramaturgy. Furthermore, I contend twenty-first century

case study commissions that have received numerous revivals and tell socially-relevant stories can spark intrigue and cultivate audience connections.

Necessity of the Study

Society is transforming at a radical rate, greatly influencing the way in which every day people experience entertainment in its various forms, from the comforts of the couch and its streaming platforms, social media, or video games to the grandeur of the venue with live art performances. Amidst these entertainment options, opera has often been referred to as a dying art, yet recent studies allude to the fact that opera is not dead, but rather, an evolving genre distinguishing itself from its forefather.[1] A night at the opera is no longer only an extended evening of foreign language, three times removed from the average American by language, story, and musical barriers. Moreover, the process for commissioning new operas has significantly developed: workshops are prioritized and more creative team members are involved in decision making. Through this, many opera companies and creatives have democratized the genre of opera into a more contemporary and, dare I say, competitive art form.[2] These fundamental elements contribute to opera's reimagined and evolving identity and through these changes over the last century, the gap between art music and popular music has narrowed.

[1]See Lydia Goehr, "*Amerikamüde*/Europadmüde: The Very Idea of American Opera," *The Opera Quarterly* 22, No. 3-4 (Summer-Autumn 2006): 398-99; Michael Lee, "Seattle Experimental Opera's Artistic Insurrection," *World Literature Today* 87, no. 4 (July/August 2013): 7; Sasha Metcalf, "'Opera for the 80s and Beyond': The Role of Impresarios in Creating a New American Repertoire," *American Music* 35, no.1 (Spring 2017): 7-28; Anne Midgette, "The Voice of American Opera," *The Opera Quarterly* 23, no.1 (Winter 2007): 81-95; Robert Ward, "American Opera Today: A Second Chance," *Opera News* 61, No. 3 (1996): 19-22.

[2] Competitive is difficult to measure, and, in terms of digital views, opera is not truly in direct competition with other more popular entertainment choices. However, opera companies seek to make the genre known and available to a wider demographic. Additionally, competitive can be applied in terms of live theatre experiences.

A recent dissertation by Daniela Smolov Levy broadly examines the popularization of opera in America throughout the twentieth-century, noting the diverse forms it has taken: from the people's opera to educational opera to cheap opera. These popularizing modifiers generate a hybrid genre that she dubs "democratizing."[3] I argue democratic decisions have continued to shape the twenty-first century operatic scene as well. Though it may be hyperbole to say opera is alive and well, it is not a dying art. From the efforts first initiated by Opera for the Eighties and Beyond, the producing of new opera in the United States has flourished over the last several decades with the direct intent of injecting the historical art form with new life. Surveying the OPERA America archive, the North American Works Directory, the quantity of new operas per year increased significantly from 1970 to 2020, with a marked increase in the last thirty years. Indeed, Marc A. Scorca, current President of OPERA America, said in 1990: "Over the course of a decade, […] the progress of the field of opera in relation to new works is not only measurable, it is remarkable."[4] Those metrics indicate continual growth from the mid-1990s to the present. This study contributes to the current need to document and understand the vigorous growth of American opera commissions. In addition to the creation of new opera, other elements need to be examined, like what contributes to an opera moving past its premiere to achieve revival status. Musicologist Robert Fink, invoking Joseph Kerman, claims, "the enduring cultural vitality of [twenty-first century] opera will derive not from well-wrought musical structures, but from its continued ability to involve audiences in the emotional spectacle of a well-staged drama."[5] I build

[3] Daniela Smolov Levy, "Democratizing Opera in Opera, 1895 to the Present," (PhD Diss., Stanford University, 2014), 1.

[4] *OPERA America's Opera for the 80s and Beyond: Final Report* (Washington D.C.: OPERA America, 1990): 5.

[5] Robert Fink, "After the Canon," in *The Oxford Handbook of Opera*, ed. Helen M. Greenwald (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1074.

my argument upon this sentiment: story-oriented opera seeks to elicit emotional response. With a renewed focus on attracting audiences, new operas receiving attention consist of familiar dramatic content, and theatres capitalize on this as a means of connecting with prospective new operagoers.

Drawing from the new works that have been regularly performed over the past thirty or so years, dramatic topics range from momentous news events, famous figures, literature and film, social justice, LGBTQ+ representation, to everyday people.[6] I argue new works mounting multiple performances attract producers and, therefore, audiences through relevant, relatable, or recognizable dramatic content.[7] Opera studies scholar Colleen Renihan boldly professes that "[n]ew opera has the potential to engage with contemporary issues in a voice that speaks from a place of knowing in the here and now. Most significantly, it speaks in real time with real bodies of an embodied, experienced knowledge that is brought to life in the time of performance."[8] Enacting familiar stories through the operatic medium is a significant avenue of connection for contemporary sung theatre to endure amidst an over-saturated entertainment industry. As former General Director of Lyric Opera of Chicago William Mason said in a 2002 interview,

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[6] Selected examples of these subjects: momentous news events (John Adams/Alice Goodman's *Nixon in China* 1987 or Adams/Peter Sellars' *Doctor Atomic* 2005), famous figures (Michael Daugherty/Wayne Koestenbaum's *Jackie O* 1997 or Tarik O'Regan/John Carid's *The Phoenix* 2019), American literature (Mark Adamo's *Little Women* 1998 or Lori Laitman/David Mason's *The Scarlet Letter* 2008), film (*The Shining* Paul Moravec/Mark Campbell 2016), social justice (Anthony Davis/Richard Wesley's *The Central Park Five* 2019 or Jeanine Tesori/Tazewell Thompson's *Blue* 2019), LGBTQ+ representation (Stewart Wallace/Michael Korie's *Harvey Milk* 1995 or Laura Kaminsky/Kimberly Reed/Campbell's *As One* 2014), to everyday people (Jake Heggie/Gene Scheer's *Three Decembers* 2008).

[7] My claim is not unfounded. An innovator in the field, Robert Ashley is a composer on par with Charles Ives, Henry Cowell, and John Cage as representative of the creative Americans in music. Arthur Sabatini said that "for Ashley, personalities, narratives, politics, and landscapes would constitute the substance of musical meaning in American contexts. […] From its beginnings, Ashley argues, American music inherently reflects the essential social conditions of 'the people who make it' and how they live." Arthur J. Sabatini, "Robert Ashley: Defining American Opera," *A Journal of Performance and Art* 27, no. 2 (May 2005): 46.

[8] Colleen Renihan, *The Operatic Archive: American Opera as History* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 31.

"People can now relate more personally to the performance."[9] Relatability has the power to draw in first-time attendees, and this serves the theatre company two-fold: building future opera audiences by generating new potential spectators as well as increasing box office sales. The old adage "art for art's sake" does not keep the lights on. Public theatre has relied on ticket sales since the seventeenth-century. While box office revenue only makes up 34 percent of the average income of opera houses in America as of 2019,[10] familiar or socially-relevant stories wield the power to build audiences and entice prospective patrons. Musicologist James Parakilas suggests future studies should examine the intersection of financial production demands with audience demographics to determine what forces "reshaped their ideologies of taste."[11] Though his suggestion is geared more toward historical audiences, this notion sparked my interest and is applied in this dissertation to a more recent past.

Methodologies, Parameters, and Procedures

To shed light on twenty-first century operatic commissioning practices and creations at opera theatres, my multimodal methodologies are an amalgamation of archival, ethnographic, analytical, and statistical methods. I also referenced secondary scholarship and primary sources, including archived interviews, annual reports, impact reports, surveys, musical scores, libretti, program notes, archived footage, archived correspondence, in addition to newspaper, magazine, and blog reviews. At the larger level, my investigation starts from quantitative data garnered from theatre repertory archives, while ethnographic practices through industry interviews and

[9] Eugene H. Cropsey, "A Conversation with William Mason, General Director of Lyric Opera of Chicago," *The Opera Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (Autumn 2002): 555.

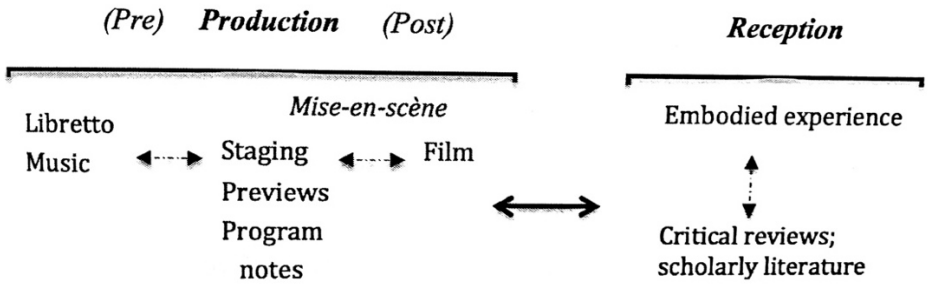
[10] OPERA America, 2019 Annual Field Report, 3.

[11] James Parakilas, "The Operatic Canon," in *The Oxford Handbook of Opera*, ed. Helen M. Greenwald (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 868.

questionnaires provide a foundation of qualitative data. Through a mixed methods approach that merges both quantitative and qualitive procedures, the theatre and opera case studies reveal twenty-first century trends concerning commissioning, producing, and dramaturgy.

Most broadly, this study is situated in opera studies; however, this evolving area embraces a variety of disciplines to examine opera, including multimodality, performance studies, and reception history. Music theorist Yayoi Uno Everett's model for multimodal operatic discourse inspired my primary framework for analyzing case studies.[12] Everett elucidates multimodality as a means to "utilize different sensory modes — indexing verbal, visual, and aural resources that are evoked by the media — and the system of choices we use to construct meaning."[13] Figure 1 shows Everett's precise model.

Figure 1: Everett's Multimodal Model for Operatic Discourse



Everett contends the embodied experience of attending an operatic production is a "highly mediated and situated cultural practice;" therefore, multimodal analysis attends to "the evolving relationship between music, libretto, and more variable aspects of production."[14] While her case study analyses center on constructing semiotic meaning from production performances, my

[12] See also Michael and Linda Hutcheon, "Opera: Forever and Always Multimodal," in *New Perspectives in Narrative and Multimodality*, edited by Ruth Page, (New York: Routledge, 2010).

[13] Yayoi Uno Everett, *Reconfiguring Myth and Narrative in Contemporary Opera*, (Bloomington, IA: Indiana University Press, 2015), 3.

[14] Ibid, 40.

angle considers creative process behaviors as well as post-production reception and revivals.[15] In the subsequent examinations, in place of pure score study and musical theoretical analysis, each chapter's operatic case study is approached through a performance studies[16] lens and recounts the history of the production process, especially before and after. This involves concentrating on creation activities and addressing theatrical and dramaturgical conventions along with other modalities that contribute to opera enactment. The information uncovered for each case study varies, but they each present a unique commissioning origin story, while also demonstrating twenty-first century new work trends. Inspired by ethnographic practices in recent musical theatre studies, my methodology presents opera as a lived experience, identifying cultural agents who have impacted the operatic field.[17]

Drawing upon theatre repertory archives, the North American Works Directory (hereafter, the NAWD Archive) provides this study's basis for quantitative data, albeit incomplete.[18] Examining the number of new operas at a particular house is a quantifiable way to determine which companies are concerned with promoting new opera as well as a measurable mode to compare and contrast theatres.[19] In addition to the NAWD Archive, I accessed more quantitative figures in the OPERA America Annual Field Reports for given fiscal years and

[15] Reception history concerns audience experience and perception, along with published reviews and literature. Interviewing audience members was out of the study's scope due to its historical nature. See Appendix A for comprehensive bibliographies of reporting on and critical reception of the four case studies.

[16] The discipline of performance studies examines art from a behavioral perspective and ponders the actions required during creation.

[17] Judah M. Cohen and Jake Johnson, "Editorial," *Studies in Musical Theatre* 14, No. 1 (January 2020): 3-9.

[18] Member companies are responsible for entering the data through a "Manage My Company" option. Thorough study of the NAWD Archive reveals multiple double entries as well as many incomplete entries, missing repertoire, and partial metadata. This slightly skews the production statistics present on the website.

[19] "Theatre," "house," and "company" are used interchangeably in this study to describe opera organizations. The operatic industry in the United States consists of primarily non-profit organizations who run their companies as businesses. Therefore, the terminology in this document reflects industry terms used in arts administration. For example, creative team and creatives are used often, which includes composer and librettist but can also extend to directors, designers, and dramaturgs.

worked with theatre archivists at the four theatres to engage with more detailed records. Theatre repertory archive data provides a programming foundation from which to launch this study and serves as a springboard to qualitative analysis. Revivals (or lack thereof) are especially revealing in regard to the longevity and sustainability of new works. From there, employment of performance studies tools moves the analysis away from the abstract *Werktreue* and allows me to address the work as embodiment and lived experience.[20] For this particular study, the genesis of the work is emphasized: the commissioning, creating, workshopping, and producing processes. My interviews with fourteen creative team members and industry leaders, as well as a concentrated survey amongst the theatres who revived the four case study operas, offer enlightening insights and historical memories. Additionally, available annual reports and financial records were gathered from each institution to study impact and fiscal contributions.[21]

During the research process, I compiled an on-going list of established and innovative companies noted in late twentieth-century to current scholarship for frequently commissioning and producing new American opera:

[20] For the evolution of performance studies as an intersecting field, see Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

[21] Impact reports were also requested. Impact reports are often used by nonprofit companies to track community connections and impact, analyze audience response, and provide measurable data for patrons, like demographics or economic investment. It was revealed that not all opera theaters generate impact reports, common for nonprofit organizations to produce. OTSL began gathering this data and making it publicly available starting in 2015 and MO in 2018. HGO's archives include thorough annual reports that are available upon request, starting in 2000. SFO does not produce annual reports or impact reports.

American Opera Projects
Austin Lyric Opera
Beth Morrison Projects
Chicago Opera Theater
Dallas Opera
Fort Worth Opera
Houston Grand Opera
Los Angeles Opera
Lyric Opera of Chicago
Lyric Opera of Kansas City
Minnesota Opera
New Orleans Opera
New York City Opera
Opera Theatre of St. Louis
Pittsburgh Opera
San Diego Opera
San Francisco Opera
Santa Fe Opera
Washington National Opera
Utah Opera
**arranged in alphabetical order*

After comparing the commissions of these theatres, I narrowed the focus to the four bolded theatres: Houston Grand Opera, Minnesota Opera, Opera Theatre of St. Louis, and Santa Fe Opera. These companies have promoted and programmed new works regularly over the last fifty years, helping shape the industry landscape. Houston Grand Opera (hereafter, HGO) and Santa Fe (hereafter, SFO) represent the top-tier operatic creations in the country, designated as Level 1 houses with budgets over 15 million dollars. Minnesota Opera (hereafter, MO) and Opera Theatre of St. Louis (hereafter, OTSL) represent Level 2 houses with budgets between 3 million and 15 million dollars. Geographically, according to OPERA America's regional boundaries, three regions are represented: SFO in the West, HGO in the South, and MO and OTSL in the Midwest.[22] All four epitomize prominent companies thriving during the first two decades of the twenty-first century and dedicating resources to the commission of new works.

[22] Though not in line with the OPERA America boundaries, it can be argued MO represents a northern area of the United States, making this study technically cover four geographical areas.

Coinciding with other contemporary musicological studies that consider "how institutional forces have acted as gatekeepers in shaping the production and promotion of new music,"[23] the present study examines selected repertoire from these four gatekeepers premiered between 2000-2019. Administrative leaders working for the company during the commissioning years of the selected opera were interviewed:[24]

> HGO: Anthony Freud (former General Director), Patrick Summers (Artistic Director)
> OTSL: Timothy O'Leary (former General Director), Paul Kilmer (former Director of Artistic Administration), Allison Felter (Director of Education and Engagement)
> MO: Dale Johnson (former Artistic Director)

To discern the case study operas, I scrutinized the new works repertory archives of each theatre. Due to their commissioning commitments, there is a large quantity from which to choose, and many operas were viable options for further study. Therefore, two major limiting factors were set: 1) multiple productions to highlight repertoire exhibiting enduring life and 2) familiar narratives tied to American culture, as opposed to Euro-centric content. With a desire to contemplate creative processes throughout the two decades coupled with the above-mentioned parameters, the selected case studies are *Dream of the Pacific* (2004; OTSL), Stephen Mager and Elkhanah Pulitzer; *The Grapes of Wrath* (2007; MO), Ricky Ian Gordon and Michael Korie; *Three Decembers* (2008; HGO), Jake Heggie and Gene Scheer; *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* (2017; SFO), Mason Bates and Mark Campbell. These new operas present socially-relevant subtexts through journey stories. While *Dream of the Pacific* and *The Grapes of Wrath* follow physical expeditions, *Three Decembers* and *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* explore the path of maturing characters. Each unique trajectory is conveyed through character relationships and the emotional

[23] Metcalf, "OFTEAB," 23.
[24] SFO was contacted but declined participation.

challenges they face. The psychological exploration of individuals, whether historical or contemporary, drives these opera journeys. Though the four case studies vary in content and creation, the transhistorical dramatic material exhibits the power to transcend time and place.

Interviews with creative team members from the four operas include:[25]

HGO: Jake Heggie (Composer)
OTSL: Stephen Mager (Composer), Elkhanah Pulitzer (Librettist and Stage Director)
MO: Michael Korie (Librettist), Eric Simonson (Stage Director and Dramaturg)
SFO: Mark Campbell (Librettist), Kevin Newbury (Stage Director), Rick Jacobsohn (Sound Designer)

Though archival interviews were also accessed, the qualitative data gathered from these new interviews in 2021 act as way into the personal perspectives of the artists and administrators. While I did not conduct field research and observe the commissioning, rehearsal, or premiere performances in real-time, these interviews serve as a means to construct a detailed narrative of the commissioning timeline for each work based on their remembered experiences.[26] The interviews also shed light on meaning, process, and trends in operatic creation. Ethnomusicologist Steven Feld says the multi-faceted communication of meaning through music "is central to the study of human musicality in evolutionary, cross-cultural, and symbolic perspective" and by "investigating the substance of these processes leads to the notion that music's major messages are general and multi-leveled, and concern expressive ideology in value, identity and character, and coherence of world sense."[27] Furthermore, while many of the

[25] Interviews were requested from all composers and librettists. Of the eleven creative team members contacted, these eight responded and participated.

[26] In the field of linguistic anthropology, "narratives of personal experience are viewed as a discourse genre, mode of cognition, and social activity," which entail "complex cognitive processes, such as remembering, situating, anticipating, representing, evaluating, and otherwise interrelating life events." Elinor Ochs, "Narrative Lessons," in *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, edited by Alessandro Duranti (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), 279.

[27] Steven Feld, "Communication, Music, and Speech about Music," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 16 (1984), 15.

expounded upon trends were present prior to 2020, it is imperative to note these interviews took place in 2021, amidst a period of radical social awakenings. Since recollections of past experiences can be "filtered through one's current cares,"[28] an increased awareness and concern for diversity, equity, and inclusivity is present in the responses of several interviewees.

Revivals and Evident Trends

The large majority of operas found in the NAWD Archive do not receive multiple productions or widespread exposure.[29] The lack of recognizable operas sparked my investigation of what elements prompt a lucky few to be produced again. Consider Heggie and Terrance McNally's *Dead Man Walking* (2000) at the onset of the millennium. Produced seventy-five times over the last twenty-one years, it serves as an exemplar of revival success. But what about it, precisely, has led to so many productions? I conjecture its dramatic content coupled with musical sonorities appeal to attendees. Furthermore, it has received nine grants[30] from 2001 to 2017 that provide a financial foundation supporting creative control and boosting exposure. This document's case studies have received multiple productions at other theatres, spanning from four (*Dream of the Pacific*) to thirty-two (*Three Decembers*). I contend certain factors contribute to revivals, considering the following measurable criteria: dramatic, economic, aural, and social. Sixteen revival companies participated in a questionnaire gauging artistic and fiscal choices for

[28] Ochs, "Narrative Lessons," 273.

[29] An OPERA America study from 2015 measured the quantity of international premieres of North American works from 1995 to 2015. Of the 589 North American operas premiered in this twenty-year span, only 11 percent have been revived (71 of 589). The composers with the most amount of revived works include Mark Adamo, Jake Heggie, Philip Glass, Tobias Picker, and John Adams (in order of most to least). National OPERA America Center, "North American Opera Report," (New York: OPERA America, 2015).

[30] These grants include The New Stage, The Robert L.B. Tobin Director-Designer Showcase, The Opera Fund: Audience Development 2012/17, New Works Exploration Grants 2012/13/15/16/17.

programming these new operas. Results show artistic decisions were largely motivated by dramatic and social causes.

Based on the past twenty years, the emerging audience-centric trends that can lead to a successful new work include clear dramaturgy and accessibility. In terms of dramatic content, characters deemed socially-relevant from literature, recent history, or popular culture were attractive. Accessible music[31] was also a concern for producers who sought to attract new operagoers while simultaneously appealing to their traditional attendees. These traditionalists often opposed twentieth-century modern music's atonal or experimental soundscapes and disliked the non-idiomatic, disjunct vocal writing styles. Musical elements beloved in the operas of Donizetti, Verdi, or Puccini — lyrical impassioned singing against rich harmonic structures, numbered opera, reminiscent motifs — have resurfaced in many of the early twenty-first century commissions, albeit, in freshly fashioned ways. Other emerging trends stem from a producing company's financial position. The scale of a new work, including its feasibility and adaptability, became more important with the reduced budgets of many opera theatres. Smaller scope chamber operas or flexible stagecraft demands contributed to a new work's viability.

As this study's research illustrates, commissions in the first two decades of the twenty-first century represent a period of growth, not only in quantity of new works produced but also in collaborative processes. *Dream of the Pacific* occurred during the first few years of the 2000s and exhibits an eager, spirited era of increased commissioning. *The Grapes of Wrath*, also, situates itself within this timeframe; however, its revival period faced a bleak economic landscape

[31] The term "accessible" is imprecise with multiple connotations. Does it indicate the music is too simplistic and, therefore, no longer high art, or does it denote it is easy on the ears and, therefore, more subjectivity beautiful to hear? See Jochen Eisentraut, *The Accessibility of Music* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

after 2008. *Three Decembers* was produced in the year of the Great Recession and exemplifies the success of chamber opera in the unstable financial years to follow. And finally, *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* premiered during what was a flourishing period for audience-centric opera.[32] With a methodology focused on process from the perspective of creators, this dissertation constitutes an archive in the making.

Overview

Following this introduction, Chapter 2's literature review identifies scholarship delineating dramatic trends in mid-to-late twentieth-century new opera, and I connect that to recent opera studies topics in the twenty-first century. To situate commissioning, the significance of the institution is tracked during this liminal period, citing the institutional historical discoveries of musicologist Sasha Metcalf along with primary source interviews from the 1980s. Advocating for the renaissance of new opera in twenty-first century America, as opposed to the dying art narrative often professed, the trends in composition and dramaturgy show prominent polystylistic permutations of opera. I also unpack the influential methodologies of opera scholars Colleen Renihan and Yayoi Uno Everett, who offer inspiring case study models.

With the increase in commissions along with vast social change, Chapter 3 serves to contextualize social events influencing the operatic field during the twenty-first century. Funding initiatives were, and still are, key to supporting the costly act of commissioning; therefore, I briefly survey the seminal programs started in the 1980s and extend into this century to establish the funding landscape. Additionally, this chapter broadly explores the improved commissioning

[32] The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic may have temporarily halted the traction of this movement. This study will not focus on the significant effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the opera industry, as the pandemic is still occurring during the writing of this document.

practices gleaned through institutional interviews, like workshopping, company collaborations, and an emphasis on "emotional resonance." After establishing the authority of the four theatres, archival evaluation of revivals and dramaturgy reveals the favored fundamentals of familiar and cultural stories.

Chapters 4 through 7 begin with a selective history of each pioneering institution, focusing on its initial establishment, commissioning efforts, influential administrations, and twenty-first century community impact. The second half of each chapter tells the origin story and collaborative process of each case study, along with revival histories and selected analysis of musico-dramatic structures. Additionally, the case studies are arranged chronologically according to the year they premiered in the century.

In Chapter 4, *Dream of the Pacific* serves as an educational example of young people's opera. Of the four case studies, it is the only opera not conceived for the mainstage, but rather a flexible one-act created to involve and engage people of all ages. This commissioning history is recounted for the first time and constructed through interviews with the two creative team members and three administrators, along with the composer's scrupulous personal archives. Through character and motivic analysis, the musico-dramatic setting of this historical journey evokes emotional resonance.

The Grapes of Wrath, in Chapter 5, is an exemplar of a living, breathing contemporary opera shifting to suit the economy by undergoing drastic revisions during its revival history. I chronicle its initial development process through interviews with two creative team members and one commissioner, thorough archival reading and watching, as well as reflecting on revival survey results. This populist opera proves a timely yet timeless topic can transcend the historical.

Chapter 6 presents the most revived opera of the forty commissions sample (see Figure 3.2), *Three Decembers*. Interviews with the composer and two influential industry leaders provide a detailed account of its commissioning history. Crafted on a limited budget, it has blossomed into a new beloved favorite, being revived at thirty-two theatres in thirteen years. Nine companies share their programming decisions, proving this opera to be a paradigm of populism and polystylism. Through ethnographic fieldwork, attending rehearsals and performances of the Painted Sky Opera production in 2018, coupled with thorough score analysis, a brief motivic assessment is explored to substantiate familiar emotional themes. Indeed, the collaborative efforts of the *Three Decembers* creative team manifest in an intimate and honest, relatable and real sung story.

The final case study, *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* in Chapter 7, is the latest in this document's historical examination of the recent past. Illuminating interviews with three creative team members present the first comprehensive commissioning account. From the angle of librettist, stage director, and sound designer, this chapter offers a distinct look into the opera's collaborative origins by way of the streamlined story, staging, scenery, sonic identities, and singer enhancement. Selected textual analysis reveals the drama's cultural resonance through a creative technologist's confrontation with mortality.

Following the origins stories of Chapters 4-7, Chapter 8 briefly looks to the future, considering how the recent past informs the pending heritage of opera. Ruminations and predictions from the interviewees support the need for culturally- and socially-relevant new opera. Finally, the conclusion answers the overarching research, illuminating industry influencers who have shaped early twenty-first century practices. Comparing and contrasting the

selected companies and case studies, I distinguish their convergences and highlight the sticking power of these commissions.

CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

Connecting twentieth-century scholarship to the twenty-first century

Opera studies is now an established musicological subfield with scholarship covering a range of topics related to opera, its dramaturgy, and cultural contextualization.[33] Scholars of the rather recent past, in particular, have reflected on the role of technology in disseminating mediated performance, like the Met's HD Live series that commenced in 2007, [34] canonic repertoire programming in conjunction with new works, and the institutions that commission and fund new opera. Other scholarship trends from the later twentieth century to now examine stylistic features in operatic composition, especially postminimalism in the works of Philip Glass and John Adams. Interviews with creative teams — including composers, librettists, impresarios, and directors — abound.

A prevailing question that continues to arise in the literature is "What is opera?" More precisely, this question attempts to elucidate what conventions distinguish the four-hundred-year-old art form from its twentieth-century rival, American Musical Theatre. Opera at its core is a type of musical theatre, after all. Though a continually evolving genre, historical operatic reforms, perpetuated by social change, manifested in musical and dramatic style shifts. Consequently, academics question how the radical social change of the late twentieth and early

[33] See Nicholas Till, *The Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[34] For technology disseminating performance scholarship, see James Steichen "HD Opera: A Love/Hate Story," *The Opera Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (Autumn 2011): 443-459; Steichen "The Metropolitan Opera Goes Public: Peter Gelb and the Institutional Dramaturgy of The Met: Live in HD" *Music and the Moving Image* 2, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 24-30; Philip Auslander, "Live and Technologically Mediated Performance," in *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Levy, "Democratizing Opera," Chapter 3.

twenty-first centuries has impacted opera. Much of the forthcoming literature endeavors to explore this concept, as does this document.

To study contemporary opera, it is critical to consider what occurred prior to the millennium in order to build a chronology of the genre's American development. Scholarship centered on twentieth-century opera from the United States discusses the need for the art form to seek cultural relevance as it contends with massive technological advancements impacting rapid cultural change. In 1996, Robert Ward claimed new entertainments were influencing the tastes of the next generation, [35] and I posit this is still at work; while MTv or Vh1 were shaping taste in the 1990s, TikTok and Instagram in the 2010s are the new influencers. Moreover, society has had widespread access, through technology, to music outside of live performance, affecting live entertainment attendance. Thus, companies have to sell more than a product; they must sell experience.[36] American opera, in many ways, has become entrenched in consumer culture, for better or worse.

Elise K. Kirk's monograph, *American Opera,* chronicles the genre through the twentieth-century and is the most exhaustive resource regarding this period. Kirk positions Andrew Previn/Philip Littell's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1998), William Bolcom/Arnold Weinstein's *A View from the Bridge* (1999), and John Harbison's *The Great Gatsby* (1999) as examples of century closing operas that boast of verismo through cultural literary icons:

> In these works, human characters — often more flawed than heroic — magnetically draw the audience into their emotional worlds of lust, guilt, and compassion. American locales and popular music may pepper these operas, but it is not their American elements alone that make them part of the nation's cultural legacy. Rather, it is the composer's skills in musically interpreting the elements as drama.[37]

[35] Ward, "American Opera Today," 19.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Elise K. Kirk, *American Opera* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 383.

In more recent literature, Waleson's recount of the rise and fall of the New York City Opera (hereafter, NYCO), agrees that the 1990s set the stage for the next experiments in operatic composition: "companies could see that a new generation of composers and librettists were producing pieces that audiences found more relatable, both in their musical language and their subject matter."[38] I seek to build upon Waleson and Kirk's assertions of the integrated importance of cultural narratives told through operatic music.

American Style and Stories

Fink notices a paradoxical relationship between compositional style and public theater in the late twentieth century.[39] The postwar compositional practices that were popular amongst serious composers — serialist, aleatoric, and electronic musics — were hermeneutic and abstract. Indeed, composition in the Academy cared little for writing for the masses, which does not (and did not) bode well for the popular aspect of opera. The dwindling of indeterminacy and the avant-garde as preferred idioms, replaced with minimalism, allowed for opera to return "to the forefront of classical music consciousness."[40] In the 1980s, minimalism in opera, demonstrated in Philip Glass' *Akhnaten* (1984) and John Adams/Alice Goodman's *Nixon in China* (1987), became the dominant style, which Fink coins as "trans-avant-garde." Through the incessant iterations intrinsic to minimalism, opera returned to familiar rhythms and, at times, a semblance

[38] Heidi Waleson, *Mad Scenes and Exit Arias: The Death of the New York City Opera and the Future of Opera in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2018), 242.
[39] Fink, "After the Canon," 1067.
[40] Ibid.

of tonality. I attest style fusion, integrating minimalistic techniques with other idioms, should be referred to broadly as polystylistic — a label still applicable to contemporary opera composition.[41]

The fracturing of classical music into varying perspectives affects not just style but also expressive content. A definitive American style is intangible to distinguish. However, it is evident this country's version of opera is propelled by its mélange of diverse peoples. "The story of opera in America," scholar John Dizikes says, "has continually reflected the dynamic of American culture."[42] American opera reflects ethnic diversity and multiculturalism, thus manifesting in a polystylistic style and non-European dramatic content. Mason (Lyric Opera of Chicago), professed this sentiment at the onset of the twenty-first century in an interview with Eugene H. Cropsey:

> It is still too early to tell what the American tradition will be. […] What is encouraging is that every company is now starting to commission respected American composers to write new pieces. I would like to think that in the next twenty-five years, one or two people will come up and lead us off in the direction of a distinctive American tradition. But it's going to take a great composer and a couple of great works, and it will be based on the American musical idiom, not on a mere imitation of the European.[43]

We are living in his projected timeframe. The next "great" composer may be left up to personal preference, but many scholars have named the following as contenders: Mark Adamo, William Bolcom, John Harbison, Jake Heggie, Tobias Picker, and André Previn.

Although a range of expressive content is explored, socially-relevant dramaturgy began to take hold in the 1980s. Following the plotless and experimental operas of the 1970s, like Vivian Fine's *The Women in the Garden* (1977) and Philip Glass' *Einstein on the Beach* (1979), the next

[41] This stems from the heterogeneous nature of our society and audiences as well as the inherent difficulty to codify conventions near our present time.

[42] John Dizikes, *Opera in America: A Cultural History* (New Have: Yale University Press, 1993), 510.

[43] Cropsey, "Conversation with William Mason," 563.

phase of operatic writing was dubbed, derogatorily, "CNN Opera" by critics.[44] Though contemporary discourse recognizes Adams' *Nixon in China* as the news-driven opera of the 1980s, NYCO's production of Anthony Davis/Thulani Davis' *X: the Life and Times of Malcolm X* (1986) made waves a year before Nixon. Adams recalls how the contemporary subjects of his and Davis' operas were shocking and even uncomfortable to some people. He would often receive skeptical questions about when he was going to write a real opera on subjects like Oedipus or King Lear. When asked this, he would quip back, "If opera is going to stay alive, these kinds of issues that Anthony has chosen are what's needed."[45] These choices by both Adams and Davis illustrate the shift to cultural subjects. Two decades, or so, later at an OPERA America conference, Davis remained strong on the ideological platform of familiar subjects. He said at a panel discussion, "In opera it is almost necessary to borrow themes. Opera is a pretty clumsy narrative. It is better if you can make some assumptions going in." Moreover, Davis spoke to the importance of continuing contemporary topics too: "The whole idea is to envision an opera that is for tomorrow what it wasn't yesterday. Something that reflects the incredible collision of cultures, that is both improvised and composed. The whole idea is to find the universal in the contemporary."[46] Socially-concerned dramas mark a change that extended into the 1990s and has yet to go out of vogue. So much so that after the cultural awakenings towards the end of the 2010s, the concern for content driven by culturally-relevant topics is more prevalent than ever before in new works.

[44] Kirk, *American Opera*, 335.
[45] Ibid., 353.
[46] Kelley Rourke, "'To Promote the Expansion and Growth of the Art Form' OPERA America and American Opera," *OPERA America* (Winter 2009): 29.

Near the same time Davis made such claims at this industry conference, Heggie's chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of Opera* continued the notion of relatability. Familiar tales establish a connecting thread with the public. Heggie elaborates, saying,

> whether seeking outright entertainment or something much deeper, an audience yearns for connection. And in general, the audience is less resistant to something with which it has some sense of familiarity — especially for a new opera. You're already asking an audience to absorb several thousand measures of new music on a single hearing. Add to that an unknown story, and you have the potential for one overwhelmed audience.[47]

My document further expounds upon this framework of familiarity. Like the operas of Heggie and his librettists Terrance McNally and Gene Scheer, the operatic output of John Adams and Peter Sellars also emphasizes twentieth-century American historical moments. Musicologist Ryan Scott Ebright posits, "the frequency with which Adams frames his operas in terms of a collective American identity and mythology might be linked to the neo-Romantic impulse that underlies the continuing nationalistic desire to create the 'Great American Opera.'"[48] The latter designation is the topic of respected critic Anne Midgette's 2006 *New York Times* article, where she discusses the hunt for the next great work. Midgette continues the quest in another article two years later, focusing on defining opera's identity as an American art form. She pointedly refines the persisting question of "What is opera?," asking, "What is *American* opera?" and contends the American opera singer is an integral ingredient to the genre, known for "good vocal training, flexibility, stage presence, and chameleon-like adaptability."[49] Additionally, the

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[47] Jake Heggie, "Composing Opera," in *The Oxford Handbook of Opera*, ed. Helen M. Greenwald (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1092.

[48] Ryan Scott Ebright, "Echoes of the Avant-Garde in American Minimalist Opera," (PhD Diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2014), 181-182. John Adams also confirms this in a 2008 interview: "I draw my subject matter from my contemporary experience as an American. I find these stories, whether they be about presidential politics, or terrorism, or the atomic bomb, to be at the psychic core of our collective unconscious as Americans. We are defined as a nation and as a culture by how we respond to these themes." John Adams, "Interview: John Adams, Composer of 'Doctor Atomic,'" *THIRTEEN*, 29 December 2008; quoted in Ebright.

[49] Midgette, "The Voice of American Opera," 81.

resonant-driven, organically amplified vocality of opera distinguishes it from live theatre competitors, specifically the singing style utilized in Broadway musicals.

I agree with Midgette's suggestions about opera as it develops in the future. She proposes the following elements for a mindful and fiscally-responsible repertory: 1) plot subjects that appeal to the audience and 2) small-scale works that are economically savvy for the company to produce. Her strong concluding ultimatum alludes to a budding trend, too:

> We appear, once again, to be in a new age of American opera. There is a tremendous amount of new work being written, which is a good thing. Yet this push also reflects the recognition that American opera, however you define it, is hanging in the balance. It is not enough merely to present well-meaning productions of operas 150 years old. […] The ultimate goal, after all, is to make opera meaningful again, and perhaps, […] to create something more enduring than disposable.[50]

Branching off from her final statement, this study will explore selected new operas that have, thus far, endured. A year after Midgette's article, musicologist Lawrence Kramer continued the conversation regarding operatic identity. He elaborates on the innate nationalistic agenda in America, saying, "The Great American Opera, like the Great American Novel, is inimitable: a deeply problematical masterwork, epic and epochal, that both inspires and frustrates emulation. These works do not so much set an agenda as symbolize an agenda that has long since been set for a host of deep-seated cultural reasons."[51] Though this document does seek to contribute to the developing body of literature dedicated to new American opera and its identity, its purpose is not aimed at identifying the "next great."

Commissioning and the Institution

[50] Ibid., 91. Her appendix is full of valuable data, including a repertory of American operas from 2005-2010, gathered from her interview, press releases, and company websites. She includes revivals when possible.

[51] Lawrence Kramer, "The Great American Opera: *Klinghoffer, Streetcar,* and the Exception," *Opera Quarterly* 23, No. 1 (2007): 66.

Amidst our current media-driven existence, with its variety of entertainments to indulge in from Netflix to Instagram to PlayStation (along with their variants), live theatre is a marginalized art form — and opera even more so. Opera companies must go to extreme efforts to attract audiences, not just for their new works but standard canonic productions as well. Respected impresario Michael Kaiser's 2015 monograph *Curtains?: the Future of the Arts in America* offers unique insights into the past, present, and future of arts philanthropy. The performing arts industry has never been a self-sustaining sector. Arts institutions differ from other modern businesses because they cannot increase the productivity of their workers via technology or more efficient systems. This results, therefore, in an increased rate of inflation comparatively to other industries. To combat this, most prominent twenty-first century institutions are emphasizing brand awareness. Kaiser argues that the arts are not unpopular, but rather, people now have the ability to be entertained in cheaper ways, pricing out live performance in the market. To address the revenue loss, some companies decreased the number of operas per season or by doing less ambitious work.[52] But this is not always a successful strategy since most patrons are not interested in supporting organizations that seem to be doing less. He references the 2013 closure of NYCO as a prime example. Other more productive strategies companies were implementing to fill the income gap are 1) collaborative productions, 2) underwriting, and 3) new works. Kaiser contends "innovative works remind people why they care about the arts in the first place. These are the works that get people talking about an arts organization, […] that make it sexy to participate — as a donor, board member, volunteer, or

[52] Michael M. Kaiser, *Curtains?: The Future of the Arts in America*, (Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2015), 5-8.

audience member."[53] Indeed, socially-relevant opera is, ideally, a means of overcoming apathy and encouraging action from community members.

Heggie's Oxford chapter also sheds light on the twenty-first century commissioning motivations and the demand for media attention. He argues that to keep opera alive companies need newsworthy content to disseminate, and the commissioning of a new opera is just that. Commissions function as a way to create civic connections, humanize the project through its creative team, and garner media buzz. Through this, the company creates a way in which the "audience can participate. The opera company feels more connected and essential to the community. Even better, a new work can get a new crowd into the opera house."[54] Heggie has been regularly commissioned at HGO, Dallas Opera, and San Francisco Opera. He can, therefore, attest to the fact that commissions enrich the repertoire and keep "the art form alive by creating new, timely, and meaningful works that will intrigue, engage, delight, and connect with a contemporary audience. They require us to participate, show up, pay attention, reflect, and take a chance. Against considerable odds, our passion still compels us to do this."[55] The commission, and the hype it attracts, invites an emphasis on community connections, which will hopefully manifest as potential audience members and who will engage in collective musicking by attending live performance. Nina Eidsheim defines collective musicking as "the cooperative participating in sound."[56]

[53] Ibid., 24.
[54] Heggie, "Composing Opera," 1096.
[55] Ibid., 1091.
[56] Nina Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing & Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 145.

The original notion of collective musicking was proposed by Christopher Small in his seminal text in the late 1990s, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*. Small defines musicking as taking part in a musical performance, in any capacity: "whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing."[57] Making the noun into a verb creates action that humanizes and expands the conception of the art and how people interact with it. These methodologies intersect with performance studies and demonstrate the shift in scholarship stressing phenomenology and process, two notions that frame the present study.

While Waleson provides a demystifying history of the pioneer house NYCO, Sasha Metcalf's recent article in *American Music* illuminates the role of the institution and its influence over late twentieth-century American opera through the leadership of two impresarios: Harvey Lichtenstein, former Executive Producer at Brooklyn Academy of Music (hereafter, BAM), and David Gockley, former General Director of HGO. I am particularly inspired by Metcalf's framework of looking at new opera through the lens of the institution and the power it exerts over the shaping of the art form. Her research tracks the growth of American opera, through financial support, from the 1960s to the turn of the century. Starting in the 1980s, the three most prominent funders supporting new opera were the National Endowment for the Arts (hereafter, NEA), Rockefeller Foundation, and OPERA America. Two initiatives, subsidized by these funders, set real change into motion: Opera for the Eighties and Beyond (hereafter, OFTEAB) and BAM's Next Wave Festival. Her study showcases how the institution has informed the

[57] Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 9.

production and promotion of new music.[58] An OPERA America report from the 1970s outlines the reasons why many companies were fearful of producing new opera, considering it a risky endeavor.[59] I enumerate them as follows:

1) Singers must invest time to learn complex roles with little chance to perform again.
2) Time and money are commodities; therefore, astronomically high expenses are accrued.
3) More rehearsal time is required (which plays into time and money).
4) Traditional operatic audience appeal, in terms of musical accessibility, is lacking.

Extensive interviews with prominent operatic industry figures from 1986 continues this conversation, providing eye-witness accounts (and, frankly, personal opinions) regarding the risks of investing in new opera. Beverly Sills, at the time the director of NYCO, professed from her firsthand experience that the prohibitive expenses of extra rehearsals, along with the slim chance of a revival (therefore only playing four or five times in total), contributed to the scarcity in new repertoire and the fearful qualms of the companies to resist new work productions.[60] Although these are still prevailing reasons why companies do not premiere new works, the funding landscape and specified grants geared towards supporting new opera have alleviated some of the economic investment required from theatres, as is delineated in Chapter 3.

Despite the fiscal risk involved in the commission of a new opera that potentially may not garner attention nor warrant revival, impresario Humphrey Burton, in the 1986 interview, spoke of opera's future in a hopeful light: "New operas are being written, and some statistics would suggest that great works are still being created on an average of five or six a decade; this holds true for the twentieth century and matches the proportion of durable works created in the

[58] Metcalf, "OFTEAB," 23.
[59] Ibid., 9.
[60] Lies Askonas-Shepherd, et. al, "The Future of Opera," *Daedalus* 115, no. 4 (Fall 1986): 8.

nineteenth century."[61] I would like to suggest this concept has continued into the twenty-first century. Though I do not claim the forthcoming case studies as a part of the "greats" of a particular decade, Burton's perspective is refreshing. Scholarship shows concern for the lack of revival. But is this not the nature of art? Some operas will enter the repertory. Others will have their moment and end where it began. Creative expression and audience experience may not always align. In relationship to my study, the revival parameter was set as a measurable indicator of which works contain potential for lasting impact and are, therefore, worthy of more in-depth analysis.

Resuscitating opera

> Behind the large audiences and huge dollar signs, opera in America in the 1970s and 1980s had been nagged by doubts about the future. One was the familiar problem of financial support. **Equally familiar was the cry that 'opera is dying,**' a death predicted almost since its birth. Was there a new reason for believing that an art so long and deeply embedded in people's affections and needs would disappear? Surely the issue was not the death of opera but its transformation. And that was not new. Opera has always been changing — and will continue to do so. Jazz opera, folk opera, electronic opera, rap opera — the possible forms and permutations are many.[62]

When Dizikes wrote *Opera in America* in 1993 and made this profound statement, he was predicting the malleable, merging soundscapes that would shape forthcoming opera: from *Champion* (2013), an opera in jazz by Terence Blanchard and Michael Cristofer at OTSL, to electronics intrinsic in many operatic idioms, Bates/Campbell's *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* (2017) at SFO, or the music theatre crossover sounds found in the scores of Ricky Ian Gordon and Jake Heggie. Musically, opera of the twenty-first century is a synthesis of sonic experiences sung by opera singers and driven by the drama. In 2006, Midgette further illuminated changing

[61] Ibid., 33.
[62] Dizikes, *Opera in America*, 536. Bolded emphasis added.

conventions in the operatic industry. Celebrated composer Mark Adamo suggested the decline in ticket sales was "forcing American opera presenters to take a broader view of the future."[63] In this renewed perspective, the traditional ideas regarding what constitutes an opera were expanding and, I argue, narratives with aspects of familiarity became a driving force. Midgette notes the manifestation of an audience-focused art was due to "the new crop of opera composers, including many who come not from the temples of high-art composition but from the world of music theater."[64] On this point, many of the renowned composers and librettists featured in this study have strong theatrical backgrounds, and polystylistic permutations of opera prevail.

Fink, in 1998, Kramer, in 2007, and Joseph Kerman, in 2008, argued for the vitality of opera, claiming it as the savior of classical music in current society: "The story of opera at the turn of the twenty-first century took place under the gathering gloom of an extended twilight of Western art music, in which the fate of opera was caught up in the larger question of whether classical music itself was 'dying.'"[65] More recently in 2020, Renihan's monograph *The Operatic Archive: American Opera as History* defends opera's rebirth "in contrast with its previously hailed death." This stems from, and is entangled with a "renewed historical consciousness" that began around the early 1990s and was epitomized in the aftermath of 9/11.[66] Her study investigates the growing number of operatic works from 1990-2020 that engage with history, shedding light on seven specific case studies.[67] Renihan's methodology specifically intersects opera studies with the

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[63] Anne Midgette, "In Search of the Next Great American Opera," *The New York Times*, March 19, 2006. https://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/19/arts/music/in-search-of-the-next-great-american-opera.html

[64] Ibid. Though I make the caveat that opera linked to theatre is not a new phenomenon, nor is the notion of merging conventions from popular and high art traditions.

[65] Fink, "After the Canon," 1068; See Joseph Kerman, *Opera and the Morbidity of Music* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2008) and Kramer, "The Great American Opera."

[66] Renihan, *The Operatic Archive,* 2.

[67] John Adams' *Nixon in China* and *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Stewart Wallace's *Harvey Milk,* Kevin Puts' *Silent Night*, Nico Muhly's *Dark Sisters* and *Two Boys*, and Jake Heggie's *Out of Darkness*.

philosophy of history and performance studies. She claims her phenomenological approach is critical to how opera functions, emphasizing the essential and unique element of audiences experiencing history through music. Though my angle does not assess historiography via opera, Renihan's interdisciplinary methodology and engagement with case studies serve as inspiring models. Likewise, another esteemed recent opera studies resource is Everett's monograph *Reconfiguring Myth and Narrative in Contemporary Opera*. In her semiotic and multimodal methodologies, she theorizes cultural meanings latent in four new operas.[68] She posits that both analyst and opera attendee decode meaning from experiencing different elements of the production: the text, the soundscape, projections and scenery, character movement, lighting, and more. This study looks to Metcalf, Renihan, and Everett, seeking to engage in the ongoing discourse of opera scholars defending the place of opera as more than a dying art. The forthcoming case studies illuminate a few of Dizikes' permutations that have, indeed, materialized.

[68] Her case studies include Osvaldo Golijov's *Ainadamar*, Kaija Saariaho's *Adriana Mater*, John Adam's *Doctor Atomic,* and Tan Dun's *The First Emperor.*

CHAPTER 3 – BROAD SCOPE: COMMISSIONING PRACTICES AND TRENDS

The early twenty-first century represents a renaissance period in new opera, and the enthusiastic commitment to producing new works has led to emerging commissioning practices, procedures, and trends. Not only does the NAWD Archive demonstrate this, with an average of thirty-seven operas a year being commissioned in North America during the twenty-first century, but new works are now commonly programmed alongside the canonic blockbuster hits in an American theatre's season. This chapter first zooms out to contextualize the recent past of 2000-2019, considering the shifting social behaviors, defining economic events, and the operatic funding landscape. It then zooms in on the pioneer theatres, their combined forty commissions, and archive evaluation. Through analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data, I investigate the proliferation of new operas and seek to discern measurable aspects that contribute to subsequent revivals.

Twenty-first Century Context and Its Impact on the Industry

The new millennium was marked by the attack at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. A devastating event on the whole, it also impacted lifestyle and theatre practices, instigating a decline in subscription purchases and, therefore, stable and projected ticket sales. Waleson describes the seismic effect 9/11 had on the cultural world and social behaviors:

> The shock of 9/11, and the subsequent unwillingness of operagoers to commit far in advance, was not simply a momentary phenomenon that would eventually dissipate. Rather, it amplified a trend that was already beginning to take hold all over the country. The generation that relied on subscriptions to organize their lives was giving way to another, made up of people who were often more inclined to make more spontaneous

> choices. Another factor was that entertainment options had expanded dramatically, both in live performance and, critically, in on-demand entertainment at home.[69]

In that same year, Apple released the first version of the iPod, launching a new phase of music consumption via streaming. Communication would change with the creation of YouTube in 2005 and FaceBook and Twitter in 2006. A year later, the first generation of iPhone was released. These events sparked social change from the way in which interpersonal relationships take place to how people prioritize their time. Like NYCO, OTSL and HGO records also show a significant decline in subscriptions during the first decade of the century.[70] The first three case studies (*Dream of the Pacific*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *Three Decembers*) exemplify operas created amidst the tech-driven changes of the first decade, while the last case study (*The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs*) more pointedly embraces the technological progress through one of the most influential figures who helped implement it. *The Grapes of Wrath* takes on a unique position, as well, since it was commissioned during the first decade, but revised and condensed to suit the changed needs of theatres and their audiences in the following decade.

The 2008 Great Recession impacted the opera industry at large, too. Multiple companies closed, initiating drastic change across the field. At the start of the decade, Heggie/Scheer's *Dead Man Walking* (2000) and Bolcom/Weinstein's *A View from the Bridge* (1999) projected a bright future for the possibilities of inspiring new opera. Yet the ensuing 2008 economic crisis revealed cracks in the fiscal foundations of many companies, with four long-standing companies abruptly closing from November 2008 to April 2009: Baltimore Opera Company, Connecticut Opera,

[69] Waleson, *Death of NYCO,* 125-26.
[70] OTSL Strategic Plan 2015-2020; HGO Annual Reports, 2000-2010.

Orlando Opera, and Southern California's Opera Pacific.[71] Four years later, the household repertory-model, opera-for-the-people theatre NYCO folded too. The inflated market concealed the fragile budgets, while pledged donations fell through. All of these houses had budgets of 10 million dollars or less, and "they all had been in various stages of financial trouble for some time. The downturn merely exposed weaknesses that had been present all along — exacerbating their problems with bad ticket sales, reduced contributions, and defaults on pledges."[72] The closed companies were without endowments to keep them afloat and relied heavily on annual patron donations. In 2001, NYCO received a 51.5 million dollar endowment, helping it limp along year by year through the decade, but, eventually, the changes of leadership drained the endowment to compensate for budget deficits and it, too, closed in 2013.[73]

Level 1 houses were affected also, with seventeen staff layoffs at Los Angeles Opera and the Metropolitan Opera cutting staff pay by 10 percent as well as eliminating four costly productions. Barry Singer reflected on the shocking events in a 2009 *Opera News* article, poetically saying, "Opera has never before confronted such an ominous numbers game — a beggar's opera of plummeting balance sheets."[74] Although this study does not seek to uncover theatre response during and following the economic downturn, this bleak backdrop contextualizes the milieu of the first two decades. More specifically, it frames the revision of *The Grapes of Wrath* and the driving economic trends that changed the operatic industry at-large. When *Grapes* was premiered in 2007, Level 1 and 2 houses were able to spend and invest at a

[71] See Kaiser, *The Future of the Arts in America*. Kaiser claims the 2008 economic crisis was not the problem but rather revealed the precarious foundation and already inherent weaknesses of American arts organizations.

[72] Waleson, *Death of NYCO,* 191.

[73] Ibid., 113.

[74] Barry Singer, "Opera in the Age of Anxiety," *Opera News* 74, No. 3 (September 2009): 35.

grand level. But 2008 became a defining year, with works produced pre-2008 viewed as a previous economy. While the original commission was a spectacular success, "nobody could ever afford to do it again exactly that way."[75] Thus, in the years following, the creative team had to drastically revise the work for the lean economic landscape. Many manifestations of *Grapes* were produced in its revivals, with OTSL's revision the most noteworthy. OTSL reduced the chorus as well as the length, going from four hours with two intermissions to under three hours and one intermission. The theatre also redesigned the production to be more affordable for smaller companies, as is further explored in Chapter 5.

Funding Landscape

Commencing in the 1980s, the push to create new works specifically derives from the efforts of the following arts administrators: Martin Kagan (Executive Director of OPERA America 1980-90), Howard Klein (Director of the Arts at the Rockefeller Foundation 1973-1986), David DiChiera (President of Opera America 1979-1983), Ann Farris (Opera/Music Theatre Program Director at the National Endowment of the Arts 1982-1984), and Ben Krywosz (Project Director for OFTEAB 1984-87). The seminal initiative OFTEAB was the first grant program in America, from 1983 to 1989 that was geared towards supporting and encouraging the production of new American opera and expanding the repertory. At the time, producing new opera was contrary to most company missions to stay rooted in the Eurocentric canon. Krywosz discovered this when scouting for companies to become involved in OFTEAB.[76] While this program paved the way, it was succeeded in 1990 by the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Opera for a New America

[75] Paul Schankman Productions, "*The Grapes of Wrath* Opera," 5:30. May 30, 2017. https://hecmedia.org/posts/the-new-grapes-of-wrath.

[76] *OPERA America's Opera for the 80s and Beyond: Final Report*: 12.

project (hereafter, OFANA). Of the many companies that benefited from financial support from OFANA and its audience-building focus, three of the four featured in this study were direct recipients: HGO, OTSL, and MO.[77] From 1995-98, and restarted in 2020, the Next Stage grants program specifically required compositions to present compelling stories concerned with contemporary, culturally relevant topics.[78] It also focused on revivals, that is, when a new work receives subsequent productions. OTSL and MO both benefited from this program in 1997.[79]

Philanthropic programs, such as those noted here, provided the necessary support for theatres to take risks that led to the increase in commissions and revivals. While OPERA America grant programs continued to offer new works funding, many company programs now exist with the singular goal of developing the American operatic repertory. While some companies stand-alone on this mission, like The American Opera Project founded in 1988 in Brooklyn, New York, the current trend is for companies to create initiatives and raise money earmarked for commissions. MO's New Works Initiative serves as a prime example of this. Founded in 2008, the program raised 7 million dollars to be used over ten years.[80] Other noteworthy new works initiatives include Beth Morrison Projects (founded in 2006 in Brooklyn, New York and now in conjunction with Los Angeles Opera), American Opera Initiative at the Kennedy Center (founded in 2012 by Washington National Opera),[81] Opera Fusion: New Works

[77] Michael Eugene McKelvey, "Making American Opera in the 1990's: The Co-Commissioning and Co-Producing of Houston Grand Opera from the 1990-1991 through 2000-2001 Seasons," (DMA diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2004), 13.

[78] Ward, "American Opera Today," 21.

[79] www.operaamerica.org/programs/services/grants-awards/opera-companies/next-stage-grants/

[80] The elements of this initiative are fully fleshed out in Chapter 5.

[81] Current General Director of WNO, Timothy O'Leary, explains that AOI "has a very explicit purpose to expand the diversity of who is creating new opera." It was the brainchild of Artistic Director Francesca Zambello, who designed the program to provide opportunity to female and BIPOC composers and librettists. These creatives apply to the program and are matched into teams. The program then produces three new twenty-minute operas each year. Timothy O'Leary, Interview with author, September 21, 2021.

(founded in 2011 by Cincinnati Opera and the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music). More recently in 2017, a consortium of opera companies joined forces to co-commission new works for a new program called Opera for All Voices (OFAV). SFO is leading OFAV in collaboration with Lyric Opera of Kansas City, MO, OTSL, San Francisco Opera, Sarasota Opera, and Seattle Opera.

The non-profit status of the average opera company means patron support makes up a sizable portion of the annual budget. Public tax records show the majority of donations come from patron, rather than government, contributions. The revenue breakdown provided by OPERA America's 2019 Annual Report demonstrates government support only averaged at 4 percent for most companies and box office sales contribute around 34 percent. Thus, prominent donors, grants, partnerships, and underwriters are critical for an American opera company to fiscally succeed. All four companies featured in this study have dedicated development departments running substantial fundraising campaigns along with grant writers who must seek funding for the overall budget as well as funds allocated for new works. OPERA America offers a range of initiative specific grants to support the production of opera, and more specifically, commissioning and repertoire building. A 2009 article published in the *OPERA America* magazine chronicles the impact of its seminal new works, like OFTEAB, alongside major companies leading the way in commissioning. It also forecasted a change in the twenty-first century operatic landscape: "it is now expected that every significant city will host an opera company of its own. For many of these companies a commitment to new work remains an

important calling card."[82] My conversations with industry leaders and creatives reveal the necessity of company commitment, too.

The Opera Fund is the current OPERA America endowment that funds commissioning. Since 2001, companies can apply for Repertoire Development Grants. As of 2021, grants can be as much as 35,000 dollars for single companies or up to 65,000 dollars for consortiums. The funds for these grants come from the NEA, along with private foundations: Helen F. Whitaker Fund, Lee Day Gillespie, Lloyd and Mary Ann Gerlach, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, and the George Cedric Metcalf Charitable Foundation. These grants support new voices and ideas aiming to make an artistic impact on local communities.[83] On the latter front, a new grant under the umbrella of the Opera Fund was created in 2019, called the Civic Practice Grant. These grants offer up to 30,000 dollars with the intent of helping companies develop partnerships through respect and learning that acknowledges the preexisting historical and cultural context of a given community. Of the seven companies who benefited from this new grant program in 2019, three are featured theatres in this document: HGO ("We Belong": Serving Houston's Refugee Population), MO (Conversation Series with the Hmong-American Community), and SFO (Annual Event with Native American Tribes in New Mexico). OPERA America grants have continued to be a valuable resource expanding new operatic production through the current century. These major grants cover a range of topics involved with commissioning: encouraging experimentation (New Works Exploration Grants; Innovation Grants, starting in 2017), building audiences (Audience Development Grants, 2002; Building Opera Audience Grants, 2013),

[82] Rourke, "To Promote the Expansion and Growth of the Art Form," 27.
[83] www.operaamerica.org/programs/services/grants-awards

supporting creative team members (Robert L. B. Tobin Director-Designer Prize, 2009; Campbell Opera Librettist Prize, 2021), promoting gender equality (Opera Grants for Women Composers: Discovery Grants, 2014; Opera Grants for Women Composers: Commissioning Grants, 2015; Opera Grants for Women Stage Directors and Conductors, 2021), and funding BIPOC composers and librettists (IDEA Opera Grants, 2019; IDEA Opera Residencies, 2021). The year in which each grant type was created illuminates the industry's shift to be more socially conscious and prioritize supporting marginalized groups. Allocating grants to mitigate gender and race inequalities rampant in the field is promising.

In addition to OPERA America's Opera Fund, two funders are noteworthy for new works contributions. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation is a private foundation that has established itself as a major funder for the arts, in particular opera, while the NEA is the federal program that offers support to companies who apply. Former Artistic Director of MO Dale Johnson identifies Susan Feder of the Mellon Foundation as a critical supporter of the operatic arts. The Mellon Foundation supports institutions that seek to expand the American repertory, seeing this as critical to the preservation and development of opera. Grant support is offered by invitation only. At MO, from 2000 to the present, the company was awarded five grants at 3 million dollars in total. Indeed, the Mellon Foundation has provided extensive support to the new works developed at HGO, OTSL, and SFO also. Since 2000, HGO has received eight major grants, totaling 4.85 million dollars from Mellon. OTSL, too, was granted eight grants, totaling 4.58 million dollars from 2000 to the present, and SFO received five grants, at 2.85 million.[84] After 2008, while some companies could not commit to commissioning, the Mellon Foundation sought to be a resource:

[84] www.mellon.org/grants/grants-database

"The stakes are awfully high, and in an economic downturn, it is not surprising that certain companies have become risk-averse. We want to explore whether we can move the needle to enable more successful launching of new works by helping with the development process and encouraging second and third productions of new operas."[85] In addition to supporting commissions, the Mellon Foundation sees the value in reviving new works. Revivals are gaining traction since they tend to be most cost effective for regional companies who cannot afford an initial commission. Reasons for revivals are explored further in a subsequent section and throughout the document.

Commissioning Practices

Increased commissioning quantities have led to evolving practices at individual companies, which in turn broadly influenced the industry. Stage director and dramaturg Eric Simonson has produced many new operas with MO since the early 1990s. He recalls a conversation with respected composer Dominick Argento when MO was reviving *The Dream of Valentino* in 2014. At a community lecture, Argento recounted his process for composing new opera. He gave this straightforward, though rather antiquated, scenario: an opera company gives the composer a lot of money. With that money, the composer hires the librettist and tells them his vision. The librettist goes away for a year and writes the text. One day in the mail, the composer receives the libretto and then starts writing the music. When the composer finishes, he delivers the finished product to the conductor, rehearsals begin between the conductor, director, and musicians, and the composer shows up on opening night to see it. Simonson reacts to this archaic practice, saying, "I don't know how you'd get a good opera doing it that way. Except, I

[85] Susan Felder, "A Funder's Perspective," *OPERA America* (Winter 2009), 40.

guess, that's the way that operas were composed for a long time anyway."[86] In contrast to this twentieth-century practice, my interviews reveal improved aspects of twenty-first century commissioning: economic and creative investments, collaborative workshops, company partnerships, and resonating subjects.

Archival Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data from the NAWD Archive, gathered through the OPERA America database, shows a significant increase in new operas per year, substantiating the renaissance of new opera in America. Steady growth since 1990 indicates the trend towards a larger quantity of commissions per year. Moreover, in the last twenty years, an average of thirty-seven operas were commissioned and performed each year. See Figures 3.1a and 3.1b.[87]

Figure 3.1a NAWD Archive World Premieres 1970-2019

Year	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Premieres in North America	5	11	9	8	9	8	13	11	16	11	19	9	10	8	9	12	11	8	9	15	12	17	19	27	19	22	32	36	34	46

Year	**2000**	**2001**	**2002**	**2003**	**2004**	**2005**	**2006**	**2007**	**2008**	**2009**	**2010**	**2011**	**2012**	**2013**	**2014**	**2015**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**	**2019**
Premieres in North America	**33**	**28**	**35**	**46**	**33**	**28**	**27**	**38**	**37**	**33**	**47**	**43**	**24**	**30**	**47**	**50**	**33**	**49**	**44**	**41**

[86] Eric Simonson, Interview with author, September 9, 2021.

[87] Data in Figures 3.1 has not been refined to represent solely operas from the United States, but includes Canadian and Musical Theatre shows in its final numbers, too, per its OPERA America memberships.

Figure 3.1b NAWD Archive World Premieres 1970-2019 – Trend line

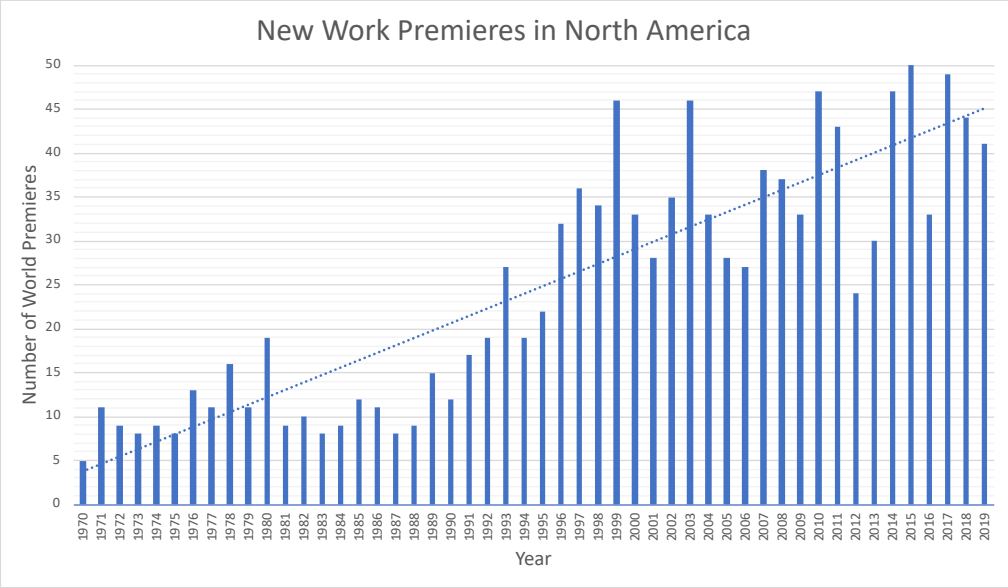

Figure 3.1a enumerates the exact amount of shows, clearly depicting the growth in commissions. From 2000 to 2019, 746 world premieres by OPERA America companies transpired. Considering some grassroots organizations do not establish themselves as OPERA America companies, the number of new operas is most likely more. Conversely, from 1970 to 1999, 475 world premieres took place. Therefore, the number of new operas produced in the last twenty years is up 57 percent compared to the previous three decades.[88] The trend line, shown in Figure 3.1b, illustrates remarkable progress since mid-1990s and proves a renewed vitality of the art form.

Economic and Creative Commitment

Commissioning is a multi-year economic and creative investment: an economic investment by the company and its resources and a creative investment by the composers, librettists and other involved team members like stage directors, dramaturgs, conductors,

[88]It seems necessary to qualify why the data commences in 1970. Though American operas were composed and produced prior to the year 1970, the OPERA America organization formed in 1970. The data it has collected since their formation is the most complete, exhaustive record of North American music drama compositions.

technical and scenic designers, costume directors, and sound designers. Many of the industry persons interviewed for this study emphasize the word "commitment" when describing the companies that prioritize commissioning new opera.[89] "It's a commitment to doing a new work," Heggie said. "And that's the most inspiring thing of all: someone believes in you and believes in the possibility of what you're creating, and they're committed to actually producing it so that we can all experience it […]. Otherwise, it doesn't really exist until it's on a stage with an audience. But it's a commitment."[90] Moreover, it is a fiscal venture, often in the millions, not taken lightly. Campbell stresses the gravity of a company entrusting artists with its resources, and eventually its audience: "When they invest in these things, it's a big deal. […] I'm always very grateful to opera companies when they make this commitment."[91] He notes attitudes regarding new works are changing too. Producers in years past claimed they would love to do a new work, but they did not have an audience for it. The trend has changed with most major companies including at least one contemporary English-language opera in their seasons. The twenty-first century is the golden age for new American opera, and productions abound.

Johnson and Simonson agree that the company must shape the cultural expectations of its subscription audience, those that are loyal attendees. Many regular audience bases have come to expect a new opera as a part of a company's season offerings. At MO, the sophisticated subscription audience of Minneapolis knows the company is going to take chances. Simonson elaborates,

> I think it's the sustained commitment to that kind of work. You train your audiences to expect a certain kind of artistic output. And then they come, and they get it, and they're

[89] O'Leary, Kilmer, Newbury, Campbell, Heggie, Simonson, and Freud all reference commitment as a crucial aspect of commissioning.

[90] Jake Heggie, Interview with author, August 10, 2021.

[91] Mark Campbell, Interview with author, August 3, 2021.

> satisfied. But if you trip them up — if you're doing classical repertoire, and then suddenly you throw in some *avant garde*, atonal opera that they've never heard before, they're going to be upset. But if they come to expect that you're going to be doing experimental, cutting-edge stuff, then that's the audience that you're going to get. And they're going to expect that and they're going to support you.[92]

Johnson confirms that MO's audience trusts the company. So much so that its new works tend to sell out; for example, *Silent Night* and *The Shining* both sold out a month before opening. Johnson established a track record of consistently delivering operas that intrigued the local public. At HGO, Summers acknowledges that a part of commissioning new works is recognizing not every commission will be a hit, "but the more you commission, the more that's in the DNA of the audience and the company, and frankly, the more that makes the standard repertory new. So, it's a very important part of our cultural identity as a company."[93] Both of these companies attest that by committing to commissioning and offering new works to regular attendees, they are developing a culture of expectation and excitement for new works. They have also budgeted and allocated their finances through specialized initiatives, prioritizing commissions and revivals.

In addition to the financial risks the company assumes, the artists must also take on a high creative investment. Likening the process of creating opera to the raising of a child, it requires diligent and intense emotional attachment from creative team members. Johnson says, "You live them. And I still do; I still live them, talking about them today is emotional for me. And, so, that can't stop. That has to continue. And opera companies have to have the strength and courage and fortitude to keep moving forward that way, because they owe it to the audiences. They really do."[94] Furthermore, for both entities, creating opera is a long-term

[92] Simonson, Interview with author.
[93] Patrick Summers, Interview with author, September 21, 2021.
[94] Dale Johnson, Interview with author, August 19, 2021.

commitment. While most commissioning projects span from two to six years, on average, three years is the most common timeframe. When Heggie is approached for a commission, he trusts his artistic instincts and selects a topic that "feels really resonant and right."[95] Though it must be mutual between the commissioner and composer, it has to be a topic he feels convicted to musically bring to life. This conviction to create is necessary for the composer to be able to make the years-long creative commitment.

Workshops

Campbell, Freud, Heggie, Johnson, Kilmer, Korie, Newbury, Simonson, and Summers all address the significance of workshopping to the creative process. While the development of new opera may be a different procedure than the Broadway musical, the process has taken notes from the latter. Felder, of the Mellon Foundation, defines the changing workshop landscape circa 2009: "The opera world, unlike the theater world, does not have a very well-established system of workshopping a new piece," she said. "Schedules for premieres that are fixed at the time of commission mean that there is seldom time built into the creation process to identify and adjust crucial elements of dramaturgy, pacing, balance, etc."[96] Additionally, funding an opera workshop was often too expensive. While the script is relatively inexpensive to produce for a straight play workshop, operatic workshops require multiple musical scores and personnel that make workshopping more cost prohibitive. Numerous workshops may be a luxury, yet most new works receive two workshops before a full production. Though not a concerted effort at-large from the industry, workshop practices have organically developed over the course of the last twenty years, with specific company practices influencing one another along the way.

[95] Heggie, Interview with author.
[96] Felder, "A Funder's Perspective," 40.

Since new opera is living, evolving theatrical art that requires teamwork, workshops are critical to the team's creative process and the ability to refine. They allow for the collaborators to "see things early on and change them," Simonson says. "Whereas, in the way that operas were composed before, you just really had one shot and you crossed your fingers. You hoped that it worked."[97] The aforementioned Argento scenario illustrates the lack of collaboration amongst creative team members and theatre producers in twentieth-century commissions. At the creative level, regular interactions between composer and librettist (as well as dramaturg and director) are now normal procedure. Additionally, workshops and resources offered by the theatre to support the creative process are also expected.

Though all four case studies were workshopped in some manner, the evolution of the process over the last two decades has led to generalized standards. *Dream of the Pacific,* at the onset of the century, was the least developed model. The concept of workshopping was freer, in a sense. The first public performance in February 2004 was considered both a workshop and a production. The composer, Stephen Mager, describes the initial performances functioning like a workshop due to the adjustments made between February and the mainstage production in June. Allison Felter, who headed this educational commission, speaks of workshopping *Dream*, but then clarifies her use of the word. In the early 2000s, workshopping could mean a lengthy rehearsal process that consisted of weeks upon weeks of rehearsal and experimenting.[98] A few years later in 2007, Korie compared his experiences creating musicals versus opera. A defining difference was the lack of workshopping at the Broadway standard, which involves full previews

[97] Simonson, Interview with author.
[98] Allison Felter, interview with author, September 2, 2021.

for audiences to see the work on its feet and gauge reception. Contemporary with this time period, HGO's *Three Decembers* was shaped at its concentrated workshops and further refined after its regional premieres. Around this same time, the MET and Lincoln Center established a joint opera commissioning program in 2006. The directors commissioned nine works, with musically diverse composers —from classical to jazz. MET General Manager Peter Gelb wanted the program to emphasis the collaborative workshop process: "The way opera companies have commissioned new works," Gelb said, "is more about the act of commissioning and less about the concentration to make sure each piece is a success,"[99] and he hoped to change this practice. Gelb's idea to promote the workshop model, though encouraging for industry change, was not revolutionary since Broadway-influenced workshopping was already being implemented by many American opera companies by this point in the century. However, it did signify change at the highest level and set an unspoken standard. With workshops becoming regular in the development process, grants were made available to support the financial investment required to produce workshops.[100]

At OTSL, Kilmer's outline of the commissioning sequence emphasizes workshopping as an established part of the process by the 2010s. He said workshops are "something we've done a lot more since Jim Robinson [in 2009] has come along. And I think it's because he feels that —and rightly so I think —that often times the libretto has been shortchanged, in terms of its internal development. Somebody will create a libretto, a composer would orchestrate it, and that's it."[101] Conversely, under the new more collaborative system, the composer and librettist are

[99] Midgette, "In Search of the Next Great American Opera."

[100] Indeed, the OPERA America grant allocated for this part of the commissioning process is called the Repertoire Development Grant and began to be offered in 2001.

[101] Paul Kilmer, Interview with author, August 16, 2021.

always present at the workshops per contract agreements. It is often the first time the composer and librettist hear a vocal artist interpret their combined music and text. Through this, the creative team can refine the work by considering aspects such as text setting and syllabication, balance between instrumentation and singer, as well as overall dramatic structure and pacing.

In 2011, Cincinnati Opera and the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music partnered to create a new workshopping program, Opera Fusion: New Works. This notable orchestral program has served many pioneering companies in the workshopping process with fifteen commissions, thus far, and counting. As orchestral workshops are often too costly, Opera Fusion provides a ten-day residency for the composer and librettist to utilize the facilities and personnel of the institutions, culminating in a free public performance of selections from the opera along with a question and answer session between the creative team and audience. The selected pioneering companies have all taken advantage of this program. MO's *Doubt* was the initial opener of Opera Fusion. OTSL has workshopped three operas with the program since 2013. HGO had one opera workshopped in 2017, and SFO one in the following year. Explored further in the subsequent section, this serves as an example of company collaborations that are creatively moderating new work expenses and furthering the art form's viability.

On the whole, companies who prioritize new works value workshops. Artistic partnerships, like Opera Fusion, lead to more collaborative, and, ideally, impactful art in the end. These trends are improving the commissioning process overall. Though Summers believes workshops are highly beneficial, he also acknowledges that too many collaborators, and an overabundance of ideas, can sometimes derail the opera:

> I have been involved in some operas that had too many cooks at the workshop. And that is not useful for a creative team. Because the engine of an opera, the dramaturgical engine, has to be the composer. And it can't be an impresario or a conductor or even the

> librettist. Certainly, the librettist is the most important collaborator for the composer, but the composer has to make the dramaturgical decision. What stays? What goes? What is emphasized? What is this opera about? And if a workshop has too many cooks, you've got too many people doing too many different operas. And I've seen that happen. We've had a couple of things that were workshopped out of their original concepts.[102]

Though the workshop process is essential to the refinement of new operas during a commission, collaboration is a delicate balance. Summers emphasizes the dramaturgical decisions, by composer and librettist, must guide the process so the core of the project is retained.

Company Collaborations

Co-commissioning and co-producing are critical for funding new work, covering all fiscal aspects from creative artist fees to workshop expenses to production costs. According to Johnson at MO, many twentieth-century American opera houses were not interested in co-productions.[103] This began to change, however, in this century. Most significantly, co-commissioning offers companies a shared financial burden. Though co-commissioning is not a concept new to the twenty-first century, it was not widely practiced due to some of its drawbacks, namely performance order. The original commissioner is referred to as the lead company, which is given the premiere claim along with the initial publicity and media buzz. For instance, the NAWD Archive does not credit co-commissioning or co-producing companies. Without the recognition that comes from a world premiere designation, co-commissioning companies will often classify their production as a regional premiere for media appeal. San Francisco Opera, for example, called its revival of *Three Decembers* the "West Coast premiere" since it was the co-commissioner, while HGO received the archival recognition as lead commissioner.

[102] Summers, Interview with author.
[103] Johnson, Interview with author.

Kilmer at OTSL helped instigate change in co-commissioning practices during the first decade of the twenty-first century. For instance, in 2004, OTSL produced a smaller scope production of *Nixon in China* by set designer Allen Moyer. Nine co-commissioners signed on early in the project, meaning the set was designed for flexibility between their venues, whether a standard stage with proscenium or a three-quarter thrust. This operation became an attractive option for companies to partner and disperse financial risk with new productions. A secondary company can choose between two options: co-commissioner or co-producer. Co-commissioners are on the front end and pay a higher buy-in. Co-producers, who tend to enter the project later in the development process, receive the physical production and pay royalties. While the lead company and co-commissioners share in funding the collaborative process, co-producing companies invest in the actual costs of the production. This allows for a higher quality production that travels to multiple theatres. Kilmer describes his contract process:

> Most of the time, when I start a commissioning contract, we're the only ones involved. But I have a provision that we could add two additional co-commissioners, at no addition to the commissioning fee. Then we have the right to add those to help amortize our investment. After that, they start having to pay royalties, co-producers. And there's probably one or two co-producers that are allowed to join and use the physical set. But again, who would pay maybe a reduced fee — maybe I might, in the context, say the co-producer can use the work with a 3 percent royalty, rather than 7.5 percent. Each one is different. It depends — somebody who is writing their first opera is pretty much happy for everybody to get involved as much as they can. *(laugh together)* But somebody who has been down the pike realizes and wants to have more of a financial return. So, it's all negotiable. Frankly, oftentimes, the ugly little secret is that a lot of people don't want to go in on the front end or even on the producer end. And they just want to wait see how it turns out and rent it. And then they just rent the physical set and costumes, and they pay a royalty.[104]

Simonson concurs with the benefits of co-productions, noting the initial production is still a first try, while a guaranteed second production provides experiences that will help make the work

[104] Kilmer, Interview with author.

better by its next run. "But that's where opera really hasn't evolved. Because getting the second production of anything is harder to get than getting the first production."[105] Simonson is not wrong. The ratio of revivals to premieres is still dreadfully low. My case studies, however, beat the odds and have received a noteworthy number of revivals.

Subjects that Resonate

Beyond commitment being a common theme in the responses from industry interviews, the notion of the work resonating with the audience was a recurring idea. "Resonance," a buzzword found throughout materials advocating for new works, is sylleptic in its application in opera. An operatic voice physically resonates through the theatre, while culturally-relevant and socially-conscious narratives resonate with audiences. In a literal sense, resonance is the acoustical physics of how opera singers project their voices, refine their timbres, and, essentially, create their art. In its figurative usage, it is the meaningful connection of a story that emotionally hits. In a 2007 WolfBrown study assessing the intrinsic benefits of live performing arts experiences, "emotional resonance" was found to be a valued impact.[106] The summary findings elaborate emotional resonance as art intended to elicit "a strong emotional response from the audience" along with some spectators attending "performances with the explicit objective of being 'moved.' Promotional language used by presenters often accentuates the likely emotional impact of the performance."[107] Though over-used in industry marketing and campaigns, resonance remains powerfully effective with its dual connotations.

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[105] Simonson, Interview with author.

[106] Other intrinsic impacts include captivation, intellectual stimulation, spiritual value, aesthetic growth, and social bonding.

[107] See Alan S. Brown and Jennifer L. Novak, "Assessing the Intrinsic Impacts of a Live Performance," WolfBrown (2007): 13.

A resonant story, though not mutually exclusive with familiarity, often exudes something known: an emotion, a framework, a conviction, a social theme. Heggie concisely encapsulates this, saying, "Stories that have popular resonance in our cultural imagination but also work well on the opera stage"[108] are the most ideal for the medium. Finding this balance is a feat. Opera's original dramatic content derived from "stories that were in the public conscious:"[109] from ancient history to mythology to royalty and peasants. The historical audience could arrive at the opera already knowing essential information about archetypes, character relationships, and plot progression. When the subject matter is unknown or ambiguous, it can be difficult for contemporary audiences to digest while also experiencing the music simultaneously. Heggie explains, "It's very, very challenging for an audience to go into a theater, completely fresh, no idea who these characters are and how they relate. I know, because I've done a couple of original stories, where people told me, 'Oh, God, the music is so beautiful, but the story… I just couldn't follow it. I didn't get it at all.'"[110] If archetype characters are clear, the audience will focus more on the musical telling rather than be consumed with questions about the story. Archetypes — like doctor, villain, hero, ingénue, martyr, underdog — provide a functioning framework for the audience. Heggie agrees familiarity is critical because people need a point of reference. When pitching a move to a friend, for instance, they want to know what the story is about in a few short sentences or who stars in it: "They're looking for some sense of familiarity. Familiarity is something that you can trust. Something that's clear and known to you."[111] Familiar narrative

[108] Heggie, Interview with author.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Ibid.

parameters establish a known quantity from which curiosity can be cultivated about how the story will be creatively expressed through music.

Positioning the Selected Pioneering Theatres

To position the four pioneering theatres, the following delineates the chief reasons they were chosen as the defining companies of this study. The OTSL festival season has included a mixed repertory of canonic and contemporary works since its foundation in 1976. The theatre's founding artistic vision was focused on developing opera "into its future, as an increasingly American and vibrant, forward-looking art form."[112] Its strategic efforts during the twenty-first century have situated it as a frontrunner company by maintaining a core subscriber base, established donor support, growing endowment, and flexible festival system. As was said in an *Opera Today* article, "If opera is to remain a viable, accessible twenty-first century art form, it will be largely owing to the commitment of visionary companies like Opera Theatre of Saint Louis."[113] Its business structure has made it a model among companies, helping define a new path for opera during the radical changes of twenty-first century entertainment industries.[114] Alongside producing high quality traditional operas, the company renewed their mission to include a focus on championing new works, building new audiences, and engaging with the community. In 2009, they established the *New Works, Bold Voices* program to provide sustained support to producing contemporary opera. Since the initiative's first commission *Champion* (Blanchard/Cristofer) in 2013, it has produced four full new mainstage operas, three new twenty-

[112] O'Leary, Interview with author.

[113] James Sohre, "Saint Louis: Gordon's Revised *Grapes*," *Opera Today* June 27, 2017. http://www.operatoday.com/content/2017/06/saint_louis_gor.php

[114] OTSL, "Connecting our Community and Shaping the Future of Opera," Strategic Plan 2015-2020, 1.

minute operas (digitally disseminated during 2021), and two revival revisions. The company keeps scrupulous records that demonstrate measurable statistics regarding community impact and box office sales. For example, in 2014 OTSL compared ticket sales of the blockbuster hits, *The Magic Flute*, *Carmen, The Marriage of* Figaro, and *La bohème,* to their recent new works productions, *Champion* (2013), *27* (2014)*, The Golden Ticket* (2010), and *The Ghosts of Versailles* (2009 OTSL production). The canonic works and new works all sold in the same range: 85 to 98 percent capacity, with *Champion* selling at over 98 percent — higher than any canonic opera in OTSL's recent seasons.[115]

MO established itself as a cutting-edge company from the start with new works and became the home theatre of Argento. In the early years, its motto was "opera without elephants" with the intent of defining the company as nontraditional. However, after the venue change to the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts and its 2,206 seats in the mid-1980s, the organization decreased its quantity of commissions for the mainstage due to expense and size. Johnson recalls his commission of Evan Chen's *Bok Choy Variations* in 1994 as an important mainstage commission that inspired the company to return to its roots:

> As the company was stabilizing and getting much more fiscally stable, and the funding community was taking us more seriously in a sense, we began to think that we needed to sort of reach back into our history, because that's the DNA of Minnesota Opera. A lot of companies don't have that DNA, and we absolutely did. And so we began to think about creating a new piece. And we didn't really have a timeline; we just began to explore the idea of a new piece, and what kind of opera would it be? This is not a sort of scholarly thought. But, if you look back in opera history, back in the late '20s into the '30s, where pieces like *Porgy* and *Showboat* and *Mahagonny*: those pieces were very much 'populist' works. And they talked about social issues without sort of hammering people over the head with it, and then the classical music community sort of went the other way.[116]

[115] OTSL, Strategic Plan 2015-2020, 9. OTSL provides yearly annual reports to show impact along with progress reports that demonstrate execution of their strategic plan. These documents are available to the public through its website.

[116] Johnson, Interview with author.

After the recommitment to commissioning populist opera, Johnson, former General Director Kevin Smith, and the board discussed what the next work might look like, and *The Grapes of Wrath* as an opera was born. This more than ten-year project was a defining work for the theatre to reassert itself as a forerunner in commissioning after a short hiatus. The sold-out work garnered so much public attention that it influenced MO to initiate a new works program. Smith calls *Grapes* a "game-changer," noting the plethora of strategic advantages a new works initiative gives the company, including attracting sought-after singers and creative teams, as well as partnering companies to co-produce. In a 2009 *OPERA America* article, Smith was quoted saying:

> It elevates our image in the field. We're now able to do substantial fundraising outside of Minnesota. The whole endeavor is both altruistic and selfish. […] Yes, it's expensive, and it's hard. But even in a down economy there are opportunities to be had. In one sense, when it comes to creation of new works, this is a very tough time for opera companies. We have seized on that. It is a perfect time to really assert ourselves.[117]

And that they did. That same year, OPERA America President Marc Scorca said this was "the most important new works program in the country."[118] Since *Grapes*, under the New Works Initiative at MO, seven operas have been produced in the last ten years, with a few reaching critical success and already receiving multiple revivals, like *Silent Night* (Kevin Puts/Campbell) and *The Shining* (Paul Moravec/Campbell).

HGO has been a force in the opera industry as the leading advocate of commissions and American repertory building since the 1970s under the helm of David Gockley. Gockley's goals were continued by twenty-first century administrations, including leaders Anthony Freud and

[117] Kelley Rourke, "Opera in the Heartland," *OPERA America* (Winter 2009), 27.
[118] MO 2009 Program Book.

Patrick Summers. According to Summers, Gockley wanted "an American version of an opera company"[119] that was purposefully modeled to serve its local city and audience, separate from European theatre expectations. When Gockley stepped down in 2006, Freud continued to invest in the company's rich history of commissioning:

> I was really conscious that the company's extraordinary track record in commissioning was one that was so important to its artistic identity that I very much wanted to develop it. Patrick Summers who was — still is — the Music Director of Houston Grand Opera, obviously someone with whom I worked very closely, shared that passion and that commitment. I was very keen at Houston Grand Opera for our idea of new commissions not to be limited to full scale opera in the subscription season.[120]

In regards to the final statement, Freud spearheaded a sector of the company called HGOco. This inspirational program involves cross-department interaction and continues to be the company's avenue to connect and engage with Houston communities as well as commission outside the large-scale productions meant for the Brown Theater's 2,405 seats.

SFO's founding General Director John O. Crosby envisioned a summer festival destination in the Southwest that provided an operatic getaway in the states. From its genesis, SFO has programmed adventurous new and rare works alongside traditional repertoire. SFO's new works repertoire was largely European from the start, giving forty-four American premieres to new works by non-American composers from 1958 to 2014. Since the mid-1990s, however, the company's focus shifted toward American commissions. More recent initiatives demonstrate SFO's emergence as a major pioneering company in the twenty-first century. Its Tech and the West (2017-2018) initiative involved the new commission *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* and a revival of *Doctor Atomic,* along with various community events. In 2017, the company also

[119] Summers, Interview with author.
[120] Anthony Freud, Interview with author, October 14, 2021.

announced its newest initiative with San Francisco Opera and other consortium companies: Opera for All Voices. Commissions in this initiative must present diverse dramaturgy and be malleable in scale.

Considering the quantity of commissions from these four theatres over the last twenty years, forty in total, I compare this small sample to identify revival rates as well as dramaturgical conventions, shown in Figure 3.2.[121] From 2000 to 2019, HGO commissioned fifteen mainstage operas (not including an additional twenty-eight HGOco commissions), OTSL commissioned ten operas, MO commissioned eight, and SF seven. Not only is HGO the leader of the most commissions in the last two decades, but its new works archive possesses the most commissions of any American company, at 70 as of 2020 (see Figure 6.1). From this forty-commission-sample, thirteen were never revived. Twelve have received a handful of revivals. Six have received between five and ten revivals, while three were revived between eleven and sixteen times. Only one opera, *Three Decembers,* has been revived more than twenty times. The bolded operas are the case studies for this study that fit into the revival and cultural narrative parameters.

[121] The following archives were determined based on the managing company who initiated and lead the commission and do not account for co-commissioners.

Figure 3.2 Four Theatres New Works 2000-2019

Year	New Opera	Premiering Company	Composer	Librettist	No. of Productions (premiere + revivals)	Key
2000	*Cold Sassy Tree*	HGO	Carlisle Floyd		9	2 to 4
	Tale of Genji	OTSL	Miki Minoru	Colin Graham	1	5 to 10
2001					0	11 to 20
2002	*Loss of Eden*	OTSL	Cary Franklin	Michael Patrick Albano	1	20+
2003	*Madame Mao*	SF	Bright Sheng	Colin Graham	1	
	The Little Prince	HGO	Rachel Portman	Nicholas Wright	13	
2004	***Dream of the Pacific***	**OTSL**	**Stephen Mager**	**Elkhanah Pulitzer**	**5**	
	The End of the Affair	HGO	Jake Heggie	Heather McDonald	1	
	Salsipuedes, a tale of Love, War and Anchovies	HGO	Daniel Catán	Eliseo Alberto	5	
2005	*Lysistrata, or the Nude Goddess*	HGO	Mark Adamo		4	
2006	*Send (who are you? I love you)*	HGO	Michael John LaChiusa		1	
2007	***The Grapes of Wrath***	**MO**	**Ricky Ian Gordon**	**Michael Korie**	**12**	
	Anna Karenina	OTSL	David Carlson	Colin Graham	3	
2008	***Three Decembers***	**HGO**	**Jake Heggie**	**Gene Scheer**	**33**	
2009	*Brief Encounter*	HGO	André Previn	John Caird	2	
	The Letter	SF	Paul Moravec	Terry Teachout	1	
	Adventures of Pinocchio	MO	Jonathan Dove	Alasdair Middleton	1	
2010	*Life is a Dream*	SF	Lewis Spratlan	James Maraniss	1	
	The Golden Ticket	OTSL	Peter Ash	Donald Sturrock	2	
2011	*Silent Night*	MO	Kevin Puts	Mark Campbell	16	
2012					0	
2013	*Oscar*	SF	Theodore Morrison		2	
	Doubt	MO	Douglas J. Cuomo	John Patrick Shanley	1	
	Champion	OTSL	Terence Blanchard	Michael Cristofer	5	
2014	*A Coffin in Egypt*	HGO	Ricky Ian Gordon	Leonard Foglia	3	
	A Christmas Carol	HGO	Iain Bell &	Simon Callow	1	
	27	OTSL	Ricky Ian Gordon	Royc Vavrek	5	
	Cold Mountain	SF	Jennifer Higdon	Gene Scheer	3	
2015	*The Manchurian Candidate*	MO	Kevin Puts &	Mark Campbell	3	
2016	*Prince of Players*	HGO	Carlisle Floyd		3	
	It's a Wonderful Life	HGO	Jake Heggie	Gene Scheer	3	
	Shalimar the Clown	OTSL	Jack Liberatore	Rajiv Joseph	1	
	The Shining	MO	Paul Moravec	Mark Campbell	2	
2017	***The (R)evolution Steve Jobs***	**SF**	**Mason Bates**	**Mark Campbell**	**7**	
	The House without a Christmas Tree	HGO	Ricky Ian Gordon	Royce Vavrek	1	
	Dinner at Eight	MO	William Bolcom	Mark Campbell	1	
2018	*An American Soldier*	OTSL	Huang Ruo	David Henry Hwang	2	
2019	*The Phoenix*	HGO	Tarik O'Regan	John Caird		
	Milagro del Recuerdo	HGO	Javier Martinez	Leonard Foglia		
	The Thirteenth Child	SF	Poul Ruders	Becky and David Starobin		
	Fire Shut Up in My Bones	OTSL	Terence Blanchard	Kasi Lemmons		
	The Fix	MO	Joel Puckett	Eric Simonson		

Tracking Topics

Drawing on twentieth-century American opera classifications, musicologist Lydia Goehr recognizes four overarching narratives: folkloric, purist, democratic, and posthistoric. Ebright continues her assessment of these four stances, noting how they "fit American opera into a larger

teleology that viewed an ascendant United States as the replacement for a moribund Europe."[122] He posits all but the posthistoric are present in opera of the 1990s and beyond. American legends and literature are the basis of the folklorist view, while the purist narrative is rooted in the concept of performing in the English language. The democratic notion describes a popular vein. It includes the institutions themselves, who are moving away from Eurocentric conventions and presenting new works conceived for their communities. The posthistoric category was based on the experimentations and antiopera movement led by John Cage in the 1980s with his satirical *Europeras 1-5* project.[123] The radical rejection of traditional form in the posthistoric narrative has not manifested in twenty-first century operatic conventions, while the other three views are evident: American tales presented in English with popular appeal. To examine this trend more closely, the four theatres' forty commissions function as a small data sample with the intent of codifying dramatic content along with cultural narrative perspectives. The subject matter of the new works sample is organized into four overarching categories: source material, context, characters, and nationality.

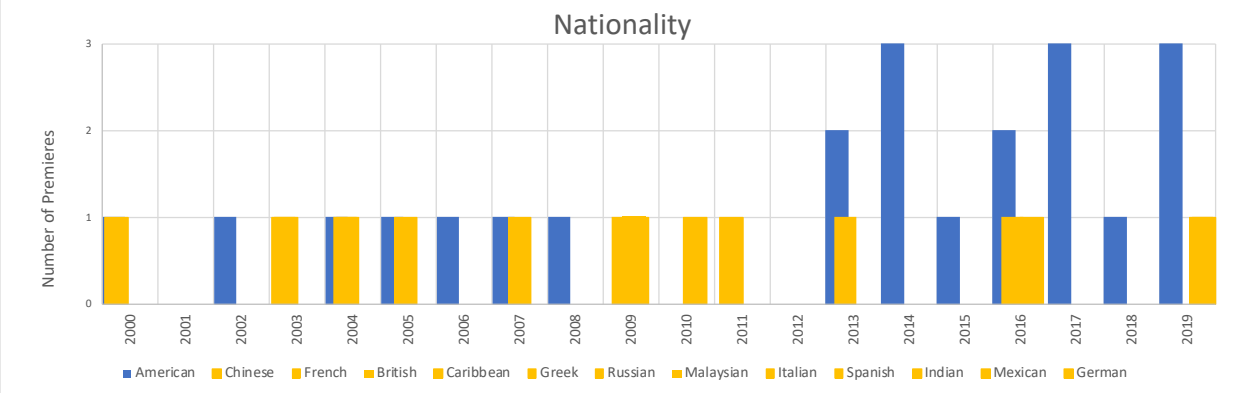
Source material is broken into five possible derivations: literature, play, film, primary source documents, original ideas. Context conveys the time period, whether historical or contemporary. Further refinement of the historical includes considering whether the story is fictional or dramatized fact. Additionally, I consider contemporary to be an opera set within ten years of the present time of the premiere. When classifying the characters, the celebrity status category includes iconic persons, recognized for their real-life achievements, rather than figures made famous through familiar stories. For example, while Steinbeck presents common folk, the

[122] Ebright, "Echoes of the Avant-Garde," 47.
[123] Goehr, "*Amerikamüde/Europamüde*," 423.

Joads have become famous over time; likewise, other popular novels and movies have taken everyday people and made them into icons: George Bailey, Scrooge, Jack Torrance, etc. To avoid overlap, these fictional figures are not factored in the celebrity status category. The other character divisions are everyday people versus royalty and/or upper echelon citizens. The fourth category indicates the cultural representation of a particular nation. Appendix B contains a chart specifying each category for the forty new works.

After analyzing the subject matter data from the 2000-2019 four theatres sample, the statistical trends show no apparent change over time in the categories of source material, context, and characters, while a trend does emerge in narrative nationality. A marked increase in American multi-cultural stories starts in 2013 and continues to the present, as shown in Figure 3.3.

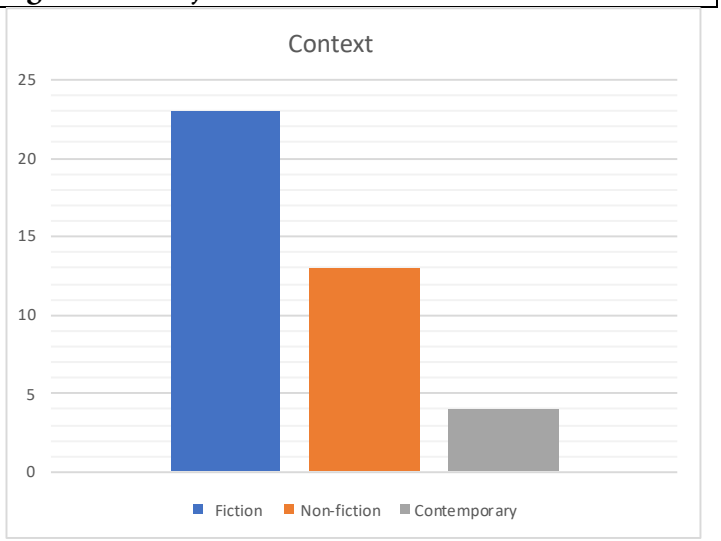
Figure 3.3 Cultural Stories 2000-2019



Though not emerging trends, observations regarding the quantity of the other three categories can be made. For the category of subject matter context, it is evident historical settings are greatly favored over contemporary subject matter with historical context used nine times more than contemporary locales. In Figure 3.4, the historical stories are separated into fiction

(twenty-three) and non-fiction (thirteen). Indicated by the blue and orange bars, thirty-six new operas were set in a historical period, compared to the four contemporary settings.

Figure 3.4 Subject Matter Context 2000-2019

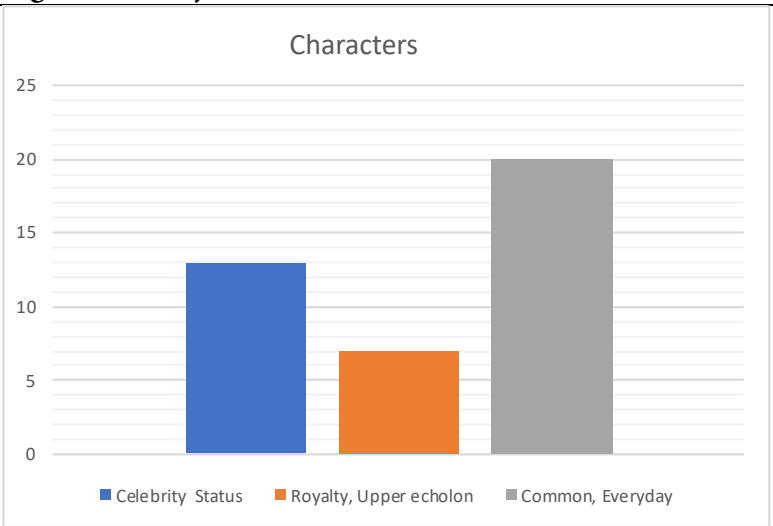


Even though historical context is consistently higher overall than contemporary, historical fiction is the most favored having nearly double the amount as non-fiction. Everett claims new opera mythologizes historical subject matter "by transforming them into archetypal figures through textualized representation and transhistoricism" which blurs the "temporal distinction between past, present, and future."[124] Therefore, despite not being literally contemporary in terms of immediate setting, historical narratives transcend time and place if their topics are culturally-relevant or include universal emotional themes.

For the characters, common and everyday people (twenty) are explored at the same frequency as celebrities (thirteen) and royalty (seven) combined. See Figure 3.5.

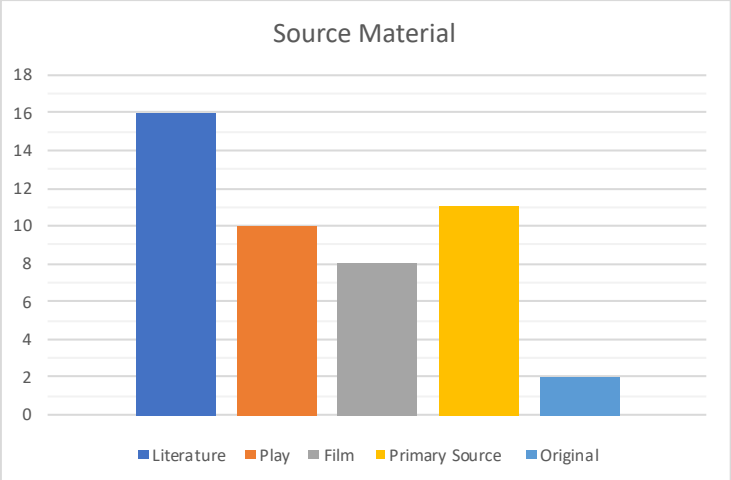
[124] Everett, *Reconfiguring Myth and Narrative in Contemporary Opera*, 39.

Figure 3.5 Subject Matter Characters 2000-2019



The source material survey shows literature (sixteen) as the favored story derivative followed by primary source materials (eleven), plays (ten), and film (eight) in respective order. Of significant note, original stories were used only twice in the forty commissions, making them considerably less common.

Figure 3.6 Subject Matter Source Material



This statistical data supports my claim that familiar narratives are favored and employed over original ideas. I argue familiarity, in some fashion, is key to creating a connection with the audience. Johnson's strategy at MO was based on this notion. Around 2010, he received negative attention from other company administrations for focusing on familiar narratives:

> Because *Grapes of Wrath* is based on the book and then *Joyeux Noel / Silent Night* was based on the movie, we got a lot of flak for not doing original stories. And I basically said, 'Well, it's your theater, you can do what you wish, but this is what's worked very well for us.' And I also told my board and the New Works Initiative Committee, I said, 'I would like to be able to do some original stories. But we have to get our audience back into the notion of coming to the theater to see a new work. And that it's not a bad thing. That it's not scary.' And so, it worked out pretty well for us. [125]

That is has. Both *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Silent Night* are exemplars of familiar narrative operas that have sold out during their premieres and have been revived a remarkable amount of times: eleven revivals for *Grapes* and sixteen for *Silent Night*. Librettist Michael Korie believes *Grapes* was intrinsic to the change to dramatically-driven opera. Though innovative creatives like Philip Glass and Robert Wilson infused life into the new opera scene in the second half of the twentieth-century, "there wasn't that much story-oriented opera," he said. "And *The Grapes of Wrath* kind of took it back to that."[126] The story-oriented convention is audience-centric at its core, seeking to serve viewers through timely yet timeless topics. Though historical subjects still reign, they tend to represent history with cultural resonance, and this distinction is of crucial importance. O'Leary recognizes its significance:

> The great works of generations past speak to us very directly emotionally, but of course, a lot of the subject matter is about situations that are now quite dated. And it's sometimes dated in ways that are almost dangerous, because they reinforce stereotypes and cultural norms from times past that we have rightly moved on from. So the opportunity to tell new stories that reflect the situations and cultural conversations of today is incredibly important. All of that requires incredible work to cause audiences to understand what

[125] Johnson, Interview with author.
[126] Michael Korie, Interview with author, August 3, 2021.

> you're doing and why they should come and show up and open themselves to the experience. [127]

Revivals

Despite a massive increase in commissioning, many of the commissioned operas only receive one production and then become a name and number in a repertory archive. Lack of revival or widespread exposure is not uncommon in the operatic tradition, though. Historically, thousands of operas have graced the stage for a short period, followed by the score collecting dust on a shelf. It is a part of the process. Freud explains that a sizable quantity of new operas is crucial to the emergence of new repertoire:

> Creating new work seems to me to be a critical part of the responsibility of every major opera company, because if we don't contribute to what one hundred years from now will be regarded as the heritage of opera, then opera will simply become a fossilized heritage from the last century and the last four centuries. There's a reason why today's core repertoire is made up mainly of nineteenth century titles. And that's because the sheer amount of commissioning in the nineteenth century meant that there's a huge range of pieces being created. And so the chances of a small handful of those pieces having longevity are greatly enhanced by there being a lot of them. And that's part of the challenge today: to create enough new work in order to provide the heritage for the future.[128]

Once a piece receives many revivals, it begins to be considered a part of the canonic repertoire.[129] There is, of course, not a specific number at which time a piece becomes established. However, after examining the four theatres' new works archives and comparing revivals, five or more productions seems significant. Of the forty works, only ten have received five or more productions (see Figure 3.2), while four have received more than ten revivals: *The Little Prince*

[127] O'Leary, Interview with author.
[128] Freud, Interview with author.
[129] Furthermore, although the revival number of productions is a strong indicator, it is not the only defining element of success; however, it is a measurable parameter.

(Rachel Portman/Nicholas Wright; 2003), *The Grapes of Wrath* (Gordon/Korie; 2007), *Three Decembers* (Heggie/Scheer; 2008), and *Silent Night* (Puts/Campbell; 2011). Each of these operas contain unique dramatic classifications, showing no direct correlation between dramaturgy and revival status.[130] The two operas with American narratives were selected for further study (see Chapter 5 and Chapter 6).

The following figures present the companies who revived each work, gathered through cross-referencing the NAWD Archive, online websites, newspaper archives, and Operabase performance calendars.

Figure 3.7 *Dream of the Pacific* - 4 Revivals	
2005	Opera Omaha (co-commission)
2005	Lyric Opera of Kansas City (co-producer)
2006	Washington National Opera (co-producer)
2017	**Amarillo Opera**

Figure 3.8 *Grapes of Wrath* - 11 Revivals	
2007	**Utah Opera** (co-commission)
2008	**Pittsburgh Opera** (co-producer)
2009	**Moores School of Music, University of Houston**
2009	Opera Pacific (cancelled due to sudden closure)
2010	MasterVoices/ American Symphony Orchestra at Carnegie Hall (concert version)
2011	Michigan State University College of Music Opera Theater
2011	**Anchorage Opera**
2013	**Northwestern University Bienen School of Music**
2014	San José University (concert version)
2016	Sugar Creek Opera
2017	**Opera Theatre of Saint Louis** (shortened version)
2019	Michigan Opera Theatre (co-commission of new version)

Figure 3.9 *Three Decembers* - 32 Revivals	
2008	San Francisco Opera & Cal Performances (co-commission)
2010	Chicago Opera Theater
2010	Central City Opera

[130] *The Little Prince* (literature; fiction; royalty; French), *The Grapes of Wrath* (literature; fiction, common; American), *Three Decembers* (play; contemporary; common; American), and *Silent Night* (film; non-fiction; celebrity; European).

2010	University of Southern California Thornton School of Music
2011	**Boston University**
2011	**Fort Worth Opera**
2012	Vanderbilt University Blair School of Music
2013	Florida State Opera
2013	**Opera in Knopfloch** (Switzerland)
2014	**UrbanArias**
2014	Des Moines Metro Opera
2015	Atlanta Opera
2015	Kentucky Opera
2016	Butler School of Music
2016	Florentine Opera Company
2016	Opera Fayetteville
2017	**Opera Birmingham**
2017	Hawai'i Opera Theatre
2017	Opera Memphis
2018	**Livermore Valley Opera**
2018	**Painted Sky Opera**
2018	Opera Maine
2018	St. Louis Opera Collective
2018	**Nashville Opera**
2019	Fargo-Moorhead Opera
2019	Tri-Cities Opera
2019	San Diego Opera
2020	**Little Opera Company** (Canada) (postponed due to COVID-19; rescheduled 2022)
2020	Opera San José
2021	Portland Opera
2021	Florida Grand Opera
2022	Virginia Opera

Figure 3.10 *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* - 6 Revivals	
2018	Indiana University Opera (co-commission)
2019	Seattle Opera (co-commission)
2020	San Francisco Opera (postponed due to COVID-19)
2022	Austin Opera
2022	Lyric Opera of Kansas City
2022	Atlanta Opera

Of these fifty-four revival companies, sixteen participated in a questionnaire designed to evaluate programming choices.[131] The bolded companies in the figures are those that responded: *Dream of the Pacific* (1), *Grapes of Wrath* (6), and *Three Decembers* (9).

Longevity can derive from a variety of factors. For the lucky few commissions composed with the right ingredients to attract audiences and gain exposure among industry leaders, what gives them sticking power?[132] No exact formula or recipe generates traction or exudes sticking power. Nonetheless, I conjecture four fundamental elements contribute to revival programming: dramatic content, economic considerations, aural characteristics, and social aspects. I proposed the elements enumerated in Figure 3.11 and collected the qualitative data responses to ascertain which factors led to the revival.

Figure 3.11 Four fundamentals for Programming Revivals	
Fundamental	**Elements** *including but not limited to*
DRAMATIC	cultural stories
	familiar stories
	American identity
ECONOMIC	orchestration size
	cast quantity
	venue size
	set
	lighting
	costumery
	staff required
AURAL	soundscape
	style
	accessibility
SOCIAL	marketability (relevance, relatability, recognition)
	length of opera

[131] Another company sent a program book in lieu of the questionnaire, and six companies were in correspondence but declined participation. The other companies did not respond to the request.

[132] I am indebted to my conversation with Fort Worth Opera Artistic Director Joe Illick for coining the phrase "sticking power."

While detailed responses are included in the revival subsections of each chapter, sweeping observations can be made overall. Dramatic content, particularly familiar and cultural stories, is the overwhelming contributing factor. Of the three operas in question, the only element all sixteen revivers have in common is the desire to present opera with familiar narratives. Closely aligned with familiarity, the social aspects of relevance and relatability are also a chief consideration. This substantiates my claim that familiar narratives have the potential power to cultivate cultural connections with audience members. Further exploration of these fundamentals in relation to particular operas can be found in Chapter 4 (*Dream of the Pacific*), as well as at the end of Chapter 5 (*Grapes of Wrath*) and Chapter 6 (*Three Decembers*).

CHAPTER 4 - OPERA THEATRE OF SAINT LOUIS AND *DREAM OF THE PACIFIC* (2004)

Pioneer Institution: Opera Theatre of Saint Louis

Commissioning is wound into the fabric of Opera Theatre of Saint Louis's origins. OTSL has valued new American opera since its first season, a rarity among opera companies in the mid-twentieth century. From its establishment in 1976, its programming has featured both canonic and contemporary works, with a focus on singing in English and connecting to the community. The founding members believed the Santa Fe Opera festival model would be successful in St. Louis and sought direct advice from SFO's artistic administrator Richard Gaddes. Gaddes helped select the theater he thought had potential, the 987-seat intimate Loretto-Hilton Center, and joined the team as OTSL's first general director. The founders were led by Leigh Gerdine, Webster College President and former Chair of the Washington University Department of Music. Gerdine recruited two businessmen who could establish the organization on sound financial footing: James A. Van Sant, President of General Steel Industries, and Laurance L. Browning of Emerson, Vice-President of Emerson Electric Company. Former General Director, Timothy O'Leary, characterizes the origins of OTSL as "visionary, civic-minded and idealistic."[133] Indeed, these attributes led to a sold out first season. The buzz about what was happening in the center of the country continued into the second season, with the *New Yorker* describing OTSL as "fresh, welcoming, artistically serious, and quite unpompous," and by

[133] Gloria S. Ross, "Obituary of Laurance L. Browning Jr.: Former Emerson executive and founder of Opera Theatre" *St. Louis Public Radio*, December 4, 2012, https://news.stlpublicradio.org/arts/2012-12-04/obituary-of-laurance-l-browning-jr-former-emerson-executive-and-founder-of-opera-theatre.

the third season music critic Alan Rich called OTSL "one of the true jewels of the operatic firmament."[134]

Since its conception in the late 1970s, the company has prided itself on its adventurous programming, demonstrated in its repertory archive. From the period of 1976 to 2000, the informal plan was to produce a new piece every third year, while also reviving existing American operas. Former Director of Artistic Administrator Paul Kilmer specifies after 2000, and especially when Artistic Director James Robinson joined the team in 2009, as the period of acceleration in terms of new opera commissions and revivals.[135] Furthermore, its new works archive shows a mixture of mainstage and children's productions. From 1988 to 2007, the company produced just as many children's operas as it did mainstage, seven each. Director of Education and Engagement Allison Felter recalls those wonderful years. Though a recognized company, OTSL is still regional and small in comparison to Level 1 theatres. Thus, changing administrations and company priorities instigated a shift to the mainstage new works since 2007. Felter explains,

> It takes every bit the same amount of resources from my colleagues in production and artistic to pull off a young people's opera world premiere as it would for mainstage premiere. […] It's just a little sexier to commission a world premiere for the mainstage. It makes a bigger splash. It has its place. We're hopefully continuing to shape the art form; and these are important things to do. But of course, I'm in the camp of both/and. I would like to see both.[136]

Indeed, the larger trend in commissioning in the last decade has swung toward mainstage over children's opera. Felter is hopeful OTSL will return to educational commissions in the near future, though.[137]

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[134] Quoted in the OTSL 2018 Program Book.
[135] Kilmer, Interview with author.
[136] Felter, Interview with author.
[137] At the time of this interview, she had it on her agenda to discuss with the general director that very afternoon.

Figure 4.1 shows the world premieres commissioned or revised by OTSL from 1979-2019. The new works it has produced since 2000 represent diverse dramatic content, various nationalities ranging from American to Chinese to Russian to Indian, and source material from literature and primary source historical documents.

Figure 4.1 Opera Theatre of St. Louis New Works Archive 1979-2019

Year	Title	Composer	Librettist	Type	Toured	Co-Production	Comissioned From Scratch	Pre-Existing Score	Revised Edition
1979	*The Village Singer*	Stephen Paulus	Michael Dennis Browne	mainstage			yes		
1982	*The Postman Always Rings Twice*	Stephen Paulus	Colin Graham	mainstage			yes		
1983	*Margot La Rouge*	Frederick Delius	Berthe Gaston-Danville	mainstage				yes	
1985	*The Woodlanders*	Stephen Paulus	Colin Graham	mainstage			yes		
1985	*Joruri*	Minoru Miki	Colin Graham	mainstage			yes		
1988	*Love, Death & High Notes*	Claude White	Linda Brovsky	children	yes		yes		
1989	*Laclede's Landing*	James Meyer	James Meyer	children	yes		yes		
1989	*Under the Double Moon*	Anthony Davis	Deborah Atherton	mainstage			yes		
1992	*The Very Last Green Thing*	Cary John Franklin	Michael Patrick Albano	children	yes		yes		
1993	*The Midnight Angel*	David Carlson	Peter S. Beagle	mainstage		yes	yes		
1995	*The Thunder of Horses*	Cary John Franklin	Michael Patrick Albano	children	yes		yes		
1995	*The Woman at Otowi Crossing*	Stephen Paulus	Joan Vail Thorne	mainstage			yes		
1999	*Joshua's Boots*	Adolphus Hailstork	Susan Kander	children	yes		yes		
1999	*The Merchant and the Pauper*	Paul Schoenfield	Margaret Stearns	mainstage			yes		
2000	*The Tale of Genji*	Minoru Miki	Colin Graham	mainstage			yes		
2002	*Loss of Eden*	Cary John Franklin	Michael Patrick Albano	mainstage			yes		
2004	*Dream of the Pacific*	Stephen Mager	Elkhanah Pulitzer	children	yes		yes		
2007	*The Enchantment of Dreams*	Cary John Franklin	Michael Patrick Albano	children	yes	yes	yes		
2007	*Anna Karenina*	David Carlson	Colin Graham	mainstage		yes			
2008	*Troilus and Cressida (New Performing Edition)*	William Walton	Christopher Hassall	mainstage					yes
2009	*The Ghosts of Versailles (New Performing Edition)*	John Corigliano	William M. Hoffman	mainstage					yes
2010	*The Golden Ticket*	Peter Ash	Donald Sturrock	mainstage		yes		yes	
2013	*Champion*	Terence Blanchard	Michael Cristofer	mainstage		yes	yes		
2014	*27*	Ricky Ian Gordon	Royce Vavrek	mainstage			yes		
2016	*Shalimar the Clown*	Jack Perla	Rajiv Joseph	mainstage			yes		
2017	*The Grapes of Wrath (New Performing Version)*	Ricky Ian Gordon	Michael Korie	mainstage					yes
2018	*An American Soldier*	Huang Ruo	David Henry Hwang	mainstage					
2019	*Fire Shut Up in My Bones*	Terence Blanchard	Kasi Lemmons	mainstage		yes	yes		

As of 2019, OTSL has commissioned twenty-eight world premieres, which according to their 2018 Program Book is "among the highest percentages of new work in the repertory of any US company."[138] The company's infrastructure has cultivated ideal fundamentals that enable successful, nearly sold out, new works productions: 1) a core audience base open to new works and 2) the festival system. Rather than having to sell the public on an individual new work, the festival season allows operagoers the ability to see new opera amidst other beloved canonic

[138] OTSL 2018 Program Book. HGO's percentage of new works is higher, though, as well as MO's new works output.

operas. For example, if a new opera was programmed as a "standalone in a stagione system in February, you'd have to really work," Kilmer said. "You'd have to be sure that piece could pay for itself in a way. But when it's in the middle of a festival season, you've got the whole festival helping you along with that. You're not starting from scratch every time."[139] Therefore, the five-week festival season model, held from May to June each year, is a useful marketing tool in terms of new works. The department is able to package the season and promote it to patrons in a way that allows them to customize their experience, which could include standard repertory along with new contemporary opera.

Two industry giants led OTSL over the last few decades: Charles MacKay (1985-2008) and Timothy O'Leary (2008-2018). MacKay went on to lead SFO from 2008-2018, while O'Leary is now the current General Director of Washington National Opera at the Kennedy Center. Andrew Jorgensen succeeded O'Leary in 2018. O'Leary joined OTSL near the same timeframe of Artistic Director James Robinson and worked alongside Music Director Stephen Lord. O'Leary said they "had in common a real excitement about this idea of adding to the future of the art form, in addition to creating great performances of past works. And we found that this was something that absolutely excited the audiences and supporters of the company."[140] Among his many achievements, including a renewed effort to focus on community-centered projects and building the audience, O'Leary nearly doubled the OTSL endowment from 16.5 million to nearly 35 million dollars, along with recording breaking fundraising triumphs. His fiscally-focused plan of action set up a firm financial foundation. As of 2021, Jorgensen has continued the work of the

[139] Kilmer, Interview with author.
[140] O'Leary, Interview with author.

previous administrations with three new commissions over the next four years currently in the works.

Moreover, under the tenure of these three general directors, OTSL has established many initiatives that extend the reach of opera into the community. Among its many programs geared towards civic education, emerging young artists, and operatic growth, *New Works, Bold Voices* (hereafter, *NWBV*) champions commissioned opera and living composers. [141] Launched in 2009, the series is designed to tell "stories that resonate with diverse, contemporary audiences"[142] and seeks out creative teams who wish to tell "socially relevant themes."[143] Rather than a generalized commitment to new works, Kilmer likens the *NWBV* initiative to a "formal manifesto." It was pitched to the NEA and the Mellon Foundation so support could be secured for long-term projects that provide opportunities to American opera composers to write about culturally-relevant narratives.[144] O'Leary first meeting as general director in 2008 was tied to the new opera that commenced the program, Blanchard's *Champion*. O'Leary's predecessor, MacKay, had initiated an artistic partnership with Gene Dobbs Bradford, the Executive Director of Jazz St. Louis, with the aim of commissioning a jazz opera. Robinson, Dobbs Bradford, and O'Leary went ahead with the project as the first commission for *NWBV*:

> We premiered *Champion* in 2013. And on opening night of *Champion*, we asked Terence to write a second opera. And that opera became *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*. And that's about to premiere at the Metropolitan Opera. It's incredible. It will be the first opera by a black composer in the entire history of the Metropolitan Opera, which is surprising that this first still exists to be marked. But if we could have hoped for our wildest dreams to come true in terms of making impact on the future of the art form through

[141] This series was founded with a one-million-dollar fund, Innovation Capital Fund, that acts as "long-term working capital, allowing Opera Theatre to continue producing innovative work while relieving the pressure created by these activities on cash flow." OTSL, Strategic Plan 2015-2020.

[142] OTSL 2018 Program, 35.

[143] Judith H. Dobrzynski, "Think Opera's Not For You" Opera Theatre of Saint Louis Says Think Again" (The Wallace Foundation, 2018), 3.

[144] Kilmer, Interview with author; OTSL, Strategic Plan 2015-2020.

> commissioning back at that meeting in 2008, that's exactly the kind of thing that we would hope to have happen.[145]

Fire Shut Up in My Bones was a massive success for the company at both the local and national levels. Locally, 42 percent of audience members at the sold-out premiere were attending an OTSL opera for the first time.[146] A marked increase in various demographics of attendees included 13 percent more BIPOC attendees, 25 percent more GenX attendees, and 50 percent more Millennials.

Since the conception of *NWBV*, six operas have premiered (each year excepting 2015). With each of these projects, the company is highly concerned with crafting the dramatic and aural elements during the commissioning process. Kilmer nostalgically recalls a saying his father, a professional painter, would tell him:

> 'Your final product is only as good as the prime coat.' If you don't prepare it right and get that prime down right, the rest of it might look great for a couple of weeks until it starts peeling. And it's the same thing with us [OTSL]: we try to make sure that the foundational aspects of drama and music are in place and are refined to their utmost. And then the piece has a chance.[147]

In order to do this, OTSL offers workshops and encourages collaboration in the creation process. I asked Kilmer if he believes social media and its effect on communication have impacted how artists create twenty-first century operas. His initial reaction was no; however, after rumination, he discovered the pattern of dramatic content linked to social relevance found in OTSL's recent works from the *NWBV* initiative:

> We are more bombarded by information. The sort of relevance of opera — it has had to adapt itself to this sort of 24/7 news cycle to be relevant. And I can't tell you how amazed I am from time to time how lucky we have been when pieces that we have done emerge — *Champion* was happening just as we were going through this process of LGBTQ growth

[145] O'Leary, Interview with author.
[146] OTSL, 2019 Annual Report, 12.
[147] Kilmer, Interview with author.

> in relevance and same-sex marriage developing. *Shalimar the Clown*: the Middle East and India and Pakistan and Afghanistan. And in *Awakenings,* now coming in the middle of a pandemic. It just seems like these pieces… it can't be just good luck. There has to be something about the Zeitgeist that is drawing us to topics that are developing.[148]

The spirit of this era, or the Zeitgeist philosophy Kilmer aptly alludes to, is informing the topics librettists, composers, and administrators select to set in the operatic form. With audience in mind, drama with cultural resonance win out.

Kilmer joined OTSL in 1984 and shares his insights from firsthand experiences in the industry over the last forty years. His position involved communicating with, contracting, and engaging all personnel, taking part in the artistic planning and allocation of resources, and budgeting all artistic activities. In regards to the intrinsic mission of producing new work, he said that all aspects of programming are budget related. Kilmer recalls MacKay regularly reciting the phrase, "every artistic decision is a budget decision." The market crashes in the early 2000s, connected to the internet bubble and the Great Recession a few years later, posed a difficult economic landscape for OTSL to navigate when programming its season. Yet the company remained committed to new works, albeit on an informal cycle: one year featuring a new commission, the next season a rare or seldom-performed piece, followed by a third year featuring a revival that may need revising, and finally a return to a from-scratch commission. MacKay referred to the non-commissioning years as budget relief, Kilmer says:

> The cycle would morph. But those were the elements of it. And it seems like when we got to 2008 and the Great Recession a lot of companies were deciding to cut back the number of pieces they might do or go with repertory that was reliable, and perhaps not so expensive. A piece like *La Bohème* […]. But we made the conscious decision, particularly because our patrons — our board and direct patrons —have tremendous faith in his company. One of our board patrons last year [2020] left us 45 million dollars.[149] This was

[148] Ibid.

[149] Indeed, in February 2020, OTSL received the largest single contribution in its history with a 45 million dollar donation from philanthropist and lifetime board member Phyllis Brissenden. Prior to this, the company's

> the kind of support we had. And we made the conscious decision to lead with strength. And so rather than reducing our numbers of operas — we, of course, tried to do as much budgetary downsizing as we could — but at the same time, we committed to going forward with the kind of repertory that we had made our reputation with. So that we continued to provide and to maintain that reputation and come out of the recession without losing step. [150]

This demonstrates how critical economic investment and company dedication is for continued commissioning success.

The OTSL timeline for producing new work is on average a three-year process. Since Kilmer crafted the contracts for all of the new works at OTSL, he explains the general process. Though no timeline is set in stone with the initial agreement, the payment of the creative artists help shape a schedule: a portion at signing, fractions during the development process, and the final amount at the premiere. Commonly, the signing fee encourages the process to get going. The contract includes parameters and limitations set by the company that the artists must observe as they create. For instance, OTSL often asks for no chorus since the rest of the festival running in the same timeframe tends to require chorus members. Beyond that, the maximum quantity of musical forces is also determined, including leading and supporting principals as well as orchestra size. Depending on the budget, the commissioning contract may also stipulate no non-Western instruments. Though the inclusion of exotic instruments may be attractive to a composer's vision, Kilmer warns of the barriers this can create for future productions. He tells composers, "'I know you want to go for the sound you want to go to. But if it's very esoteric, or very exotic, people aren't going to perform your opera because they won't be able to afford to do

largest single contribution was estimated to 2 million dollars. Brissenden had given to the company since 1976, and her final donation increased the opera's endowment to 80 million dollars. Jeremy D. Goodwin, "Late Board Member's $45 Million Donation Will Boost Opera Theatre of St. Louis," *St. Louis Public Radio*, February 6, 2020. https://news.stlpublicradio.org/show/st-louis-on-the-air/2020-02-06/late-board-members-45-million-donation-will-boost-opera-theatre-of-st-louis.

[150] Kilmer, Interview with author.

that stuff. So if you can do like Puccini did and give it an exotic flair, using standard Western orchestra, you're much better off.'" [151] However, innovation and high-quality art are still the primary concerns and OTSL does not wish to cripple the composer. It is a creative endeavour, so despite being contractual art with specified conditions, each contract includes a qualifying statement along the lines of: "this is subject to adjustment by mutual agreement."[152]

In addition to an emphasis on programming new works, OTSL has taken steps to connect to the community with its projects and diligently work to build its audience. When asked about his emphasis on the latter, O'Leary answered with the reply "why do we do live performance?" Because opera is an acoustic art form. To perform it live requires an enormous amount of resources and specialized skillful singers, musicians, and directors. O'Leary continues,

> I have always been irrationally moved by, and committed to, the experience of this live acoustic. To me, what opera singers are able to create — using their voices — its wonder and awe and emotional impact that you could only compare them to Olympic athletes. This is the greatest achievements that the human body is capable of. And you combine that with the storytelling and meaning-making that the combination of words and music can do — because, you know, Paul Simon combines words and music into works of incredible beauty and meaning; you don't need to commission an opera to do that — but there's something very special about the collective experience of an audience gathered for this ephemeral, live acoustic, athletic, miraculous, meaningful experience. So all of that said, it takes a lot of resources to cause it to be, always. It's never been commercially viable.[153]

The opera's multimodal elements make it unique in comparison to the other performing arts; for the vibratory features of collective musicking to transpire, people must be present in person.

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[151] Ibid. At HGO and Lyric Opera of Chicago, Anthony Freud warned against this scenario as well. He stresses the importance of finding the "right balance between creating a brief that is clear enough to actually represent what your company needs but not restrictive to an extent that it handcuffs the creators and dilutes their own individual aesthetic — musical and theatrical voices." Freud, Interview with author.

[152] Kilmer, Interview with author.

[153] O'Leary, Interview with author. O'Leary continues these sentiments by describing a non-profit organization's position in the entertainment industry. The creation and scale of new work must be within the scope of a theatre's limited budget. The way the profit is generated in nonprofit performing arts institutions is not equivalent to commercially viable entertainments like film, television, rock concerts, or even Broadway.

Thus, it is the company's responsibility to cut through the media noise in order to spark potential spectators' interest and for them to willingly invest their time in this art form.

The audience-focused programs, then, must be wisely developed and targeted. *Young Friends* is one that underwent change during O'Leary's tenure. Originally titled OPERAtors, this program was developed in 1996 by volunteer Susan Sherman. It offered a cheaper subscription to young professionals but had little focus on fostering community and lacked structure. Erin Farrell, former Development Officer and Events Coordinator, was hired by OTSL in 2004 to develop the program in order to attract a younger demographic. When interviewed in 2007 to speak about the re-instatement of the OPERAtors program, Farrell emphasized specialized events, like wine and martini nights featuring opera, which promote audience engagement and generate excitement in an informal environment. [154] While the renewal rate for subscriptions took a hit in the 2008 economic crisis, falling by 11 percent from 2008 to 2009 (88 percent to 79 percent), the company implemented a strategic plan to increase their subscription base and diversify their audiences. OPERAtors was one of the re-envisioned programs, becoming *Young Friends.* In 2018, *Young Friends* reached 700 attendees under the age of forty-five. The incentives for this program include a pre-performance buffet on the lawn, opera ticket, and open bar, all for 49 dollars.

Beyond *Young Friends*, OTSL was one of four opera companies involved in a 2015-2018 audience-building research grant by the Wallace Foundation. The Building Audiences for Sustainability initiative provided 64 million dollars to twenty-six performing arts organizations in order to develop audience-building practices that could be applied across the arts industry.

[154] Emilie M. Hensley, "How Nonprofit Art Organizations in St. Louis Are Utilizing Their Young Friends programs," (Thesis; Leigh Gerdine College of Fine Arts of Webster University, 2007): 34-35; 40; 48.

Through funding provided by the Wallace grant, OTSL was able to conduct market research that revealed the complex issues regarding audience retention and development. They designed a new event, Opera Tastings, in 2015 that was meant to alleviate misconceptions and perceptual barriers associated with attending opera. A millennial who attended Opera Tastings said she had a "preconceived notion of opera; that it was something that I couldn't afford or that it wasn't necessarily something that I'd be interested in."[155] The event changed her mind, and she even joined the *Young Friends* steering committee. Opera Tastings succeeded in growing OTSL's audience, with an average of 42 percent of those attending these events buying tickets to mainstage productions.[156] Furthermore, in the 2017 season, 34 percent of the OTSL festival season tickets came from first-time attendees: "This record-breaking number of new attendees is a promising metric in OTSL's ongoing quest to make opera accessible, engaging, and relevant to modern audiences."[157] Indeed, Felter's mantra in the education department is "access, access, access."[158]

Felter's concentration on arts accessibility goes beyond bringing people to the opera house. Her community connections are extensive, and her educational programs are especially noteworthy. In the 1990s, the organization developed an interdisciplinary education curriculum, *Music! Words! Opera!*, that intersects history, literature, and humanities. With a focus on problem solving and literacy skills, this program was used in elementary schools nationwide during the twenty-first century. In 2017, 4,000 students from more than thirty schools took part in creating, producing, and performing new student operas, which exemplifies OTSL's typical

[155] Dobrzynski, "Think Opera's Not For You," 5.
[156] Ibid., 7.
[157] OTSL 2018 Program Book.
[158] Felter, Interview with author.

reach.[159] Of its twelve education programs combined, the company on average reaches 10,000 children and adults a year.[160] Felter, who has run the department for twenty-seven years, is intrinsic to the success of these programs. From early childhood to senior citizens, she works with all ages of the St. Louis community. She recalls OTSL's revival production of *The Death of Klinghoffer*[161] in 2011 as a turning point for her department. Though this is a controversial opera with difficult subject matter based on the *Achille Lauro* hijacking in 1985, the theatre believed in its power to address social issues and prompt cultural conversations:

> This was a great opportunity to just name the elephants in the room. Talk about the friction among Jews, Christians, and Muslims and to talk about it as people groups in our community. And so it ended up being a community engagement opportunity that had a whole lot more meaning and pulled people together. Opera is a great convener of people. And it presents a great opportunity to convene people from different walks of life from different socio-economic places. It just has that potential and inherent power to do that if treated and understood by the presenting company — if you understand that potential. With the *Death of Klinghoffer* experience that went extremely well in our community, we saw the potential for engaging and using other operas that were maybe sensitive or just had a particular point of view. It became, I guess the word is, more intentional. It had more depth. It wasn't just about exchanging advertising and program books, it became more about collaborating in panel discussions and doing projects with youth who might have a certain affiliation. It was sort of a through-composed effort at different levels and departments within the organization and within the community. We were just being smarter about how to make an impact in our community. Not letting an opportunity be wasted.[162]

Felter has used this experience to inform her intentionality when programming community events and partnerships in relation to the other *NWBV* commissions at OTSL in the last ten years.

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[159] OTSL 2017 Program Book.

[160] OTSL Strategic Plan, 2015-2020.

[161] Premiering in 1991, the revival history of *The Death of Klinghoffer* is fraught with difficulty, with multiple stagings canceled after protests and claims of anti-Semitism. These accusations were refuted in the following decades by the creative team, other industry administrators, and musicologist Robert Fink. The OTSL production marked the first fully-staged production since its premiere and was conducted by Michael Christie and directed by James Robinson.

[162] Felter, Interview with author.

In regards to community, the industry terminology has also evolved. Education, outreach, and engagement are the labels used in the last few decades. The first two designations — especially outreach with its inherent power over others — have been deemed antiquated due to the built-in concept of inevitably reaching down; whereas, engagement is the word that became readily used in the second decade of the twenty-first century and is still in use. However, Felter believes this, again, needs a refresh. In a recent Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion[163] session with her staff, the idea of "community learning" was proposed. Connecting with the community is a two-way street:

> It shouldn't be us pushing out just splatting things out there. It should be a two-way, reciprocal exchange. Community learning or, the word we've heard a lot already, partnership — community partnership. But I like the idea of community learning, because that suggests we, the company, are learning, as we also impart information to a partner. So, it's more of a circular thing happening rather than a one-way transaction. In fact, even transaction is kind of a word that hopefully does not apply anymore. It's more organic than that. There's more authenticity. It's not just about selling tickets to a show. It's more about bringing people together, learning about one another, learning about different cultures. So really building community.[164]

It will be intriguing to witness whether the proposed term "community learning" takes hold among other OPERA America companies who tend to control the industry narrative.

Through intentional and collaborative efforts, Felter's department works alongside Marketing and Public Relations with an overall strategic framework, established in 2015. They clearly focus their many community events around five imperatives: perform, educate, train, co-create, interact.[165] Felter says she wishes to connect genuinely and authentically with many parts

[163] OTSL established the Engagement and Inclusion Task Force in 2012, under advisement from the former Director of Marketing and Public Relations, Joe Gfaller. The committee of this task force addresses diversity, equity, and inclusion in terms of performers and audience.

[164] Felter, Interview with author.

[165] OTSL, Strategic Plan 2015-2020.

of their city, and OTSL's community-centric activities are paying off, as their impact reports demonstrate. Impact numbers collected from the 2019 season show the OTSL audience came from forty-six states and seventeen countries. The company believes its contemporary repertory is a key factor in attracting this far-reaching audience, in addition to its many community programs.

Dreaming up Dream of the Pacific *and its Creative Team*

Though the chosen case study does not directly reflect the initiatives OTSL has instituted in the last decade, it was selected with the parameters of this study in mind. Going to the beginning of the millennium, it serves as this document's earliest case study of commissioning practices in the twenty-first century. With OTSL's numerous educational programs, this piece represents youth-centered and family-focused opera as well as an emphasis on American narratives and civic involvement. Community impact has emerged as a major trend in non-profit theatres over the last two decades. Not only do new works with familiar narratives contribute to this effort, but community-focused commissions involve people of all ages from the surrounding region.

The two artists who led the creative team for *Dream of the Pacific* were composer Stephen Mager and librettist Elkhanah Pulitzer. Mager is a St. Louis-based choral conductor and composer with a Doctorate of Music from the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University. His output ranges from choral and symphonic works to instrumental chamber works to numerous sacred settings. Mager's relationship with OTSL began in the late 1990s, where he found his niche conducting children's opera. As Music Director for young people's operas, he conducted Hans Krasà's *Brundibàr* in 1997, the world premiere of Adolphus Hailstork's *Joshua's Boots* in 1999,

Lukas Foss' *The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* in 2000, and Cary John Franklin's *Thunder of Horses* in 2001. Through these experiences, Mager became familiar with OTSL's process for commissioning new works, specifically children's operas and young people's works meant for general audiences. Additionally, he composed supplementary incidental music to accompany the reading of primary source poetry for the 1997 OTSL production of *Brundibàr*. These works demonstrate OTSL's concern to share the diverse and historical in its new operas: *Joshua's Boots* centers on Black cowboys in the Wild West circa 1878; *Jumping Frogs* showcases a tall-tale by Mark Twain; and *Thunder of Horses* recounts a mystical legend of a Native American warrior and his adopted son. In addition to composing *Dream of the Pacific,* Mager was also the music director and conductor for its premiere performances.

During these educational projects, Mager met Pulitzer. They collaborated on *Brundibàr* and *Jumping Frogs of Cavaleras County*, while *Dream of the Pacific* was their first original creation together. Pulitzer is a stage director and librettist with a biography boasting a sprawling list of opera companies and theatres for which she has directed a number of canonic and contemporary opera. She recently served as the Artistic Curator of San Francisco Opera's Opera Lab, a two-year program focused on experimental chamber opera.[166] When the *Dream* commission commenced, though, Pulitzer was assisting OTSL mainstage productions, directing educational projects, and learning on the job from the artistic director. Her libretto for *Dream of the Pacific* won the opera an OPERA America Success Award too. Other creative team

[166] This program was designed by San Francisco Opera as a means to prototype ideas in its new smaller venue. Pulitzer was drawn to the project because of her passion for experimenting with various scale in opera. Chamber operas are akin to an intimate relationship with "a flexible, non-traditional, non-proscenium kind of relationship to the work itself and to the performers. I'm personally aesthetically interested in all of it. I'm interested in big proscenium; I'm also interested in non-traditional museum performance." Elkhanah Pulitzer, Interview with author, August 13, 2021.

collaborators included Benjamin Spierman (assistant stage director), Chad Owens (set designer), Robin VerHage-Abrams (costume designer), Jeff Brangan (lighting designer),[167] Tom Watson (wig and makeup designer), Alice Nelson (associate music director), Theresa Schlafly (stage manager), and Carrie Furay (assistant stage manager).

The hazy idea for *Dream of the Pacific* began with the goal of celebrating the bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark Expedition (1803 to 1806). St. Louis holds a prominent role in this historic exploration as the team commenced its voyage from the nearby town of St. Charles. OTSL saw the commemoration as an ideal opportunity to connect with the community, especially since schools would be studying the material in depth and other cultural institutions were celebrating the event. Mager and Pulitzer were hired for the job with the prompt by MacKay[168] to create a family opera like Benjamin Britten's *Noye's Fludde*. Britten conceived this work to uniquely mix both amateur children in chorus and orchestral roles as well as feature professional singers in the principal roles. For the premiere of *Noye's Fludde* in 1958, Britten had requested Colin Graham to direct. With Graham as Artistic Director of OTSL during the commissioning of the Lewis and Clark opera, he knew the work intimately and offered direct insight in regards to the original Britten inspiration. Graham extended guiding expertise throughout the process: "And that's amazing looking back," Felter reminisces, "to have the benefit of someone as gifted and remarkable as Colin, and Colin was very devoted to young people. And he put as much of himself into this kind of a project as he would in anything he was

[167] An example of collaboration, Brangan asked Mager to hear excerpts of the opera before designing the lights to achieve a sense of atmosphere.

[168] Pulitzer credits MacKay as "a visionary in terms of American opera. There's a small group of people with him really at the top of the list for several decades who were really advocating for and cultivating and developing new works, young voices, and emerging talent — cultivating the talents of American artists." Pulitzer, Interview with author. MacKay and his influence in the field is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.

doing on the mainstage."[169] With Graham as her mentor, Pulitzer set to work on bringing MacKay and Graham's vision to life. As a part of the original inspiration discussions, Mager references MacKay's desire for *Dream* to be full of pageantry; hence, a piece of theatre boasting colorful and gestural music, rich in prosody, and stylized action.[170] Thus, though this opera was a first for both composer and librettist, two seasoned industry leaders influenced its development.

From the onset of the project, the quantities of musical forces were laid out, requesting a medium-sized chorus designed to feature youth singers, a handful of principal adult performers, and a chamber orchestra. The initial brief specified a subject matter celebrating the bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark journey presented in no more than seventy minutes. The creative team was faced with the difficult task of condensing a grueling three-year quest into about an hour. To do this, the characters were selected carefully. Lewis, Clark, and Sacagawea were critical, while the fourth principal role was dually played (Sergeant Floyd and Shoshone Chief Cameâhwait), making only four principals from a financial standpoint. The secondary role was created for the enslaved person, York. This role could be played by either an artist-in-training or a professional singer.[171]

Approached by OTSL in the spring of 1999 about creating a new family opera, the original creative team was slated to include Mager as composer, Maggie Stearns as librettist, and Pulitzer as director. In April 1999, the three met for lunch with the staff of the Missouri Historical Society to begin brainstorming about how such a broad, multi-year historical

[169] Felter, Interview with author.

[170] Mager Personal Archives; Stephen Mager, Interview with author, August 4, 2021.

[171] In Washington, there was a misunderstanding about the race of York. A young performer, Barrett Armbruster, had been given the part as an award after graduating from Washington's Opera Institute. The creative team knew it would not be appropriate for a Caucasian male to sing the part, so they created another secondary character, George Shannon, for Armbruster to sing. This was the only revival that included this additional character.

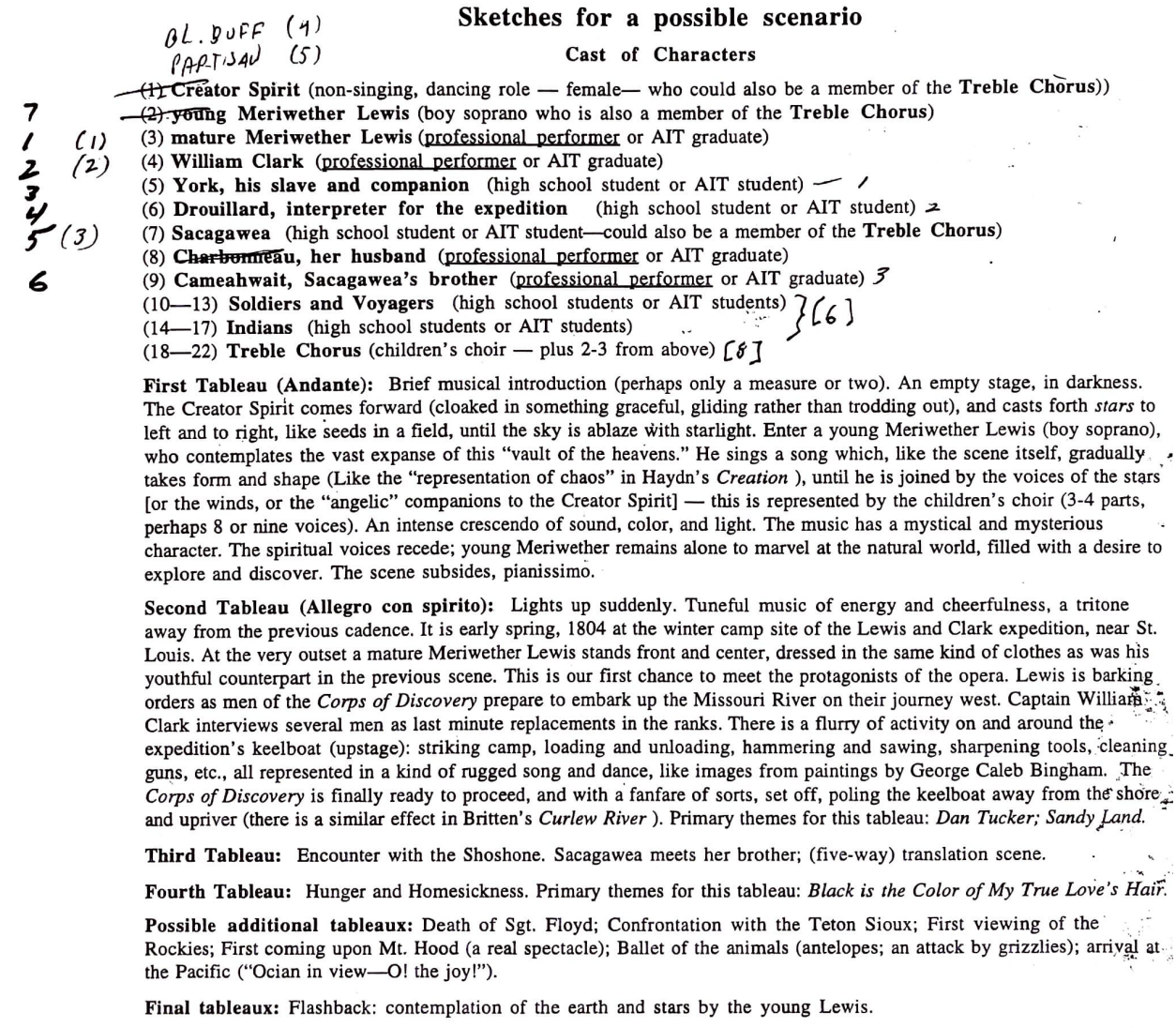
expedition would manifest in a succinct musical telling. The ideas continued through correspondence from May to August, including a variety of topics: how to sensitively tell the story of a Shoshone person, how to remain factually accurate and avoid unnecessary dramatic embellishment, and how to prevent too much focus one character. From this period of artistic discussion, the following document in Figure 4.2 shows a preliminary scenario from the composer to Stearns.[172] At this stage, only five, possibly six, tableaux were imagined along with other possible characters. The conversation continued in those early stages with a true concern for how to uniquely present this historical moment. In September 1999, Mager wrote the following to Stearns:

> We are traversing some well-traveled ground here, striving to explore and represent this auspicious moment in American history. I must confess that I am wary of getting entangled in all the well-worn clichés of the typical 'tale of the Old West': the hairy, dirty frontiersman; the clear, resourceful, solitary soldier of fortune; the noble savage; the ignoble savage; the homespun widow who can ride, rope, tie, and brand, as well as cook a mean stack of flapjacks; the obligatory violin reel; sets, costumes, and everything else cast in a preponderance dull earth tones—In short, a vast, predictable All-American panorama. […] Alternatively, it is plausible to take the perspective of the Indians; naturally, they need to be important players in the entire story, particularly Sacagawea and the Shoshone. However, I have to be honest right from the start: I have an artistic bias which is firmly rooted in Western (i.e. European) music. I'm just as American as Aaron Copland, but after all, even Copland went to Paris to study. So, if we were to attempt to tell the story from a Native American perspective, I'm afraid the musical result would be counterfeit.[173]

[172] Mager keeps meticulous records and shared his personal archives for this study. Selected documents are included as figures through the chapter to illustrate the commissioning process. These documents are labeled: Mager Personal Archives. Where possible, dates and titles are included.

[173] Mager Personal Archives. Letter sent to Maggie Stearns, September 1999.

Figure 4.2 Sketches for Possible Scenarios – Early Stages April 26, 1999



Sketches for a possible scenario

BL. BUFF (4)
PARTISAN (5)

Cast of Characters

~~(1) Creator Spirit~~ (non-singing, dancing role — female— who could also be a member of the **Treble Chorus**))
7 ~~(2) young~~ **Meriwether Lewis** (boy soprano who is also a member of the **Treble Chorus**)
1 (1) (3) **mature Meriwether Lewis** (professional performer or AIT graduate)
2 (2) (4) **William Clark** (professional performer or AIT graduate)
3 (5) **York, his slave and companion** (high school student or AIT student) — 1
4 (6) **Drouillard, interpreter for the expedition** (high school student or AIT student) 2
5 (3) (7) **Sacagawea** (high school student or AIT student—could also be a member of the **Treble Chorus**)
(8) **~~Charbonneau~~, her husband** (professional performer or AIT graduate)
6 (9) **Cameahwait, Sacagawea's brother** (professional performer or AIT graduate) 3
(10—13) **Soldiers and Voyagers** (high school students or AIT students) } [6]
(14—17) **Indians** (high school students or AIT students)
(18—22) **Treble Chorus** (children's choir — plus 2-3 from above) [8]

First Tableau (Andante): Brief musical introduction (perhaps only a measure or two). An empty stage, in darkness. The Creator Spirit comes forward (cloaked in something graceful, gliding rather than trodding out), and casts forth *stars* to left and to right, like seeds in a field, until the sky is ablaze with starlight. Enter a young Meriwether Lewis (boy soprano), who contemplates the vast expanse of this "vault of the heavens." He sings a song which, like the scene itself, gradually takes form and shape (Like the "representation of chaos" in Haydn's *Creation*), until he is joined by the voices of the stars [or the winds, or the "angelic" companions to the Creator Spirit] — this is represented by the children's choir (3-4 parts, perhaps 8 or nine voices). An intense crescendo of sound, color, and light. The music has a mystical and mysterious character. The spiritual voices recede; young Meriwether remains alone to marvel at the natural world, filled with a desire to explore and discover. The scene subsides, pianissimo.

Second Tableau (Allegro con spirito): Lights up suddenly. Tuneful music of energy and cheerfulness, a tritone away from the previous cadence. It is early spring, 1804 at the winter camp site of the Lewis and Clark expedition, near St. Louis. At the very outset a mature Meriwether Lewis stands front and center, dressed in the same kind of clothes as was his youthful counterpart in the previous scene. This is our first chance to meet the protagonists of the opera. Lewis is barking orders as men of the *Corps of Discovery* prepare to embark up the Missouri River on their journey west. Captain William Clark interviews several men as last minute replacements in the ranks. There is a flurry of activity on and around the expedition's keelboat (upstage): striking camp, loading and unloading, hammering and sawing, sharpening tools, cleaning guns, etc., all represented in a kind of rugged song and dance, like images from paintings by George Caleb Bingham. The *Corps of Discovery* is finally ready to proceed, and with a fanfare of sorts, set off, poling the keelboat away from the shore and upriver (there is a similar effect in Britten's *Curlew River*). Primary themes for this tableau: *Dan Tucker; Sandy Land.*

Third Tableau: Encounter with the Shoshone. Sacagawea meets her brother; (five-way) translation scene.

Fourth Tableau: Hunger and Homesickness. Primary themes for this tableau: *Black is the Color of My True Love's Hair.*

Possible additional tableaux: Death of Sgt. Floyd; Confrontation with the Teton Sioux; First viewing of the Rockies; First coming upon Mt. Hood (a real spectacle); Ballet of the animals (antelopes; an attack by grizzlies); arrival at the Pacific ("Ocian in view—O! the joy!").

Final tableaux: Flashback: contemplation of the earth and stars by the young Lewis.

The composer's honesty and forthright reasoning for not writing this opera solely from the Native American perspective shows a desire to be sensitive in the musical setting. He continues, in this letter by recounting his responses to the Lewis and Clark tale. Mager was inspired not by the action-oriented events but rather the travelers experiences and responses to nature. This spurred his idea of a mystical opening capturing the essence of nighttime starlight. He did not see

this as romanticizing or religious, as had been a concern in their discussions. Instead, it was a mode for illuminating the ecological elements so intrinsic to the exploration: stars as the navigation tool used to guide the journey.

Further solidifying the project, Mager received a formal Letter of Intent February 17, 2000. This document illustrates the language and contractual obligations that commence a commissioning project of this magnitude. The first page, Figure 4.3, outlines the initial projected timeline in four phases. In the first stage, February – December 2000, the creative team would have just shy of a year to develop the artistic vision as well as finish a first draft of the libretto. Another year is given for the writing of the piano/voice score. Six months were planned for the initial orchestration, while the composer would have ten months to finalize the orchestration after review. A revised timeline document, Figure 4.4, indicates these deadlines did not materialize precisely as projected. The libretto was not finalized until February 1, 2002, pushing the rest of the deadlines by about a year. Mager believes the company built in an earlier due date on purpose to account for the fact that OTSL rarely receives a composer's score by the given deadline.[174] All came together by the 2004 premieres, though.

[174] This is not uncommon in commissioning. Heggie and Summers both reference the regularity of missed deadlines by creative teams.

Figure 4.3 OTSL Letter of Intent with Stephen Mager

OPERA THEATRE OF SAINT LOUIS

[Letter of Intent, page 1.]

17 February 2000

Mr. Stephen Mager
767 Montmarte Drive
St. Louis, MO 63141

Dear Stephen:

This letter will confirm the intention of Opera Theatre of Saint Louis (hereinafter referred to as the "ORGANIZATION") to offer STEPHEN MAGER (hereinafter referred to as the "COMPOSER") a commission to write a one-act opera of fifty-five to sixty minutes in length suitable for performance by children on the subject of the *Lewis and Clark Expedition* (hereinafter referred to as the "WORK"). The formal commission will be issued by separate letter at such time as the project concept is fully developed by the COMPOSER and the librettist and a first draft of the libretto is completed (Stage 1, as below). The formal commissioning agreement will incorporate and supersede the terms indicated below.

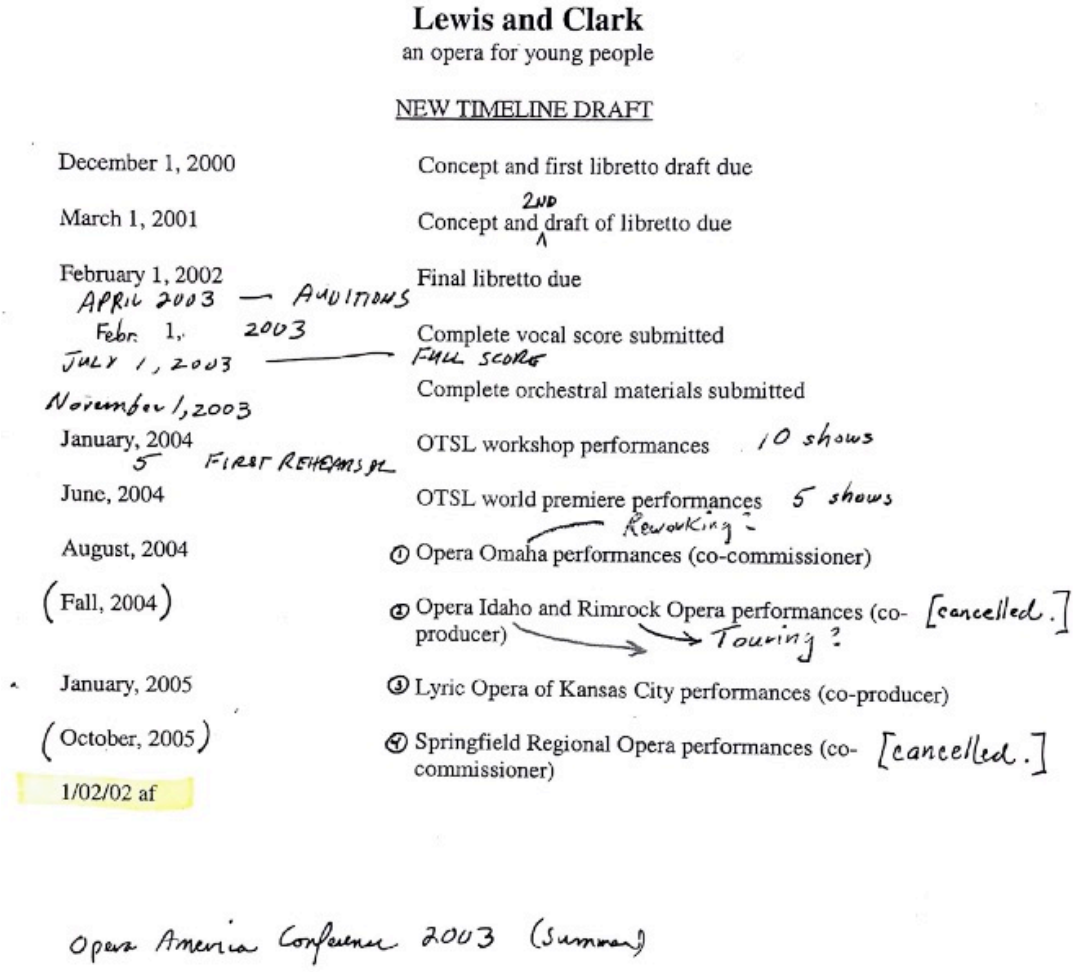
In affirming this letter of intention, the COMPOSER agrees to develop the WORK and provide project materials and/or copy masters as indicated according to the following schedule:

ORIGINAL TIMELINE

1 December 2000	**Stage 1:** Project concept fully elaborated and first draft of the libretto submitted to the ORGANIZATION for review and approval to proceed;
1 December 2001	**Stage 2**: Complete Vocal Score of the WORK submitted to the ORGANIZATION for review and approval to proceed;
1 June 2002	**Stage 3:** Full Score submitted to the ORGANIZATION for review and approval to proceed:
1 April 2003	**Stage 4**: Complete orchestral materials submitted to the ORGANIZATION for reproduction/preparation/and rehearsal by the ORGANIZATION'S orchestra.

COMPOSER and ORGANIZATION agree that the ORGANIZATION must authorize or terminate its further collaboration in the evolution of the work in writing prior to each subsequent stage. In the event that further stages are not authorized and the ORGANIZATION terminates its involvement in developing the WORK, it is agreed that all further obligations of the COMPOSER and ORGANIZATION under this letter of agreement shall be likewise terminated. In the case of such termination of involvement, the ORGANIZATION will be responsible to the COMPOSER for only those fees set forth below for completed stages in the project. It is understood that the COMPOSER and LIBRETTIST will then be free to offer the WORK to other potential

Figure 4.4 Revised Timeline (*Dream of the Pacific*)



Lewis and Clark
an opera for young people

NEW TIMELINE DRAFT

December 1, 2000	Concept and first libretto draft due
March 1, 2001	Concept and 2ND draft of libretto due
February 1, 2002	Final libretto due
APRIL 2003 — AUDITIONS	
Febr 1, 2003	Complete vocal score submitted
JULY 1, 2003 — FULL SCORE	
November 1, 2003	Complete orchestral materials submitted
January, 2004	OTSL workshop performances 10 shows
5 FIRST REHEARSAL	
June, 2004	OTSL world premiere performances 5 shows
	Reworking
August, 2004	① Opera Omaha performances (co-commissioner)
(Fall, 2004)	② Opera Idaho and Rimrock Opera performances (co-producer) [cancelled.]
	Touring?
January, 2005	③ Lyric Opera of Kansas City performances (co-producer)
(October, 2005)	④ Springfield Regional Opera performances (co-commissioner) [cancelled.]
1/02/02 af	

Opera America Conference 2003 (Summer)

As a community-centered project, securing funding was essential. As department leader, Felter's role in commissioning educational operas involved pitching the project and maintaining artistic partnerships. *Dream of the Pacific* is the largest commission her department executed in her twenty-seven years at the company, amounting to a half-a-million dollar budget. Due to its scope, it had to receive special approval from the board, considering its financial demands. To put this in perspective, the Education Department usually received 5 percent of the entire company budget, while *Dream* called for 30 percent of the budget for the 2003-2004 season. The ratio of funds dedicated to the commission was significant, but Felter emphasizes: "it was the

right topic. Everybody wanted to fund Lewis and Clark" due to the timely nature of the expedition's anniversary.[175] Many grants were secured for this commission,[176] along with other opera company partnerships. Additionally, the project stretched into the community through a consortium of cultural partners in the area celebrating the bicentennial and programming individual events: the St. Louis Zoo, the St. Louis Science Center, the Missouri History Museum, and the Botanical Garden. Felter recalls the collaborations as "an exchange of information. There weren't very many opportunities to genuinely work together, because we were each developing that theme in such a robust way. But there was some cross-pollinating going on and that's always a healthy thing."[177] The project was cutting-edge for the time, developing a website dedicated to the opera; "it was kind of at the dawn of that whole wave of how we function," she said.

They also provided opportunities to experience opera rehearsals and costume shop experiences, where the students were able to see the costumes being constructed. A specialized writer was hired to design an integrated arts curriculum to go along with the opera that could be used in the schools, too. This meant the *Music, Words, Opera!* curriculum, built on revised standards like *Magic Flute* and *Hänsel and Gretel,* was replaced with *Dream of the Pacific*. August 4-8, 2003, a week-long workshop was offered to school teachers, called the "Lewis and Clark Teacher Institute," which centered around *Dream of the Pacific* and its multi-disciplinary educational materials developed for it. "We had the highest number of teachers ever take that workshop," Felter observes. "They knew they were going to be asked to do lots of curriculum

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[175] Felter, Interview with author.

[176] Funding was provided by national sponsor Dana Brown Charitable Trust, national corporate sponsor MetLife Foundation, local sponsor Greater Saint Louis Community Foundation, the NEA, the Educational Foundation of America, and the Fred M. Saigh Endowment (specifically supporting new works for young people). OTSL *Dream of the Pacific* Program Book (2004), 2.

[177] Felter, Interview with author.

coinciding with the bicentennial. There were just lots and lots of opportunities to engage locally and nationally."[178] All of these opportunities provided interactions valuing process over product, which is unique in terms of operatic experience. As a polished art form, the focus is often centered on the final creation in all its glory, so to speak. However, Felter capitalized on the process of creation, which I attest is significant in the area of new works and provides a multitude of engaging experiences for community members. Felter's educational programming emphasizes learning as multi-dimensional and seeks to present "endless opportunities to provide integrated lessons" in math, science, and reading.[179] Interdisciplinary aspects are intrinsic to opera, and this opera, along with her other programs, tap into the possibilities for play and process that can be provided to all ages.

Performance History: On and Off the Trail

The first public performances took place February 5 - 7 and 9 - 13, 2004 at the Saint Louis Art Museum. Mager describes these as workshop performances, as was also depicted in the timeline in Figure 4.4. The first two performances were essentially trial runs for children audiences, while it was billed as a "special event for the whole family" and opened to the general public from February 7 and on. At the February 7 performance, special appearances were given by tribal members of the Eastern Shoshone from Wyoming, who were descendants of Sacagawea. This included an authentic dancer in tribal dress that performed during intermission. Felter stresses the importance of the presentation as a part of the operatic event because it honored the

[178] Felter, Interview with author.
[179] Ibid.

culture being represented. After these initial performances, the mainstage world premiere of the piece took place on June 21 and 22 at the official OTSL season in the Loretto-Hilton Theatre.

The production was originally set to travel, from 2004 to 2006, to many cities along the Expedition's trail and then culminate in a final performance in the nation's capital. This included co-producers in Nebraska, Idaho, Montana, Kansas, Oregon, and Washington D.C. Unfortunately, some of these performances were cancelled, and the opera production came to fruition in only Nebraska, Kansas, and Washington D.C. For these productions, the sets and costumes traveled from place to place, while the casts and personnel often changed in each location.[180] Each company's level of support and resources varied. Pulitzer directed all three revival productions on the trail, while Mager acted in differing capacities: he conducted the Washington National performances, was in a lecture residency at Opera Omaha, and attended the Kansas City production. Mager recalls the KC performance being gratifying to hear, since they employed a professional orchestra. Both creative team members spoke fondly of the Washington D.C. production, also. *Dream of the Pacific* was a part of the eight-show season in 2006-2007 with its performances taking place on August 5 - 6, 2006 on the Millennium Stage of

[180] How to appropriately cast these characters is a controversial topic without a clear answer. Both Pulitzer and Mager mention colorblind casting as a part of the process when this premiered in 2004, besides York who must be cast as a black singer. Pulitzer further describes their choices, saying the OTSL cast "was essentially colorblind casting for the Corps of Discovery as well as for the female chorus, which wasn't really ever named because they play in multiple different facets: they play forces, they play nature, they play people — they are changeable in terms of the role that they play. And I think it was determined, without much discussion, that Lewis and Clark would both essentially look like white men, and Sacagawea would look more like a native person, somebody who had some indigenous characteristics and just in terms of the color of skin. And same with her brother, the chief that they encounter. And so each place that it was performed that changed; who those cast members were. I think there wasn't that much crossover. And I think that's... I mean, I have questions about what that means. Now, if you're going to tell a story about race, and you're going to tell the story about Otello, and you're going to tell it with him as a Moor in relationship to a community where he's being treated as an outsider, and that's part of the narrative, then you do need to address issues of race, and the color of somebody's skin. […] I was reflecting on that thinking, 'I wonder how it would sit with things now?' But I do think that because the casting was diverse for the Corps, and for the kids generally, that felt right, and I think it still holds." Pulitzer, Interview with author.

the Kennedy Center. It was a night of "firsts" for WNO. They dubbed this performance their first "family opera" and also the first event in which all areas of their education and training departments came together: WNO Opera Camp, Opera Institute, the Domingo-Cafritz Young Artist Program, and the Youth Orchestra of the Americas. This ensemble consisted of high-level musicians, including collegiate players. Mager believes this was one of the highest quality performances of the co-productions that fully realized his envisioned soundscape. Furthermore, audience response was positive at these traveling productions.

Beyond these first revivals, it was again revived by Amarillo Opera in 2017, totaling five productions with four being revivals from 2004 to 2017. Since *Dream* had not been produced since its touring co-productions in the years following its initial premiere, I investigated further to identify how the company discovered this lesser known piece. David O'Dell, the former General Director of Amarillo, has a history of programming OTSL educational commissions from the 1990s and early 2000s. In addition to *Dream* in 2017, he produced revivals of *The Very Last Green Thing* (Cary John Franklin/Michael Patrick Albano; 1992) in 2014, *Thunder of Horses* (Franklin/Albano; 1995) in 2015, and *Joshua's Boots* (Hailstork/Susan Kander; 1999) in 2018. *Dream,* in particular, was selected primarily for its "cultural recognizability throughout America and the Texas Panhandle's roots in Native American culture," Education Director at Amarillo Chancelor Barbaree said.[181] Therefore, its familiar and cultural content, along with the shorter length ideal for a school-aged audience, were primary programming factors for this revival. While the first four productions were performed with orchestra, Amarillo choose to perform the score with solely piano accompaniment. Mager said this was an option clearly spelled out in the

[181] Amarillo is the only revival company who participated in the study questionnaire.

original commissioning agreement.[182] In fact, during the lead up to the summer mainstage premiere, run-out performances used only piano accompaniment to punctuate the sung story. One run-out stayed with Mager. On June 18, 2004, in place of a general rehearsal, the opera was performed at the St. Louis Juvenile Detention Center: "I don't know whether it was a success with our audience," Mager said, "but I was very pleased nonetheless to offer it to these kids who have a lot going against them."[183] A unique way to view dramatized history, this scenario exemplifies the malleability of this opera. In addition to orchestration options,[184] the score itself is full of clear directions of permissible cuts and alterations, generously providing the performing company the ability to manipulate the piece as needed to suit time constraints.

The program books for each of the productions clarify *Dream of the Pacific's* genre: this is not crafted as a children's opera yet is instead considered a family opera. It appears family operas may have been a trend in the early 2000s. In addition to this family opera being highly invested and advertised by OTSL and WNO, HGO's 2006 five-year repertoire plan included family operas among its targeted genres. [185] Felter elucidates the appeal of the family opera:

> It cut across all the ages. A good piece of art — a good cartoon — has multiple levels to it. So even if it looks like it might be for kids, there are other things going on that adults would pick up on. I think for that reason, it may have been very obvious that this would be a great family outing, and what better way to maybe pull in somebody who's not necessarily going to go to an opera, then if the family's going and, okay, you got to go too. And maybe you make a discovery that this is actually something you would enjoy and might consider doing again. It's an easy entry into the art form.[186]

[182] Mager, Interview with author.
[183] Ibid.
[184] The ten-piece orchestration includes violin, cello, bass, flute, piccolo, clarinet, bassoon, French horn, percussion, and piano.
[185] HGO 2006 Annual Report, 105.
[186] Felter, Interview with author.

The modifier "family" means the work should be nuanced and could function as an entry-point into the genre at large: easily digestible and entertaining for a person new to the art form. Mager confirms he carefully approached this commission, thinking of it connecting to all ages:

> We had a goal of a young people's piece. I had to look at this from a slightly different creative angle. You don't get a commission with a major opera company all the time. I didn't want to just write something naïve or trivial. And of course, we had chosen a very adult subject. […] The great thing about it: it's a kind of a subject for general audiences, isn't it? It's about achievement and heroic acts of discovery. And there's almost everything except maybe a love angle. And even that we flirt with. Turning this into an opera, I wanted to write an opera that had a lot of the most wonderful features of the lyric stage.[187]

These lyrical and theatrical features include melodic vocal lines, persistent leitmotifs and musical gestures, and a powerful chorus.

The *Dream* project's primary aim sought to contribute to the development of contemporary repertoire while simultaneously providing performance opportunities to a small number of St. Louis youth. Designed to offer young people an embodied experience, *Dream* provides a meaningful and prolonged immersion with the operatic art form. As the development department wrote grant applications, they were commonly required to address how many children would be impacted. Pulitzer remembers MacKay questioning the validity of this concept: 3,000 kids could come see a reduced *Magic Flute*, or two dozen kids can have an embodied experience of enactment through the opera's three-week rehearsal process. OTSL argued this performative opportunity provided a deeper level of exposure to the operatic medium, constituting a quality experience over a quantity of those exposed. MacKay made this public statement the week before the premiere:

> Whenever you commission and produce a new opera, it's a bit of a journey into the unknown. So an opera about Lewis and Clark and their momentous expedition sort of heightens that whole sense of a spirit of discovery. For many people, opera is a kind of

[187] Mager, Interview with author.

> new frontier. It's been thrilling to see how readily the young people in the cast have embraced a new opera – embraced the music and the whole process.[188]

Essentially, not just how many were reached but *how* were they being reached: through an hour of operatic entertainment or through an experience that could influence the trajectory of their lives? For example, Pulitzer knows youth participants from *Dream* and *Brundibàr* who are now, more than fifteen years later, career musicians singing on the mainstage of OTSL and other houses. MacKay's plan worked in terms of the number of people who were impacted. "Quite profoundly," Pulitzer says, "so much so that it's their careers now."[189] While the twenty-four-person chorus consisted of primarily high school students from the St. Louis community, the four principals were professional vocalists working as Gerdine Young Artists.

Familiar Story: Humanizing the Historical

> My goal is exploration, not of places, but of faces: it seeks to probe and illuminate the characters who make up this magnificent story and to discover in their humanity some mirror of our own. And, much as our protagonists were continually amazed at the natural phenomena they encountered throughout their westward journey, my hope is to surprise my audience as often as possible. Ultimately, I intend to draw the listener into the midst of the *Dream,* to spur the imagination, not so much by recounting our story with the exacting eye of a scientist, but with the heart of a poet.[190]

Mager illuminated his prime intent in this passage from his vision statement submitted to Felter in 2002. This sprawling story is immense in its scope, both in content and geography. Scale and scope were always at the forefront of both Mager and Pulitzer's minds.[191] After much

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[188] Sarah Bryan Miller, "Lewis and Clark Opera is its Own Voyage of Discovery," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch,* February 1, 2004.

[189] Pulitzer, Interview with author.

[190] Mager Personal Archives, "A Composer's Perspective: Vision Statement," July 26, 2002.

[191] While the work was requested to be under an hour, it is between seventy to eighty minutes, depending on observation of optional cuts. With time constraints in mind, Mager offers many choices for future productions to make informed decisions about what to cut if time is limited. Mager mentions the reason to trim came from multiple administrative and creative persons. Some may have viewed the project as a "dramatic presentation" rather than

collaborative discussion, some of which is outlined in the following prose, the story was distilled to five main characters (Sacagawea, lyric soprano; Captain Meriwether Lewis, tenor; Captain William Clark, baritone; Sergeant Charles Floyd, baritone; York, enslaved person, tenor or high baritone; Chief Cameâhwait, baritone) and two choirs (Men of the Corps of Discovery, male chorus; Voices of the Waters, treble chorus). The story centers solely on the outbound expedition from the St. Louis area to the arrival at the mouth of the Columbia River when the travelers reach the Pacific Ocean.

From her broad research, Pulitzer identified the many common tropes in the seminal events of the historical journey that would be recognizable in most mythical stories, utilizing "those identifiable markers in the development of the narrative." [192] Then, she determined what parts of the journey could provide a balanced, coherent storyline in a short timeframe. Pulitzer's strength as a librettist and director lie in her innate curiosity concerning the needs of each individual project, along with a sense of trajectory towards an end goal. Since working on *Dream of the Pacific,* she has collaborated on many contemporary opera productions: "It's really interesting to see how other librettists feel about the process and how involved they are — or not — in those, down to the minutiae of the word 'the' versus 'a' and whether that change is acceptable."[193] Contrary to this scenario, her approach is less controlling. When she gave the libretto to Mager, she was open to change "as long as he kept the integrity of the arc and the event of each scene in place. There were certain direct quotes from Lewis's journal that I

elongated musical immersion. There was also the primary concern that the opera be entertaining and attainable for all ages.

[192] Pulitzer, Interview with author.
[193] Ibid.

definitely didn't want tinkered with, but aside from that, it was a little bit more flexible."[194] Through the collaboration, the libretto went through at least four or five drafts as it became focused, with each draft being discussed with Graham and other OTSL creative administrators. They were concerned with maintaining appropriate representation of the expedition's encounters with native tribes, ensuring they addressed the indigenous elements of the story with respect. In this vein, prior to writing the libretto, Felter and Pulitzer took an excursion to Wyoming to prepare and learn. Though there is controversy over Sacagawea's original affiliation, she is claimed by the Shoshone tribe. With the hope of learning about Shoshone customs, traditions, and history, they were invited to the Wind River Reservation at the Eastern Shoshone Cultural Center. Felter humbly recounts the experience:

> I have to say I was very intimidated to understand the complexity behind Sacagawea's role. It is not the romanticized version that a lot of our history writers have given us. But understanding that there would be complexities and, maybe, nuances that couldn't be understood as a white female from the Midwest. But we went there, with every bit of community learning in mind, because we wanted to learn and be respectful. We were given a tour of some of the reported areas where Sacagawea would have lived. And one of the greatest honors was being thrown sort of a party by some of the people on the reservation. […] That experience informed Elkhanah in the writing of her libretto, so that's some of the footwork we got to do in preparation.[195]

This practice is reminiscent of an anthropological field report in an ethnographic methodology. Conscious of her role as facilitator, Felter wanted to support the creative team so they could be informed as they took on this immense historical story. Beyond the trip itself, Felter corresponded with her contact from the tribe, who helped maintain authenticity where possible. For instance, she gave the contact a list and was provided proper pronunciations and spellings of Shoshone words and names.

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[194] Ibid.
[195] Felter, Interview with author.

For the other characters, Pulitzer learned about the personalities of Lewis and Clark from the primary source of Lewis' journal entries as well as reading historical documents detailing their character traits and professional partnership. She wanted to represent how they shared the roles of "authority and leadership and decision-making," along with capturing the "personality traits that enabled them to do that in tandem with one another."[196] She found Lewis was "brooding, melancholic, and introspective," while Clark was the social force energizing and moving the explorers forward on the trip. She knew Sacagawea would be critical to the journey. It is a remarkable true story; a large group of nineteenth-century men willingly led by an indigenous woman and her new child:

> She essentially helped them navigate and enabled them to survive by presenting them to her community and also creating safe passage by going with them and peaceably encountering indigenous tribes that otherwise might have been a little bit more suspicious if there wasn't someone among them who could speak directly and communicate what the needs might be and what the expectations were and defuse the possible powder keg situation of a bunch of strange foreign people tromping through the woods coming towards them: communities that are established and have been for thousands of years.[197]

Therefore, Sacagawea plays the indispensable role as guide on the literal journey as well as the symbolic role of a bridge between two cultures. Pulitzer emphasizes Sacagawea's "rightful place as one of the critical leadership people on that team that made it all possible."[198] Though other secondary characters emerge as the drama progresses, these three characters function as the primary protagonists. Also moved by Lewis' innate melancholy, Pulitzer captures his ability to persevere through his pensiveness in order to accomplish this harrowing feat. She recognizes they could have approached this story by addressing the,

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[196] Pulitzer, Interview with author.
[197] Ibid.
[198] Ibid.

> European white male perspective that is essentially conquering pre-existing cultures that have been here for thousands of years. That is one narrative, and that is a very real about what was going down. We didn't really get into all that because the parameter was to celebrate the human endeavor of going up against one's own limits; because them getting to the Pacific was an extraordinary thing, regardless of who they were or what their pedigree might have been.[199]

Though the opera, of course, deals with thematic material from the historical expansion of the United States to the West, the creative team sought to emphasis the more universal truths personified in the journey and the nature of the characters — what Mager calls "the nobility of the human spirit."[200] Transcending the temporal constraints of this colonial moment, the artists hoped to capture the personal pursuit of overcoming great odds through musical drama.

Beyond the preserved accounts left behind, Pulitzer recognizes it is impossible to truly know the relationship between Sacagawea and the men. However, she chose to depict it "as one of mutual respect and regard and a sharing of talents and abilities in order to navigate natural forces that would otherwise possibly cause peril. There is a relationship with nature in the piece that is a push and pull."[201] Mager, also, was highly involved with the initial discussions surrounding how to properly depict these iconic historical characters. He was enamored with Jefferson and Lewis, in particular, as "products of the Enlightenment, self-assured individuals with a profound thirst for scientific knowledge, and a corresponding interest and respect for the natural world, which they perceived, was clearly a lot bigger than they."[202] He also identifies the twofold meaning of the opera's title. Pacific signifies not only the Pacific Ocean but also the pacifism of the men; they accomplished their grueling task without militant means.

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[199] Ibid.

[200] Mager, Interview with author.

[201] Ibid.

[202] Mager Personal Archives, Letter to Maggie Stearns, September 1999. I devised the signpost "Humanizing the Historical" after my first hearing of *Dream of the Pacific*. It is rewarding to discover this is, indeed, the author's intent.

While Mager was idealistic in his view of the men, Pulitzer approached them with a sober outlook, recognizing that they were not purely naturalists but were on a military expedition funded by the United States government. To find the right balance in her representation, she engaged with a range of resources in her research process: "I spent a ton of time reading a bunch of really rich, deep, complicated historical research. And then I started to go into the juvenile section of the library and to look at how the story was being depicted for high school students."[203] Examining adolescent historical documentation helped her select and compress. She was also inspired by Joseph Campbell's hero quest, which too informed her framework for the journey's progression.[204] Capitalizing on this, the creative team used the storybook trope to help the audience visually track the journey. Chad Owens, the set designer, employed enlarged antique maps that lit up the route as the expedition advanced. This "framed the story as a book, as if it had been open to the map" so the audience could follow along with the various stops along the journey.[205] The epistolary nature of Lewis' journals also contributes to this storybook structure: "that's also where the book framing idea came from," Pulitzer elucidates. "We have his journals. We don't see the whole story through his eyes exclusively, right? We get to hear critically from other people and their perspectives."[206] Operatic song forms of arias and duets allow for this. Mager also utilizes the melodrama technique of setting dramatically spoken lines over

[203] Pulitzer, Interview with author.

[204] In Campbell's monomyth, he delineates a sequence of stages commonly found in narratives and legends centered on questing heroes. Stage one involves the departure, where the hero is called to an adventure, refuses the call but, after encountering an advising mentor, sets out on the quest. In the second stage, Initiation, the hero must endure trials, facing an ultimate test. The final stage sees the hero returning home, in a number of guises, namely reflecting on lessons learned and gleaned wisdom from his exploit. See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949).

[205] At the Amarillo revival in 2017, its new production projected famous paintings of Lewis and Clark for each scene. "This served as a sort of 'double-whammy' for the opera, because it allowed us to tell the story of Lewis and Clark but also expose the children to actual American artwork that had been created as a result of the expedition." Barbaree, Questionnaire from author.

[206] Pulitzer, Interview with author.

orchestration on multiple occasions. In addition to giving an epistolary mode to multiple characters, it is a useful compression device in opera to disseminate much information in a small amount of time. Melodrama is employed in Scenes 3, 6, 7, 9, 11. The Scene 6 melodrame exemplifies presenting a great deal of content in a condensed scene: the Corps of Discovery is struggling through their journey up the river, while Lewis clinically observes. Lewis, though not uncaring, is essentially unaware of how his ambitious push forward affects his companions. When one dies from the rigor, Lewis takes the blame. To distinguish the scene's emotional aspects (sung) from the cerebral (spoken), the men sing while Lewis speaks. Therefore, in addition to being temporally economical, melodrama can serve a dramatic purpose by differentiating between opposing expressive states.

Since this was Pulitzer's first libretto, she says her first draft was "more of a play. And then Stephen took it, and then he kind of cooked it into the musical structure that he needed, which meant quite a bit of amendment in certain places."[207] She would send him sections of the libretto, and he would often rework as needed when text setting. He prefers metered poetry because of its inherent musical flow: "What we would try to do is shape the text so that it had more of a metric flow," Mager said.[208] While collaborating closely through regular email correspondence, Mager referenced a discussion he had with former OTSL Music Director Stephen Lord. Lord warned him against using "grossly unsatisfactory operatic lines" like, "'Please, pass the potatoes.' If a line doesn't cry out to be set to music, he said, then it shouldn't be sung. And I think he's right."[209] As Mager was crafting musical excerpts and Pulitzer was

[207] Pulitzer, Interview with author.
[208] Mager, Interview with author.
[209] Mager Personal Archives, correspondence from 2001-2002.

solidifying the sequence of the scenes, he was reading psychologist Anthony Storr's *Music and the Mind*. Through this reading, Mager became captivated by the eighteenth-century philosophical insights of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Giambattista Vico. The notion that poetry is song; metaphorical language may have come before literal; or the fact that ancient Greeks linked song and speech as one. With development of the modern age, language has become more objective, scientific, and lost its anthropomorphic qualities. Inspired by these linguistic theories, Mager hoped to retain the innate musical elements of prosody as he set the text. He sent scans of certain passages from the book to Pulitzer and wrote to her, sharing his developed awareness of,

> the distinction between refined music as art (e.g. Western Man and classical music), and music as an expression of social identity and function (e.g. as with pre-literate societies). While all this may seem sophisticated for a children's opera, let me suggest that we tell this story on a variety of levels at once, and see what kids can grasp from it. If they can hear in the musical contrasts a distinction between the colliding societies and world-views (and I think with some help they can), then we will have conveyed a lot more to them than just another run-of-the-mill story about heroic success in spite of adversity.[210]

Mager's depth of consideration during his creation clarifies why this opera is designated as a "family opera" rather than purely for children. He sought edifying nuance. Another inspiring passage addressed collective musicking in ancient cultures. Rituals and ceremonies were distinguished from everyday routines through singing, dancing, and reciting poetry. In pre-literate societies, "the arts are concerned with 'making special'; that is, with underlining and rendering ritualized forms of behavior. In ritual, words are used metaphorically and symbolically and often reunited with music, which still further charges them with meaning."[211] In the margin, as Mager was reading, he scrawled "OUR FIRST SCENE!!" In the collaborators continuing correspondence, Pulitzer thanked Mager for the excerpt, noting she was reading the *Odyssey* and

[210] Mager Personal Archives, correspondence June 30, 2001.
[211] Anthony Storr, *Music and the Mind* (New York; Ballantine Books, 1992), 17.

found the ideas regarding "music and poetry, language and the voice, even more resonant."[212] Empowered by these enlightening philosophies, Mager and Pulitzer open the opera with the treble chorus embodying mystical sirens who narrate the dream of the far-off sparkling ocean, illuminated by the natural light of the stars. Pageantry at its utmost.

While Mager had a hand in the fine details of the text, he credits Pulitzer with devising a clear structure for the opera. The major task: digesting a three-year expedition into one hour. Deciding they would focus solely on the voyage from Missouri to the West Coast, Pulitzer distilled the journey into thirteen scenes. On September 16, 2001, she sent the composer a rough draft outline of the story's structure. See Figure 4.5. This proposed form, with written-in adjustments by Mager, came to fruition. Mager was thoroughly pleased with Pulitzer's devised symmetry in the dramatic structure. Capitalizing on the number thirteen, Mager set each scene in a tonal center progressing from C, travelling through the key centers by (roughly) a step and returning to C by the thirteenth scene: C-D-em-fm-G-am-B-A♭-G♭-fm-e♭m-D♭-C. Figure 4.6 shows his meticulous tonal framework aligned with the corresponding dramatic impetus of each scene.

[212] Mager Personal Archives, correspondence July 4, 2001.

Figure 4.5 Final Proposed Structure of *Dream of the Pacific* - September 16, 2001

* Over arching scenario, in development.

9/16/01

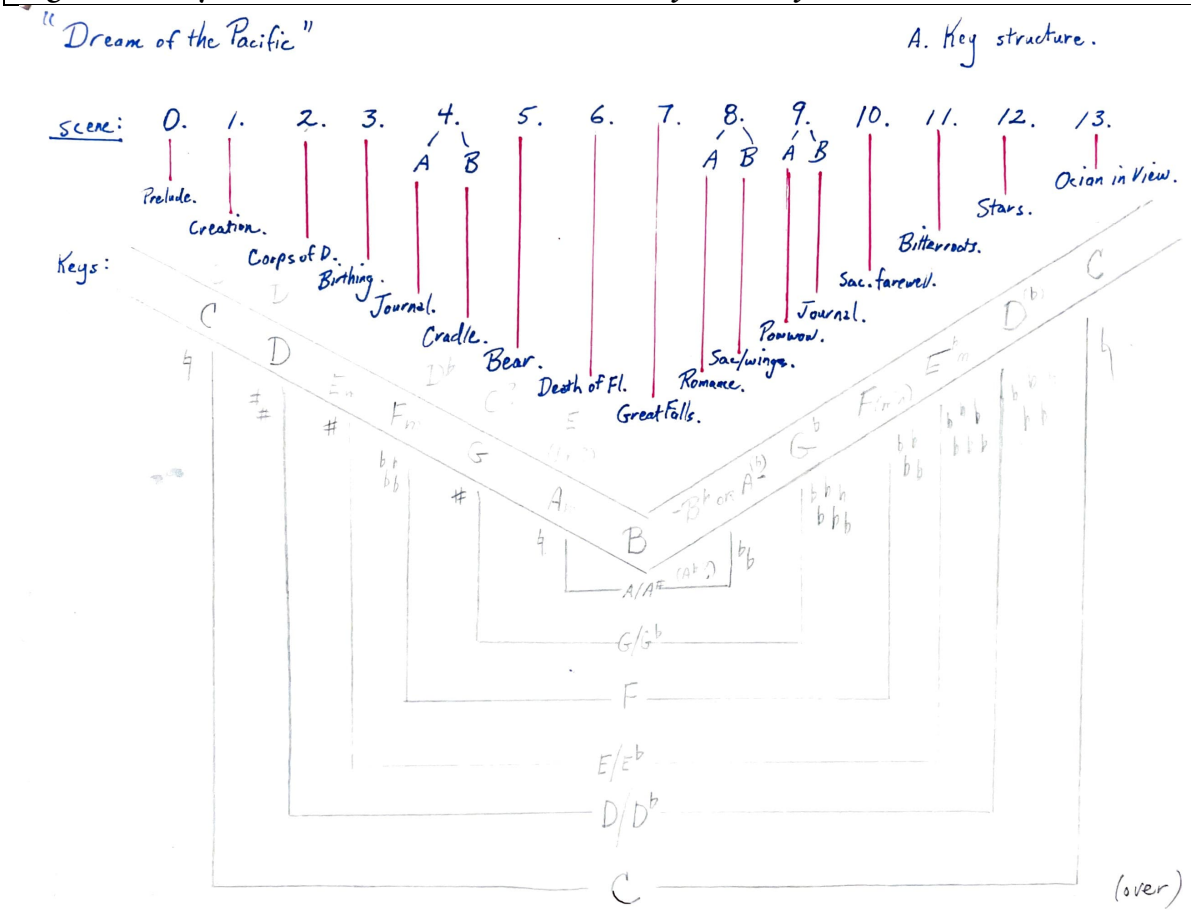
Stephen,

Here is the latest quick scene flow chart and I've included numbers before each scene to indicate how many minutes I've estimated each scene should take. its preliminary by every stretch, but its a jumping off point...

1. 2-Sac Mythology
2. 3-Intro of Men- Chorus Bru-ha-ha
   L and C Jeffersonian Duet
3. 6-Teton ~~Sioux Encounter~~ Birthing of "Pompey"
4. [Lewis: Journal entry
   3-Sac Cradle Song
   Mandan Village Backup Singers
5. 3-Bear Scene
6. 6-Naming/ Floyd Dies
7. 3-L and C Arguement at Great Falls
8. [3-C and Sac Romance
   1-Sac Solo: found wings
9. [8-Men Smoke with Cam, discuss horses and land
   Sac and Cam Reunite-OK Horses, Feast!
   1-Lewis: men face dark hour in icy mountains
10. 2-Sac and Cam Goodbye
    Men move out with gear, Sac joins them
11. 5-Men broken in Snow
    York "Black is the Color," Clark rouses Men
12. 2-L Alone, Stars, C enter, Duet
    Fog Clears
13. 8-Everyone, Ocean in View! Fine.

4-Post Climax, ~~Vote~~ omitted.
~~Stars Theme~~ comes back

Figure 4.6 Key Structure in the scenes of *Dream of the Pacific*



Beyond the tonal progression, his composition depicts the dramatic symmetry. Although new to writing theatrical music, the composer was keenly aware in the early phases of how intrinsically tied the dramatic content was to the music. They cannot be treated separately for inspired opera. In correspondence with the librettist in 2001, Mager explained his thought process regarding drama:

> Drama is not about soap opera dialogue. Drama is simply the business of juxtaposing contrasting elements, bringing opposites together, and considering the unfolding of their relationship to one another, whether they be contrasts in appearance, contrasts in desires, or contrasts in attitude (what in real life we call conflicts of opinion). […] In music, we create drama in the contrast of keys, of instrumental colors, especially in the contrasts of louds and softs, and ultimately in the very elementary contrasts of consonance and

> dissonance. Brash, ugly sounds haven't much place in genuinely lyrical music, but in a dramatic piece such as ours: absolutely.[213]

With these significant contrasts in mind, a musico-dramatic symmetry manifests like so: the uplifting grandiose opening (Scene 1) and closing scenes (Scene 13) along with the centerpiece of the opera (Scene 7) feature orchestral water imagery and employ the full musical forces with the chorus. Scene 2a and Scene 12 highlight a poetic Lewis and his philosophical musings, while Scene 2b and Scene 11 present a contrasting (read: hopeless and struggling) perspective from the Corps of Discovery men. Sacagawea's appearances in Scene 3 and 4 are symmetrical with her farewell to her brother in Scene 10. Scene 5 and Scene 9 depict tense confrontations, while Scene 6 and Scene 8 provide opportunities for massive mood shifts.[214] This serves as a paradigm of musical and dramatic elements converging for an ideal symmetrical structure. It also illustrates Pulitzer's attention to what she calls the "metabolic rate of the journey:"[215] a metaphor for dramatic pacing.

This opera's musico-dramatic structure and style warrant closer examination of the living composer's intent. He sees himself as a "lyric composer with a strong harmonic bent."[216] Mager's idiom pulls inspiration from a variety of classical conventions: from fourteenth-century medieval *chanson*s to nineteenth-century leitmotifs and rich, chromatic harmonic structures to twentieth-century twelve-tone rows. At the heart of it, he is a tonal composer who employs specific techniques for effect: "I think that we engage people through the memory," Mager said, "and so you have to give people something that is memorable." Motivic melodies are the essence of

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[213] Mager Personal Archives, Correspondence 2001.

[214] Mager Personal Archives, Correspondence to Pulitzer 2002. In our interview, Mager notes they were not beholden to the concept but used it as a helpful framework that allowed them to build in the musico-dramatic contrasts evenly.

[215] Pulitzer, Interview with author.

[216] Mager, Interview with author.

memorable. Though Mager admits these can be naïve images: "it's a very engaging way to get people to listen. Of course, the music, it tells much more than drawing an image. These [motives] are meant to draw the listener into it more fully, with some sense of meaning."[217] And thus, *Dream* is bursting with leitmotifs, many motivated by natural phenomena: the sprinkling of stars through an ascending flourishing gesture, nature signified through a tone row, turbulent waters animated through vigorous arpeggiation in the lowest registers, or birdcalls depicted via leaping triplet figures.

I detected symbolic associations with many of the aforementioned motives while listening. Stacked fifths in The Open Country motive generate a sense of wide-open spaces. The rapidly ascending gesture in the Scattering of the Stars creates a stunning fireworks effect. Predominantly diatonic steps and skips found in some of the tuneful themes (Song of the Stars, Corps of Discovery, Lewis's Joy, Missouri Mud, Distress) establish an American folk song ambiance.[218] I was also struck by the impressionistic and gestural qualities that saturate the score. These mimetic ideas I experienced as a listener were, indeed, intentional in order to evoke the desired imagery. Due to the educational nature of this project, the creative team crafted resources meant to plainly explain the musico-dramatic elements of the opera to a youthful audience. For this purpose, Mager included a detailed index of all the opera's musical themes and motives in

[217] Ibid. In the early stages of the commissioning process, Mager studied Wagner's *Ring* cycle for inspiration. In a letter to the librettist, he identified "similarities of the *Ring* cycle, with its natural and supernatural phenomena, to the account of the Lewis and Clark expedition. Wagner's tetralogy begins with a depiction of the Rhine River — four and a half audacious minutes of an E Flat major chord. That opening alone immediately establishes enormous, epic scope of the cycle. The Lewis and Clark account also begins with a river, in actuality an even longer, wider and wilder body of water than the Rhine. So I began to think, shouldn't our opera also have something 'cinematic' about its images?" Mager Personal Archives, correspondence to Pulitzer May 11, 2000.

[218] In Scene 9, for example, a feast is thrown to celebrate the homecoming of Sacagawea. An orchestral interlude musically signifies the mingling of the two cultural groups through the use of the Shoshone theme followed by the Missouri Mud fiddle tune.

the vocal/piano score's appendix.[219] For the labeling process, Mager sometimes attached names during his writing process, while other times, in retrospect.

Full theoretical analysis of the themes and motives are out of the scope of this study; nevertheless, I draw attention to one fundamental that appears in multiple themes to demonstrate the musical underpinning that animates the plot. A dotted figure is favored in all themes associated with the Corps of Discovery, the Journey's Ordeal, as well as Sergeant Floyd theme. Depending on the other musical elements, the rhythmic figure can elicit distinctive moods. A folk character is established through the Scottish snap of the Corps of Discovery in Scene 2. Conversely, a more *maestoso* tempo of the "mile upon mile" text in the unfolding of Scene 6 generates mysterious wonder and eventually evokes poignancy as Floyd dies. In this scene, he also uses an ostinato dotted figure to convey energy and power, which is "indicative of this seemingly endless journey they were on. They're going upstream, so against the current, and the Missouri River is known as having a very fast current. Rivers flow downhill. So just imagine tons of cubic meters of water coming at you. It must have been grueling."[220] Clearly, Mager was considering precise experiences the historical figures were enduring and sought to set them meaningfully through musical means. Each music fundamental he selects — tempo, dynamics, tonality, register, timbre — colors the dotted figure to accurately exemplify the scene's given emotional state and position within the overall dramatic structure.

Dream of the Pacific represents Mager's compositional style, with the inspirations ranging from the water effects of Debussy to the rhythmic energy of Stravinsky to the birdsong of Olivier

[219] Through permission granted by Mager and Pulitzer (Copyright © 2004), this appendix is re-printed as Appendix C in this document.

[220] Mager, Interview with author.

Messiaen or the Americana of Aaron Copland. When reflecting on his writing process for *Dream*, Mager brought up the adage "prima le parole e poi la musica" (first the words, and then the music). When an operatic composer is asked about their process, they will say, "'give me the libretto, and I'll give you the music.' I would say the problem with that — and this is a conscious decision on my part — a lot of contemporary opera relies very heavily on a kind of recitative that is not very interesting musically. And so, it's as if the music is simply a vehicle for the libretto and nothing else."[221] While this document does argue for the driving force of dramatic elements, a critical balance of story to music must be achieved in opera. For *Dream of the Pacific*, many of his musical inspirations were ignited before he read the libretto, too. The tone row, for instance, has a strong sense of C Major but "it meanders in a sort of musical surprising way," Mager said.[222] And his first inspired motive, Scattering of the Stars, came to him before Pulitzer joined the creative team. This spontaneous musical idea derived from his ruminations on the naturalist and Enlightenment elements of the expedition. He played the passage for his young daughter, asking her to describe what she heard. She responded to him, saying, "'It sounds like someone's throwing stars into the sky.' Now, that was the child's reflection, and she was probably 10 or 12 at the time. And so I thought, Out of the mouth of babes, and what a beautiful image."[223] A number of musico-dramatic choices derive from traditional opera conventions, too. Mager likens Sacagawea's farewell duet with her brother in Scene 10 to an Italian opera hero and heroine's singing about their conflict of love versus duty. In Scene 5, the grizzly bear attack acts as comic relief. "The kids loved that," Mager remembers. "We did have a person in a bear suit. And my

[221] Ibid.
[222] Ibid.
[223] Ibid.

friends who took the music so seriously were a little offended, like 'Oh, that trivialized it.' Well, it had to be; we have to have that in the story."[224] Not only because this opera was created with all ages in mind, but Mozart, too, knew the power of a comedic scene to provide relief amidst tragedy. To balance the dramatic pacing, Scene 5's levity was prefaced with what Mager calls a "placid pastoral moment" meant to imitate birdsong before chaos erupts with the bear.

From my assessment, this opera offers expressive and delightfully unpredictable music with rich imagery and gestural leitmotifs that fully realize and enhance the journey and its characters. The composer, however, does acknowledge the complexity of the score. After looking at it again, more recently, he said, "if someone wants to do this again for a big company, I may revisit it and make it a little bit less formidable;"[225] hence, the beauty of living, breathing opera. Mager hopes a company will produce this as a one-act opera in its season, outside of a purely educational slot. *Dream of the Pacific,* now seventeen years old, is an early twenty-first century opera constructed in a collaborative manner, serving a local community. Its profound message, national history, and thrilling soundscapes make it ideal for revival. Journey stories on the whole hold popular appeal, and the exploration of the inner psychologies of three famous figures through lyrical song is intriguing. Moreover, the dramatic content of this historical non-fiction opera presents an opportunity for a company to hire a diverse cast and highlight an American historical story showcasing multiple cultural groups.

[224] Ibid.
[225] Ibid. The recent revival company, Amarillo, did address the difficulty of mastering this score.

CHAPTER 5 - MINNESOTA OPERA AND *THE GRAPES OF WRATH* (2007; 2017)

Pioneer Institution: Minnesota Opera

Minnesota Opera opened its inaugural season with a commissioned opera and continued to emphasize new avant-garde works. Starting as a grassroots organization called Center Opera Company, the Walker Center Arts Council founded the company in 1963 with the original intent of producing new chamber operas, sung by professional singers in the area. Dominick Argento's *A Masque of Angels* was the first commission, premiering in January 1964, and it became his home theatre. The president of the board in 1969, Norton Hintz, built the company's reputation on an artistic vision meant to pave a new direction for opera in America. After incorporating separately from the Walker Center in 1969 and becoming an OPERA America member in 1970, the company decided to refine its name in order to avoid confusion and establish itself geographically. Thus, in 1972, Center Opera Company became the Minnesota Opera.

As its repertory archives show, the company committed to commissions throughout its first few decades. Contemporary, new opera was known as a part of its DNA. Under the helm of co-Artistic and Stage Director H. Wesley Balk (1965-1982) and Music Director Philip Brunelle (1969-1986) "the company pursued a more iconoclastic, countercultural path, using slogans like 'Down With Opera' and 'Non-Opera' in its publicity and boasting of the visual allure of its productions."[226] During Balk and Brunelle's leadership, the company commissioned and produced at least one new opera every year. This record continued until 1992 when the New

[226] Michael Anthony, "Minnesota Opera at 50: Thriving, with an engaging, auspicious *Nabucco*," *MinnPost* September 25, 2012. https://www.minnpost.com/arts-culture/2012/09/minnesota-opera-50-thriving-engaging-auspicious-nabucco/

Music-Theater Ensemble, the program of MO focused on creating innovative new operas, broke away to form its own independent company. Figure 5.1 displays the commissions at MO since 1963.[227]

Figure 5.1 Minnesota Opera New Works Archive 1963-2019

Year	Title	Composer	Librettist*	Co. Name
1963–1964	*The Masque of Angels*	Dominik Argento	John Olon-Scrymgeour	Center Opera Co.
1966–1967	*Opera Without Elephants*	unclear	unclear	Center Opera Co.
1968–1969	*Horspfal*	Eric Stokes	Alvin Greenberg	Center Opera Co.
1969–1970	*The Wanderer*	Paul Boesing	Martha Boesing	Center Opera Co.
1969–1970	*Oedipus and the Sphinx*	Yale Marshall	Wesley Balk	Center Opera Co.
1970–1971	*Faust Counter Faust*	John Gessner	Wesley Balk	Center Opera Co.
1970–1971	*Christmas Mummeries & Good Government*	Yale Marshall	John Arden	Center Opera Co.
1971–1972	*Postcard from Morocco*	Dominick Argento	John Donahue	Center Opera Co.
1972–1973	*Transformations*	Conrad Susa	Anne Sexton	
1973–1974	*The Newest Opera in the World*	Minnesota Opera		
1974–1975	*Gulliver*	Blackwood, Kaplan, Lewin	Robert Karmon, Louis Phillips	
1974–1975	*Gallimaufry*	Minnesota Opera		
1975–1976	*The Voyage of Edgar Allan Poe*	Dominick Argento	Charles M Nolte	
1975–1976	*Black River*	Conrad Susa	Richard Street and Conrad Susa	
1977–1978	*Claudia Legare*	Robert Ward	Bernard Stambler	
1978–1979	*The Jealous Cellist*	Eric Stokes	Alvin Greenberg	
1979–1980	*Rosina*	Hiram Titus	Barbara Field	
1980–1981	*Miss Havisham's Wedding Night*	Dominick Argento	John Olon-Scrymgeour	
1981–1982	*The Mask of Evil*	Henry Mollicone	Kate Pogue	
1981–1982	*Feathertop*	Edward Barnes	Maurice Valency	
1982–1983	*A Death in the Family*	William Mayer	William Mayer	
1983–1984	*The Abduction of Figaro*	PDQ Bach (Peter Schickele)	unclear	
1984–1985	*Casanova's Homecoming*	Dominick Argento	Dominick Argento	
1985–1986	*The Music Shop*	Richard Wargo	Wargo based on Anton Chekhov	Education Tour
1985–1986	*Opera Tomorrow*	unclear	unclear	
1986–1987	*Jargonauts, Ahoy!*	James McKeel	unclear	Education Tour
1987–1988	*Fly Away All*	Brenda Hutchinson	Theodore Shank	New Music-Theater Ensemble production
1988–1989	*Newest Little Opera in the World*	Ensemble (improvisational)		New Music-Theater Ensemble production
1988–1989	*Red Tide*	Kim Sherman	Paul Selig	New Music-Theater Ensemble production
1988–1989	*Without Colors*	Melissa Shiflett	Mac Wellman	New Music-Theater Ensemble production
1989–1990	*Snow Leopard*	William Harper	Roger Nieboer	
1989–1990	*Frankenstein, The Modern Prometheus*	Libby Larsen	Libby Larsen	
1991–1992	*From the Towers of the Moon*	Robert Moran	Michael John LaChiusa	
1993–1994	*The Merry Widow & The Hollywood Tycoon*	Franz Lehár	unclear	
1994–1995	*Bok Choy Variations*	Evan Chen	Fifi Servoss, Eric Simonson	
1998–1999	*How the Camel Got His Hump*	(unclear first name) Alcorn	unclear	
1999–2000	*The Cat That Walked By Himself*	(unclear first name) Alcorn	unclear	
2000–2001	*The Birds, the Beasts, and the Ball Game*	(unclear first name) Alcorn	unclear	
2006–2007	*The Grapes of Wrath*	Ricky Ian Gordon	Michael Korie	
2011–2012	*Silent Night*	Kevin Puts	Mark Campbell	
2012–2013	*Doubt*	Douglas J. Cuomo	John Ptrick Shanley	
2014–2015	*The Manchurian Candidate*	Kevin Puts	Mark Campbell	
2015–2016	*The Shining*	Paul Moravec	Mark Campbell	
2016–2017	*Dinner at Eight*	William Bolcom	Mark Campbell	
2018–2019	*The Fix*	Joel Puckett	Eric Simonson	
2019-2020	*Edward Tulane*	Paola Prestini	Mark Campbell	

Prior to the above division, programming had already started to shift in an effort to serve the community and patrons. Originally the citizens of the Twin Cities had two options for seeing

[227] MO's repertory archive is missing critical metadata, including librettist name, first name of composer, and incomplete records regarding education vs. mainstage designations. Through further research, I was able to determine first names of all but "Alcorn." Where "unclear" is stated, no information could be ascertained.

traditional, historical opera: the St. Paul Opera as well as the Metropolitan Opera tours. In 1975, the St. Paul Opera closed, and in 1986, the MET stopped touring. Therefore, while MO continued to present contemporary works under the New Music-Theater Ensemble program throughout the 1980s, its seasons began to include canonic operas too, after merging with St. Paul Opera in 1976 and seeking to meet audience desire of a more varied repertory. Lead by newly named President and CEO Kevin Smith and Artistic Director Dale Johnson, the company's programming became an amalgamation of "progressive and conservative."[228] Moreover, MO was recognized as a leading advocate of contemporary opera from the 1960s into the 1980s, and it became more of a prominent national player in 1990 when it expanded its real estate. The organization renovated three warehouses that provided 50,000 square feet of facilities, including administrative offices, multiple rehearsal spaces, scenes and stagecraft shops, costume shops, and storage. The expansion allowed for large-scale and inventive productions, proving its prowess nationwide. It also meant it needed to allocate its funds differently, evading the expensive costs of producing new work for a while. Johnson says they began to focus more on innovatively producing nineteenth- and twentieth-century opera in place of costly commissions.[229]

Financially, the company started out small but received a Rockefeller grant of $29,250 (half given in 1963 and the other half in 1964) that sustained them through their first three years of operations. In a 1965 *New York Times* article, highlighting the up-and-coming company, a bright future was predicated for the MO: "The future of the company looks bright, as production costs usually average 20,000 dollars and, if the house is sold out for all four performances, that

[228] Anthony, "Minnesota Opera at 50."
[229] Johnson, Interview with author.

figure is taken in. Last season the company made over 6,000 dollars."[230] The company has, indeed, massively increased its economic standing in its fifty-eight years. Despite starting the twenty-first century with approximately 100,000 dollar deficits, its net income increased to 2.9 million dollars in 2003, after nearly doubling public contributions.[231] For the next five years, the company maintained 2 million dollars in the black until the economic crisis hit in 2008. Its total revenue from 2001 to 2018 ranged from 7 to 11 million dollar (and made a large leap in 2019 after a huge increase in contributions: from 11 million dollars in 2018 to 21.2 million dollars 2019).[232] According to nonprofit public records, over one million people are exposed to MO's programming each year through live and broadcasted performances as well as education and engagement events.[233] Johnson was a leading administrator at the company during all of the aforementioned expansions and changes. He began as a chorus master, coach, and general music administrator in the fall of 1984. As the company grew, Smith asked Johnson to partner with him at the top level, becoming the artistic director. Though Smith retired in 2011, Johnson stayed with the company until 2020. Though retired as of 2021, he served as a creative advisor to the president as he transitioned into retirement.[234]

While MO shifted its artistic focus to a *bel canto* driven vision in 2000, the success of *The Grapes of Wrath* in 2007 inspired the company to rededicate its efforts to producing new works through its New Works Initiative (hereafter, NWI) in 2008. *The Grapes of Wrath* took an

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[230] Howard Klein, "Opera Without Elephants," *New York Times,* January 24, 1965, 360.

[231] In 02-03, direct public support was $3,896,498 and government support was $270,027. In 03-04, direct public support was $6,335,558, with an additional $201,460 of government support. These numbers indicate the small percentage of government contribution.

[232] MO Tax-Exempt Records 2001-2019.

[233] IRS Form 990. https://www.guidestar.org/profile/41-0946789

[234] After Smith's long tenure, turn-over at the leadership level began around 2011, with Allan Naplan serving as General Director for one year, followed by Kevin Ramach for four years, and finally current General Director Ryan Taylor since 2016.

extended period of time to produce because of the delay in achieving partnerships with other co-producers, according to Johnson. Johnson, Smith, and Development Director Patrick Duane devised a plan for MO to partner with itself. Considering the various fees required, they developed a budget proposing a necessary 400,000 to 600,000 dollars for each commission. This would ensure allocated funds were always available for commissions, meaning timelines would not be delayed and creative team members could be hired years in advance. The administrators and board at MO committed to the initiative, recognizing the local impact a new opera could have on the community as well as national benefits for the company's profile. Despite the 2008 financial crisis negatively effecting theatres nationwide, MO committed 7 million dollars to produce seven operas over seven years. The company received support from three notable Twin Cities fundraisers: the McKnight Foundation, Bush Foundation, and Dayton Family Foundation. This attracted national attention, and it started receiving national grants to achieve the multi-million-dollar goal by the time productions were slated to commence.[235] NWI's overarching mission sought to rejuvenate the repertoire through new opera. The detailed seven-year plan included three types of contemporary repertory: three world premiere commissions, three rarely revived American operas, and one partnership with a European company to produce one of their new works.[236] NWI elevated MO's commitment guaranteeing 20 percent of its season was dedicated to contemporary opera (one of the five pieces presented each season).

NWI set a standard that has created a bond with MO's regular attendees: "The audience trusts us," Johnson said. For example, *Silent Night* and *The Shining*, two notable NWI

[235] Johnson, Interview with author.

[236] The commissions are detailed later in this section, but the revivals were Bernard Herman's *Wuthering Heights*, Argento's *Casanova's Homecoming* and *The Dream of Valentino*. The European partnership was with Opera North and was Jonathan Dove's *Pinocchio*.

commissions, sold out at least a month before the premieres. “We're kind of lucky that way. We don't try to trip up the audience.” Growing up as an Ohio farm boy, Johnson uses his humble background as a litmus test for determining whether a potential new work will achieve his vision of operatic success:

> Why do I want to go to an opera? What do I want to feel at the opera? And what do I want to remember when I'm leaving? At the great operas, there's a group catharsis at the end, where the audience comes together. […] And you can feel that sort of flow of emotion back to the stage. It's sort of like this [*makes sound with mouth to indicate back and forth flow*] And it's a magical feeling. And not all new pieces do it. Not all versions of *La Traviata* do it. But you can feel that, and that's what I strive for. When I'm sitting there listening, or when I read a piece, or listen to a composer's music, I want to be engaged intellectually but a lot from the heart. I want to feel something. […] And I think that's what's helped me create pieces. I would sit back and allow — I don't tell the composer and librettist: you need to do this, or you have to do this, or this is how you do this. I sit there and just simply ask questions. I think that's what a good dramaturg does. And, when you realize a piece is going on way too long — and that happens more often than not — you basically have to ask them, ‘Is that the story you want the audience to remember when they leave the theater?’ I ask them, ‘Do you think that they're feeling the reaction that you want them to feel?’ And generally, the librettist will basically say, ‘Well, you know, we could probably curb this or maybe shorten this up.’ Librettists — when you got a good one like Michael Korie or Mark Campbell — they know exactly how much the audience needs to know.[237]

Johnson’s heart-felt stream of conscious presents a plethora of pertinent concepts in commissioning, like creative collaboration. He commissioned new operas with the intent of hopefully eliciting emotional resonance through culturally-relevant content, which can lead to collective musicking between spectators and musicians during the performance.

While multiple works have come from NWI, the most popular is Kevin Puts and Mark Campbell’s *Silent Night*. Premiering in 2012, it won the Pulitzer Prize for Music and has gone on

[237] Interestingly, Johnson was not aware I also interviewed Mark Campbell. Without prompting, he sees Korie and Campbell as two of the great librettist of this time. Johnson, Interview with author.

to be revived sixteen times in the last nine years.[238] In the Program Notes for *Silent Night*, former President and General Director, Allan Naplan said, at MO,

> we are committed to the creation and production of new operas in order to ensure that our art form does not merely become a collection of museum artifact, but remains an engaging, vibrant, and relevant way for us to explore the ideas, emotions, and stories that unite and confront us as humans. Through our New Works Initiative, we are invigorating the operatic repertoire with an infusion of contemporary works, and doing so with unstinting dedication. Our ambition is uniquely bold, but we believe that our efforts befit the occasion. We are, after all, creating opera history.[239]

A bold statement crystallizing the company's comprehensive impact aim: a historical legacy. In addition to *Silent Night,* the NWI commissions continued past the three originally pitched, now including *Doubt* (Douglas J. Cuomo/John Patrick Shanley), *The Manchurian Candidate* (Puts/Campbell), *The Shining* (Moravec/Campbell), *Dinner at Eight* (Bolcom/Campell), *The Fix* (Joel Puckett/ Simonson), and *Edward Tulane* (Paola Prestini/Campbell). Johnson notes how MO's NWI differs from the commissioning conventions of other companies. The administrators choose the story first, and then search for a creative team:

> That's kind of ass-backwards compared to what most people do. And I think, quite honestly, it had to do with me understanding what our audience wants. And me also knowing, as a musician myself, that our audience in particular — now this may be different than Los Angeles or Chicago — but our audience wants to feel, in many ways, they know what they're going in to see. They want to go to classes. They want to hear me talk about it. They want to hear the composer and librettist talk about it. They want to *know* what it is they're going to see. And they want to be able to say, 'I get it! I understand it. I feel it.' Because you don't want them to be spending two and a half hours saying, 'I don't get it. I don't like these people.'[240]

He stresses the dramatic content must be carefully selected with a protagonist an audience is likely to adore or a villain they love to hate.

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[238] MO Repertory Archive; NAWD Archive.
[239] MO 2012 Program Book, 5.
[240] Johnson, Interview with author.

In an effort to show more community involvement, MO began publishing impact reports in 2019. With the goal of captivating audiences, and following current research practices, the company attempted to measure audience "captivation." As was professed in the WolfBrown Intrinsic Impact study (2007): "Captivation is the lynchpin of impact. In interviews, performing arts attendees talk enthusiastically about 'getting lost' in the performance or 'going to another place.'" [241] The study found captivation was closely linked to satisfaction and intrinsic to an performance's potential impact. With this in mind, Minnesota's 2018 audience surveys demonstrated that 86 percent of attendees at *Silent Night* said the performance exceeded expectations, while 76 percent "felt 'tingles' and/or 'chills' during the performance."[242] Further, familiar stories are linked to captivation. While my overarching argument emphasizes the critical nature of familiarity in new opera, Johnson remembers being criticized by other companies for MO's focus on the familiar in *The Grapes of Wrath* and then *Silent Night*. But he held to the creative choices his artistic team was making, saying that though he hoped at some point they would be able to introduce original narratives, the first step with the NWI was to change audience outlooks regarding new opera by eliminating the fear and dislike that often colors the perception of new music. This point of contention regarding narrative creativity is still challenged. Though the future may trend differently, familiar stories — whether from literature, film, or cultural histories — have contributed to revival of new works, and MO's repertory exemplifies this notion.

[241] Brown and Novak, "Assessing the Intrinsic Impacts," 11.
[242] MO 2019 Impact Report, 7.

The Theatrical Creative Team of The Grapes of Wrath

Often described as crossover composer, Ricky Ian Gordon is an established twenty-first century operatic composer with an astonishing seven commissioned new operas in fifteen years: *The Grapes of Wrath* (MO 2007; OTSL 2017), *27* (OTSL 2014), *A Coffin in Egypt* (HGO 2014), *Morning Star* (Cincinnati Opera 2015*), The House Without a Christmas Tree* (HGO 2017), *Ellen West* (Opera Saratoga 2019), *Intimate Apparel* (Lincoln Center Theater 2022).[243] This does not include a number of song cycles, art songs, and voice and chamber works he has written in his illustrious forty-year career. Before studying Piano Performance and Drama at Carnegie Mellon University, he would travel into New York City from Long Island to immerse himself in music. Obsessed with twentieth-century opera, nearly every Saturday he would go to the Lincoln Center Library to score study or to the Metropolitan Opera to hear the stars. After these formative years, he composed art song and chamber works in the NYC classical scene during the late '80s and early '90s. 1994 was a particularly defining year for him: he sent around a cassette tape to opera companies in hopes of transitioning into the operatic field. David Gockley of HGO responded, and Gordon's first chamber opera premiered in 1996, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. This opera was dedicated to, and inspired by, his partner Jeffrey Grossi, who passed away from AIDS in 1996. Love and loss continue to be imbued in his compositions. As one journalist put it: "It would be too simple to imagine that Gordon has thrown off his grief and marched into a new chapter in his life. His work continues to be pervaded by an enormous sense of loss — or perhaps, more specifically, a search for home."[244]

[243] Examining his *œuvre* and where the commissions originate, Gordon has worked with three of the four pioneering companies.

[244] Brian Kellow, "The Lonely Hunter," *Opera News* (January 2007), 32.

Gordon's dramatic instincts and tuneful, melodic tendencies generate an accessible operatic experience that has achieved him a prominent spot among the opera composers of this generation. His fusion of musical styles follows in the footsteps of other twentieth-century American composers like Gershwin, Copland, Bernstein, and Sondheim. Indeed, Gordon said, as a young person, "no one said there is serious music and not serious music. So when people started saying crossover music, I said, what does that even mean? I am just a synthesis of all the music I love" from the Beatles to Britten or Joni Mitchell to Mahler.[245] His writing style surely breaks with academic systems that oppose tonality and melody. The score of *The Grapes of Wrath*, for example, is full of theatrical impulses and melodic motives along with moments of sweeping lyricism and choral majesty. These traits distinguish it as popular opera and, thus, have led to some criticism regarding Gordon's array of musical flavors. Yet the *Grapes of Wrath* garnered Gordon widespread praise by producers and audiences.

Gordon's chosen librettist, Michel Korie, has an accomplished theatrical background. Though musically trained on baroque harpsichord and pipe organ as a child, Korie was a reporter for *The Village Voice* for many years prior to his work in the music industry. Comfortable and successful in both the musical theatre realm and operatic world, his most notable operatic title is his 1995 collaboration with Stewart Wallace on *Harvey Milk* at HGO, and his most recognized Broadway work is his 2006 *Grey Gardens* collaboration with Scott Frankel and Doug Wright. Both have a documentary inclination, and Korie professes he is drawn to the

[245] Andrew Druckenbrod, "CMU Alumnus Turns Steinbeck's *Grapes* into Wine with Pittsburgh Opera." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* November 13, 2008. https://www.post-gazette.com/ae/2008/11/13/CMU-alumnus-turns-Steinbeck-s-Grapes-into-wine-with-Pittsburgh-Opera/stories/200811130441

politically-charged that boasts the breaking news. He even received the Marc Blitzstein Award in 2017, which is granted to artists who raise awareness of social issues in their work.

Simonson acted as both stage director and dramaturg on the *Grapes* project. Simonson brings a unique perspective to the team, as he is an active director in multiple mediums: theatre, film, and opera. Johnson and Simonson worked together for the first time on their first new opera, *Bok Choy Variations,* in the early 1990s. It was a learning experience that helped shape their professional relationship and honed their process for producing new works at MO, including *Silent Night*, *The Shining*, and *The Fix*. He was given the title of dramaturg, in addition to director, to ensure he was considered a part of the creative team. Simonson explains it like so:

> Dale was very invested in me not just as an opera director, but as somebody who had come from theater and was experienced at telling story. Because part of the mission of bringing *Grapes of Wrath* to life, and also, I think, Dale's lifelong mission in creating new operas is really leaning into the storytelling and making sure that an audience is engaged and invested in the characters. So when you say dramaturg, it really is about taking a look at the libretto from the first step and giving the librettist feedback on what's working and what's not. To maybe look for cuts, maybe to develop and flesh out some places that need fleshing out. And then because it's an opera and there's a musical language and music is a part of the storytelling, I was also involved with Ricky in terms of like 'do we really need four verses or can it be three?' (*laughs*) and things like that. And as a director, 'I need more transition music here' or 'I need less transition music.' And really, from the very beginning, it was also, 'what should this sound like?' and we were trading musical pieces back and forth because we wanted it to have a very American sound to it.[246]

Simonson emphasizes storytelling and the critical role of dramaturg. Moreover, the creators must actively collaborate throughout the composition process. The other members of the creative team working on the premiere production include Grant Gershon (conductor), Bruce Coughlin (co-orchestrator), Doug Varone (choreographer), Allen Moyer (set designer), Kärin Kopischke (costume designer), Robert Wierzel (lighting designer), Wendall K. Harrington (video designer),

[246] Simonson, Interview with author.

C. Andrew Mayer (sound designer), Doug Scholz-Carlson (assistant director), Heidi Spesard-Noble (assistant choreographer), Tom Watson (wig master), Janice Kimes (children's chorusmaster), Elisa Carlson (dialect coach), and Alexander Farino (production stage manager).

Genesis of Grapes*: A Grand Opera*

The idea for *Grapes* came directly from Johnson's desire to provide the Twin Cities operatic community with another new opera following the 1994 *Bok Choy Variations* commission. The artistic administrators, Johnson and Smith, along with their active board pondered "what kind of story would appeal to our audience?"[247] Johnsons recalls that they wanted to avoid a narrative that was pseudo-intellectual or generated apathy in the audience; likewise, he did not want to talk down to the audience. Generally speaking, MO's audience consists of educated, well-informed persons with access to many orchestral and theatrical experiences. Therefore, they needed to find an intriguing topic with the right level of sophistication. In 1995, Johnson and close friend and colleague Simonson were instructing at a summer festival at the (now closed) Berkshire Opera Company. Having just re-read *The Grapes of Wrath*, Johnson casually pitched the idea of making it into an opera to Simonson. Serendipitously, Simonson had performed the theatrical version of *Grapes* with the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago a few years prior. He knew it had been adapted for the stage and believed it had the potential to be reimagined in operatic form. They parted ways after the summer of dreaming, and the appeal of the *Grapes* story continued to capture Johnson's imagination. He began framing the Joad family in terms of Verdi scenarios:

> I'm very much in love with Verdi and with Verdi's early political operas. And I think at the core of all those political operas were this small group of people, which you began to

[247] Johnson, Interview with author.

> know, and you began to care about, and you began to bring into your heart. And they were fighting against this giant thing that was going on around them. In that case, it was the Austrians. And I started thinking of the Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath* as that group of people that were sort of being buffeted so strongly by all of the events around them. Things totally out of their control, and how would they exist? And the more I began to think, 'this piece could sing!' Now doing it is the hard part! […] Even today, in 2021, it just speaks to us so strongly about social change.[248]

Archived interviews along with my interviews indeed demonstrate a salient concern for the social aspects of the *Grapes* story, both as a reflection of a moment in history as well as speaking to the present socio-political milieu.

As the project started to take shape, Johnson hired Simonson as the director and dramaturg. Then the search for the composer and librettist began. Smith, Simonson, and Johnson desired a crossover approach, meaning it would be suitable for both the operatic and musical theater stages. Representing what they deemed "American style grand opera," the overriding structure was to be song-oriented, as opposed to through-composed. Johnson knew Ricky Ian Gordon as a captivating songwriter and contacted him in 1998 about composing *Grapes*. Simonson insisted the score "sound American" with thick chordal structures à la Copland or Ives. Gordon fit the bill. He felt the task was daunting but read the book on a plane ride to and from California. "Dazzled by it, and shaken, and utterly upset," Gordon thought, "If the book could do this to me, what could it do as an opera?"[249] From there, the commissioning process commenced. In 2007, Smith confirmed why he made the massive economic and creative commitment: "There are a lot of reasons to take a risk on a new opera. It's our mission to take risks, and what better risk to take than to put the energies of the company and the resources of

[248] Johnson, Interview with author.

[249] Nancy Van Valkenburg, "Bravo for *Grapes of Wrath*," *Standard-Enquirer,* May 11, 2007. https://www.rickyiangordon.com/press/works-reviews/the-grapes-of-wrath-standard-enquirer-2007/

the community behind a project that will really — can very much — have lasting value. Not only for us but for the opera field as a whole."[250]

How does one go about setting the 479 pages of the Great American Novel to music in operatic form? Korie was resistant at first when Gordon pitched the idea to him at the corner grocery store when buying milk for his coffee. Living a mere eight blocks away, the two would often bump into each other with a nonchalant we-should-collaborate-sometime greeting. Korie recalls this time as different. Gordon said to him, "'I finally came up with an idea for the two of us. Don't think it's crazy, but the Minnesota Opera wants to do *The Grapes of Wrath*.' I said, 'You're out of your mind.'"[251] But Korie went home and re-read the novel, considering whether it felt operatic in nature: "And it leapt off the page. It really did," he said. He noticed a natural three-part structure to the story: dislocation from Oklahoma, the exodus as the family journeys to California, and their alarming experiences in the not-so-promising promised land. With this revelation, Korie committed to the project and got to work convincing MO to hire him. Johnson recognized Korie's compelling socio-political perspective and theatrical experience with song-form. Korie showcased his ideas to the MO administrators by creating a thorough storyboard, complete with photoshopped visuals. His pitch sold them, and he officially joined the creative team.

Arts collaborators know it is often an uphill battle to achieve the rights to set famous, familiar, or copyrighted intellectual properties, and MO went through a legal journey to secure the rights to John Steinbeck's renowned story. For many years, Elaine Steinbeck, Steinbeck's

[250] "Making an Opera – *The Grapes of Wrath*." Twin Cities PBS, 26:45. February 3, 2007. https://www.tpt.org/making-an-opera-the-grapes-of-wrath/.

[251] Korie, Interview with author.

third wife, held the rights to the book and had turned away other composers. According to Korie, Elaine did not want an academic or atonal composer setting the story to music.[252] Johnson recalls that when attaining the rights, they were directed to many different lawyers. Simonson became the key: he happened to know Elaine personally, having met during the tour of the Steppenwolf *Grapes* in the late 1980s. He called her, explained the project, and she told him, "If you're involved, I'm completely for it. Let me tell my legal team."[253] Elaine gladly agreed to extend the rights, though it was still six more years of legal discussion before full permission was granted since the company, co-commissioner, composer, and librettist had to be vetted. By the time the rights were secured, a budget of nearly 2 million dollars was set, and Utah as the co-commissioning company was splitting the financial burden forty/sixty with MO.[254]

The creative team collaborated regularly throughout the writing process. Korie fondly recalls the writing process, working closely with Gordon in the early stages:

> I'd get a call, like an alarm clock every other day. [Ricky would say,] 'Oh, you've got to come over and hear this. You've got to come over, and then we'll go have coffee.' So there was constant collaboration, just like you write in musicals. It was so different than most academic kinds of opera construction. It was, really, and I think the whole Minnesota Opera Company caught that fever. Because, so often they have to do rep, or even if they do new productions, it's not a new work, or they're co-doing it with three other companies, or they're borrowing it. I know many of the employees of these companies are underpaid, though very hard working, but they love it. So when they decide to do a new work, every department gets to join in. The administration, the assistants, the press, the dramaturgy department, the scene shop, the costume shop, and a fever takes over the company. And it really is like the old Mickey and Judy, let's put on a show in the barn feeling.[255]

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[252] Korie, Interview with author.

[253] Simonson, Interview with author.

[254] Patrons Ruth and John Huss provided the capital to initiate the commission, while former General Director of Utah Symphony & Opera Anne Ewers was responsible for the co-commission. Other production sponsors that funded the project include The Shen Family Foundation, The Carlyle Fund, The Seaver Institute, NEA, OPERA America's Opera Fund, BNSF Foundation, Ann & Gordon Getty Foundation, St. Paul Travelers, Nordstrom. Program Notes, *The Grapes of Wrath (*Minnesota Opera: February 10-18, 2007), 7-10.

[255] Korie, Interview with author.

The energy and cooperative efforts for producing this grand opera were monumental. Johnson noted that it was "really extraordinary how long it took for us to think of the idea, get it in place, and then finally start working on it."[256] The timeline commences around 1995 in the Berkshires, when the initial concept was first casually discussed between Johnson and Simonson. With the premiere taking place in 2007, this project was more than a ten-year endeavor. When Korie finished the libretto, the three met in New York. Korie read the entire work aloud to them. Simonson remembers, it "was a really great way to hear it the first time. And Michael, of all the librettists I've worked with, he's the most poetic. His libretto, his words, can sound beautiful without music."[257] While Gordon was composing the music, Korie and Simonson would sometimes receive a burned CD in the mail. Other times, when Simonson was in New York, the three would convene at Gordon's home, and he would play and sing at the piano for them, or play MIDI tracks. When they were finally in the third phase, leading up to the production, the senior staff and creative team members would meet once a week, and when the production rehearsals began, the inner team met every day, in the morning and at night after the rehearsal.

Korie explains that the refinement process was similar to the Broadway theatre model, including highly collaborative workshops and rehearsals where the composer, librettist, and dramaturg were consistently present.[258] They were also able to try out acts separately. Johnson agrees that the workshop process set in motion with *The Grapes of Wrath* helped solidify workshop conventions now standardized at MO, including a first act workshop, second act workshop, and an orchestral workshop roughly six months before the premiere. Johnson

[256] Johnson, Interview with author.
[257] Simonson, Interview with author.
[258] Korie, Interview with author.

remembers how the first *Grapes* workshop "taught us a lot of stuff about the characters and how to tell the characters in the musical language. So in many ways, we kind of went back to the drawing board before the second workshop."[259] Simonson concurs the first workshop was critically informative as they moved ahead to constructing the next two acts. For example, with Gordon's crossover style, it became apparent there was too much musical theatre comedy happening during the Act 1 prison scene, so it was reimagined and helped influence the musical writing in the subsequent acts.

Excerpts of the opera were performed publicly at the Utah Arts Festival in 2005 as well as at the MO Center for a private performance for board members and patrons. Around this time, the composer, librettist, dramaturg/director, conductor, and both artistic directors of MO and Utah met in LA to make cuts to the mammoth score. Going through the opera note by note, they cut over 650 bars of music.[260] And still, the opera was well over three hours in length.[261] In 2006, a semi-staged first act workshop performance was given at the Utah Arts Festival, and this served as the orchestral workshop. In a short 2007 documentary chronicling the making of the opera, premiere conductor Grant Gershon mentioned the pressure but privilege to be in the room working on the piece in real time with the creative team: "Frankly, Michael has done some of his most brilliant work on the fly here when he hears a line that he's not that crazy about," Gershon said. "He'll leave the room, come back five or ten minutes later and have something absolutely

[259] Johnson, Interview with author.

[260] Tim Gihring, "*Grapes of Wrath*," *Minnesota Monthly*, January 12, 2007. https://www.minnesotamonthly.com/arts-entertainment/grapes-of-wrath/;

[261] The length of an opera can be a fiscal consideration because of orchestral fees. If an opera exceeds three hours, including intermissions, orchestra unions often require overtime fees.

brilliant to offer to the singers. And Ricky as well, he's tailoring the roles to these singers as they're singing them and as he's hearing it."[262]

Both composer and librettist incorporated suggestions from the performers. For instance, Rosalind Elias, a noted MET soprano, asked to be cast as Granma in the original production. Though she was told it was a smaller cameo-type role, during rehearsals she asked for an aria and a more dramatic death scene. Roger Honeywell (Casy) asked Korie why the preacher, who has lost his faith, employs such biblical language. Korie responded with, "You know what, you're right. It shouldn't be in that section, and I rewrote it."[263] During the No. 8 "Us" aria, Deanne Meek (Ma Joad) could not find meaning in a flower vase:

> Every time we'd rehearse that, for weeks the singer would say, 'I don't know what to do here! This vase.' And finally, I said, 'You know what, it's not her problem. It's mine.' It's a climactic moment in the music, and the words aren't matching it. So, I changed it to a child's lock of hair. It rhymes, and no problems from then on in. She had the stuff that she needed. I listened very closely to the singers. I'm not sure that that's that normal in opera. It is closer to theater where there's a lot of give and take. It's not: finish it and slip it under the door, and I'll see you opening night. I was grateful to Minnesota Opera, and the other companies that joined, giving us the opportunities that we needed to make it good and revise it.[264]

Though the practices Korie describes were not yet commissioning standards in previous decades, operatic case studies from the late twentieth-century to now exhibit the industry change. For example, baritone Mark McCrory premiered a role in Bolcom's *A View From the Bridge* at Lyric Opera of Chicago in 1999, and he shared his experience during the rehearsal process of that opera. Similar to Korie's account, the composer and librettist were highly involved and willing to receive feedback from the singing actors.

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[262] "Making an Opera – *The Grapes of Wrath*."
[263] Korie, Interview with author.
[264] Ibid.

The set, technical, and costumery requirements were enormous for the *Grapes* premiere. Allen Moyer's set design was true spectacle on a massive scale, seeking to realize Korie and Simonson's visions with lots of complicated pieces: an upstage catwalk that created multiple tiers, chain-link fences on the flies, projections, and multiple backdrops, including one of purely corrugated, rusted metal and another of weathered wood. The vintage 1929 Ford truck set piece was visually striking but created many challenges for crew and cast. Needing to be hustled around the stage, while also accommodating a dozen or so cast members, the stage crew emptied it of its heaviest parts, put it on triple swivel casters on a customized carriage system, and rebuilt the bed so it was extendable. The eight full-time MO stagehand crew members started construction in November of 2006 to be ready for the February premiere.[265] The costumes, by Kärin Kopischke, were inspired by the photographs taken when Steinbeck traveled to California to chronicle the real-life happenings for the *San Francisco News* exposé. Each of the principals had four versions of their costumes, which went through four levels of distressing to depict the wear and tear of the journey and their descent further into poverty.

With the stagecraft demands, the week leading up to the premiere was especially chaotic. All the interviewees shared lasting memories from the final rehearsals. Korie remembers a particular dress rehearsal, which Johnson sarcastically calls Tuesday Tech Hell. The opera was disastrously not coming together: beyond inaudible singers, the stage was a mess with garage doors visibly coming up and down, people walking around in the rafters, the struggle of shifting the giant red truck around the stage with eleven people in it. Korie said it looked like a terrible

[265] "Stagehands craft set for Minnesota Opera's *Grapes of Wrath*," *Workday Minnesota,* February 7, 2007. https://workdayminnesota.org/stagehands-craft-set-for-minnesota-operas-grapes-of-wrath/.

scene from *Bandwagon* or *Springtime for Hitler.* Johnson even wondered if they had made a huge mistake. But Smith was known for reminding everyone to "wait for the lights," which would elevate and unite all the elements.[266] Despite the horrific Tuesday rehearsal, Wednesday presented a glimmer of hope, with its afternoon and evening rehearsals. The lighting began to work, and the singing actors committed fully, filling the hall with resonant sound. Johnson says,

> You could start seeing the arc of the show. And it was very moving, I have to say. The end of the first act really kind of gets you, and then the end of the second act destroys you. And then the end of the third act is just amazing. So Ricky and Michael really understood arc and pace. And all of those things that keep the audience invested in the storytelling.[267]

And on opening night, the audience showed this to be true by giving a screaming standing ovation at the end of the first act. Korie believes there is a miraculous aspect to operatic production, noting how two nights after the Tuesday Tech Hell all the elements converged:

> From being in opera, it looks like it's not coming together. And then suddenly, it does, magically. Magic! A lot of opera companies and a lot of people in opera say, 'Don't worry, we'll get it there.' And in theater, that does not happen. If you're not prepared two nights before, you're not prepared two nights later. It takes as long as you're given. And in opera, you're given a lot shorter time. One of the lighting designers for my show *War Paint* on Broadway, also lit the show that we did in St. Louis for the shorter version of *Grapes of Wrath* [2017]. And I said, 'I can't believe you had six weeks to take over the lights from *War Paint*, and here you're lighting this show in three days. How are you doing it?' He says, 'We make it work. Now go away, because I have to do it.' [268]

For better or worse, this speaks to a larger industry issue. With scarce budgets, technical and administrative staff are often expected to do high quality work in exceptionally limited timeframes. But the show must go on, and that it did in the case of the *Grapes of Wrath,* playing to sold out audiences of 2,200 on February 10, 13, 15, 17, 18, 2007 at the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts.

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[266]After Smith retired in 2011, Johnson fondly continued the motto.
[267] Johnson, Interview with author.
[268] Korie, Interview with author.

Johnson fondly remembers enthusiastic responses leading up to the production from invited audiences who watched rehearsals and previews. However, many commented on the length. He would ask them, "Did you want to leave?" And they would say, "No, it was really good."[269] He addresses how audiences have been conditioned by the two-hour Puccini hits like *La Bohème* and *Tosca* but believes that despite the length, the *The Grapes of Wrath* "hit those marks to engage the audience emotionally, and I think that's what happened. It wasn't intellectual. It was really right here — just in the heart. And the musical style was so engaging. Even though it was complex, it was very engaging to the ear, and the audience could get it."[270] As Johnson describes, the music and drama are accessible and audience-centric despite the opera's length. Sound balance was another qualm. MO did not want to amplify the vocalists. However, this caused persistent balance issues between singers and orchestra. A Broadway orchestrator, Coughlin, co-orchestrated the score with Gordon. Simonson believes there was a consensus "that it was over orchestrated. The singers had a lot of trouble getting their melodies and lines to cut through the symphonic wall because they were being constantly doubled up by horns and winds."[271] Through the orchestra rehearsals leading up to the premiere, as well as afterward at the regional premieres in Utah and Pittsburgh, "Ricky was constantly stripping away [instrumental] musical lines that were challenging for the singers. You just couldn't hear the singing. And I think it's because in musical theater, they have microphones. And I remember Ricky saying, 'Can't we just mic the singers?' It's like, 'No! you can't. It'll be insulting. You'll ruin their careers!'"[272] And in 2007, this stigma was true. Aside from John Adams' operas, it was not

[269] Johnson, Interview with author.
[270] Ibid.
[271] Simonson, Interview with author
[272] Ibid.

welcomed to enhance singing in the opera house. But just one year later with the Pittsburgh production, body mics were employed by all singers in order to create more balance between the heavy orchestration and vocalists. As will be explored in the sound design section of Chapter 7, this is a controversial subject for the traditionally-entrenched art form, but, on the whole, amplification is no longer deemed insulting or career-breaking and can be used subtly as an artistic tool.

Simonson recalls the opening night of *Grapes* being one of the most extraordinary premieres he has experienced:

> The place was buzzing. People were excited to see it. It was also a lot of adrenaline because I think it's the only opera I ever worked on where we continued to tech the show the night before we open. (*laugh together*) Usually that's... we gave the principals the day off, but we begged the chorus to volunteer their time and come in and do an extra rehearsal because we hadn't finished teching the show. So, there was a lot of anticipation, but there was a feeling that we had something really special on our hands. And everyone was hoping and praying that we would get through the show that first night, but the ovation at the end was incredible. And you know, people I know who I'd invited to the show after the second act — after Noah's death — they came and found me and they were weeping. You know that you have something special on your hand.[273]

Not only was it sold out, but people were scalping tickets on the street for more than one hundred dollars over ticket price. When Gordon was asked what he hoped the audience would take away from experiencing *The Grapes of Wrath*, he said, "first and foremost, you want them to be moved. And then you want them to be moved to compassion, moved to empathy, moved to action. But also moved to go to the opera more. Moved to realize that opera is a resonant form now. It has something to say to us living right now, today."[274] These sentiments clearly capture Everett's transhistoricism claims or the emotional resonance WolfBrown found to be intrinsic to

[273] Ibid.

[274] Peter Whorf, Interview with Ricky Ian Gordon for WRCJ, 14:16. May 8, 2019. https://soundcloud.com/wrcj909fmhd1/ricky-ian-gordon-may-8-2019

impact. The *Grapes* narrative transcends time and place, and the music intensifies the emotional response.

Familiar Story: Americana Literature

A family forced from their home by a government institution due to an ecological disaster. Enticed by the promise of solid work, the family migrates to find a new life. At a universal level, these natural forces and hope for a better lifestyle could apply to a myriad of historical moments. This framework sets up the narrative of John Steinbeck's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, published in 1939. Based on field notes and authentic observations, the book illuminates the plight of migrant workers in California who escaped the Dust Bowl, though often forcibly by bank foreclosures. Steinbeck's fictional Joad family, traveling from Sallisaw, Oklahoma, load up in one rickety Hudson truck. With around one hundred dollars to their name, they drive Highway 66 to California in the hopes of gaining advertised high wages picking oranges. With a socialist subtext, the story explores multi-generational familial relationships, a poverty-stricken America, and greedy government structures. Humility, belonging, hunger, tenacity, humanity, sacrifice, hatred, compassion — the list of complex emotional themes in *Grapes* is a treasure trove of the human condition. Moreover, *The Grapes of Wrath* is the epitome of a familiar story. Steinbeck captures nationalistic American virtues of a folk people, steeped in biblical beliefs, navigating their place amongst corrupt capitalism. Simonson knew this story would be epic and engaging if set right. With the goal of making it "an opera for all time," he wanted Korie to lean into the inherent mythology of Steinbeck's story:

> There's a reason why it's considered the greatest American novel. And I think that Steinbeck was able to tap into something that every American could relate to. That every human being could relate to and that it works on the foundation of mythology that all of

> us understand at a subconscious level. There's something very Joseph Campbell about it, in that Tom Joad is a reluctant hero. He really resists his call to arms until the very end.[275]

Campbell's seminal monograph compares cultural myths related to the hero's quest. While Tom Joad does not enthusiastically embrace his role as a hero, he does represent the male protagonist who leads the family through their tumultuous journey of trials and transformation. Both librettist Pulitzer in Chapter 4 and Simonson refer to Campbell's hero journey as an informative framing device.[276] Religious inferences are also extensive:

> There's something tragic and cathartic about what happens to the Joads. There's a lot of biblical reference in Jim Casey, in the initials JC for Jesus Christ. That he is a sacrifice, a sacrifice for all men. He gives himself up. He dies for our sins. There's the imagery of crossing the desert. Escaping enslavement. Going to the promised land: the land of milk and honey. I mean, it's all over that book. It's very religious. And Madonna and Child, the last image of the opera.[277]

Agreeing wholeheartedly, I argue that though historical, the core social issues of *Grapes* continue to be relevant and relatable with contemporary audiences, who may identify with the depicted wealth disparity or see the Dust Bowl as an allusion to our current man-made environmental concerns or connect with the rampant religious undertones.

The timely nature of the operatic version of *Grapes of Wrath* premiering in 2007 was prophetic, in a way. Only a year later, in 2008, the banking and housing industries collapsed. *The Grapes of Wrath*, set during the Great Depression nearly eighty years prior, demonstrates a similar event between corrupt banking and a crumbling economy. Johnson describes the parallel further:

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[275] See Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

[276] Everett's analysis of John Adam's *Doctor Atomic* also references the significance of Campbell's monomyth too. Everett, *Reconfiguring Myth and Narrative in Contemporary Opera*, 155.

[277] Simonson, Interview with author. Another religious undertone baked into the original grand opera version is thirty-three scenes, an allusion to the age of Christ.

> The story of *The Grapes of Wrath*, with the sort of banking industry crushing the nation, it's exactly what happened. The banking industry crushed the nation again in 2008. And the people got it. And they got the sense that opera, even though some people may feel it's an archaic art form, that opera can actually talk about current events and current situations, and how those current events are crushing people in the case of *The Grapes of Wrath*. It crushed people. And it did in 2008.[278]

A year after the premiere, an editorial in the *Star Tribune* pinpointed the opera as a foretelling of the economic collapse. Johnson was struck by this, noting it is rare for an opera to foreshadow social events. But he believes "opera can be a very strong force for social change."[279]

When adapting the prose into singable text, Korie considered the unique book construction with its inclusion of interstitial chapters. Steinbeck encapsulates the people of the Depression at two levels: personal and universal. Amidst the lengthy story of the Joad family's personal journey, inserted intercalary chapters recount the social conditions of the traveling farm communities. These chapters function on a universal level, zooming out from the Joads to depict the economic and politic strife of society at large. Korie was hyper-aware of the abundance of socio-political commentary crystallized in the universal interstitial chapters:

> The theme that came out most strongly was the total disinterest of the capitalist system in the plight that they had created for the people. They say, 'It's not my fault,' and pass the buck to some other entity: go to the government, go to this, go to that. There's nothing I can do about it, no one would take responsibility. And at the time [of creation], we were having migrants trying to cross the border from Mexico to get work and food for their families. And there was a huge resistance starting at that time. So, it fulfilled everything that I like about operas, which is that it had a classic structure and it merged politics with story. […] This is a way to deal with the issues of today: through a historical lens. And people will come in thinking they're seeing a classic and about twenty minutes into it, they'll realize it's about today. It's relevant as ever. I call that a stealth opera. *(laugh together)* That's my stealthy agenda to write about the world we live in without saying so and letting the audience figure it out. And seeing something about America and the cycles of our lives through the decades.[280]

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[278] Johnson, Interview with author.
[279] Ibid.
[280] Korie, Interview with author.

Korie's stealth opera is, indeed, layered. In televised archival interviews with librettist William Hoffman before the premiere, Gordon and Korie mentioned the relevant social themes. The *Grapes* narrative is set during the Dust Bowl with a corrupt government system; whereas, the timeless themes attached to these components translated to contemporary 2007 topics, like Hurricane Katrina and immigration. It can be argued ecological dilemmas, natural disasters, and political divisions are just as pertinent to audiences today, circa 2021. That is what, I contend, makes this story transcend time. Though historical fiction, its inherent social themes are not beholden to time and place.

Beyond the contemporary transparent themes, Korie's attention to the content within the intercalary chapters made the opera adaption distinct. He wove together the story differently than John Ford's film adaptation (1940) or Frank Galati's straight play (1988). Drawing on the universal stories, he melds many of the extra situations into the Joad's storyline. Two distinct additions include the used car salesman pawning off junk[281] and the vivid description of hopeless migrants huddling from continuous rain in crowded barns: no work from flooding, no money to buy food, no relief from pneumonia outbreaks.[282] The chorus element also sets the opera apart from other storytelling mediums. The epic-sized chorus functions like a Greek chorus, filling in details beyond just the Joads and relaying social criticism in a way that is only suitable in the operatic genre. Korie believes this is what makes his telling unique and why "other versions are just pure unadulterated sad."[283] He relied heavily on the interstitial content to infuse layers of meaning, both upbeat and politically biting, into the narrative.

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[281] See John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York, NY: Viking Press, Inc., 1939), Chapter 7. Built into the Joad's story in the opera Act 1, Scene 7 "Good Machine."

[282] Steinbeck, *Grapes,* Chapter 29. Built into the Joad's story in Act 3, Scene 9 "The Day the Rain Began."

[283] Korie, Interview with author.

A large cast is required to bring the plethora of characters to life. At the hyper level, Korie views the familial unit as one character, who gradually loses its limbs. Simonson sees this as Tom's story, and Korie also identifies Tom, Ma, and Rosasharn as the three critical characters leading the narrative. Johnson believes Ma is the main character, as matriarch, while Rosasharn is following in her footsteps as the next generation. Clear character arcs transpire for these three characters amidst the larger, bustling onstage chaos: Tom as a criminal turned activist; Ma as submissive supporter to leader; Rosasharn as a naïve, selfish child to humbled citizen. With time constraints and dramatic pacing in mind, Korie centers on these characters, having to eliminate many persons from the novel like fellow migrants the Wilsons. Despite compressing the characters from novel to opera, the list still lengthy:[284]

Principal Characters

1. Tom Joad, baritone
2. Ma Joad, mezzo-soprano
3. Rosasharn, soprano
4. Jim Casy, tenor
5. Pa Joad, baritone
6. Uncle John, baritone
7. Granma, mezzo-soprano
8. Granpa, tenor
9. Connie Rivers, baritone
10. Noah, bass-baritone
11. Al, tenor
12. Ruthie, child
13. Winfield, child

Featured Roles

Played by three men (tenor, baritone, bass) two women (soprano, mezzo-soprano), and chorus

Oklahoma Croppers (Farmers)
Prison Guard (McAlester Penitentiary)
Truck Driver (Oklahoma Oil Transport)
Muley Graves (Evicted Farmer)
Muley's Wife (Evicted Farmer Woman)
Pete Fowler (Tractor Operator)
Senator (Oklahoma Politician)
Man in Suit (Repossesses Farms)
Constable (Enforces Evictions)
Traffic Cop (Route 66)

[284] Though the 2017 revision was reformulated on a much smaller and malleable budget, it does not call for a cut in principal or featured roles. It does, however, not employ a large chorus.

Three Pump Guys (Route 66)
Ragged Man (A Cropper)
Mae (Waitress)
Val (Cook)
Bill (Trucker)
Joe (Trucker)
Two Inspectors (Agricultural Officers)
Starving Man (Boy's Father)
Cropper Woman (Hooverville Squatter)
Contractor (Migrant Workers)
Deputy (Vigilante)
Man (Cropper Woman' S Husband)
Two Deputies (Local Law Enforcement)
Gate Guard (Government Camp)
Peach Checker (Counts Peaches)
Commissary Clerk (Hooper Ranch Store)
Cabin Mistress (Hooper Cabins)
Washroom Guard (At Hooper Ranch)
Patrol Guard (By Fence)
Lou, Tim, And Jake (Strikers)
George (Vigilante)
Bill (Vigilante)
State Trooper (Outside Vineyard)
Farmer (A Small Cotton Farm)
Boy (in Barn)

MO's Residence Artist Training program artists workshopped and premiered many of these roles, including the principal Al and many of the featured ensemble roles.

Korie employs only a small amount of the Steinbeck dialogue, especially for Tom "because a lot of his dialogue was very shortened, 'Yup!' 'Welp!' 'Uh, guess so!' You can't sing that. And so much of the dialogue was within his narrative. And I had to create a libretto with dialogue that could be sung that sounded like Steinbeck," though very little of it was Steinbeck.[285] For example, Act 1, Scene 2 begins Tom's story more dramatically than the book. While the source text delineates Tom's hitchhiking journey back to his family, Korie emphasizes Tom's release from jail, inventing the jailer and Tom's interaction with him to raise the stakes. Then, Korie selected the details he believed would provide nuance to the storytelling:

> There were also indications that he might have been raped in prison, or there was some kind of homosexual stuff going on there. Because his mother heard it — I thought it was so weird when I read about that in Steinbeck. I said, 'How advanced. I'm not going to leave this out, like everybody else does.' It's very subtle. But that's what I mean by subtext. You don't have to announce it. If the actor just gives his Ma a look, 'How you know about stuff like that? I didn't get it—I, I kept away from stuff like that!' That's also why I chose the hook, 'I keep my nose free of trouble.' [Tom's Aria, Act 1, Scene 2] Because I knew that theme would keep coming back. You know, it's a little bit I'm reading this book, and

[285] Korie, Interview with author.

> so much of it came to me during that first reread. 'Wow,' I said, 'This, this, this, this. And I started organizing it in my mind.'[286]

His instinctual response to the source did, indeed, manifest as a libretto ripe with subtly and nuance, arguably, a difficult task to master in the operatic genre. With a keen mind about how the words could translate into musical and rhythmic motifs, the "Nose Free of Trouble" melodic theme is reiterated and sequenced many times in the aria.

Matriarch Ma Joad also leads the family through its tumultuous journey, alongside Tom. While all the men eventually leave, she is the one who holds the rest of the family together. Her aria, No. 8 "Us," serves as a critical moment in Act 1. While everyone else grumbles about the move to California, Ma emphasizes how material concerns are not the essence of who they are. Korie gleaned this idea, and built it into Ma's character, through a story told in one of the interstitial chapters, Chapter 9. Steinbeck portrays an unidentified people forced to sell their possessions at abysmally low prices, desperate to leave the miserable memories of the bank repossessing their property. The thought of starting over in the rich land of California gives a glimmer of hope. Realization sets in and the unnamed person realizes they can never start again like a child:

> The anger of a moment, the thousand pictures, that's us. This land, this red land, is us; and the flood years and the dust years and the drought years are us. We can't start again. The bitterness we sold to the junk man — he got it all right, but we have it still. And when the owner men told us to go, that's us; and when the tractor hit the house, that's us until we're dead.[287]

Finding beauty in these sentiments, Korie imbeds this concept, along with a few paraphrased quotations in Ma's expressions as she decides what the family will take and leave:

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[286] Ibid.
[287] Steinbeck, *Grapes,* 90.

> We can start again, maybe… Though not like a baby can.
> Grown men and women set in their ways, we're all that's been. The stuff of our days.
> And now, how to decide what goes, what stays…?
> This dead land, is us. All its hardship, is us.
> And the flood years. And the drought years. And the dust years, all us.
> When the owner threw us off, is us. When the tractor hit the house, is us.
> The table that we sold; the cupboard and the chairs; the tubs and tanks; the piggybanks;
> This corncob pipe, Lord know I used to cuss. A postcard from a fair;
> A *Pilgrim's Progress* book; Feathers for a hat I didn't wear. A child's lock 'o hair. (*etc.*)[288]

While the drought years, and the dust years, and the flood years are directly quoted, Korie concocts the other items, inspired by the written rhythm Steinbeck employs in that chapter. Using the material from the generic chapter, Ma's character is fleshed out to be sympathetic and down-to-earth. Each item Ma rattles off could spark an association or response from a family member on stage or a listener in the audience. Korie notes, too, the word "us" became an important notion, on its many levels of application, after writing this aria. The "us" functions as familial identity but also social identity. Many instances in the book Steinbeck mentions "I" becoming "we" in terms of a socio-economic people banding together to survive unfair treatment and alluding to strength in numbers. "Us," then, becomes all-encompassing of these broader ideas when translated into the opera. To aurally demarcate the importance of the text "is us," Gordon calls for an eighth rest before the two-word phrase in each of its many appearances.

Each of the creative team members entered into the vast *Grapes* story from various inspired angles. For Gordon, it was "us." For Korie, his imagination ignited with the transformative power of the rain. Simonson started his process with the water; the creek to be exact. When reminiscing on these impetus moments, Korie recalls Gordon was inspired by the "us" metaphor when he gave him the Act 1 libretto. He began composing from that, which

[288] Ricky Ian Gordon and Michael Korie, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York, NY: Carl Fischer, 2009), 90-92.

enabled him "to find leitmotifs," according to Korie. Gordon would "go backwards and forward from there. Whereas, in the theater tradition, you start from the first song, and you change and you edit, and you rewrite, you put it together like a mosaic. But in opera, the composer needs to carry it with leitmotif and unified composition."[289] Indeed, in a 2007 interview during the rehearsal process, Gordon confirmed his overall writing style is rooted in his conceptions of musical gesture. For Ma, he was "looking for utter simplicity — that grounded earth-mother quality. So for her, I didn't compose consecutively. I skipped far ahead into the act and composed 'Us' before I set her duet with Tom, 'Promise Me, Tommy.' I selected key moments or musical hotspots because once you have them, you know what your thematic material is."[290] Cleverly, as Tom begins to take on familial responsibility, Gordon reprises the "Us" theme for the Act 1 Finale as the family bids farewell to their home. Still in the key of C, it is set an octave lower in Tom's baritone range against a more active and swelling accompaniment. Korie starts the Steinbeck quotation, but extends out the line to be more encompassing:

> This red land is us. All its hardship is us.
> And the flood years. And the drought years. And the durst years all us.
> So we hold the ones we lose… in here. (*touches heart*)[291]
> And protect the ones we have… with this. (*makes a fist*)
> Till we find a place to live, a home for us to stay,
> our home is where we are, 'cause *us* is U.S.A!
> (*Stage direction: The rear garage wall opens to reveal the highway, Route 66, stretching on forever in the distance.*)
> Texaco is a gas pump. Greyhound's a goddamn bus. Route Sixty-Six, the highway… is us.
> *(Following Tom and Noah, the people head off through the rear garage wall and down the long highway as the curtain descends*).[292]

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[289] Korie, Interview with author.

[290] Program notes, *The Grapes of Wrath*, 15.

[291] The piano/vocal score includes thorough stage directions throughout. At the beginning of each number as well as during numbers. Korie wrote all of these with the intention of offering his clear idea of how the opera could transpire. He notes that sometimes stage directions are written after the fact to record what occurred during the production. However, Korie wrote the printed stage directions in the libretto in its final form.

[292] Gordon and Korie, *Grapes*, 141-43.

Granpa represents the Joad family's connection to the land. When he dies toward the end of Act 1 (Scene 11), the family is detached from its Oklahoman roots. As Tom's "Us" reprise follows Casy's dust-to-dust eulogy, Korie broadens the idea of what makes up "us" to not just the red land but now the country and its roads.[293]

Korie supplied Gordon with the complete first act as the initial part of the process. Korie recalls this being the most difficult act to write, as he struggled to find the right opening line. He imagined the audience coming to the opera with a plethora of predisposed ideas: moving pictures of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl; of director John Ford's vision from the 1940 movie; of dejected people looking at lost crops and a piece of grain drooping out of the side of their mouths. Yet Korie desired to shock the audience from the onset, designing an unpredictable opening that was a vision of the past in verdant splendor. Inspired by the first intercalary chapter, Chapter 1, he envisioned the stage starting from the last rains that left the earth covered in grassy green. Thinking practically, he immediately called a set designer to see if his dream could materialize, asking him, "Can I dramatize the Dust Bowl on stage in five minutes? Begin with a field of verdant, growing corn? Have it die in front of the audience's eyes, sink into the stage, and everything turn to dust?" The set designer, Moyer who ended up designing the show, assured him it was possible. He explained three methods: "the very expensive way, the expensive way, and the less expensive way." Korie responded, "'Good. That's all I want to know, as long as I can do it.' And then I was able to write the first line. And then the whole act almost wrote itself."[294] When it came time distribute funds in the scenery budget, Moyer asked Korie to identify his top

[293] The "us" textual theme is indirectly referred to in the intercalary chapters 5 and 14. From my reading, it appears this is another example of Korie being informed by the broad chapters to bring detail to the Joad story.

[294] Korie, Interview with author.

priorities. Korie insisted on the grandiose, involved opening scene as well as the dramatic creek scene in the Act 2 finale.

The Act 2 finale features the suicidal drowning of Noah. It was Korie's "biggest gamble" in regards to elaborating and deviating from the primary source text. While Steinbeck has him wander off ambiguously, Korie has Noah sacrifice his life in an emotionally ravaging scene:

> I knew that people would want to leave after Act 2 and go home because it was late. So I moved the death of Noah, and I actually made it death. In the book, it just says Noah wandered away down the street. It happens earlier. And you never hear from Noah again. But my instinct told me that I could make a huge big deal out of Noah. And do the most abstract thing in the opera that would leave people so unsettled, that they wouldn't feel like going home. Because it's the saddest thing in the whole opera. It's tragic. And it was invented by me. I was really worried that the Steinbeck estate would make me cut it.[295]

The Steinbeck Estate had approval over the libretto, but they did not respond within the thirty-day contractual time limit, thus missing their deadline to respond to libretto amendments and forfeiting their rights of approval. Korie recalls, "I got away with every liberty that I took, which I'm glad because those liberties made the opera work in a very constructed kind of way."[296] Johnson calls Noah's sacrificial scene one of the best MO has ever done: "The way Eric and the set designers staged it, it showed him sort of literally jumping into the water. And then the lights went out and he was lifted up behind this screen. And then, as she [Ma] sang the lullaby, you could see him just floating down to the bottom of the water."[297] This image was the first Simonson pictured when working on *Grapes*. Before the director planned anything else, he worked with the designers to technically create that captivating scene. A scrim descends from the flies to the floor. Behind it, the body looks like it is floating in blue water through upward shining

[295] Ibid.
[296] Ibid.
[297] Johnson, Interview with author.

lights and projections. Like Johnson's recollections, Simonson agrees it was magnificent and one of his favorite stage images he has created. Simonson's staging coupled with Gordon's swelling, sentimental sonic underpinning and Korie's bold story choice culminate in this highlight of the opera that packs a punch:

> I don't know if everyone in the audience picked up on it, but before Noah is singing, and he takes off his shoes. And he fills his coveralls with rocks. Then he walks off stage and the lights fade. And the next time you see him, he is floating in midair drowning. And then Ma Joad comes on stage in a flashback carrying baby Noah. And she sits down and she takes off the baby's baby shoes and puts them right next to Noah's shoes. The music is very emotive. It's very unabashedly sentimental. And I remember — it's a massive opera, it's four hours long, and it was new, and we were just racing the clock the entire time — but I remember when Ricky came in and saw the staging for the first time in the rehearsal room. And I'm watching to make sure that the singers are supposed to be going where they are. And I look over at Ricky, and he's shaking, like this [bent over with hands on face], weeping. I thought, 'Oh, wait, that's the greatest compliment, isn't it? But you can't do that because you composed this.' Of course, you're going to be moved by it; you created it! (*laughs*) [298]

The temporal constraints of live theatre were dispelled in this high impact scene. The plot twist heightens the intensity of Noah's disappearance, while the flashback staging emphasizes Noah's beginning and end. The musical soundscape enhances the dramatic development, too. Noah's aria "I Can Be a Help" (Act 2, No.8) employs a pervasive jaunty dotted figure in a diatonic major tonality as he builds an ark to help the family (i.e. filling his wood pails with rocks so that he can sink into the creek and sacrifice himself). The simple step-wise melodies evoke a childlike sincerity. The texture thickens as the chorus echoes Noah's main melody. His last line reveals his attained sense of belonging: "Noah got his wish. / Helped his loved ones. / Ev'ryone's a help… / Now me."[299] As he drowns, the full orchestration punctuates with effectual percussion and a melodic brass section devolves into non-diatonic dissonance. Seamlessly, the soundscape thins to

[298] Simonson, Interview with author.
[299] Gordon and Korie, *The Grapes of Wrath*, 253-54.

a lyrical lullaby with young Ma rocking baby Noah to the text "No innocence / as the dream of a simple child. / Breath easily, / softly as a breeze's ripples / on a stream."[300] Noah continues to sink during the flashback and the music slowly slips into a haunting quality crafted through oscillating augmented chords. The music powerfully enhances the gripping, sacrificial suicide. It is no surprise Gordon was so affected when he heard his dramatically-inspired musical ideas realized in rehearsal. Nor that members of the audience were emotionally shattered and crying at the close of Act 2.[301]

Like the old adage about Verdi's melodies sung in the streets post-show, Johnson hoped the tunes of *Grapes* would be hummed afterwards too. Though the opera is not entirely melodic, with its many quasi-*accompagnato*-recitative dialogue settings, there are multiple motives that have the potential to keep playing pervasively: The Last Time There was Rain, It's Not My Fault, Head Down the Plenty Road, One Star, Is Us, Truck Drivers.[302] Of these motives, I conjecture It's Not My Fault is most likely to stick in a listener's mind. This motif first appears in Act 1, Scene 5 and is sequenced, repeated, and transformed throughout the number. It also makes many appearances as the opera progresses. Gordon syllabically sets the text "it's not my fault" to a short-short-short-long rhythm (three eighth notes followed by a quarter note). Intervallicly, the motif repeats the same pitch on the short values and drops a fourth on the long. This simple but highly powerful motif is reminiscent of Beethoven's beloved Fifth Symphony elements (short-short-short-long with repeated pitches that drop a minor third), which when repeated persistently tends to stick. Moreover, in regards to the dramatic subtext of this line, Korie

[300] Ibid., 257-58.
[301] Johnson, Interview with author.
[302] I have named these motives according to the title of the number. Full motivic analysis is out of the scope of this study but is ideal future research.

contends Rosasharn is the answer to the "it's not my fault" mentality.[303] Her personal transformation to maturity is revealed in her socially responsible act of human kindness when she offers the starving man her breast milk in the final scene. Originally, Korie captured Rosasharn's naiveté in a section of recitative, but Gordon wanted more from her character. He felt Rosasharn needed a dream. Korie remembered the dust-filled sky and thought about one star shining through. Recognizing the symbolism of the star to her dreams, he developed this into not only a soaring duet to build a deeper connection between her and Connie, but also brought it back as the closing notion of the whole opera. Although not a reminiscent motif in a literal sense, the act of reprising thematic material generates a familiar effect for the listener.

When listening and outlining the dramatic structure of this opera, I distinguished Korie's attention to crafting contrast into the structure. He sets up the tragic deaths of each grandparent in both acts to be preceded by hopeful, intimate love duets between Connie and Rosasharn. For instance, near the end of Act 1, No. 11, the lyrical and optimistic longing of the One Star duet is immediately followed by the death of the Granpa and Casy's prayer, where he soberly speaks of a murky future. This contrast carefully controls the emotional trajectory of the listener, and Korie agrees he intently crafted this chain of events. He expounds, saying, Steinbeck's book "began life as muckraking. And that's the spirit in which he wrote it. He was angry. He had socialist politics. And he saw much that was wrong. He wanted to tell it in almost a journalistic fashion. So, to have dissected it and done it as a series of set pieces would have intellectualized and robbed it of all emotion. Almost everything in the opera balances out with something else."[304] His ensemble-building in Act 2, No. 2 is another example of dramatic balance. A duet between Casy and Uncle

[303] Korie, Interview with author.
[304] Korie, Interview with author.

John turns into a duet between Rosasharn and Connie into a quartet that builds into a polyphonic septet. Korie elucidates Verdi as his muse:

> In Verdi operas, you have sextets. And it's glorious. And I can't think of any American operas lately where they're writing classical Verdi sextets. But I can do that if I take three different parts of this truck, split the truck up, turn it around, and show the different points of view. So, they [Connie and Rosasharn] are trying to make love not realizing that their grandmother has died during the night right nearby. I always tried to instill some hope before, POW![305]

During the septet, each of the characters sing about the internal predicaments of their given stage in life: youthful lust, middle-aged musings, and life's end. Cinematic orchestration enhances the psychology of this scene, too. Impacting audience experience, the dramatic pacing maintains momentum and instills powerful unpredictability. In fact, after speaking with Korie, it is clear structure drives his writing style. He always thinks in terms of structure and how it will pay off in the end. Korie mentions Oscar Hammerstein as the original master of this technique. The musical *Carousel* is "a crying machine. It's calibrated to manipulate an audience on a journey and catch them up emotionally so that they don't even know why. But they're crying for this man who's supernaturally still alive and going to heaven and plucking the star. And that has to do with construction and repetition."[306] Two writing strategies in which Korie is also a master. Korie professes that "structure is all" and librettists who intellectualize it are doing the work a disservice. He organized the work in traditional operatic form with numbered scenes consisting of excerpt-able arias, ensembles, and choruses.[307]

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[305] Ibid.

[306] Ibid.

[307] An aria book with sixteen arias from *Grapes* was published a few years after the premiere. Ricky Ian Gordon and Michael Korie, *Solo Aria Collection: 16 Aria Excerpts from the Opera* The Grapes of Wrath, (New York: NY, Carl Fischer, 2009).

Its Many Permutations

In a 2008 review, a critic said, "maybe this time that creaky institution known as opera has turned a corner."[308] That it has. *The Grapes of Wrath* embodies the true definition of a living, breathing opera with sticking power. Since its original conception fourteen years ago, it has been revived eleven times, with most performances being significantly reduced or re-written. From the three MO interviews, co-commission response, and my archival studies, I track the following major phases: 1) nearly four hours at its MO premiere; 2) Cut by approximately thirty minutes by the second performance at the Utah co-commission; 3) Cut again to under three hours at its third performance at Pittsburgh Opera; 4) Amended and reconfigured for concert versions; 5) Heavily revised to the point of being a re-commissioned as a two-act opera at OTSL in 2017. Essentially, each time it has been produced, a revision of some kind has transpired. At first, Gordon was hesitant to slimming down the score from its four hours of aural storytelling. However, as the piece was being prepared for its first revision at the second production in Utah Opera, the composer said, "I no longer feel like we're ruining the piece. I recognize the cutting will allow the piece to be done more. Maybe the piece in its cut version will have a strength that is unique and makes it viable for many companies."[309] Though he, along with the creatives I interviewed, reveal they prefer the original and complete version, believing it to be the most effective.

In its original format, the administrators considered the idea of treating *Grapes* like a *Ring* cycle, with three to four individual evenings that each featured a part of the story. Idealistically,

[308] Alan Rich, "Steinbeck *Wrath* Sears in New Staging," *Bloomberg Muse*, September 8, 2008. https://www.rickyiangordon.com/press/works-reviews/the-grapes-of-wrath-bloomgberg-muse-2008/

[309] Genette Freeman, "*The Grapes of Wrath* – Rise for Success?" *Classical Singer*, May 2007. https://www.rickyiangordon.com/press/works-reviews/the-grapes-of-wrath-classical-singer-may-2007/

the creative team members liked the idea of doing the story full justice, but Smith said it was not possible within budgetary confinements. Korie suggested one evening with three acts and two intermissions as a better solution. The three-hour cut off, necessary for unionized large orchestras, was essential to maintain the already-exploding budget. However, one vital mistake was made: Korie and Gordon did not consider the two twenty-minute intermissions as a part of the agreed upon three-hour time limit. They had to cut four solid hours of music drama down to three hours, but the forty minutes of included intermissions brought the event to a total of three hours and forty minutes. The company believed in the power of the opera, sought funding, and an "angel" of a donor, according to Korie, paid for the overtime so the original production did not have to be condensed any further.

The concert versions took two forms. Gordon constructed a fifty-minute choral suite presented by the Los Angeles Master Chorale at Disney Hall on May 18, 2008 that showcased *Grapes'* chorale numbers and ensembles. The first full production revision was at Carnegie Hall with conductor Ted Sperling and The Collegiate Chorale. Gordon envisioned a more theatrical concert version for Carnegie. He edited the score, taking out many of the recitatives and replacing those with a narrator. Jane Fonda narrated and had a special connection to the story since her father played Tom Joad in the 1940 film version. Gordon said this version emphasizes the opera's "musical theater aspects."[310] The concert version inspired the change to two acts. Korie deliberated where the new intermission could be shifted to maintain the dramatic pulse: he decided on the moment where the family glimpses the picturesque hills of California for the first time. Korie likens the operatic revision process to Sondheim allowing for his more expensive

[310] Michael Portantiere, "Steinbeck Sings," *BroadwayStars*, March 10, 2010. https://broadwaystars.com/michael-portantiere/2010/03/ricky-ian-gordon-makes-steinbe.shtml

works, like *Pacific Overtures* or *Sweeney Todd*, to be produced in smaller versions. In theater, someone will try it a new way each time, constantly reinventing the production. "And in a way, that's a good thing," Korie said. "Opera can be reinvented by the community where it's being done."[311] This is a defining feature that makes live theatre different than mediated art forms, like film and television. The creative choices made during these processes are cemented in place, but live theatre can serve a particular people and make creative decisions that better suit the given community.

The shortened and revised version of *The Grapes of Wrath* was commissioned by OTSL in 2015, premiering in 2017. Former General Director at OTSL O'Leary pointed out that commissions sometimes start with a topic in mind, and the institution finds the creatives needed to bring that subject to life. In the case of its version of *Grapes,* the composer, rather than material, captured the company's attention. OTSL had worked with Gordon on the commission and premiere of his opera *27* in 2014, which O'Leary described as an artistically, professionally, and personally rewarding experience. As O'Leary expounds, the repertoire "we love is full of works that that needed a second production: a revision to take root and succeed with an audience. *Madama Butterfly* being the most famous example. Everybody agreed that *The Grapes of Wrath* was an extraordinary work, but it needed a second pass to be more producible."[312] The sheer size of the original grand opera, with its eighteen principals and featured ensemble, forty-five chorus members, and sixty-one-piece orchestra along with enormous set demands, make it financially impossible for most companies to produce. Beyond shortening the time frame, they

[311] Korie, Interview with author.
[312] O'Leary, Interview with author.

also conflated the chorus. Historically, this concept of revision and adjustment is not uncommon. Kilmer said,

> To be able to make this thing fit into a theater, a very intimate sized theater like we have in St. Louis, and work on the stage gives the piece so much more potential for being performed elsewhere. And I think Opera Theatre has done a great service to the business in that regard. Because, if you take a look at Puccini and Verdi and those people, their pieces got adjusted, as they went along. They might even take it to Paris and do it French and bring it back to Italy, and they would undergo a process. But here in America, it seems like it's so often a one shot and off if it doesn't really catch on. But there are pieces out there that are valuable if the composer has the opportunity to go back and revisit and reflect.[313]

So while adjustments may seem sacrilege to those that value the sanctity of the score, flexibility in score and scope is a historically grounded convention. In addition to moving the intermission, Korie and Gordon cut and re-worked existing material and even wrote new scenes (some of which were axed again). While Act 1 is relatively similar, the second and third acts were stripped down considerably.

This condensed version was also a completely new production. Moyer, who designed the original mammoth production, also designed the new version, with the intent of making it distinctly different than the original. Embracing the unique aspects of OTSL's three-quarter thrust stage and intimate proximity of audience to performers, the entire show transpires in a rundown beige soup kitchen. The long tables and wooden chairs are used in all sorts of inventive configurations, like platforms to walk across in the scene where Tom meets Casy or stacked in a way that gives the impression of a truck. Lighting, imaginative acting, and stage business are crucial in this figurative visual telling of the story (in contrast to the literal manner of the grand opera production). Michigan Opera Theatre joined the revision commission after Lord suggested

[313] Kilmer, Interview with author.

they become involved. It was already at a point in the project where the commission was in "full tilt," as Kilmer referred to it; however, their agreement included that OTSL would physically adapt the set so that it would also work in Michigan's venue.[314] In addition to the set, OTSL's marketing team capitalized on the event. For two weekends, March 22-24 and May 1-3, Gordon and Korie toured St. Louis for public and private community events with the hope of generating "resonant community conversations about the opera in advance of the season."[315] OTSL saw the potential of Steinbeck's story to connect with contemporary people. Kilmer identifies the relevant social issues, like refugees and the controversial question regarding who is deemed to be American: "it speaks to all of these kinds of contemporary phenomena that are still ongoing in our culture and in our society," he said.[316] Artistic Director James Robinson was also intrinsic in the project. He worked closely with the creative team as the dramaturg, and O'Leary praises his role in the process:

> The art of dramaturgy is both about knowing how a work is going to come across to an audience, but then it's also kind of a human psychology. You have to work with the creative artists to get them to make choices. And it's hard. And Jim is actually one of the most talented people doing this that I've ever known of because he gets artists to really focus on what's most important. To let go of things that are not working and see what sticks.[317]

Revival Results: The American Identity

To gauge revival programming reasons, my questionnaire posits four primary fundamentals: dramatic, economic, aural, and social (see Figure 3.11). Each administrator shared their personal and professional reasons for reviving *The Grapes of Wrath*. To analyze the textual

[314] Ibid.
[315] OTSL 2017 Program Book.
[316] Kilmer, Interview with author.
[317] O'Leary, Interview with author.

data, I cross-examined the six responses and identified common themes. The following six administrators, who worked for the given company at the time of the revival, responded:

> Anchorage Opera (Torrie Allan, former Executive and Artistic Director)
> Moores Opera Center of University of Houston (Buck Ross, Director)
> Northwestern University Bienen School (Michael Ehrman, former Director)
> Opera Theatre of St. Louis (Paul Kilmer, former Director of Artistic Administration)
> Pittsburgh Opera (Christopher Hahn, General Director)
> Utah Opera (Christopher McBeth, Artistic Director)

Of the four proposed fundamentals, three areas were consistently cited: dramatic, aural, and social. The dramatic content of *Grapes of Wrath* was the more pervasive reason. All six agree the opera typifies familiar stories and American identity, while three reference its cultural relevance. Ross said, "I thought it was the most important American opera of the decade."[318] Ehrman concurs, noting the multi-generational audience appeal due to its iconic place in American literature "with highly theatrical situations and compelling characters." Tied to the drama, the social aspect of title recognition also contributed to all the decisions to program the work. Title recognition was also cited by all responders, while story relevance was identified by half the companies. The final area of widespread agreement concerns the aural elements. All of the responders considered the composer's compositional style when programming the opera, as well as the score's overall accessibility. McBeth describes Gordon's style as "immediately approachable" and references Copland and Carlisle Floyd as Gordon's predecessors, saying "these influences lent themselves to his writing in a language that has a certain American aural language." Ross, too, characterizes Gordon's idiom as "uniquely American" and found the soundscape of *Grapes* to be "immensely moving with great sweep and ambition." Hahn was also

[318]All quoted material in this subsection comes from the original IRB-regulated surveys administered for this study.

drawn to the "composer's facility in the ballad mode." Allan calls the score vibrant with a "cinematic landscape," especially highlighting the composer's unpretentious style, which "powerfully evokes a sense of ear and heart-pleasing 'folksy Americana'."

In terms of economic and technical considerations, each company's response varied based on its individual needs. For the university programs, the larger-sized cast and orchestra was an added benefit, as it provided more opportunities for students to perform. For the other reviving companies, they were chiefly concerned with maintaining the scope of the opera within a manageable length, which in most cases required cutting material from the original score. Notably, of all the revivals, Moores Opera Center did not make any cuts to the original production at the request of the composer in 2009. Comparing this to all the other eleven revivals of *Grapes*, this makes the Moores production the only time the original score from MO was performed again in its entirety.

Additional factors were also mentioned, including the cordial relationship with the living composer, who was present at all of the revivals, and the high-profile publicity the opera generated. In regards to working with creatives tied to the original production, Allan raved about Gordon, who he says "was a dream to work with. He was flexible, encouraging and helped with publicity and community relations. He attended the dress rehearsal and performance. His presence and exceptional social skills (with the public, performers, staff, and board, etc.) helped make the effort a huge success." Gordon also attended the dress rehearsal and premiere at Northwestern, which was an "added incentive for programming the piece" (Ehrman) as it's a rare opportunity for the students to work with the composer. This particular revival was also enriched by the involvement of another person from the original production, guest artist Robert Orth as Uncle John. Orth has played the title roles of Harvey Milk, Nixon, and Owen Hart in *Dead Man*

Walking, and he provided students with an inspiring experience of working with a seasoned new works performer. Though title recognition within itself was an attraction, each revival company received individual media attention from their productions:

- Utah (co-commissioner) and Pittsburgh (co-producer): tied to the initial premiere as original company collaborators
- Moores: first university production and second new production overall
- Anchorage: second production of the Carnegie Hall concert version and enabled artistic partnerships with Anchorage Symphony and Anchorage Concert Chorus
- Northwestern: first production of this opera in the major city of Chicago, attracting critics for the first time in years as well as representatives from Chicago professional opera companies
- OTSL: established a major revision that garnered national attention

More broadly, all of the administrators who programmed *Grapes* are regular advocates of contemporary opera. Pittsburgh and Moores mention an approximately twenty-year commitment to producing new work, precisely aligning with the timeframe of this study.

Whichever permutation, Korie was able to distill a monumental historical tome into three, and then two, acts. Though *Grapes* can be interpreted as socially-relevant and timely, it is timeless with it transhistorical plot. O'Leary describes the feedback at OTSL as overwhelmingly positive, packing an "enormous emotional punch:"

> People were beside themselves. We liked doing this kind of work that was sitting in the twenty-first century, telling the story of how we got where we are by looking at the relatively recent past. The history of the Great Depression, as told by Steinbeck and then reinterpreted through this opera, is an incredibly important piece of social history for this country. And all the topics of wealth distribution and inequality and the structural economic issues, and just basic questions of justice, are the same questions — audiences overwhelmingly responded to that without altering the original Steinbeck narrative, seemed like we were telling a story that had just been written. […] It was so devastatingly powerful and incredibly concise. Every hope and dream and pain felt by any parent or family member experiencing crisis and want, and then the miracle of the kindness of strangers, was so powerfully rendered**.** [319]

[319] O'Leary, Interview with author.

Moreover, the reviews throughout its performance history report positive audience feedback on the whole. The commissioning process may have been long-winded with a colossal budget, but the final product has prospered with an evolving revival history. Korie dreams of a new scaled-down production presenting the original three-act version in its entirety. In place of the expensive scenery and machinery, it could be staged as a workshop production that uses rehearsal clothing and props, set in a non-conventional venue like a gymnasium, and accompanied by two grand pianos. In the 2007 short documentary, Simonson made it clear that the creative team's intent was to produce a populist opera, and "in order for it to be populist, we needed to create a captivating story, an engaging story."[320] Certainly, *The Grapes of Wrath* tells a relevant story through heightened music drama that exemplifies polystylistic twenty-first century opera.

[320] "Making an Opera – *The Grapes of Wrath*."

CHAPTER 6 - HOUSTON GRAND OPERA AND *THREE DECEMBERS* (2008)

Pioneer Institution: Houston Grand Opera

Founded in 1955 by Walter Herbert, Louis G. Lobit, Edward Bing, and Charles F. Cockrell, Houston Grand Opera debuted with Strauss' *Salome,* a controversial twentieth-century opera that founded the company as assertive and fearless from the start. The company struggled to financially establish itself for the first few seasons in what had just been named the sixth largest city in the United States, but they successfully increased their initial 25,000 dollar budget in the first season to 100,000 dollars by the fifth season.[321] Under Herbert's general director leadership, HGO's first decade of repertory centered on mainly canonic works with a few revivals, including Kurt Weill's *Street Scene*, Gian Carlo Menotti's *The Consul*, and Douglas Moore's *The Ballad of Baby Doe*. When David Gockley took over in 1972, HGO began its concerted pursuit towards being a cutting-edge organization in the industry. Gockley was the young age of 27 when he became general director but was a strong candidate with his background in both opera and finance: he had been an apprentice vocalist and then house manager at Santa Fe Opera (SFO) before studying finance at Columbia University. After these formative experiences, he was hired as business manager at HGO in 1970. Although the company had somewhat presented itself as an advocate of contemporary works through Herbert's summer productions focused on newer repertoire, Gockley shifted the company's focus to not only producing revivals but commissioning. Gockley was convicted to make this change after hearing a 1971 performance of Carlisle Floyd's *Of Mice and Men* while visiting Cincinnati Opera. In a 1988 interview, Gockley

[321] Robert I. Giesberg, *Houston Grand Opera: A History* (Houston Grand Opera Guild. Inc., 1981): 10-15.

recalled how this particular show convinced him "there could be a popular American opera that was different than the opera that was coming out of Europe"[322] and the avant-garde works at the university Academy, steeped in Milton Babbitt's who-cares-if-you-listen philosophy. During the twentieth century, the problem, Gockley felt, was that opera had shifted from "popular entertainment — what he believed it to be during its first 350 years — to 'a kind of elite, intellectual entertainment.'"[323] He thought this critical change, from popular to cerebral opera, alienated audiences. Hence, he hoped to make HGO an opera house offering accessible opera again.

In his first season at the helm, he revived the piece that inspired him to shift the mission: Floyd's *Of Mice and Men*. In an article in *Opera Cues* in 1972, he distilled the long-term artistic aim of HGO to be the presentation of "more different kinds of opera to a broader, more varied and more discerning audience. We want to bridge the gap between the so-called 'serious' music and our young people. We want to combat the image of opera as a medium for only the wealthy and elite."[324] A rarity in his time, Gockley's vision was ahead of the curve; his statement is strongly reminiscent of the sentiments of many contemporary advocates seeking to renew of the operatic medium in the present century. And his artistic aspirations did, indeed, materialize. On March 5, 1974, HGO's first commission, Thomas Pasatieri and Kenward Elmslie's *The Seagull*, premiered. Its lush, neo-romantic score, along with its Anton Chekhov source material, were positively received. Another critical administrator at HGO is conductor Patrick Summers. He

[322] Quoted in Metcalf, "OFTEAB," 18 from HGO Archives. See David Gockley, interviewed in B5-0037: tape 4 of *Planet 8* documentary footage, VHS, June 8, 1988, Genevieve P. Demme Archives and Resource Center, HGO, Houston, Texas.

[323] Ibid.

[324] Giesberg, *Houston Grand Opera: A History*, 24.

came to HGO at the invitation of Gockley in 1998, and between the two, they span the majority of the company's history, especially its period concerned with commissioning and new repertory. Summers asserts Gockley's unique perspective made HGO stand out among American companies. While the other big twentieth-century houses were essentially European replicas, Houston needed an opera company designed its citizens. Summers elaborates,

> David knew that part of that was new work, and that until we build an American repertoire, there will be no American-izing of this art form. And, of course, what's happened to English-language opera, and specifically American opera, is that it's done culturally, very much what Americans do: they take all of this melting pot culture and make a version of it that's ours. And that's much more complex now because the country is more culturally complex than it was.[325]

As shown in Figure 6.1, HGO has led the way in building an American repertory. Their world premieres include thirty mainstage productions and forty smaller productions, an astonishing seventy commissions in total. Gockley's leadership from 1972 to 2005 resulted in thirty-three commissions, ranging from the mainstage to the touring and studio programs.

[325] Patrick Summers, Interview with author.

Figure 6.1 Houston Grand Opera World Premiere Archive 1974-2020

TOT = former touring program Texas Opera Theatre /OTG = current touring program Opera-To-Go
HGOS = studio premiere / HGOco = education or community premiere

Year	Title	Composer	Librettist	Type	Area
1974	*The Seagull*	Thomas Pasatieri	Kenward Elmslie	mainstage	HGO
1976	*Bilby's Doll*	Carlisle Floyd	Carlisle Floyd	mainstage	HGO
1980	*Starbird*	Henry Mollicone	Kate Pogue	touring	TOT
1981	*Willie Stark*	Carlisle Floyd		mainstage	HGO
1983	*A Quiet Place*	Leonard Bernstein	Stephen Wadsworth	mainstage	HGO
1987	*Nixon in China*	John Adams	Alice Goodman	mainstage	HGO
1988	*The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*	Philip Glass	Doris Lessing	mainstage	HGO
1989	*Where's Dick?*	Stewart Wallace	Michael Korie	touring	TOT
1989	*New Year*	Sir Michael Tippett		mainstage	HGO
1991	*The Passion of Jonathan Wade* (new version)	Carlisle Floyd		mainstage	HGO
1991	*ATLAS: an opera in three parts*	Meredith Monk		mainstage	HGO
1992	*Desert of Roses*	Robert Moran	Michael John LaChiusa	mainstage	HGO
1993	*The Achilles Heel*	Craig Bohmler	Mary Carol Warwick	touring	TOT
1993	*TEXAS!*	Mary Carol Warwick	Kate Pogue	touring	OTG
1994	*The Dracula Diary*	Robert Moran	James Skofield	studio	HGOS
1994	*The Outcast* (fully realized version)	Noa Ain		mainstage	HGO
1995	*Harvey Milk*	Stewart Wallace	Michael Korie	mainstage	HGO
1995	*Puppy and the Big Guy*	Sterling Tinsley	Kate Pogue	touring	OTG
1996	*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*	Ricky Ian Gordon	Jean-Claude van Itallie	studio	HGOS
1996	*Florencia en el Amazonas*	Daniel Catán	Marcela Fuentes-Berain	mainstage	HGO
1997	*Jackie O*	Michael Daugherty	Wayne Koestenbaum	studio	HGOS
1998	*Cinderella in Spain/Cinderella en España*	Mary Carol Warwick	Kate Pogue	touring	OTG
1998	*Little Women*	Mark Adamo		studio	HGOS
1999	*Resurrection*	Tod Machover	Laura Harrington and Braham Murray	mainstage	HGO
2000	*Cold Sassy Tree*	Carlisle Floyd	Carlisle Floyd	mainstage	HGO
2001	*The Emperor's New Clothes*	Mary Carol Warwick	Kate Pogue	touring	OTG
2003	*Sibanda!*	Michael Remson		touring	OTG
2003	*The Little Prince*	Rachel Portman	Nicholas Wright	mainstage	HGO
2004	*The Velveteen Rabbit*	Mary Carol Warwick	Kate Pogue	touring	OTG
2004	*The End of the Affair*	Jake Heggie	Heather McDonald	mainstage	HGO
2004	*Salsipuedes, a tale of Love, War and Anchovies*	Daniel Catán	Eliseo Alberto / Francisco Hinojosa	mainstage	HGO
2005	*The Princess and the Pea*	Mary Carol Warwick	Mary Ann Pendino	touring	OTG
2005	*Lysistrata, or the Nude Goddess*	Mark Adamo		mainstage	HGO
2006	*Strega Nona*	Mary Carol Warwick	Mary Ann Pendino	touring	OTG
2006	*Send (who are you? I love you)*	Michael John LaChiusa		mainstage	HGO
2007	*The Refuge*	Christopher Theofanidis	Leah Lax	education	HGOco
2008	*Last Acts (Three Decembers)*	Jake Heggie	Gene Scheer	mainstage	HGO
2008	*Sleeping Beauty*	Edward Charles Winkler		touring	OTG
2009	*Brief Encounter*	André Previn	John Caird	mainstage	HGO
2010	*A Way Home*	Ethan Frederick Greene	Irene Keliher	education	HGOco
2010	*Cruzar la Cara de la Luna / To Cross the Face of the Moon*	José "Pepe" Martinez	Leonard Foglia	education	HGOco
2011	*Courtside*	Jack Perla	Eugene Chan	education	HGOco
2011	*Your Name Means the Sea*	Franghiz Alizadeh		education	HGOco
2011	*Pieces of 9/11*	Jake Heggie	Gene Scheer	education	HGOco
2012	*The Clever Wife—a Chinese Folktale*	Mary Carol Warwick	Hugh Behm-Steinberg	touring	OTG
2012	*The Bricklayer*	Gregory Spears	Farnoosh Moshiri	education	HGOco
2012	*New Arrivals*	John Glover	Catherine Filloux	education	HGOco
2012	*From My Mother's Mother*	Jeeyoung Kim	Janine Joseph	education	HGOco
2013	*Past the Checkpoints*	David Hanlon	Joann Farías	touring	OTG
2013	*The Memory Stone*	Marty Regan	Kenny Fries	education	HGOco
2014	*Rapunzel*	Mary Carol Warwick	Alvaro Saar Rios	touring	OTG
2014	*Bound*	Huang Ruo	Bao-Long Chu	education	HGOco
2014	*A Coffin in Egypt*	Ricky Ian Gordon	Leonard Foglia	mainstage	HGO
2014	*River of Light*	Jack Perla	Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni	education	HGOco
2014	*A Christmas Carol*	Iain Bell	Simon Callow	mainstage	HGO
2015	*The Pastry Prince*	Mark Buller	Charles Anthony Silvestri	education	HGOco
2015	*O Columbia*	Gregory Spears	Royce Vavrek	education	HGOco
2016	*The Puffed-Up Prima Donna*	Mark Buller	Charles Anthony Silvestri	touring	OTG
2016	*Prince of Players*	Carlisle Floyd	Carlisle Floyd	mainstage	HGO
2016	*What Wings They Were: The Case of Emeline*	John L. Cornelius II	Janine Joseph	education	HGOco
2016	*After the Storm*	David Hanlon	Stephanie Fleischmann	education	HGOco
2016	*It's a Wonderful Life*	Jake Heggie	Gene Scheer	mainstage	HGO
2017	*Some Light Emerges*	Laura Kaminsky	Mark Campbell/Kimberly Reed	education	HGOco
2017	*The House without a Christmas Tree*	Ricky Ian Gordon	Royce Vavrek	mainstage	HGO
2018	*Monkey & Francine in the City of Tigers*	Kamala Sankaram	David Johnston	education	HGOco
2019	*The Phoenix*	Tarik O'Regan	John Caird	mainstage	HGO
2019	*Milagro del Recuerdo*	Javier Martinez	Leonard Foglia	mainstage	HGO
2020	*Marian's Song*	Damien Sneed	Deborah D.E.E.P. Mouton	mainstage	HGO
2020	*Songs of My Murdered Sister*	Jake Heggie	Margaret Atwood	film	HGO
2020	*Katie: The Strongest of the Strong*	Faye Chaio	Anton Dudley	touring	OTG

From the success of *Nixon in China* on, HGO was among the handful of companies committed to commissioning that spiked in the 1990s after the pioneering OFTEAB program. With the desire to create an American repertory, HGO established a program dedicated to developing new works in 1990, called Opera New World. At the onset, the program's mission sought to "encourage the creation and production of new and increasingly accessible operas, particularly works that hold appeal for groups who may have felt culturally, socially or economically removed from the traditional American opera audience."[326] Although accessibility may have been stated as a core value, the program's first commission in 1991 represented a more experimental aesthetic. Meredith Monk's *ATLAS* emphasizes travel and the quest for spirituality and truth, inspired by the explorations of Belgian Buddhist Alexandra David-Néel.[327] In place of conventional language, the opera contains few words and requires the singer to employ some extended vocal techniques, like Tibetan throat-singing. The initiative provided a safe space for composers to challenge opera's boundaries and reach new operagoers. Funding from a 1 million dollar NEA grant, in addition to corporate support, allowed for twenty-six operas to be produced from 1991-1999, and the Opera New World program ran from 1990-2002.

The strategic plan initiated in the early part of the century demonstrates the overall framework of the company, including how commissioning and community fit into the broad scheme. In 2004, Gockley suggested the company renew its strategic plan, which had not been updated since 1995. In 2005, the taskforce proposed these five imperatives: [328]

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[326] 1998-1999 Season Company Information Packet. Houston Grand Opera Association, Inc. n.d.

[327] Though a safe space to create, the audience did not respond well to *ATLAS*, according to the former Marketing Director Rodi Franco. In a phone interview with McKelvey in 2004, she recalled the premiere opening night when a patron yelled an explicative, stood up in Act 1, and left angerly. McKelvey, "Making American Opera in the 1990's," 115.

[328] HGO 2005 Annual Report, 5; 53-54.

1) emphasize purposeful programming, and revise performance scheduling based on audience trends
2) branding geared towards attracting attendance
3) education to diversify community outreach and audiences
4) implement technology to increase reach
5) restructure the economic model

These slated areas showed the company concern to re-evaluate according to shifting social structures. However, shortly after, Gockley stepped down from his post. The next phase of company renewal was brought to fruition by Anthony Freud, who took over as general director from 2006 to 2011. During Freud's tenure, he revitalized the company; after decades of growth, the revenue had plateaued for seven consecutive years.[329] Freud continued the emphasis on new commissions, was the brainchild for the community-focused HGOco, focused on rebuilding the subscription base, and re-established a strong financial state. Despite the economic crisis of 2008, during his five years, Freud raised 75 million dollars in a comprehensive fundraising campaign, targeted at multi-year and long-term pledges. Additionally, he helped establish the NEXUS Initiative. In a document entitled "Securing the Future" that Freud presented at the 2007 Annual Report Meeting, the company formally announced its new vision and five-year strategic plan. The following passages highlight the document's aim:

> We are living through a time of bewildering change: social, political, economic and cultural. As an opera company at the start of the twenty-first century, we cannot afford to exist in a hermetically sealed bubble. If we are to develop and thrive, we must establish dynamic, proactive and deepening relationships with the stakeholders, constituencies, and communities which we are here to serve. […]
>
> As a cultural service provider, we must break down barriers, extend our reach and become more accessible. As the guardians of a great art form, through a combined focus on excellence and innovation, we must both satisfy existing demand and work to expand the horizons, tastes, and size of our public, to stimulate their curiosity and their appetite for making new discoveries. […]

[329] HGO 2006, 2007 Annual Reports.

> A large-scale company is inevitably needed to produce world-class opera. However, a twenty-first century opera company must do more than excellent mainstage productions if it is to earn its indispensability to the communities which it serves. We can no longer only mount performances in our opera house and expect people to come to us. We must immerse ourselves in communities and use our resources to mount varied and wide-ranging activities in order to reach more and more people of diverse backgrounds.
>
> The telling of a story through music and words is universal, revelatory, life-changing and entertaining. Devising new environments, techniques and styles to engage more people in the creating and telling of stories through music and words is central to the work of a twenty-first century opera company.[330]

These enlightening excerpts speak volumes about the new vision Freud and his administration sought to implement at HGO. Along with a renewed emphasis on the importance of cultivating meaningful community connections, they address the need to adapt the nonprofit business model and its operatic offerings to better situate within the changing times. The last statement, in particular, demonstrates the clear trend — led by companies like HGO, OTSL, MO, and SF — of including new story-oriented operas as an intrinsic part of a twenty-first century opera season offering. Freud defines the role of general director as holistic:

> I'm responsible for the organization artistically, financially and administratively. And that's a great privilege and a great thrill on a good day, and a nightmare on a bad day because you're constantly having to balance conflicting priorities. In a way, my approach to strengthening a business model is inextricably linked to my artistic role as well as my financial role.[331]

He stresses the fact that his overall business model must encompass cultural and artistic aims. Opera theatres are nonprofit organizations; therefore, they must serve and impact their local

[330] Ibid. The actual document was filed with the 2006 archival reports and signed by Anthony Freud on June 7, 2006. However, the 2007 General Director's Report in the meeting notes detail it being formally presented at the June 2007 meeting.

[331] Freud, Interview with author.

communities. “We arguably need an even greater [fiscal] discipline to remain viable,” Freud said, “but we're not driven by the bottom line alone. That's not why we exist.”[332]

Gockley was intrinsic to laying the foundations of HGO’s new works commitment, and Freud re-focused the company’s finances and community initiatives.[333] In the last twenty years, Summers has been critical to HGO’s commissioning practices. He began music directing at HGO in 1998 and was named Artistic Director, in addition to Music Director, in 2011. Between the tenures of Gockley and Summers, they make up forty-nine years of the company’s sixty-six years of existence. They both have had a hand in shaping the American repertory at large, with Summers being especially responsible for influencing twenty-first century works. Though Summers approach to leading a commission differs from Gockley:

> David was very much engaged with directors and bringing ideas to the fore, and you would then find a composer. I am much more inclined to engage with a composer's voice; engage with a composer who I think will be a natural dramatist, and let the ideas come from them because you're going to have a much higher degree of success with a composer who's going to spend the better part of two years writing this if they have chosen this. When in a position like mine, someone's forever telling you, ‘oh, this would make a great opera, or this would make a great opera.’ I found that rarely to be true. *The Marriage of Figaro* is a great opera because Mozart *had* to write it. It wasn't because some impresario said, ‘Why don't you write this French play.’ He loved those characters so much that he had to write it. And so I'm more inclined to focus on a long set of conversations with a small group of composers that eventually lead to commissions.[334]

His ideology for commissioning supports my overall thesis of the story-driven opera sparking intrigue in the twenty-first century. Summers looks for a musical dramatist, someone who is convicted by a story at such a deep level they feel compelled to bring it to life through song. He recognizes, and emphasizes, the importance of the creative’s dramatic inspiration, which will

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[332] Ibid.

[333] Managing Director Perryn Leech seceded Freud, continuing the artistic and fiscal vision until 2021. Khori Dastoor, current General Director of Opera San José, will become HGO General Director in January 2022.

[334] Summers, Interview with author.

guide the project. Heggie, who has been commissioned by HGO on numerous occasions, confirms this notion. The administrators are looking for a story that the company, board, and community will get behind. "They also recognize this is a community event: a commission of a new opera. It isn't just the company, it isn't just the ivory tower — it's a full community event. […] And that's a great feeling as a composer: that you're not isolated and alone and terrified. That you are welcomed and embraced into the fold."[335] That support provides the foundation from which the creative team can enthusiastically invest in the project. It is a prime example of the twofold significance of economic investment from the company paving the way for creative investment to flourish. Ultimately, though, there is not a standardized way in which a new opera is commissioned. Sometimes the subject comes first and a creative team is sought after to bring it to fruition. Other times, a composer has an idea and brings it to company administrators. The first process played out in the origin stories of the *Dream of the Pacific* and *The Grapes of Wrath* commissions, while the second scenario transpired for *Three Decembers* and *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs*, as will be described in the forthcoming chapters.

From the 1974 commission of *The Seagull* spanning to the Opera New World program in the 1990s to twenty-first century initiatives, HGO has commissioned and produced seventy premieres for both its mainstage and educational outreach programs. In order to achieve such a large quantity of new repertory, various programs and funding initiatives prevailed through the new millennium. Of the four pioneering theatres surveyed for this study, HGO has maintained the most detailed records since 2000 through Annual Reports stored in their archives. These reports track fiscal growth and patron development, along with community impact and

[335] Heggie, Interview with author.

initiatives. At the beginning of the millennium, the Vanguard – New Works program encouraged new works advocates to join the program and receive benefits, like meeting commissioned composers at HGO, attending rehearsals, and events with creative and production teams. Though a great opportunity to witness the behind-the-scenes aspects of commissioning and creating, it cost money to become a Vanguard member and was not centered on accessibility. For a more formal and concerted vision of new works and community connections, the sub-brand HGOco was formed in 2007 to capitalize and expand on these efforts. It was Freud's signature initiative. The "co" designation symbolizes company, community, and collaborator. Sandra Bernhard was hired as the director of HGOco and oversees the diverse programs. Beyond mainstage productions, all other HGO events, activities, performances, and community projects fall under HGOco, making it a cross-department effort. Summers chronicles the transition to HGOco:

> It moved our then education department into this community initiative. We had a very, I would say, robust education department, but very much in the 1970s mold of 'outreach' — terrible word — reaching out and, inevitably, down to everybody. […] Houston is an extraordinarily culturally diverse, and HGOco was the first time the repertoire and activities of the opera company reflected that.[336]

Important programs that provide commissioning opportunities under the umbrella of HGOco include Opera to Go! (1993 - present) and *Song of Houston* (2007 – present). Opera to Go! features new commissions for school tours, while *Song of Houston* (hereafter, *SoH*) is geared towards commissioning new chamber works — both opera and song cycles — that reflect Houstonians and resonate with its contemporary life. For example, the first *SoH* commission was an oratorio, *The Refuge*, by Chris Theofanidis and Leah Lax. Freud, a UK-native, had the idea for

[336] Summers, Interview with author.

the community-focused project on one of his preliminary visits to Houston in 2005 before becoming general director. He said, "I was very conscious that as a European, with opera historically originating from Europe, I needed to explore how to ensure that opera in a very un-European, very twenty-first century city, had a relevance that gave it its right to exist and to be successful."[337] While at a donors dinner, he was told a story about a friend's housekeeper who had arranged for her eight-year-old child to be brought to Houston under a truck:

> And her own journey story was equally startling. I grew up in Wimbledon. This is very new territory for me. And I thought, well, this is absolutely extraordinary. And this is a city full of immigrants. And there must be a multitude of extraordinary immigration stories, journey stories, within the city. And surely, Houston's opera company should find these stories, should tell them, and should celebrate the immigrant experience. And that conversation over dinner about the friend of the housekeeper directly led to my dreaming up the idea of *The Refuge*.[338]

Freud also met the then mayor of Houston, Bill White, at these events, and he suggested seven immigrant communities prominent in Houston: African, Vietnamese, Chinese, Mexican, Central American, Indian-Pakistani, and Russian-Jewish. Each section of the oratorio tells an immigrant story, centering on a journey of displacement and learning. For a year and a half, the company made connections and sought to earn the trust of the given community. Willing members shared their experiences with the librettist that had sometimes never been shared outside their families, which encompassed both the "heart-stopping and joyful" as well as "heart-breaking and tragic," according to Freud. Moreover, the performance of each section took place in its precise community by HGO's full forces, including chorus, orchestra, young artists of the HGO studio, and about 120 community performers from the represented communities. The 2008 Annual Report raved about *The Refuge*'s success, revitalizing the connection between the company and

[337] Freud, Interview with author.
[338] Ibid.

city. Through this inaugurating first work by HGOco, the company developed "deep relationships with seven immigrant communities that heretofore found HGO irrelevant" and reached 233,549 people.[339] Freud remains proud of the program and the new work it has produced and continues to commission: "I was passionate about creating HGOco. I wanted to really establish the depth of relevance that HGO could have in relation to the city of Houston. And identifying and earning the trust of a range of communities and telling these stories seemed to me to be a way of contributing to our relevance."[340]

SoH continues to be a significant commissioning arm of HGOco, with a few works by the featured composer of this chapter, Jake Heggie. *Pieces of 9/11* is Heggie and Scheer's most notable song cycle for *SoH* written in 2011 to commemorate the tragedy's tenth anniversary. Houstonian Lauren Getuzi died on one of the flights and her family asked HGO to memorialize her through song. Another of Heggie's more recent *SoH* commission is *The Songs for Murdered Sisters*. Baritone Joshua Hopkins was in grief after the passing of his sister and wished to remember her through a song cycle with text by Margaret Atwood and music by Heggie.[341] Both artists agreed to the project, and it was digitally released during the pandemic.

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[339] HGO 2008 Annual Report General Director's Report.

[340] Freud, Interview with author. From a 2021 point of view, Freud acknowledges cultural appropriation could be claimed. His intent, however, was for the composer "in a non-simplistic way to embrace the musical and cultural traditions of the seven communities with whom we were collaborating, and find a way to create this enormous collage tapestry of a piece that really engaged the community performers as well as being built on a foundation of the large-scale performing forces of Houston Grand Opera. As I'm explaining this to you today, in 2021, I realized that through today's lens, some of those aspirations may not feel comfortable. In that, of course, the concept of cultural appropriation comes to mind. All I can say is that, push the rewind button fifteen years, and it didn't feel inappropriate. And we were committed to honoring the communities with whom we were collaborating. And I have to say, the communities, once we had earned their trust, embraced the project and were incredibly thrilled, I think, to both to participate and proud of the results. Today's lens is different. This isn't a project of today. Having said that, I continue to be very proud of *The Refuge*." The project was conducted in a way that was a sharing process and indicates positive progress in the diversifying of dramatic content.

[341] Summers believed in the project and helped move it forward. Though Heggie agreed to the project, no one heard from Atwood for six months. "We were just ready to give up and hire a librettist," Summers said, when "Margaret Atwood sent Jake a set of seven poems. This is before she said she'd do the piece! She emailed them to

HGOco's original proposal defines opera as storytelling through music that transcends culture and time which "takes the essence of the art form well beyond its European roots."[342] The original concept for the initiative centered on three guiding principles: observation, participation, creation.[343] Observation is the most traditional activity, though often the scale of the commission is chamber-sized and/or takes place in non-traditional venues. Participation and creation involve the present community members partaking in these elements. Since the formal launch of HGOco in 2007, the community-focused efforts have reached 1.75 million people.[344] The most recent impact numbers from 2018-2019, prior to the pandemic, show 79,527 people in the Houston community experienced opera through HGOco programs that year.[345] The data collected from the educational programs, in terms of demographic of peoples being served, reflect the diversity of the county in which HGO is located: on average 45 percent Hispanic/Latino, 31 percent Caucasian/Non-Hispanic White, 19 percent African American, 4 percent Asian / Pacific Islander, 0.5 percent two or more races, 0.4 percent Native American.[346]

Beyond HGOco's targeted focus on community connections, in 2017 HGO at large introduced a six-year multidisciplinary initiative called *Seeking the Human Spirit* with the goal of fostering both mainstage opera and community partnerships in order to "expand Houstonian's spiritual connections to the arts."[347] Through this program, they select each season's varied

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Jake and he called me. He said, 'I just got seven poems from Margaret Atwood. And they're the most beautiful things I've ever read in my life.' And she asked, 'Is it something like this that you want?' So it's the first time I'd ever seen someone answer an inquiry with the work itself." Summers, Interview with author.

[342] HGO 2007 "Securing the Future."

[343] Ibid.

[344] HGO 2019-2020 End of Season Report.

[345] Ibid.

[346] HGO 2017-2018, 2018-2019, 2019-2020 End of Season Reports. In 2018, a larger number of Latino and black persons experienced HGOco opera at 56 percent and 30 percent.

[347] HGO 2018-2019 End of Season Report.

repertoire based on a particular universal theme found in opera. 2017-2018 focused on Sacrifice, 2018-2019 was Transformation, 2019-2020 Identity, while the current season is Character. Each season is comprised of two to three canonic works along with one world premiere and many community events. At the announcement of this innovative initiative, former Managing Director Perryn Leech called this the most "ambitious and inclusive" company-wide program in its history. "At a time when conflict and division are all around us, two things that unite all people and cultures are spirituality and music," Leech said. "We are proud to break new ground in this city by collaborating with partner organizations who are doing vital artistic and community work and creating meaningful connections for new and nontraditional audiences as well as opera lovers."[348] *Seeking the Human Spirit* has also initiated community partnerships,[349] which involve collective musicking events comprising an array of activities: community sing-alongs; participant song-writing, music-making, and dancing; curated performances by HGO studio singers; behind-the-scenes backstage access; and revivals or commissions of new chamber works through HGOco.

In the vein of audience building and accessibility, HGO established the NEXUS Affordability Initiative in 2007. Freud helped instigate this plan, noting the state of the audience subscriptions:

> When I started at HGO, we were losing subscribers dramatically. Our prices had increased and increased. And as a newcomer coming into the company, it seemed to me to be clear that there was a direct proportionate link to price growing and subscriber numbers falling. And what I wanted to try and achieve was a breaking down of the barrier of price. And the NEXUS Initiative was a way in which we tried to do that. So, we

[348] Press Release, "HGO Announces *Seek the Human Spirit* 2017-2023."

[349] Including Buffalo Bayou, Catholic Charities of Great Houston, Discovery Green, Harris County Juvenile Detention Center, Houston's Holocaust Museum, Houston's Museum of Fine Arts, Houston Methodist Center for Performing Arts Medicine, Multicultural Education and Counseling through the Arts, Rothko Chapel, Sacred Sites Quest, and The Women's Home, among others.

> generated significant contributed revenue to fund the NEXUS Initiative. And the purpose of the NEXUS Initiative was to be able to offer world class opera at affordable prices.[350]

This ticket underwriting program offers first-time attendees a discounted ticket rate of 15 dollars as well as specialized opera performances at outdoor pavilions free to the public. Since its start, NEXUS has given free or low-cost opera experiences to more than 275,000 people in Houston.[351] Another initiative with the purpose of making opera more affordable to the younger demographic, HGO continues to offer the Pay-Your-Age option to attendees under the age of twenty-five. Programs such as these have made opera more financially feasible and community-focused. Amidst these targeted fundraising efforts, HGO commenced this millennium with an endowment of 46 million dollars, and most recent tax records from 2019 show it is at a healthy 65 million dollars. Summers notes that HGO has a donor base specifically interested in supporting new works, too. "It's proved to be easier to raise money for new work than to raise money for a new production of *La bohème*," he said. Ricky Ian Gordon's *A Coffin in Egypt* is an example of a commission where the company was able to capitalize on community connections in the Texas cities of Egypt and Wharton, as well as connections with playwright Horton Foote. This brought opportunity to reach new demographics and donors curious about the opera. However, Summers clarifies this does not allow for influence over the commissioned work, but rather the topic serves as a remarkable way for people to connect with a new opera and make the decision to financially support it.

[350] Freud, Interview with author.
[351] HGO 2017-2018 End of Season Report.

The Origin Story of Three Decembers

Recognized among the most prominent twenty-first century American opera composers, Jake Heggie garnered fame at the turn of this century with *Dead Man Walking* and, again, with *Moby Dick* in 2010. Contrasting with these large-scale operas, his intimate chamber opera with Gene Scheer, *Three Decembers,* is the commission produced at HGO that has achieved a remarkable revival status and explores a dysfunctional, contemporary family. Though a songwriter in his youth, Heggie started his career as a touring concert pianist in the late 1980s. However, a neurological condition of focal dystonia affected his right hand, causing him to end his professional career as a pianist. He transitioned to working in public relations in 1993, first for Cal Performances and then, shortly after, for San Francisco Opera (hereafter, SFranO). While he met celebrated mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade at a concert series in Beverly Hills in 1990, they became good friends when he began working at SFO.[352] It was von Stade that inspired him to begin composing and writing songs again.[353] Another influential colleague at SFO was Patrick Summers. Both Summers and von Stade helped launch Heggie's career as an opera composer and would later be active participants in the premiere production of *Three Decembers*.

Summers recalls the initial period of Heggie's discovery. It was 1996, and Summers was in the process of conducting performances of *Faust*, while also workshopping André Previn's new commission *Streetcar Named Desire*. Lotfi Mansouri, the general director of SFranO, and Summers were discussing the workshop, when Mansouri casually said to him, "We have this

[352] Jake Heggie email response in Rebecca Choate Beasley, "The Influence of Sister Helen Prejean on the Life and Work of Jake Heggie as Seen in the Song Cycle *The Deepest Desire: Four Meditations on Love*" (DMA diss., University of North Texas, 2008), 116.

[353] Jake Heggie, Program Notes, "First, The Words: Jake Heggie on the Art of Collaboration" *Three Decembers (*San Francisco Opera, December 11-14, 2008), 12.

famous composer and famous commission for 1999. In 2000, we should have a composer nobody's ever heard of." Summers suggested Heggie, which shocked Mansouri. Summers responded,

> 'Don't take my word for it. Talk to Flicka. Talk to Bryn Terfel. Talk to Renee Fleming,' who were all singing Jake's songs by that point. That had nothing to do with me. And I think within a couple of months, Jake had that commission. Now, I'm not taking credit for that at all. That was Jake. Jake achieved that. But there were a lot of people advocating for Jake with Lotfi, and to Lotfi's credit, he took the chance.[354]

Heggie was stunned with Mansouri approached him about the commission. At the time, he was the PR guy who wrote songs. However, with the support of the famous singers and conductor promoting his melodic talent, he took the commission. Mansouri connected him with Terrance McNally in New York, and the collaboration between playwright and composer commenced. His creative work with McNally has served as the model for all of his other collaborations. Their opera *Dead Man Walking* was met with success, and it established Heggie as a candidate for the next great American opera composer of our time. Indeed, Summers believes "Jake has changed the cultural conversation about American opera."[355]

After this hit, McNally told Heggie about a short play he had written for an AIDS benefit in 1999 for the NYC Gay Men's Chorus. It was titled "Some Christmas Letters (and a Couple of Phone Calls)" and was produced only once at Carnegie Hall in 1999. When McNally gave the play to Heggie to read, Heggie immediately went to a pizza parlor to read through its fourteen pages. Heggie recounts his first reactions, saying, "It sang to me, and I started sketching musical ideas in the margins. It felt so true, honest, and right."[356] Though Heggie had an immediate

[354] Summers, Interview with author.
[355] Ibid.
[356] Heggie, "A Message from the Composer," 9.

impetus to create for this story, it took the next seven years to develop the project. Initially, he thought it might be ideal material for a musical. Growing up loving musicals, people had asked him for years when he would finally write one. Along with McNally, he was in talks with Stephen Schwartz to develop the book. Von Stade was also involved with the three creative team members, and Heggie began composing. However, Schwartz had to back out of the project when hired to compose the soundtrack for the movie *Enchanted.* Then, artistic goals began to diverge, with McNally envisioning a large company of twenty while Heggie wished it to remain intimate in scope. Ultimately, McNally left the project, and Heggie turned to von Stade, who told him they had strayed from their initial inspiration of three characters and three decades. Heggie decided to pitch the intimate idea to Summers, who was now serving at HGO. Heggie recalls this pivot occurring around 2005. He presented his trajectory for the piece, HGO commissioned it, and in two years time, the new work came to fruition as a chamber opera. Freud was in the process of becoming the new general director and remembers being excited about the prospects of the opera, especially since it was "built around Frederica von Stade, an artist with a long association with HGO — let alone her global renown."[357]

Though a rocky start in its first few years of conception, by 2005 the project was underway with HGO as the lead commissioner and librettist Gene Scheer replacing McNally. Scheer is a titan librettist, having written twenty-seven stage works since 1996 in his storied career. Many of those projects include collaborations with Heggie; however, at this point, they had only worked together once on the song cycle *Statuesque*. Heggie was pleased with the outcome "once the shape was identified, the right team was in place, and it was an opera again.

[357] Freud, Interview with author.

Because that's what I do: I write musicals, but I write them for opera houses and opera singers. I take all the stuff that I've learned and loved from musicals, and I put it into that context."[358] The project pressed forward with a plan of action, a solid team, ideal timing, and an established company leading the way. The internal creative team consisted of Heggie, librettist Scheer (adapting McNally's original play), conductor Summers, and director Leonard Foglia. In January 2007, Scheer began writing the libretto. By July, Heggie started the music, and, in an impressive four months, he had finished composing and orchestrating the first draft. Scheer recalls the next step in the collaboration, saying,

> The task of writing the libretto was greatly helped by the wise counsel of our director, Leonard Foglia. Jake, Lenny and I met in San Francisco about a month before the workshop and went through the piece as carefully and as critically as we could. The agenda was always simple, even if the writing of the piece was not. We wanted each line to both ring true and to inspire music, which in the end is where the greatest poetry in opera is to be found.[359]

The drama-inspired music of *Three December* is examined in the subsequent section. The rest of the creative team for the premieres included Cesar Galindo (costume designer), Brian Nason (lighting designer), Bryndon Hassman (musical preparation), Morgan Robinson (assistant stage director), Gina Hays (stage manager), Tracy Davis (orchestra manager), and Carrie Weick (orchestra librarian).

In the collaborative process, Heggie considers Summers to be a sounding board. Summers keenly understands Heggie's music, having conducted most of Heggie's major mainstage premieres and watched him work during the writing processes, including *Dead Man Walking* (2000), *End of the Affair* (2004), *Three Decembers* (2008), *Moby Dick* (2010), *Great Scott*

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[358] Heggie, Interview with author.

[359] Gene Scheer, Program Notes, "A Message from the Librettist," *Three Decembers* (San Francisco Opera: December 11-14, 2008), 10.

(2015), and *It's a Wonderful Life* (2016). Summers "really understands my musical language and style and my theatrical impulses," Heggie said, "because things that I write for the stage, they change tempo constantly because of dramatic pacing: You're trying to capture the heartbeat of a scene and what's going on between the characters on stage."[360] Foglia acted as a dramaturg, asking refining questions to probe the essence of a scene with character reactions, motivations, and interactions. Heggie notes that hearing these questions from Foglia provided a fresh perspective and helped shape the piece. Though Heggie's working relationship with Scheer was newer, he had previously collaborated with Foglia and Summers on *End of the Affair* and would work with all three again on *Moby Dick* in 2010 at Dallas Opera. Heggie said,

> Perspective is everything from professionals while you're working on a big piece. […] We all learned together through the years about how we work together. But it's a less tangible role that they play. Lenny was always, in addition to being the director, guiding us dramaturgically. And Patrick was asking questions about character and the kind of music that they're singing, and why that note, and what does that phrase mean? Because there can't be any extra notes or phrases. Everything has to mean something. And so it's really perspective and guidance in that sense.[361]

These guiding perspectives were offered starting early in the process. Scheer and Folgia would come to San Francisco, where Heggie resides. With Heggie at the keyboard, he would play through pieces for them to provide feedback. This continued, of course, in the workshop process. By being in the same room, they were able to respond, react, and ask questions. Heggie emphasizes the importance of having "friendly ears" around that provide honesty but believe in the piece. Freud, too, was a part of the refinement process and mentions how collaborative Heggie is as a composer: "Once you develop a relationship of trust with an artist like Jake," Freud said, "I have the confidence to say, 'Jake, how about this?' and he has the confidence to say,

[360] Heggie, Interview with author.
[361] Ibid.

'That's a bad idea.' (*laugh together*) And that's what collaboration is all about." [362] He recalls the San Francisco workshop, in particular, noting "the core of the piece was incredibly sound and impressive" already. Flicka was also present at that workshop, benefiting the creative process since the lead role was crafted for her voice.

Co-commissioned by HGO and SFranO, the opera was originally titled *Last Acts* at its premiere. However, by the west coast premiere on December 11, 2008, its current title was in place.[363] Freud shares how the title change was pitched. With the premiere being February 29, 2008, the publicity materials, including 250,000 brochures, were printed in the late fall of 2007. Over the holidays, Freud was overseas,

> sitting on a square in Barcelona drinking a glass of wine. My cell phone went, and it was Jake, who said, 'I think I want to change the title. That's not a problem, is it?' In my head, I thought, 'we've just printed a quarter of a million copies!' I said, 'Jake, yes. I think it might be a problem.' So, I think the premiere actually was *Last Acts/Three Decembers*. Because Jake is very practical and very reasonable and saw that reprinting a quarter of a million brochures was not feasible. And then it became *Three Decembers*. But I won't forget that glass of white wine in the square in Barcelona. (*laugh together*)[364]

Additional changes and rewrites occurred after the two premieres before *Three Decembers* took its final form. After the Berkeley performance, Heggie and Scheer agreed that Madeline's aria needed to change. Originally titled "About to Break,"[365] Heggie likened this to an attempt at an eleventh-hour number. Heggie realized it did not deepen the understanding of the character, so he replaced it with "Daybreak," a Sondheim-inspired aria. The intermission was omitted too. While the premieres at both Houston and Berkley included intermissions, the collaborators

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[362] Freud, Interview with author.

[363] Summers recalls being resistant to the title change, but Heggie was passionate about the change because it was too difficult to say and did not encapsulate the subject matter clearly. Summers, Interview with author.

[364] Freud, Interview with author.

[365] The world premiere recording at HGO is the professional recording of the opera available on major streaming services. Since it was recorded in March 2008, it does not include the transition music revisions nor the replacement aria that are now heard in live performances.

decided in hindsight to eliminate the intermission, making the work into a one-act. Despite its division into three parts, they believed keeping the drama progressing without pause better served the audience experience and allowed for continuous immersion in the narrative.

Though *Three Decembers* found a home and a creative team at HGO, the initial contract details were hazy. While the team was envisioning a full production, the company saw this work as a recital format piece with three singers and two pianos, sans scenery or costumes, in the 1,000-seat Cullen Theatre. This misunderstanding meant the visual aspects of *Three Decembers* were practically born out of nothing since a budget had not been allocated for production costs. For instance, no production designer had been hired, so Foglia took on the job in addition to being director. Rather than elaborate new designs, he pulled all the materials for the first production from the HGO warehouse. The eleven-piece chamber orchestra was positioned upstage atop three raised platforms, making them an intrinsic part of the set, and the hydraulics of the pit apron raised and lowered characters for effect.[366] Heggie and Summers played the two grand pianos on stage at both premieres. Working together, they designed the piano parts where Summers could play but also conduct from the piano à la Baroque opera. Though the commission was produced on a limited budget, grants were garnered to support the work: The James Irvine Foundation, Cal Performances, Meet the Composer, Betty Freeman, The John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, and Annette Campbell-White and Dr. R. Naumann-Etienne.[367] Freud also helped secure the co-commissions. Though what he considered a ready-

[366] James Sohre, "Heggie's *Last Acts,*" *Opera Today* March 17, 2008, https://operatoday.com/2008/03/heggies_last_acts/; Charles Ward, "Review: Last Acts is von Stade's show all the way," *Houston Chronicle* March 3, 2008, https://www.chron.com/entertainment/article/Review-Last-Acts-is-von-Stade-s-show-all-the-way-1771916.php.

[367] Program Notes, *Three Decembers*, 6.

made project, he acknowledges projects evolve throughout the development process: "the job of a commissioner is to support and work with the creative team to steer and guide the piece. And together, we all work to try and ensure that it as good and as successful as it can possibly be."[368] Time has shown the foundations laid by the creative team and HGO set this piece up for revival success.

Familiar Story: Dysfunctional Families

The intimate narrative driving *Three Decembers* derives from McNally's fourteen-page play. Though an original story not relying on known literature, history, or celebrities, the essence of the opera is a contemporary family at odds, and this relatable aspect generates familiarity. The opera follows a dysfunctional family of three through three decades of their lives, using the mother's Christmas Letter as a point in time to drop in. Act 1 commences in 1986, transition music takes us to 1996 in Act 2, and it finishes in 2006 with a Prologue. The mother, Madeline Mitchell, is a Broadway diva extraordinaire. Madeline is also mother to grown children Charlie and Bea. Their father passed away when they were young, and Madeline was gone much of their lives due to the theatre, strongly shaping their worldview and relationships with one another. The first scene starts with the brother and sister speaking over the phone, annoyed with their mother's latest Christmas Letter that reveals her self-absorbed persona.

Though *Three Decembers* is not directly autobiographical of Heggie's life, the relevant topics of suicide and acceptance of sexual orientation link him with the opera's characters. In Act 2, the father's true tragic end is exposed: he committed suicide by drunkenly throwing himself under a train. Heggie's father committed suicide when he was just ten. Summers said

[368] Freud, Interview with author.

Heggie wrote *Three Decembers* with more ease than any of the other commission in which they have collaborated: "It just poured out of him. It's the most personal of his works because of his own father."[369] Heggie was aware of how his father passed, though, while Madeline lied to her children, telling them the father died in a car accident. Another similarity Heggie's biography shares with the opera's plot appears in the main character Charlie, who is gay. As a young man, Heggie was not openly gay, marrying his UCLA teacher Johana Harris. They became estranged when he moved to San Francisco. While Heggie's real-life partner's name is Curt, in the original McNally play the baritone is in a relationship with Burt. Heggie makes a moment of the name likeness in the conversation where Maddy mistakenly calls Burt "Curt" in her letter. Summers highlights this scene's effective musical scoring, noting the aching texture Heggie crafted out of only a few instruments: "It would not be effective with a large orchestra," Summers said. "So that's a real composer. They know how to use the forces they have to create the right musical world."[370] For this opera's effective instrumentation, Heggie calls for flute, soprano saxophone, alto saxophone, oboe, clarinet, bass clarinet, two pianos, three violins, cello, contrabass, and one percussionist who plays a range of instruments (glockenspiel, crotales, vibraphone, snare drum, three tom-toms, suspended cymbal, tam-tam, triangle, and tambourine).

Alongside his empathy and splashes of personal humor, Heggie taps into relevant topics through carefully constructed musical landscapes. He investigates the questions surrounding the innate dysfunction of the family unit as it evolves and children become adults. *Three Decembers*' dramatic themes revolve around "identity as a member of the family one is born into and within

[369] Summers, Interview with author.
[370] Ibid. Another interesting fact in regards to biography, Heggie dedicated the opera to Curt.

the ones we create — the truth of who we are and who our parents are."[371] At its core, the opera questions what responsibility family members maintain to one another as they grow apart in adulthood: family yet strangers, connected but disconnected. Scheer points out that they hoped to bring out McNally's focus on each character's "human frailty and the hope of redemption."[372] Though the characters could initially appear to be stereotypes, Heggie fleshes them out through musical representation: "It's always my goal to trace the heartbeat of a scene through music: how the characters affect each other; how their music might change in subtle or sometimes dramatic ways. But at the heart of each character is either a tune or harmony — something that identifies them and remains constant."[373] Thus, his musico-dramatic impulses produce an emotional resonance through motives often recognizable to a listener.

In *Three Decembers,* Heggie's method for navigating conventional tonal territory — while infusing it with illustrative colors and heavy doses of dissonance — derives from what I call an economy of means comprised of distinctive character-inspired motives. Character-associated themes are not a revolutionary notion in opera, of course. From the legendary recurring themes in Grétry's *Richard Cœur-de-lion* in 1784 to Wagner's leitmotifs in the mid-nineteenth-century, Heggie's use of motivic signification continues the operatic tradition of interweaving music and drama. His inspirations range from the great melodists Mozart, Verdi, and Puccini to the twentieth-century pioneers Bernstein, Sondheim, Britten, Poulenc, Debussy, and Ravel.[374] Yet, Heggie compositionally stands on his own two feet, representing a fresh idiom in the twenty-first century. Summers calls Heggie's writing style undefinable and non-academic, observing that

[371] Heggie, "A Message from the Composer," 9
[372] Scheer, "A Message from the Librettist," 10.
[373] Heggie, Correspondence with author.
[374] Heggie, Correspondence with author.

Heggie responds to characters the way actors take on new personas.[375] The parallel Summers draws reminds me of embodiment. Heggie is able to maintain his inspired voice and fuse that with the character's perspective, all through dramatized music. Summers continues, saying, "it's not acting in terms of pretending. It's just being. And it's having full presence of yourself through another person."[376] As a part of his creative process, Heggie develops relationships with his characters, "so much so that I could take a walk with each one of them outside the context of the opera and still have a conversation. I get to know the characters: what they want, what they are missing — find a music world for them to live in, and then let them emerge organically within that music world."[377] And I argue, his authenticity and raw emotion instilled into the score's sonic environment clearly emanate. The creative team saw the effect of the music during the rehearsal process, too, when each vocalist experienced an emotional breakdown when grappling with the sensitive material.

After thoroughly analyzing the score, I identify twelve pervasive musical motives. Influenced by each character's given disposition, motives organically emerge and are often transformed when reiterated. The composer's choice to transform is motivated by the character's ever-shifting emotional trajectory. Without engaging with the score, these motives are often aurally recognizable, prospectively enriching the dramatic experience of a listener too. The twelve motives fit into five categories that coincide with the four members of the family as well as one category dedicated to the family as a unit. My labels reflect the motive's original dramatic impetus:

[375] Summers, Interview with author.
[376] Ibid.
[377] Heggie, Correspondence with author.

12 MOTIVES
Mother: Madeline Mitchell, Nostalgic, Theatrical
Father: Father's Chair, Moon, Truth
Bea: Surreal Bea, Bea's Reality
Charlie: Burt
Family Dynamic: Sibling Dialogue, Mocking Music, Playful Pizzicato

At the macro-level, the music fundamentals of the character-driven motives are not limited to melodic contour but rather manifest in duration, both in rhythm and frequent tempi shifts. Transformations and alterations purposefully respond to the given emotional state. This produces a depth of character, triggering quick musical changes.

Additionally, Heggie also exploits timbre. An emotionally touching section of the opera maximizing tone color occurs at the end of Act 1, when the siblings ponder nebulous memories of their father while gazing out over the Golden Gate Bridge. Evocative of childhood with its simple step-wise motion, the Father's Chair motive (a minor second ascent, descent) is heard pervasively throughout the melodies of both Bea and Charlie. The Father's Chair motive occurs in variation throughout Scene 4 and finishes in the orchestra with a violin and oboe duet. They dialogue in imitation with a captivating continuation of the melody. Heggie chose the precise instrumentation for their emotional, timeless timbres. I imagined they might signify Bea and Charlie. Alas, they do not function as character representations but rather are used solely for their expressive Baroque evocations. Composer intent aside, an audience member could, arguably, experience the duet as an extension of the two characters. Moreover, these mesmerizing melodies are underpinned with a light pizzicato pattern that initially struck Summers as counterintuitive to the gusting wind and raucous traffic noise usually experienced

on the Golden Gate Bridge. When Heggie first played this scene for Summers during early phases of commissioning, he was overcome with a particular memory:

> During the rehearsals of *Dead Man Walking*, I was living in Sausalito. So I was crossing the Golden Gate Bridge every day. And Jake and Terrance came over for a lunch in Sausalito on a day off, and we walked back to San Francisco. […] We walked across the Golden Gate Bridge —the three of us. And it was absolutely still. There wasn't wind, and it was really quiet. It was a very strange experience. And we all remarked on it. And when Jake first played me that scene in *Three Decembers* on the Golden Gate Bridge, and Charlie and his sister experience that and that Baroque texture that he found. I thought of that day where we walked across the bridge because it was... and of course the great line in there 'every corner I turn, I still think you'll reappear,' you know? And he somehow went to a very both painful, and beautiful, memory of his own for that.[378]

These anecdotes Heggie and Summers share demonstrate the astonishing layers of memories and experiences strongly informing the score. It explains why a listener may be struck by the authentic, and somehow vulnerable, interweaving melodies of Bea and Charlie, continued by violin and oboe.

Heggie's compositional process of representing characters through transformed musical motives, cultivates a connection with the modern audience. While opera's multimodal dimensions can be difficult for an audience to absorb, Heggie crafts clear motives that enhance the narrative with the primary goal of emotionally reaching his listeners. He exploits the capabilities of motives by transforming or fragmenting them to suit the evolution of both character and plot. The story oscillates between the serious and light-hearted, while the redemptive, darker emotional themes could be relatable to any member of the audience who comes from a dysfunctional family. Summer's likens Heggie's compositional practice to Handel and Verdi, crafting musical characters for specific performers and specific events. Moreover, he is audience-centric:

[378] Summers, Interview with author.

> He writes for the ears of all, not just the studied. He would not be proud of eccentric isolation; he is urban, uncomfortable without a population around him to observe and with whom to interact. Rather than composing broad tonal pictures, he is at his best writing intimate emotions, turning his own keen eye on the human situation in ingenious ways. The voice is his natural medium.[379]

Three Decembers epitomizes this exquisite summary, with a role created precisely for von Stade and a score full of emotional character associations. And Summers, having commissioned, premiered, and performed the piece, is the most qualified to assert these claims. Among the numerous achievements at HGO Summers is most proud, he lists his collegial relationship collaborating with Heggie, saying it has "been the most important professional work of my life. The relationship between conductor and composer to last this long — more than twenty-five years and seven major operas — that has not happened very much in operatic history.[380] The interwoven relationship between impresario and composer is indeed unique: Summers and Heggie are two of the major figures who have shaped twenty-first century American opera and continue to do so as they work together in this next decade on their latest operatic project, *Intelligence*.

Reception and Revival Results: Relevant and Relatable

Since *Three Decembers* first premiered thirteen years ago, it has received a notable thirty-two productions. Though now beloved, the premieres were met with mixed reception. Critics were confounded by the libretto, calling it banal and at times awkward or uninspiring.[381] They also disliked the polystylistic musical landscape with its injection of musical theatre and jazz idioms. Madeline Mitchell's showtune style music, in particular, evokes Broadway's Golden Age

[379] Summers, "A Life," 11-12.
[380] Summers, Interview with author.
[381] See Appendix A for complete bibliographic record of archived reviews.

era in choice of rhythmic patterns, melody, and vocal tessitura. More recent reviews of revivals paint a more positive picture of the opera. Despite initial negative critiques, it is among his most performed works. Summers said to Heggie, when the poor reviews came out, "everything they're criticizing, they'll eventually admire,"[382] which is precisely what has transpired. This speaks to the broader debate regarding the reimagining of opera as a genre in this century. Summers claims this is,

> certainly the story of opera in the twenty-first century. You'll almost never have a work that's critically acclaimed and beloved by audiences. Very big, big divide. It's representative of this sort of cultural divide we have now between many groups, and how do you define it? The educated and the misinformed? However you want to define it. If you are a maverick, and you are uncompromising, and you starve that's fine. But if you are a maverick, and you're successful, that's not fine. And Jake's been very successful. And I would argue that that his bravery in writing his own reaction to characters is actually quite *avant garde*. You know the German romanticism of the Second Viennese School — which is now a century ago — that has been the lonestar for everybody, critically. Not in literature, or movies, or art, or books, or film, but in classical music only. And he has defied that. And that's a brave thing to do. And he's defied it and been successful.[383]

I assert both Heggie and Gordon present memorable motives and songwriting form in their compositional styles, which have been received enthusiastically by sold out audiences. *Three Decembers*, in particular, has earned positive audience feedback despite mixed critical reception.

Rather than writing for a targeted audience, Heggie imagines himself as an audience member. He considers what he would find meaningful and entertaining. He seeks characters he identifies with but are also creatively challenging. Trusting in his organic process, he believes if it is well done, it will find an audience. For it to begin to receive revivals, it must resonate with the audience. Heggie professes a combination of elements must align:

> It's in the moment. It feels alive. It feels resonant. It feels a combination of moving and challenging and entertaining. And you're going to go away feeling something that you

[382] Summers, Interview with author.
[383] Ibid.

> maybe didn't consider before. It will give you a fresh perspective. And it will be uplifting, or it will be somehow inspiring in some way. And transformative. You know, those are the stories I look for. Sometimes they work, sometimes they don't. You just never really can tell what the magic formula is. And so, I think all of those things matter. But then its ability to touch and move a broader audience, than maybe initially even considered, because it feels timely and timeless. [384]

Three Decembers happens to embody the aforementioned combination. Timely through its contemporary setting but timeless with its familial relationships. These winning ingredients support the significant revivals of *Three Decembers*.

To determine what aspects inspired each revival company to program *Three Decembers*, I followed the same procedure from Chapter 5's evaluation to procure connecting threads among the nine companies who responded to this study's questionnaire:

> Boston University Opera Institute (Allison Voth, Principal Coach)
> Fort Worth Opera (Joe Illick, Artistic Director)
> Little Opera Company (Spencer Duncanson, Artistic Director)
> Livermore Valley Opera (Erie Mills, Artistic Director)
> Nashville Opera (John Hoomes, CEO and Artistic Director)
> Oper im Knopfloch (Rosina Zoppi, Artistic Director)
> Opera Birmingham (Keith A. Wolfe-Hughes, General Director)
> Painted Sky Opera (Rob Glaubitz, Artistic Director)
> UrbanArias (Robert Wood, Artistic Director)[385]

Of the proposed fundamentals, all four heavily contributed to the revival decision with all nine administrators stating the familiar themes as significant and at least seven companies reporting economic, aural, and social reasons. The dramatic content struck the artistic administrators as "contemporary and relatable" (Mills) with an "accessible, linear storyline" (Hoomes).[386] Glaubitz

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[384] Heggie, Interview with author.

[385]While all companies said they were dedicated to producing a variety of repertoire, six are champions of new American works, including Fort Worth (long history of commissioning and reviving), Boston University (Fall Fringe Festival for the last twenty years), UrbanArias (exclusive mission), Opera Birmingham (one per season), Painted Sky Opera (one per season), and Nashville (long history of commissioning and reviving).

[386]All undocumented quoted material in this section derives from the responses submitted by the named administrators.

cites the "excellently written libretto" with its believable character development as the primary reason he programmed the show: it has a "combination of humor, tragedy, and familial love [that] felt very similar to a real family." Duncanson also found this to be true, remarking on the "depth of the content as it related to the human experience." The social aspects evident in the subject matter's contemporary setting also factored. Six of the responders note relevant and relatable topics manifest in the story that might resonant with audience members: complicated family dynamics, a narcissistic parent, LGBTQ acceptance, AIDs, alcoholism, and depression. In addition to these potential connections, another social aspect appealing to the large majority of the companies (seven) was the shorter length of the opera, particularly its one act.

The overall style of the composer and soundscape attracted the majority of the surveyed companies, excepting Nashville Opera where it was not a factor. Accessibility, in particular, was referenced by seven of the companies. Glaubitz sheds light on the stereotypes associated with opera deemed accessible:

> There's a stigma in opera that 'accessible opera = bad opera,' but I don't think it's true at all. In fact, that stigma has led many traditional opera lovers to refuse to go see modern[387] operas. In a poll we did after a sold-out production of *Madama Butterfly*, we found that only 30 percent of our *Butterfly* audience was particularly interested in seeing a modern opera in future seasons. While we will continue to offer those modern operas as parts of our season, we also realize that we need to make the pathway for those who are intimidated by modern opera by including those modern works which are more accessible to traditional opera fans and non-operagoers.

This illuminates the twofold audience issue. Not only are companies seeking to build audiences with first-time attendees, but they are also contending for their current opera patrons to attend contemporary operas as well. In Glaubitz's scenario, accessible takes on the meaning of

[387] "Modern" can refer to the early twentieth-century style, when the tonal system was being dismantled, but here he uses it as a synonym of contemporary or new opera.

connecting an operagoer who loves nineteenth-century *bel canto* style to contemporary opera that employs some characteristic historical operatic styles. Illick emphasizes, in contrast to the academic music of the twentieth-century, most contemporary composers "want people to come hear their pieces." *Three Decembers* is an exemplar of this with its text-driven score, and Illick describes it is as "stage worthy, believable drama [that] has enough musical protein and substance." Essentially, aurally accessible melodic motives are balanced with intriguing textures. Wood describes the overall sonic environment as the "tunefulness of a musical and a dash of cinema in the orchestration" that maintains the elements of a number opera, creating familiarity with opera listeners.

Heggie, in particular, is known for lyrical songwriting, and Wolfe-Hughes, Wood, and Mills characterize the *Three Decembers* score as "tuneful." Voth elucidates that this does not necessarily mean its "simplistic music, but it is accessible, very often, for the average listener." Indeed, the use of many musical theatre idioms invoking Madeline's Broadway persona offered a familiar, and therefore accessible, musical experience to Opera Birmingham's audience, Wolfe-Hughes said. Both Voth, Wood, and Zoppi reference how it is well-written for the voice. Glaubitz agrees, noting its lyrical aspects. Though he made the caveat that the vocal lines are difficult to learn, despite being lyrical: "Just because something sounds lyrical and pretty doesn't make it easy." Voth made the same comparison: "Jake does write so beautifully for the voice, always. But his music is not necessarily easy. In *Three Decembers,* it flows and has a harmonic foundation, but you have to be a good musician to sing it well." These examples demonstrate accessible music for listening is not synonymous with simple or easy composition.

The malleable scale of *Three Decembers* was a primary reason for programming also. With an undemanding setting and smaller artistic quantities, this opera can be produced

anywhere on the spectrum: from a lavish oversized set of the Golden Gate Bridge (Fort Worth Opera's production) to practically no physical set and only props or projections, to somewhere in between. The lack of set requirements appealed to four of the reviving companies. Moreover, the flexibility of the orchestration was cited by seven of the nine companies. Boston University was the first to use two pianos in place of the chamber ensemble, and Opera Birmingham did the same. Even when the small chamber orchestra is employed, the opera with its small musical forces and intimate characters is ideal in a smaller venue, which appealed to five revivers.

The limited cast, sans chorus, was economically attractive to seven of the companies, while the star power of the cast, with the lead role interpreted by von Stade, appealed to Livermore Valley Opera and Hawai'i Opera Theatre.[388] Hoomes mentions *Three Decembers* had been on their list to program for years, but they desired a specific cast: "Proper casting of this opera is quite important to its success." This rings true, as the whole ninety minutes revolves around character development of only three persons; therefore, strong singing actors are a necessity. Mills of Livermore happened to be in Hawaii during HOT's rehearsal process, where the original cast of von Stade, Kristin Clayton, and Keith Phares were reunited to enact the opera for the first time since the west coast premiere in December 2008. Hearing the sitzprobe, Mills fell in love with the opera. Incidentally, his company had never performed an opera written in the second half of the twentieth century or beyond. Due to the proximity of Livermore to the Bay Area, von Stade and Clayton were hired to interpret the roles again. The board was most attracted to having this legendary mezzo-soprano as the star. Star power can be a beneficial aspect, for Madeline is becoming an iconic role for mature mezzos. In 2020, Opera San José

[388] Hawai'i Opera Theatre is not counted among the responders; due to administrator turnover, they submitted the program book in lieu of the questionnaire.

produced *Three Decembers*, securing the celebrated Susan Graham, for example. The opera was produced during the pandemic as a studio production streamed for the month of December. Graham agreed to the role six weeks before capture, and it was viewed as an extraordinary opportunity for the resident artists, who play her adult children, to get to work with her as a colleague. When former General Director Khori Dastoor decided to do a digital production, she was drawn to *Three Decembers* because of how it deals with family and loss. "Whether it's a loved one or a way of life or something having to do with who we thought we were as Americans — we are changed, and how do we go back and honor the memory of those who we've lost?"[389] In addition to these universal themes, the flexible technical aspects of the opera made it doable amidst a plethora of pandemic protocols and personal protective equipment.

Freud, the original commissioner, believes Heggie is an extraordinarily smart composer who balances audience appeal with production savvy. The fact that *Three Decembers* has been revived an astounding thirty-two times is, according to Freud, "partly because it's really good. And partly because it has been created in a way that really lends itself to companies that are not very well resourced to being able to embrace it and commit to it."[390] The limited cast of three, condensed length of ninety minutes without intermission, and small chamber orchestra make it ideal for a range of companies to produce, thus increasing its likelihood of revival and longevity. Moreover, Freud highlights the power of a role designed for a mature mezzo-soprano:

> Jake is very clever. It was built around Flicka — Frederica von Stade — but it doesn't depend on Flicka. So, it's not a piece that when she retired, retired with her. Because it's written for a mature mezzo-soprano, and because it's a real vehicle for that character, the more mature singers, sopranos and mezzo- sopranos are lining up to sing it. And so that

[389] Francisco Salazar, "Q&A: Khori Dastoor on Opera San Jose's *Three Decembers* & the World of Opera Streaming." *OperaWire* November 26, 2020. https://operawire.com/q-a-khori-dastoor-on-opera-san-joses-three-decembers-the-world-of-opera-streaming/

[390] Freud, Interview with author.

> means that a small company that may not always be able to engage a star name, if you like, actually, when they decide to produce *Three Decembers*, that becomes possible. And if you just Google it — because I was astonished that this piece had been revived that often — when I googled the range of companies that have produced it, and the range of casts that have taken part in it, in a way, I think that bears out just how smart Jake is. And it's not true of many composers. And I'm thrilled with the piece's success. I think it deserves it. Because it's a delightful, moving, engaging piece that from the first workshop it became clear that it was going to be a piece that would be much loved. But it's also a very cleverly constructed piece that conforms to a very user-friendly brief.

It did not retire with Flicka and continues to be user-friendly for both producers and listeners. *Three Decembers*, though met with mixed reception in its first year of performance, exemplifies revival success. As of 2019, it ranks as the third most produced North-American work, following closely behind *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, and was the number one most produced North-American opera in the 2018-2019 season.[391] In addition to character-driven music tied to relatable realties, the constructs of the production make it an ideal choice for theatres looking to produce a show on a limited budget with adaptable venue considerations, limited musical forces, and flexible set and costumery. [392]

[391] OPERA America, 2020 Annual Field Report; 2019 Annual Field Report.

[392] Heggie elucidates most productions are new each time. However, with its established popularity, sets and costumes are available for rent from the Karl Anderson 2015 Kentucky Opera production. Technical/Production Directory, OPERA America. Though not listed as an optional rental in the directory, Hawai'i Opera Theatre's 2017 costumes were rented by Livermore Valley Opera in their 2018 production and the HOT set design and projections were rented and used for the San Diego 2019 production.

CHAPTER 7 - SANTA FE OPERA AND *THE (R)EVOLUTION OF STEVE JOBS* (2017)

Pioneer Institution: Santa Fe Opera

A rustic ranch just north of Santa Fe became the home of the country's most successful festival in 1956 when John O. Crosby founded the Santa Fe Opera. With encouragement from the former Artistic Director of the Hamburg State Opera, Dr. Leopold Sachse, and a 200,000 dollar investment from his parents, Crosby transformed the San Juan resort ranch into an operatic destination. One hundred and fifteen thousand dollars was dedicated to designing the sole outdoor opera theatre in America, planned meticulously to accommodate acoustical experience and embrace the natural surroundings. The inaugural season's repertory established the company's goal of presenting a balanced program with expected Puccini, Mozart, and Rossini operas but also featured Strauss' *Ariadne auf Naxos*, a new American opera called *The Tower* by Marvin David Levy, and Stravinsky's *Rake's Progress* (with Stravinsky at rehearsals and performance). *Time Magazine* likened the new company to a big-league baseball investment and pondered whether local support may elevate it to the become the "Salzburg of the Southwest." Even the *New York Times* recognized its "promising beginning" with the inclusion of a new American opera in its first season. [393] Indeed, not only did this company support American music at its inception but Crosby's concept sought to provide American singers opportunities to perform from home.

In its first five seasons, SFO stood apart from other mid-twentieth-century companies for many reasons: locale, festival style, and an emphasis on unconventional repertory. Of the thirty-

[393] Quoted in Eleanor Scott, *The First Twenty Years of the Santa Fe Opera*, (Santa Fe, NM: The Sun Stone Press, 1976), 13.

two works performed from 1957-1962, only thirteen were considered standard repertoire. In spite of adventurous programming, every year the box office earnings grew. Crosby stuck to his position and artistic choices, saying in 1962, "Opera is a living art. Without neglecting the standard repertory, we think it important to present the new, the different, sometimes the controversial. Gluck in his day, Wagner in his, were considered avant-garde."[394] Though not known for commissioning in its first two decades, SFO did become recognized for its commitment to programming contemporary opera. For instance, in its first twenty years, 63 percent of its repertoire were composed in the twentieth-century.[395] The foundation laid by Crosby and his artistic staff, along with Richard Gaddes, has prevailed into the present century. Gaddes served as Artistic Administrator from 1969-1976, where he helped produce the Heitor Villa-Lobo's *Yerma* commission. He left SFO to co-found OTSL, serving as General Director there until 1987. Returning to SFO as General Director in 2000, he commissioned another opera, Bright Sheng/Colin Graham's *Madame Mao*, strengthened the young artist program, and implemented many community-focused projects. When Charles MacKay left OTSL in 2008 to become SFO's General Director, the company experienced an uptick in its commitment to commissioning. During MacKay's tenure, five new American operas were produced, along with a new dedication to co-productions and collaborations with other opera companies. This history demonstrates both Gaddes and MacKay as influential gatekeepers at both SFO and OTSL, shaping commissioning as well as the way in which a twenty-first century opera house is managed.

[394] Ibid., 51.
[395] Ibid., 157.

MacKay is a mogul in the operatic industry. After immense success at OTSL, he returned home to Santa Fe. MacKay was nine years old when he saw *Die Fledermaus* at the opera-air theatre in SFO's third season and took his first volunteer job at thirteen, directing cars before and after the performance, which allowed him to watch for free. At eighteen, he convinced Crosby to let him audition as a French horn player for the pit, and he was hired to play in the stage band for *Der Rosenkavalier*, along with a number of stagehand duties. From there, his various roles in the company included painting sets to selling tickets at the box office. These experiences gave him firsthand insight into what makes a thriving company operate smoothly: "I was curious from the very beginning to understand how all the different pieces of the opera fit together and how the organization really functioned," MacKay said during a 2018 interview with Megan Kamerick of New Mexico's PBS. "I was curious to know what drove the opera — what the engine was that kept it going."[396] He kept working for, and learning from, Crosby at SFO until 1979, when he left for the Spoleto Fesitval and eventually OTSL, 1985-2008.

MacKay returned to SFO in the fall of 2008 during the tumultuous economy crisis. He describes the transition as slightly traumatic. The day he became general director, the market fell around 500 points and continued to drop. The endowment funds were decreasing in value and regular contributions fell. MacKay recounts his efforts to start his role from a position of strength, while also reducing the budget in the unstable economy:

> I had to assemble the troops, and we went through a whole sequence of trimming the budget and trying to figure out what is nonessential: what can we trim away from the budget that won't harm the artistic product because that was what was most important to me, and fortunately, in my case, Natalie Dessay was singing her first *Traviata* at the SFO. Richard Gaddes had kindly set that up for me for my first season, and you know, she was

[396] Charles MacKay, Interview with Megan Kamerick for New Mexico in Focus, 22:58. August 31, 2018. https://www.newmexicopbs.org/productions/newmexicoinfocus/outgoing-santa-fe-opera-director-charles-mackay/.

> a big star and a big draw for the box office, and so the attendance was pretty good. People really wanted to come and see Natalie. But week by week, when I met with the senior staff, we kept having to carve out 200,000, 300,000 dollars. I would go and say, 'Okay, today we have to trim another 500,000 dollars out of the budget.' And so, altogether it was making cuts of about 1.5 million dollars and getting the budget down to what I thought would be a manageable level. And we got to the end of that fiscal year and ended on a 16-million-dollar budget. We ended with a surplus of 1,607 dollars.[397]

In this interview, MacKay states his mantra: all artistic decisions are financial decisions. When I spoke with Paul Kilmer, he mentioned working with MacKay at OTSL. Kilmer brightened while speaking about MacKay, emphasizing MacKay's repeated and respected mantra: all opera house assessments must be artistic as well as fiscal. During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, SFO remained in the black, largely due to efforts by MacKay and his staff post-recession.

Although expanding new commissions, MacKay maintained the tradition of Crosby and Gaddes. SFO's annual season continued to present a mélange of historical and contemporary. The company's mission statement speaks to these programming choices with the following language: "to advance the operatic art form by presenting ensemble performances of the highest quality in a unique setting with a varied repertoire of new, rarely performed, and standard works."[398] When reflecting on his decade as general director, MacKay said he "always tried to stay true to Crosby's original vision and mission statement for the opera […] and using that as my guide in terms of planning repertory."[399] He also speaks highly of the commissions produced during his tenure, noting that both Jennifer Higdon and Gene Scheer's *Cold Mountain* (2015) and Bates and Campbell's *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* were sold out performances. MacKay says these works stand as a testament against the antiquated belief that audiences do not desire

[397] Charles MacKay, Interview with Megan Kamerick.
[398] www.santafeopera.org/company/our-mission/
[399] Charles MacKay, Interview with Megan Kamerick.

contemporary opera. SFO "really disproved that. There was great curiosity and interest in hearing these new works that were based on subjects that were alluring and familiar to people."[400] As this study demonstrates, familiar content assuredly sparks audience intrigue, and these sold out performances of new works at SFO are exemplars. MacKay was succeeded by Robert K. Meya in 2018. After the unprecedented pause of live theatre in 2020, Meya "is actively pursuing a four year forward-planning cycle to allow for the engagement of the highest caliber of artists and creative teams."[401]

Figure 7.1 Santa Fe Opera New Works Archive 1957-2019

Year	Title	Composer	Librettist
1957	*The Tower*	Marvin David Levy	Marvin David Levy
1958	*Wuthering Heights*	Carlisle Floyd	Carlisle Floyd
1970	*Opera*	Luciano Berio	Luciano Berio
1971	*Yerma*	Heitor Villa-Lobos	Heitor Villa-Lobos
1982	*The Confidence Man*	George Rochberg	George Rochberg
1985	*The Tempest*	John Eaton	Andrew Porter
1995	*Modern Painters*	David Lang	Manuela Hoelterhoff
1996	*Emmeline*	Tobias Picker	J.D. McClatchy
1997	*Ashoka's Dream*	Peter Lieberson	Douglas Penick
2003	*Madame Mao*	Bright Sheng	Colin Graham
2009	*The Letter*	Paul Moravec	Terry Teachout
2010	*Life is a Dream*	Lewis Spratlan	James Maraniss
2013	*Oscar*	Theodore Morrison	Theodore Morrison
2015	*Cold Mountain*	Jennifer Higdon	Gene Scheer
2017	*The (R)evolution Steve Jobs*	Mason Bates	Mark Campbell
2019	*The Thirteenth Child*	Poul Ruders	Becky and David Starobin

As can be viewed in Figure 7.1, SFO's total number of commissions is sixteen. Though a smaller number in comparison to the other companies in this study, its dedication to performing contemporary opera is demonstrated through rare works (for example, almost every Strauss opera) and premiering new works by non-American composers in the United States. As of 2019, SFO has produced forty-four of these works, including internationally renowned composers like

[400] Ibid.
[401] www.santafeopera.org/company/leadership/

Kaija Saaariaho (*L'Amour de Lion*, 2002; *Adriana Mater*, 2008), Thomas Adès (*The Tempest*, 2006) and Tan Dun (*Tea: A Mirror of Soul*, 2007). In an effort to shift its focus to American commissions, a new initiative, Opera for All Voices, was instituted in 2017. This program focuses on co-commissioning new operas for all ages "that bear the same artistic integrity and depth of storytelling as the season festival."[402] Santa Fe leads a consortium of companies — Lyric Opera of Kansas City, MO, OTSL, San Francisco Opera, Sarasota Opera, and Seattle Opera — in the commissioning of four new works. The new works must present resonant, contemporary storytelling from diverse voices and be conceived with malleable production requirements. The first new work of the project was premiered October 26, 2019: Augusta Read Thomas and Leslie Dunton-Downer's *Sweet Potato Kicks the Sun.* Of the four selected works, all range between sixty to ninety minutes, consist of limited instrumentation, and include at least one woman on the creative team. Two of the four present non-European expressive content. The other opera premieres were put on hold due to the pandemic but are scheduled to be performed in late 2021 and 2022. Furthering the workshop model, each work receives at least one workshop opportunity to refine the opera before premiering at a partner company from the consortium.

Another notable initiative at SFO was the "Tech and the West" plan. Commencing in 2017 with the premiere of *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* and continuing into 2018 with the revival of John Adams' *Doctor Atomic,* these performances presented opportunities to discuss the intersection of technology, innovation, and opera. The Director of Education and Community Engagement, Andrea Fellows Walters, led the initiative. Its interdisciplinary activities and events included lectures, panels, and visual art based on the tech-driven operas. "Tech and the West" led

[402] https://www.santafeopera.org/community/

to artistic and community partnerships with the Santa Fe Institute, New Mexico History Museum, Los Alamos Historical Society, and The Carl and Marilynn Thomo Art Foundation. Walters saw these operas as a chance to investigate the motives inspiring these icons: "Were Jobs and Oppenheimer creating for the greater good? Was a greater good being served, despite destructive outcomes?"[403] Furthermore, they presented innovative figures that attracted newcomers to the opera house.

The Creative Technologist's Creative Team

Composer Mason Bates specializes in integrating his DJing and mastery of electronica into the classical idiom. His symphonic works, like *Mothership*, have garnered him fame in the industry, not only for the unprecedented blend of electronics and acoustic orchestra but also for their story-driven messages. *Alternative Energy* emphasizes the issues of energy consumption, while *The Rise of Exotic Computing* links nature with technological innovations to illustrate a corporation's slogan, Amazing Together. In the pedagogy lineage of Arnold Schoenberg, Bates studied with Schoenberg's student Dika Newlin and then trained with noted composers John Corigliano and David Del Tredici in the Columbia-Juilliard Exchange Program. At UC Berkeley, he studied with Edmund Campion, earning a PhD in composition in 2008 along with a Guggenheim Fellowship. In 2015 he became the first composer-in-residence at the Kennedy Center and in the same season, he was identified as the most performed living American composer of his generation, in second place to John Adams. He has won prominence by being

[403] Julia Goldberg, "Boom: Santa Fe Opera's Tech and the West program Tackles the Big Bang of Contemporary Innovation." *SF Reporter* September 12, 2017. https://www.sfreporter.com/2017/09/12/boom/.

commissioned to write orchestral works for major city symphonies across the United States and is even championed by conductor Riccardo Muti.

As of 2021, librettist Mark Campbell has written thirty-nine opera libretti, and counting.[404] An actor turned lyricist, Sondheim awarded him the first Kleban Foundation Award for Lyricist in 1990 that solidified his place as a writer. He pivoted to the operatic medium in 2002, however, when he wrote his first opera libretto with composer John Musto at Wolf Trap. That comedic opera, an adaption of the play *Volpone*, received a Grammy nomination and set him on the operatic path. In addition to his laconic writing style, he brings brand awareness to a project from his thirty-five years of experience in advertising. Now one of the most sought-after librettists in the field, Campbell uses his position to fiercely advocate for contemporary opera and mentor budding librettists at new works programs, including American Opera Projects, American Lyric Theatre, Washington National Opera's American Opera Initiative, and the Dramatist's Guild. In our conversation, I likened him to the Lorenzo Da Ponte or Eugene Scribe of this age, and Campbell humbly responded with "I'm still trying to get it right. I think that's why I keep writing them."[405]

Other intrinsic creative team members contributing to the vision and production of *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* include stage director Kevin Newbury and sound designer Rick Jacobsohn. Newbury boasts an incredibly active *oeuvre*, directing over seventy original productions with an emphasis on new works, including over two dozen world premiere operas

[404] Campbell has also collaborated with stage director and dramaturg Eric Simonson on multiple new works at Minnesota Opera: *Silent Night*, *The Shining,* and *Edward Tulane.* Simonson comments that Campbell is known now as "the libretto guy." With his range of experience, "he's been able to hone his own craft, but also influence how operas are put together." Simonson, Interview with author.

[405] Mark Campbell, Interview with author, Aug 3, 2021.

and plays. Though he calls Santa Fe his home company, his engagements with major America opera theatres is extensive: American Repertory Theatre, BAM's Next Wave Festival, Carnegie Hall, Cincinnati Opera, HGO, Glimmerglass Opera, the Kennedy Center, Lyric Opera of Chicago, OTSL, MO, San Francisco Opera, Opera Philadelphia, Prototype Festival, and Seattle Opera. Jacobsohn is a leading NY-based sound designer and recording artist who has worked in the classical industry for over two decades. His first operatic sound design was for Osvaldo Golijov/David Henry Hwang's *Ainadmar* in 2003 at Tanglewood, and he has worked consistently with Baltimore Symphony Orchestra and Philadelphia Orchestra over the last decade. The other creatives critical to the premiere production process include Michael Christie (conductor), Susanne Sheston (chorus master), Robert Tweten (head of music staff), Victoria "Vita" Tzykun (scene design), Paul Carey (costume Design), Japhy Weirdeman (lighting Design), 59 Productions (projection design), Brian Loach (sound design), Chloe Treat (choreographer), Chelsea Antrim Dennis (production stage manager), and James Daniel (assistant stage director).

Commissioning, Collaborating, and Condensing The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs

Bates and Campbell came together under unlikely circumstances compared to the average commissioning process. Rather than the theatre hiring them per common commissioning conventions, Bates went on the hunt to find a theatre that would support his vision to memorialize innovative tech tycoon Steve Jobs through the opera. Bates called Campbell to join him on the project after Mark Adamo recommended him. Campbell was thrilled at the idea of working with "an exciting composer," but when Bates revealed Steve Jobs as the chosen topic, Campbell says his heart sunk: "I didn't know that much about him, really. And what I did know

was not positive. But I wanted to work with Mason."[406] After he hung up the phone, Campbell researched Jobs extensively. Inspiration struck as he read about Jobs' multifaceted life. Discovering an innovative approach into the story, he decided to commit to the project.

With name recognition in the classical community, Bates was able to pitch his idea to many opera companies. He was met with a variety of responses: one theatre thought it could be an educational outreach work, while another theatre wanted to produce it in a disco warehouse with Mason DJing the opera. Campbell warned against the latter, telling Bates that this would make it an event for the opera company but not as much of an artistic achievement for him. Then, SFO entered into the equation. Newbury, a regular stage director at SFO, is a longtime friend and collaborator with Campbell. Campbell casually mentioned the project to Newbury as they had dinner one evening. Newbury found the project to be brilliant; he loves Bates' music and Campbell's words and wanted to direct it. Within the week, Newbury had a meeting with MacKay to discuss his prospective directing engagements with SFO. Newbury described the Steve Jobs opera to MacKay, who expressed serious interest. After the meeting, Newbury texted Campbell from his car to tell him of SFO'S interest and possible headway. Campbell was ecstatic at the prospect of working at this company with its can-do attitude and exceptional resources. In addition to SFO premiering and leading this commission, three other companies joined the project as co-commissioners in the following order: Indiana University the Jacobs School of Music, Seattle Opera, and San Francisco Opera. Support from Cal Performances was also received, in addition to generous underwriting by Jane Stieren Lacy, David Henry Jacobs, The

[406] Campbell, Interview with author.

Carl & Marilynn Thoma Foundation, and The General Director's Premiere Fund in honor Richard Gaddes. In the end, this commission was a two-million-dollar project.

After a relatively brief commissioning period from December 2014 to July 2017, *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* premiered on July 22, 2017. Campbell recalls they may have had a cancellation in their season, which did mean the writing process had to be expediated, as can be seen in the deliverables timeline from the contract (Figure 7.2).[407]

Figure 7.2 Delivery of Materials from *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* contract	
Deadline	**Task**
December 15, 2014	Final outline of the libretto
February 15, 2015	Final libretto
March 1, 2015	Producer approval
May 15, 2015	Piano/vocal of major scene in opera
September, 2015	UC Berkeley Workshop of major scene
November 15, 2015	Piano/vocal of first half
June 1, 2016	Piano/vocal of second half
September 2016	UC Berkeley Workshop of entire opera
January 1, 2017	Full score and orchestra parts

The libretto, for instance, went from outline to first draft in two months. As a part of Campbell's regular practice, he constructs a detailed outline that he submits to the opera company before he begins the full text. He prefers the company be signed on to the story from the get-go. This also helps alleviate any surprises in terms of story planning. Once the outline is agreed upon and his libretto is drafted, he sends it to not only the composer but also the company and other creative team members, like the stage director or dramaturg in order to catch potential issues at the start. This practice is mutually beneficial for all parties involved, both economically and creatively, and allows for the vocalists to enter into the project with more confidence too.[408] Indeed, Newbury,

[407] Thanks to Campbell for supplying this excerpt of information from the official contract.
[408] Campbell, Interview with author.

who was integral to signing on the project with SFO, was a part of the process from the beginning. He said, "I'm always happy as a director to be involved from the very early phases, because then all the design ideas and staging ideas can be integrated into the entire process, as opposed to just kind of put on to the piece after it's written."[409]

For *Steve Jobs*, Campbell followed the aforementioned pattern. After submitting the libretto, MacKay was pleased but came back with one concern. In the first draft there was a curse word repeated three times. MacKay asked Campbell to reduce the number of times it was said, as he knew his audience would not like it. Campbell agreed, saying, "I don't depend on curse words for my message so that's easy. And I changed it."[410] Beyond submitting to the company, composer, and director, Campbell was also asked to submit the libretto to an entertainment lawyer to ensure SFO was not liable for defamation based on the public figures represented. On the whole, there were no issues with Campbell's libretto, beyond one requested change:

> There was one mention of Chrisann that was actually a quote from Steve Jobs. And the lawyer said, 'Is this a quote? Or did you say this?' And I said, 'It's a quote that I changed a little bit.' And he asked me what the original quote was. And he said, 'Oh, you have to go back to the original quote because the way you wrote this, it makes it seem like it's true.' It was a bad thing about her reputation. But it did come from Steve Jobs, who was very mean to Chrisann. And I was happy to change it. My father was a lawyer. So I understand how that works.[411]

Additionally, the company included a liability disclaimer in the Program Notes, saying though Steve Jobs' life and spirit inspired the opera, it did not claim to portray the "statements, beliefs, or opinions of the persons depicted" nor was it sanctioned by Apple or Steve Jobs' Estate. The events depicted in the opera are based on factual accounts available through tertiary sources as

[409] Kevin Newbury, Interview with author, August 31, 2021.
[410] Campbell, Interview with author.
[411] Ibid.

well as the Walter Isaacson biography and documentaries; Campbell watched and read everything he could find about Jobs. As he sifted through Jobs' life, certain seminal events sparked his imagination, and he would write them in a journal. In his research, he was struck by elements of Jobs' life that were poetic or text that felt like it could sing. Campbell emphasizes that "nothing in the libretto was revelatory in some gossipy or horrible way. I just didn't see the purpose of that."[412] Thus, the librettist crafted this story, which could have easily gravitated towards splashy headlines, with sensitive intention. His constructed narrative centers on Jobs as a man: relentlessly pursuing perfection, striving to streamline communication, and, most significantly, confronting his own mortality.

At the outset of the project, the creative team brainstormed how to approach what could have easily become a four-hour biography. Though biographies can often start at the tail end on the deathbed, Campbell did not want this to be another TV movie nor a predictable chronology. Instead, he latched onto Jobs' spiritual journey as a practicing Buddhist and his love of long walks that brought clarity of thought. Bates recalls early on in the process, walking with Campbell around San Francisco in a Jobsian fashion to meditate on how the plot should transpire.[413] These revelations led to the decision of a non-linear and circular story. The *ensō* symbol in Zen Buddhism was a particular point of inspiration: monk's paint the circle every day. The philosophy deduces the circle will never be perfect, and life reflects this: "That meant so much to me in terms of my way into the story," Campbell said. "Because when you think about Steve Jobs, he was trying to make something perfect. He was trying to, in a certain way, cover up all the

[412] Ibid.

[413] Dacia Clay, "MASON BATES discusses *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs*." Seattle Opera Podcast, 30:59. February 26, 2019. https://seattleopera.libsyn.com/mason-bates-discusses-the-revolution-of-steve-jobs.

messiness of life by making these perfect computers. At the same time, he was making the computer more democratic."[414] Accordingly, the story highlights significant life events bouncing back and forth in time with Jobs' spiritual advisor as a guiding companion, invoking a familiar character pairing reminiscent of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

During the collaborative process, Bates and Campbell worked together amicably. Though they had a unified artistic vision for the opera, they did view Steve Jobs in different lights. Campbell initially saw Jobs more negatively than Bates, and often had to temper his "cynical impulses" in order to create a sympathetic character.[415] Yet, the more he read about Jobs, the more he saw him as human instead of a god. As Bates was composing, he often asked Campbell for amendments. Campbell stresses that it is his job as the librettist to ensure the composer connects to the text while composing: "If a composer can't feel the words, then it's going to be bad. So, I had to keep my eye on the story to not make it too much about hagiography but then also understand what Mason was saying. And I think I did. It is probably a little bit softer and sweeter of a story than I would tell if I were telling myself, alone. But that's not what opera is. Opera is a collaboration."[416] During that collaboration, they frequently emailed back and forth. Bates would sometimes make requests for catchier language so that every aria had "a sentence or a phrase that encapsulates it: one device," for example.[417] Bates would also ask for more words or elaborations in certain scenes. Campbell notes that it is not a simple matter of just adding text, but rather he would need to re-structure the section where additions were being made since

[414] Campbell, Interview with author.

[415] Mark Campbell, Program Notes "The Evolution of (R)evolution," *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* (Santa Fe Opera: July 22, 2017), 18.

[416] Campbell, Interview with author.

[417] Clay, "MASON BATES."

"every lyric is an argument."[418] When building a story through lyrics, it requires more than additional words but a keen awareness of the inherent logic of the expressed sentiment.

From the information gathered through my institutional interviews, the average commission is three to five years from pitch to premiere. Consequently, the *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* creative team needed to closely collaborate and maintain a clear vision under the time constraint of only two years. Newbury said that the creative team,

> knew that the form and function of the production needed to mirror the subject matter. And that's always the case, of course. You want the physical production to reflect the themes of the piece itself, but in looking at a story about technology, of an icon trying to find his humanity within the technology that he created, or helped create. And we had dozens of meetings to figure out how to animate this on stage. [419]

One of the ideas that emerged derives from Kamishibai theatre. Another Japanese inspiration, the use of sliding screens led to the sleek manner in which the set transformed from scene to scene. The two workshops, at Santa Fe and San Francisco, were critical for the creation of this piece, too. They allowed the creators to assess the pacing of the piece, narrative clarity, and orchestral balance. At the workshop, Bates, Campbell, and Newbury focused primarily on refining the relationship of text to music. Newbury recalls how the ability to hear the music influenced his ability to imagine the design. After the last workshop in San Francisco, the team had a design meeting to formulate the visual aspects.

Bates is known for electronic soundscapes and technologically-driven subject matter; therefore, the design of this opera calls for many aspects of technology less common in operatic production, from massive computerized screens to singer amplification.[420] Newbury describes

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[418] Campbell, Interview with author.

[419] Newbury, Interview with author.

[420] Projections and subtle amplification are trends used more regularly in operatic production in the last decade.

their overall artistic goal as one that sought to embody the streamlined, sleek designs intrinsic to Apple devices:

> We certainly knew that if we were going to take on an icon of the tech community that our production needed to have a design component or a design approach that was hopefully worthy of Steve Jobs and Apple and all that they created. I would say the number one guidepost for us is that we wanted to aim for a seamless design. If you think of Apple products as being the perfect marriage of form and function and design, we wanted to come up with a physical production that defied traditional expectations in that we wanted something where the audience couldn't tell what was scenery, what was lighting, and what was video because everything works together in a seamless way.[421]

They designed six twelve-foot light boxes, packed full of OLEDs and infrared sensors. This makes them trackable by the computer systems and gives them the ability to be in constant motion, forming new shapes upon the stage and lighting up from within while also taking projections. Sometimes they create a line. Sometimes they imitate a Pac Man maze for Jobs to chase his ambition through. Sometimes they are stark white to suggest an ultra-modern Apple store, while other scenes call for psychedelic or nature images. Production Set Designer Vita Tzykun said she hoped to create a shifting environment that was minimal, "just like Steve Jobs' aesthetic, extremely flexible, so that it can have endless configurations, and it has to deliver a sense of wonder just like all of Steve Jobs' devices do."[422] An attendee once complimented Newbury, noting amazement at the set's seamless quality. The person could not decipher video from scenery from lighting because it was all harmoniously interwoven. To accomplish this, Newbury and Campbell were influenced by the sparse quality of Japanese Noh theater, in addition to high tech pyrotechnics. They wished to overwhelm the stage with illumination and sound and then miraculously transform the space into a minimalist Zen garden in front of the audiences' eyes:

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[421] Newbury, Interview with author.

[422] Alyssa Bereznak, "In Reinterpreting Steve Jobs Folklore, an Opera Disrupts Its Form." *The Ringer* July 20, 2017. https://www.theringer.com/2017/7/20/16078108/steve-jobs-opera-d4764d57eef7.

"So much of Noh theater is about being able to see the performers enter and exit," Newbury said, "that you're very aware of the theatrical process at all times."[423] Newbury's ensemble-driven staging style plays into this too. To make these transitions impactful and seem mechanical, a stage crew of apprentices physically ran the lightboxes from scene to scene. The stage manager gave them rhythmic counts and timings in their headphones. This hidden choreography was a "stage manager's gift/nightmare," said Newbury. During the curtain call, the lightbox crew takes a bow, creating "a sense of surprise that they were actually run by human hands and not automated."[424] I argue emphasizing an onlooker's wonderment at how the stage took shape every scene plays into an overarching symbolic subtext: when one reaches into their pocket and pulls out an iPhone and wonders, how does this device actually work? The creative team tapped into these mystifying curiosities and complexities about how technology works on a multi-million-dollar level.

Although a technologically captivating production, its expensive nature is cost prohibitive for regional companies interested in reviving this work. Other company administrators have mentioned interest in the Steve Jobs subject to Campbell. Despite its potentially entertaining and exciting experiences for their audiences, the original production is too fiscally demanding.[425] The mammoth monolith light boxes, though visually striking, require a large budget not available at most companies. To combat this barrier, General and Artistic Director Tomer Zvulun at the Atlanta Opera created a second production. Zvulun approached Bates and Campbell about a more affordable production, and they agreed it would be an ideal option and lead to more

[423] Newbury, Interview with author.
[424] Ibid.
[425] Campbell, Interview with author.

revivals. And in fact, it has: Zvulun has already signed on companies for the new production, including Lyric Opera of Kansas City and Austin Opera in 2022, while three more companies have expressed interest and may produce it in the next two years. Jacobsohn, who has worked on all the previous productions and will work on all the revivals, recalls how the original set "looks amazing. Every time the audience sees it — you hear a gasp. And it's like 'Wow!' But from what I've seen, this one's going to be just as exciting."[426] Allowing for new production interpretations will indeed give a continued life to this opera.

An Audience-Approved Reception

Met with mixed critical reception, MacKay sees the most significant marker of an opera's success as the audience response.[427] Through marketing campaigns, as well as massive news coverage due to the nature of the subject, there was substantial media buzz leading up to the premiere. At a dress rehearsal prior to the premiere, one hundred Instagram influencers were invited in order to boost the popularity of the piece and the buzz around the iconic figure. Consequently, the performances of *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* sold out at its July 22, 2017 premiere. An extra performance was even added on August 22, at the end of the festival season, making its run a total of eight performances. Many reviews profess this opera as a crowd pleaser, describing the after-show atmosphere as positive with erupting applause, cheers, and ovations. All in all, audiences at large were enamored. Jacobsohn even mentions hearing audible gasps from the audiences during the performances.

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[426] Rick Jacobsohn, Interview with author, September 9, 2021.

[427] Charles Mackay, Interview with Debra Lew Harder, WRTI FM Philadelphia, 17:20. July 26, 2018. https://www.wrti.org/arts-desk/2018-08-01/the-secrets-of-leadership-from-santa-fe-operas-beloved-general-director-charles-mackay.

Despite popular appeal, a few scathing reviews questioned the story choices and the sanctifying of Jobs through Laurene. MacKay told the creative team that receiving negative reviews puts them in the company of opera history's beloved operas, from *The Barber of Seville* to *Madame Butterfly* to *Nixon in China.* These canonic works were not immediately met with positive reception by critics but have become canonic, nonetheless. In a 2018 interview with Debra Lew Harder, MacKay continued by saying,

> Everyone has a different opinion. I think, as I say, 'time will tell' as to the durability of *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs,* but what has been so exciting about this work is the fact that it has drawn new audiences to opera. Every single convening that we've had, be it a preview talk or lecture or random scan of the audience, many of the people attending our performances are seeing their first opera. It is opening a new door to them. And it is such a different sound. Mason Bates use of electronica is so interesting and ear-catching, if you will. And the production is visually stunning. And I think it really presents opera as being a vibrant, living opera, which is what we need today.[428]

Newbury agrees wholeheartedly: "If there were things that critics didn't agree with, it's like, 'Well, the audiences still went for it.' And I think sometimes something that's really popular and fun to watch about a figure that we all know — there's a lot to be said for that."[429] These statements demonstrate its audience appeal, and opening night had the audience on their feet for a final ovation. As one review recounts, "don't believe a prominent handful of venomous reviews that smack of pre-conceived bias against a composer who dares to be accessible and — worse still — popular. [It] may not be perfect, but it does feature compelling music in the service of good drama."[430] Indeed, this opera has garnered high praise and was nominated for four Grammy awards, including Best Engineered Album (Classical), Producer of the Year (Classical), Best

[428] Charles MacKay, Interview with Harder.

[429] Newbury, Interview with author.

[430] Clive Paget, "Mason Bates: *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* (Santa Fe Opera/Michael Christie)." *Limelight Magazine* September 12, 2018. https://limelightmagazine.com.au/reviews/mason-bates-the-revolution-of-steve-jobs-santa-fe-opera-michael-christie/.

Contemporary Classical Composition, and Best Opera Recording. *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* was the winner of the latter category, officially receiving a Grammy in 2019. The PentaTone recording released in 2018 uses the live recordings from its 2017 SFO premiere.

Familiar Story: Celebrity Insider and the Streamlining of Steve Jobs

Opera at its core communicates through sustained sound, and Bates believes Steve Jobs, the man who revolutionized social communication, is therefore an ideal subject for the art form.[431] Bates notes that opera is full of narratives focused on creative individuals, like Britten's *Death in Venice* or Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann*. *(R)evolution* seeks to explore the innermost psychology of an icon from a more poetic perspective rather than a cold biography or chronological account. Bates' fascination with the famous figure derives from Jobs' innate complexities: "the man who miniaturized and simplified our human communication onto these sleek little devices had so many issues with the complication of human life."[432] Moreover, in many public interviews, Bates refers to Jobs as a creative technologist and saw his life as an ideal "intersection of technology, creativity, and human connection."[433] Along with what I label a "celebrity insider subject," these intersections generate widespread appeal, sparking curiosity to know more about a familiar topic.

As previously specified, the scenes do not progress in a temporal sequential order. Rather the selected formative events bounce between growing up in the 1960s in Los Altos, being a countercultural entrepreneur in the 1970s, becoming a corporate capitalist in the 1980s,

[431] Clay, "MASON BATES."

[432] Santa Fe Opera. "The Making of The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs." 2:38. April 27, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_IuI9z3LUIM.

[433] Joshua Kosman, "Steve Jobs to Get the Operatic Treatment," *SF Gate* August 6, 2015. https://www.sfgate.com/music/article/Steve-Jobs-to-get-the-operatic-treatment-6427182.php.

marrying Laurene in 1991, launching the iPhone in 2007, and dying in 2011. Though a long-list of influential people could have shown up in the opera, Campbell kept it lean with only a handful of characters: Paul Jobs (father), Steve Jobs, Laurene Powell Jobs (wife), Kōbun Chino Otogawa (spiritual advisor), Steve Wozniak (Apple co-founder and friend), Chrisann Brennan (girlfriend), Teacher (calligraphy), Young Steve Jobs (silent role), and a chorus.[434] The opera commences in the humble childhood garage in 1965. Young Steve is being gifted a workbench by his father. The workbench is a nuanced symbol. Not only is it an occasion to show how Jobs cultivated his ability to work with his hands, but it is an opportunity for the audience to connect. When deciding to start the story here, Campbell expresses,

> I get to tell this story, where there will be parents in the audience understanding that when a child shows an affinity for something, to encourage it as much as possible. And I just thought that was so beautiful. And a workbench. A workbench, which every garage had, or still has. And it's just this wooden, rusty thing, where ideas are made into this [holds up iPhone]. One of the most — I won't say the greatest inventions of our time because I don't necessarily agree with that — but certainly, one of the most influential inventions of our time.[435]

Campbell recognizes the potential connection an audience member could make while watching a son express interest in building and tinkering and how parent response can foster this curiosity. Newbury comments on this same concept, noting how he adores the opening section and its clever transitions through time. In quick succession, the audience is transported from the ten-year-old's workbench to the momentous product launch to an intimate discussion between

[434] Campbell muses about the people that came out of the woodwork while he was writing. They would contact him saying something like, "'I'm on page 445 in the book. Am I going to be in your opera?' And I would be like, 'No, I'm sorry, I can't. You were there in spirit but not in character.' Steve Jobs meant a lot to a lot of people, some of it really bad, some of it really good. […] I hope that they do feel themselves and see themselves in that world. I wasn't trying to exclude; I was just trying to create a story." Campbell, Interview with author.

[435] Ibid.

husband and wife to finally a Zen meditation, featuring the Santa Fe sunset with its natural landscape backdrop:

> I was particularly proud of the way the story and the design work together in that first fifteen minutes. I think the whole production worked really well, but I really loved that opening. That excitement of counting down to a launch, that we all experienced, and having it come on the heels of a moment of childhood — euphoria, or that eureka moment of a kid discovering how to take things apart and put them back together.[436]

As this sequence exhibits, Campbell's writing encapsulates intuitive dramatic pacing. He structures the opera through balanced events, crafting climaxes through bustling scenes filled with choristers and then implements release for the viewer in more intimate scenes between two or three principal characters.

The staging and scenery help solidify subtext and symbolism. Newbury likens the bench to a magnet. It becomes a "grounding place for Steve to return to and also to introduce the characters, either from the past or the present."[437] Though the vignettes travel forward and backward through Jobs' memories, the bench always remains a part of the scene. The strong yet simplistic scenery shifts to depict his various emotional states as he confronts his mortality. The rock garden and its bench are a peaceful sanctuary; whereas, the glaring monolith light boxes read like an electrified video game:

> It felt like he was trapped in his own technology. It's like man versus the machine in a way. And confronting his own demons and his own successes. And then the wonder of childhood was also a big guiding principle for us. So, you saw him at the beginning with his father getting his first workbench, and then we ended the opera with that same moment of wonder. I think for Steve's character, it's about trying to maintain that joy, stay connected to that joy and wonder what made him want to explore what was possible in the realm of technology and bringing the world together. Whether that was the wonder of taking mushrooms or having a love affair, or creating a blue box with Woz in the iconic garage.[438]

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[436] Newbury, Interview with author.
[437] Ibid.
[438] Ibid.

Each of these scenes represent heightened realism, in contrast to the magical realism, previously described, that transpires in the visible scene transformations.

Many opinions, often found in the critical reception, circulate around how these iconic figures are represented. From the stage director's perspective, research is the first step. Newbury soaks up all he can about the famous people, from documentaries to publications and biographies to archival footage. But once the rehearsal process begins, he moves on to the next creative step:

> We want to create a version of this that feels theatrical. It's not about the verisimilitude of adopting their exact mannerisms. And I've done it with three different Steve Jobs actors playing the role now, and everyone's approach is different. Some people want to really adopt that physicality. Some people want to find their own way into it. But I'm more interested in what each actor brings to it; what does each Woz feel like represents the fun-loving side of Woz.[439]

Though the costumes stick to historically accurate clothing, like the black turtleneck and lightwash jeans, at its essence, this opera is dramatized history. Interpretation, especially in the intimate moments, is a present and active aspect. Besides the 2007 product launch, "most of the scenes in the opera are behind closed doors between lovers and friends and collaborators," Newbury said. "So really, it's up to us to create that vocabulary. We certainly would look at things here and there, but it wasn't like we were slavishly trying to recreate who these people actually were."[440]

Bates composes through dramatic impetus, prompting discussion of the overarching musical components. Expanding the notion of Wagnerian leitmotifs, Bates crafts soundworlds

[439] Ibid.
[440] Ibid.

representative of each character.[441] Moving beyond character themes, Bates creates what he calls sonic identities: a defined soundworld in which the instrumentation, melodic contour, and overall sonic atmosphere evokes a particular mood associated with the character. Two sonic identities define the dichotomies of Jobs throughout the opera: 1) electro-acoustic swirling sounds consisting of computerized clicks and dings paired with, and layered upon, rhythmic orchestral minimalism and 2) an acoustic guitar with pizzicato, finger-picked unraveling melodies. The first appears in his external, big business scenes. Remarkably, Bates samples the actual sounds of Jobs' creations. He notes that while the listener may not be able to precisely recognize "a spinning hard drive of an Apple 1, a Power Mac or Mac Plus key click, I think the accumulation of those sounds does lend an authenticity to the soundworld."[442] Jobs' second sonic identity depicts his restless internal struggle. Bates points out that not only did Jobs personally love the guitar used in mid-twentieth-century folk music, it was also an instrument regularly employed in early opera, making that a natural timbre decision to represent Jobs' inner self. He conceives of Jobs as a positive and negative charge, with Laurene acting as a ground.[443] Her sonic identity is "slow-moving, oceanic harmonies [that] collide with the frenetic music of Steve."[444] Laurene's broad melodic lines are underpinned with full, lush orchestration. The sonic identity of the spiritual mentor, Kōbun, inspires a meditative aesthetic through the use of electronically-produced resonation of Tibetan prayer bowls and Chinese gongs. First heard in Scene 3, Kōbun's soundscape is tranquil, and the sustained atmosphere heavily contrasts with the frantic pace of

[441] Bates, "The Music of Communication," 12.

[442] Chloe Veltman, "'Nobody has one button': Steve Jobs opera sings Apple founder's praises – and flaws." *The Guardian* July 23, 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jul/23/revolution-of-steve-jobs-opera-sante-fe.

[443] Dario Acosta, "Connecting the Dots" *Opera Now* June 2017, 32.

[444] Bates, "The Music of Communication," 13.

Jobs' sonic identities. Bates chose to voice Kōbun as a bass, wishing to continue the traditional supernatural bass trope, à la Sarastro, commonly found in opera. The final two characters with sonic identities are Steve Wozniak and Chrisann Brennan. As figures in Jobs' younger life, their music illustrates his transformation from idealistic entrepreneur to hard-hearted business tycoon. The instrumentation for Woz's energetic soundworld always includes two dueting alto saxophones along with jazz chords and vocal melismas. Chrisann's sonic identity is voiced through flutes fluttering on sixteenth-note gestures.

In regards to the libretto, Campbell's style epitomizes conciseness. He employs power-packed words in short phrases and limits his text because "it gives room for the composer to expand."[445] This smacks with the mark of a mindful, collaborative partner, and I would argue it is, among a plethora of reasons, why this opera works so well. An example in the score, where brevity is exploited, occurs in Scene 1 during Steve's "One Device" aria with chorus. He sings the following text:

> One device.
> Does it all.
> In one hand,
> All you need.
> Communication,
> Entertainment,
> Information,
> Illumination,
> Connection,
> Interaction,
> Navigation,
> Communication,
> Inspiration,
> Comprehension,
> Not to mention,
> Communication.[446]

In an earlier libretto draft, Campbell only supplied a couple of sentences with a "-tion" rhyme, because he does not find it to be an inspiring ending: "when a word is easy to rhyme, it doesn't have as much color to an audience."[447] However, Bates had a vision of re-iterating a precise

[445] Campbell, Interview with author.
[446] Program Notes, *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs*, 34.
[447] Campbell, Interview with author.

melodic and rhythmic idea. He shared the musical idea with Campbell, who gladly supplied more one-word "-tion" hits to flesh out the scene. He also includes inner and onset rhymes. For example, "talk to friends / stalk celebs" is an onset rhyme Jobs sings when showing all the capabilities of the product. In addition to the rhyme schemes, Campbell employs a three-syllable poetic meter for high impact.[448] The following section demonstrates onset and final rhymes (underlined for clarity), playful word iterations (italicized for clarity), and the three-syllable meter in all lines, excepting the monosyllabic taps and zaps:

Cheer the *game*.	
Play a *game*.	
Send a card.	
Mend a heart.*	* *slant rhyme*
Buy a *tie*.	
Learn some *Thai*.	
Order *Thai*.	
Miss your kids?	
Miss your wife?	
Miss your home?	
Miss your life?	
Tap,	*[live image of a family waving (as on Skype)]*
Make up with	
your *girlfriend*.	*[image of text message with hearts]*
Tap,	
Break up with	
your *girlfriend*.	*[image of text message with skulls]*
Tap,	
Break up with	
your parents.	*[photo of a person with parents]*
Zap,	*[the same photo with parents deleted]*
Take up with	
a puppy.[449]	

These succinct techniques transform what could be read as plain text and colors them as engaging rhetoric. Through syntax, prosody, and clever word choice, he spins tiny phrases into bite-sized magical moments, further enhanced by musical soundscapes. Since these words are to

[448] A part of his style, Campbell uses the three-syllable strategy in the Sleep Chorus in *Silent Night*, also. This operatic commission with Kevin Puts premiered at MO in 2011 and has received sixteen revivals since. It is noted as another of Campbell's creations to enter the American canon.

[449] Program Notes, *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs,* 32.

be sung, they must have a radiant power to them; however, Campbell captures this through "simple human texts" instead of elongated, flowery poetry. He instructs student librettists to listen to the way we converse day to day for inspiration "because you can find poetry in the way we speak all the time."[450] But from there, it is the librettist's job to elevate:

> The more succinct I can make my text, the more that it leaves room for music, and opera's about music. The audience is there for your story — they don't care about your words that much, really. They probably won't even listen to that many of them. They really do care about the music. They really do care about that power, like Mason has in that energy that he musters all the time.[451]

Moreover, Campbell elucidates the practically of writing succinctly: brains can only process a certain amount of information at once. The ear can only absorb so much, and when both speaking and music are at play, the librettist must learn to break up the text for the sake of the listener.

Another aspect of Campbell's writing style includes phrase repetition to create coherence between scenes. Three particular paradigms stand out. In the Prologue to Scene 1, as Steve's father gives him the workbench he built him for his birthday, the father says, "it's a fine place to start" in the penultimate line. Scene 1 fast-forwards to the San Francisco convention center in 2007, where Steve is launching the smart phone product. After thanking the patrons for coming, Steve re-states the line with, "Now is a fine place to start." Though not immediately sung back-to-back in the scenes, the line iteration stands out and links moments in time separated by forty years. "A fine place to start" returns for a third time as the final sung line of the entire work, adding another layer of cyclical symbolism to the opera. Scene 4 to Scene 5 are also linked in such a manner. Learning about the *ensō* and calligraphy in a classroom at Reed College, the teacher

[450] Campbell, Interview with author.
[451] Ibid.

illuminates the various meanings of the strokes: enlightenment, elegance, nature, grace, freedom, and, finally, simplicity. Simplicity is sung four times on repeated pitch triplet figures as the scene transforms to the garage where Woz and Steve are constructing a blue box. Woz commences the scene with the line "It's like totally simple." Attention is brought to the repeated word, simple, through the musical means of duration, tenuto articulation, and crescendo. Moreover, Kōbun turns the adjective into a verb with "simplify," advising Steve with this text in many of their scenes. It was a sensible choice for Campbell to emphasize versions of the word simple, as the notion of simplifying and streamlining his products was at the forefront of Jobs' ideologies.

The third critical linking repetition revolves around the brilliant analogy of the technical element of playing an instrument to the mechanical inner workings of a machine. Steve first dreams up this parallel in Scene 6 when tripping on LSD with Chrisann in an apple orchard. Campbell read about Jobs' acid trips during his youth, noting they were described as positive experiences that opened up his mind. Campbell latched onto this:

> It was acid that led him [Jobs] to this idea of the trees coming alive and hearing music. And I segued that into the song about this. A computer can be like a musical instrument: something that you have a relationship with, not just tap at. And you can look at that as being very dangerous, which it is. We're so attached to these things now. But that's how he influenced us in a way. We put these things in our pockets, they come with us always, we check them a million times a day. And we check on these more than we check on our own mothers or people we love. [… When writing] you basically have a sieve. There's a lot of sand in it, and you keep shaking it until these golden nuggets come out."[452]

In this case, the golden nugget is the strong metaphor of interacting with machines the way musicians interact with their instruments. To create the connection between scenes, the word repetitions are "something" and "play." The hallucinatory line in Scene 6 first introduces it with

[452] Ibid.

"It's playing something. / But what's it playing? / What is it playing? / Bach!"[453] In scene 9, after cruelly rejecting Chrisann's pregnancy, Steve remembers the LSD experiment two years prior, and says "Music. / Bach. / Instruments. / These machines could be / Something we play."[454] Those last three words are repeated over and over throughout the aria. Nearly ten years later in the Cupertino offices of Scene 12, Woz references the metaphor: "Our beautiful machine, / Something we play, / that doesn't play us. / But now, / you need to control everything."[455] Though a common writing technique in other literary mediums, phrase repetition linking scenes is not conventional in opera libretti. This makes it powerful and fresh for listeners. Campbell clarifies that it also "creates a common humanity among all your characters" since it can be approached with differing emotions when uttered or sung by other perspectives.[456] In the last example, especially, the clever metaphor is now sung by Woz and is used to pivot into Steve's unfortunate change into industrial tyrant.

From the prank call with Woz to deep discussions with Kōbun, Campbell's selected events humanize the tech giant. For a public figure who created a product that has revolutionized (for better or worse) modern society, Campbell crafts down-to-earth interactions between Steve and his loved ones in life-defining moments. Indeed, when asked whether this was his intent, Campbell confirms it was his aim to humanize him: "I was not going to write an opera about someone that everyone hates and make an audience sit through that for two or three hours. Because I think that's nonsense. I think there were certain people, a lot of critics, for example,

[453] Program Notes, *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs,* 48.
[454] Ibid., 55.
[455] Ibid., 66.
[456] Campbell, Interview with author.

who wished that I had villainized him."[457] The character of Laurene is also critical in developing Steve's character. She is the person who helped stabilize and re-direct his course in the latter half of his life. Campbell thinks she is a significant character. However, after the premiere, he realized she was underwritten and needed more substantial material. He and Bates actually fleshed out her character by adding more content before the piece had its west coast premiere in Seattle. They also sought advice from mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke, who debuted the role at SFO.

Laurene's final aria closes the opera with abundant inferences and implications. Foremost, it functions in a traditionalist way by wrapping up the show like a classical opera finale that addresses the audience with a moral-of-the-story subtext. The lyrics grapple with the universal impact of the smartphone. Laurene's mandate, motivated by MacKay, urges the audience to "look up, look out, look around." The librettist recalls MacKay's desire for the audience to view their smartphones in a different light by the end of the opera. Beyond this social subtext, subtly challenging the audience to recognize the distraction of their phone, Campbell also includes the line "be here now," which came from Steve's favorite book, *Be Here Now* by Ram Dass. This phrase encourages enlightenment and awareness of one's surroundings. This, of course, plays into the overall notion to not let our devices control us but rather to be present in the moment. Though a highly nuanced aria, Campbell wrote it in an impressive fifteen minutes, demonstrating his economical abilities and clear point of view. He said, "I wanted to recapture that time when these things weren't around. When you did look at a sunset, or a lizard crossing a road, or any sort of natural event and marvel at it. And learn from it. How does that change you as a person?"[458] In addition to these subtexts, he makes other conscious choices: giving the sage

[457] Ibid.
[458] Ibid.

message of the opera to a powerful female character as well as the regular employment of his three-syllable metric technique. The latter specifically materializes in the "be here now" text. With attention to detail not just as a writer but a librettist, Campbell was cognizant of the vowels in that line, utilizing the words "be here" more than "now." He understands the importance of text setting and crafting a lyrical line; therefore, maximizing the acoustics of the [i] vowel over the [æ] to produce a purer classical legato for the vocalist.

The Steve Jobs topic boasts of sticking power. As Campbell said, "It sells a lot of tickets because it's a story that people are interested in."[459] Though familiarity may seem like a simplistic concept, it has the power to arouse curiosity in potential attendees. An intriguing topic activates a connection. That connection is cultivated once the audience member attends and engages in the acoustic experience of live music drama. Campbell concurs, demystifying his success, saying, "I'm lucky in that I've had a number of operas that have pretty much entered the repertory. And if I would choose a reason why, it's not because they've been marketed brilliantly. That's part of it, of course. But I would say because an audience finds a connection to the story. And I've worked diligently to make that happen in all of my operas, but sometimes they connect more and sometimes less."[460] *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs,* with its sold-out performances and many revival productions on the horizon, is a prime example of a familiar story with cultural connections.

[459] Ibid.
[460] Ibid.

The Performative Role of Sound Designer

John Adams' seminal works, including *Nixon in China* (1987), *Death of Klinghoffer* (1991), *El Niño* (2000), *Transmigration of Souls* (2004), *Doctor Atomic* (2005), *The Gospel According to the Other Mary* (2012), and *Girls of the Golden West* (2017), all call for amplification. Mark Grey is the pioneer sound designer in the field. Having collaborated with Adams since 1990, he has designed, and continues to design, for most of Adams' works in addition to other notable composers like Kaija Saariaho's *L'amour de loin* at the Metropolitan Opera in 2016 or Philip Glass' international tour of *Dracula* 1998-1999. Grey and Adams are responsible for establishing the sound designer as a new role in operatic production.[461] Sound design involves bringing the composer and librettist's aural visions to life, and the electro-acoustic score of *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* requires this. Grey happened to be a longtime friend and colleague with Rick Jacobsohn, whom he recommended Bates hire as sound designer. They had previously worked together on an archival recording of Bates' orchestral composition *Mothership* at Baltimore. Jacobsohn recalls joining the creative team later in the commissioning process in spring of 2017.

As a sound engineer, Jacobsohn spends about 30 percent of his time in the live sound world, while the rest is in the recording studio. During live productions, the role of sound designer is performative. Like the lighting designer or technical director, Jacobsohn pre-programs the amplification demands for each scene. Like a stage manager, he hits each cue throughout the performance. Combining those established roles, the sound designer then has to respond to music in the moment. Jacobsohn likens each performance to mixing an album live:

[461] Ebright, "Echoes of the Avant-garde," 212.

> It's like mixing live because I have no control over the sound of the orchestra. It's all about getting that perfect balance between the singers and the orchestra. And it changes every night, depending on how the orchestra is playing and how the singers feel. You're a singer; you know this. There are nights when you feel super strong and other nights where you have to hold back a little bit. So that's the really important part: getting a consistent sound every night based on what we initially came up with.[462]

As a classically trained engineer, reading music is a significant skill when sound designing. Jacobsohn has a detailed system in his score that prepares him for each performance. He color-codes each singer and marks their ideal decibel levels in each scene along with where they change. For example, when the chorus turns upstage, he raises their volume to keep the overall experience balanced. Other indications help him dial in the sound, like controlling the equalizers (EQ) to shape the sound, which in turn should produce a natural and balanced aural experience. His score notes give him an estimated foundation for each performance, and "then it's just reacting quickly to what's happening in the moment."[463] While a stage manager thinks ahead to anticipate the next cue, the sound designer acts more like a musician: performing and responding in the moment while also considering what comes next. The sound designer must simultaneously balance the acoustic orchestra, electronics, and enhanced vocalists. Though the rehearsal process is important for him to establish the approximant needs of each scene, how the musicians feel each night will change the outcome as well as the seated audience: "Once you get bodies in the house, it totally changes everything," Jacobsohn said. "Usually for the better. Bodies absorb a lot of sound, which is great, because that's what you want. Deaden it up a little bit." [464] It also creates a literal vibratory experience, contributing to the visceral aspect of hearing opera live.

[462] Jacobsohn, Interview with author.
[463] Ibid.
[464] Ibid.

Jacobsohn clarifies miking opera singers as enhancement rather than pure amplification, clearly distinguishing the differences between Broadway theatre or rock concert experiences and operatic sound design. While rock or musical theatre amplification is "screaming loud in your face" Jacobsohn seeks subtlety as his primary goal.[465] He succinctly sums up sound design as an "acoustic picture."[466] In *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs*, the electronics are amplified, while the orchestra is not (though the acoustic guitar and alto flute are amplified for balance purposes). Additionally, the singers all wear two lav body mics.[467] This required communication with the SFO costume department so outfits were constructed with sewn-in pockets to hold the transmitters and microphones would be put on appropriately. The buried mics were wireless to ensure if one failed, a backup was always in place.

For the larger system, the *Steve Jobs* project requires a stereo full range high-end PA system with subwoofers: "there is no multi-channel surround in this one," Jacobsohn explains. "Strictly for budget reasons. It would be great to do this in surround, but it's just not budgetarily possible."[468] To help create a more controlled directional experience, though, extra speakers were placed outside of the hanging arced PA system on the lip of the stage and in the pit so they were in closer proximity to the orchestra. It was Bates' idea to place speakers in the pit that the electronic are channeled through. This pulls the electronica directionally down so it sounds like part of the orchestra, fulfilling Bates desires for the electronica to sound like an extension of the percussion section.[469] Furthermore, sound design is modified at each company's production,

[465] Ibid.
[466] Ibid.
[467] The audio rider calls for 30 DPA 4061 lav microphones to be exact.
[468] Jacobsohn, Interview with author. *Doctor Atomic* was one of the first American operas to employ multi-channel surround sound. Ebright, "Echoes of the Avante-garde," 215.
[469] Clay, "MASON BATES."

depending on the venue. By opening night, the goal is that each person in the house hears a similar experience, whether seated in the prime center stage orchestra section or the nosebleed seats in the balcony. I argue this is an effective democratizing effort that provides a more egalitarian aural experience to the audience no matter their ticket price. Visually, their experience may differ, but aurally — musically — they are given a near similar experience.

Amongst the collaborators, the sound designer, composer, and conductor are the trifecta controlling the aural outcomes. Like a filter on a photo, a sound designer uses the EQ to pick specific frequencies, allowing them to shape the emitted sound to be darker or brighter. Although manipulation, Jacobsohn makes it clear he aims to achieve transparency and balance. Jacobsohn admits there are classical composers that are not tech savvy and make abstract requests like "this sounds too purple. Make it more green. But Mason is not that guy. Mason really knows what he's doing,"[470] and was highly involved in planning the *Steve Jobs* sound logistics. It is a subjective process that culminates through taste and preference. Artistic choices are achieved through collaboration between the trifecta. Jacobsohn recalls one of his mentor's mantras: "when you're mixing a project, just remember, it's not yours. It's the artist's. The composer's."[471] He keeps this in mind when the control is in his hands, considering what Bates would want to hear. At its essence, amplification provides the composer with the ability to be creatively adventurous and freely explore thick orchestral textures.

While amplifying the singers requires the art of subtly and finding a perfect balance with the natural dynamics of the orchestration, there are a few purely electronic scenes that call for the subwoofers to shake the seats. This occurs in the "Dark Interlude" between Scenes 12 and 13, for

[470] Jacobsohn, Interview with author.
[471] Ibid.

example. Enraged after the frantic boardroom scenes, Steve quits and has a mental breakdown. As a purely symphonic section, Bates requested Jacobsohn's sound design "shake the walls of the theater."[472] These kinesthetic sensations enhance the emotional impetus of the scene through powerful electronic music sans singing. Indeed, Campbell describes these soundworlds as throbbing and like nothing heard in the opera theatre before. Jacobsohn exerts control and precision over the audience's aural experience on the whole:

> You don't want to be overwhelming. You don't want to be blasting people's ears out. I've had this conversation with Mason, and with a couple of other conductors that are really sensitive to this. The world in general is too loud. Especially with my job: I have to preserve my hearing, and I don't like things particularly loud. Broadway shows are way too loud. Movies are too loud. Everything's too loud. So it's just nice to take everything down just a notch. There should be loud moments. Because that's exciting. That's what fortissimo and *sforzando* were invented for. But it shouldn't be all the time. It shouldn't be this aural assault to your senses, where it leaves your ears just fatigued and tired.[473]

Demonstrating a sensitivity to experience, Jacobsohn concentrates on the dramaturgy and its pacing, allowing it to shape the artistic choices he implements during each performance. He emphasizes that serving the music is his utmost goal when designing. Less can sometimes be more: a minimalist over maximalist approach. He only amplifies what is absolutely necessary to maintain a balanced soundscape amid vocalists to electronics to orchestra. "It's knowing when to just turn everything off. And serve the music," Jacobsohn said.[474]

The audio rider is a critical document specifying what equipment and brands, from speakers to microphones to the mixing console, are required to execute the opera. It also gives Jacobsohn the first right of refusal for any institutions producing *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs*. Like quality control, it guarantees revivals maintain amplification standards. Once the equipment

[472] Ibid.
[473] Ibid.
[474] Ibid.

is secured, tech week is critical for the logistical set up. While other departments have months to prepare, the sound design takes shape within the three to four rehearsals leading up to opening night. Since so much of the sound design is dependent upon balancing the acoustic orchestra to the enhanced singers, the sound designer prepares and programs the show during the limited orchestral rehearsals. Moreover, with sound design as a twenty-first century aspect of opera production, this area has yet to be standardized. While lighting consoles are relatively uniform, there are at least five high-end mixing consoles, and it is an unknown which a company will own. Though Jacobsohn has the programmed show saved on a particular software, each production is dependent on the type of mixing console and PA system at that specific venue. At the various revivals, he has had to start from scratch each time, and with this being a developing opera, Jacobsohn adjusts to each production. For example, after SFO and Indiana, Bates and Campbell made changes to the score: swapping some scenes, cutting a few areas, and extending Laurene's character. The sound design must be responsive to these changes, too, making it an evolving element of this living opera also. Jacobsohn and his associate, Brian Loach, have designed for and performed at all the productions of *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs,* thus far, and are also contracted to work the upcoming productions in Atlanta, Austin, and Kansas City. As of the writing of this document in late 2021, Jacobsohn was a part of the planning process, working with the other creative team members to prepare a package that can be used at each of these revivals. Bates, on the other hand, played the electronica live at the SFO premiere, while the electronics are now cued by a percussionist at revival productions.[475]

[475] The vocal/piano score notates the electronica as if it is a percussion instrument. Its staff is situated between the piano's grand staff and the singer's stave. Precise directions indicate when the conductor and electronica must be in sync. See Mason Bates and Mark Campbell, *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs,* Piano/Vocal Score (Aphra Music, 2019).

For being an aural art full of resonances and soundscapes, Jacobsohn says the biggest compliment is the absence of commentary: "There's a saying in the audio world: Nobody says anything about the sound unless there's a problem. It's just invisible. […] They just enjoy the production as a whole."[476] Opposite of the set design and costumery, which often receive attention post-production, disregard of amplification is desired. It is an intriguing notion: sound as invisible. It becomes an unnoticed production component when done well. Jacobsohn highlights that audio mixing in all styles — pop, rock, classical — is a creative process often overlooked by professional musicians and even more so with classical musicians:

> [They] don't think about that at all. I remember pointing out to someone in one of the orchestras I work with about panning, which is where things are left to right. And this person said, 'I never thought about that.' They don't even notice that the violins are on the left and the cellos on the right, and the flutes are kind of in the back a little to the left, and all this stuff that we spend a lot of time trying to get right to get that sonic picture. And it's the same with this piece even with live sound. Though with opera sound design, the singers are always right down the middle. Because if you start panning them to the left or to the right that means that the people sitting on the right side of the house won't hear the singers if you pan to the left, because it's only coming out left speaker — that's a little different in that respect. But in *(R)evolution*, the electronica is very stereo. There's stuff that ping pongs back and forth. So that is important to have that be stereo.[477]

The pinging happens to be the first sonic identity of Steve sampling iconic sounds of Mac devices. They represent his innovative and frenetic mind. Thus, Jacobsohn's role as performative sound designer is intrinsic to audience experience and storytelling. In an unusual turn of events, his often-unnoticed job has achieved positive response. At the shows, he has been approached and asked about his role, receiving compliments about the sound balance and ability to hear everything. Even some of the reviews mention the sound design favorably. When amplification is

[476] Jacobsohn, Interview with author.
[477] Ibid.

employed as enhancement with such sensitive subtly, it has the power to ignite gratifying visibility.

Closing sentiments

"There are no second acts in American lives," Jobs sings. This famous F. Scott Fitzgerald is referenced in Scene 17 as he recounts meeting and being transformed by Laurene. This cheeky quotation addresses two matters. The opera has no Act 2, acting as a pseudo-announcement to the audience. It also functions as a way to cleverly clarify the fact that this is a dramatized history. Instead of exploring Jobs' recovery after being fired, his years working at Pixar, or the return to Apple in 1997, Campbell chooses to move straight from Jobs' wedding with Laurene in 1991 to his memorial service in 2011. Laurene, invoking Kōbun's spiritual teachings, sings her final Scene 17 lines: "there is only one certainty in life. / Only one. Only one, / only one."[478] Without interlude, her final high note A^5 on the [a] vowel of "one" sustains while a portrait of Jobs' is rolled on stage and lilies are placed around it. While the stage seamlessly transitions from wedding to memorial service, her music and sentiments also bridge the scenes, emphasizing the only certainty in life is death. Campbell marvels at how visually exciting a Pixar scene might have been, but he keyed into the fact that this opera needed to be a true reflection of the inventor's one device. It is fast. It is speedy. It is streamlined. The experience need not be extended. And this one-act opera, running at an hour and thirty minutes packages all of those elements into a compressed musico-dramatic event. Though adhering to certain traditional operatic elements, like form, it also obfuscates tradition with its efficient, compact timespan and the employment electronic instrumentation and amplification enhancements. The creative team conceives of this

[478] Program Notes, *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs*, 76.

work as a number opera, and each number is on average two to four minutes in length, not unlike the attention often given to a pop song.

This crafted, circular narrative depicts an aspiring, accomplished icon who faced mortality like all others. Nuanced scenes provide numerous avenues of emotional connection and cultural resonance for an audience member. The cinematic, mesmerizing music punctuates this story and, thus, heightens those connections, and Campbell confirms that his job as librettist, along with the composer, "is to create a connection between a story onstage that is being sung and the audience that it's being performed to. That's a major thing for me. And there are lots of composers and librettists who don't care about an audience. In fact, they often just alienate them."[479] The latter is not the case in *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs*, an opera with a popular tilt that bores into the soul of a famous figure consumed with democratizing technology.

[479] Campbell, Interview with author.

CHAPTER 8 –FORECASTING THE FUTURE OF NEW OPERA

The enlightening conversations with the cultural agents interviewed for this project concluded with the following question: "My case studies were selected with revivals and American narratives in mind. Beyond these parameters, what other elements do you think are defining new American opera?" This document largely reflects on a recent past concerned with early twenty-first century commissions, and the responses to this question confirm many of the extra-musical trends expounded upon in previous chapters, like audience-centric motivations, relevance, scale, and story. On the whole, the interviewed industry influencers identify diversity, in both content and creators, as the emerging phase in contemporary opera. From their perspectives, I distinguish seven major topics and tag each in the following quotations to indicate links in current thinking. The tagged topics include

American compositional voice (as opposed to European idioms)
Diversity (content and creative teams)
Popular (an audience focus)
Social relevance (contemporary themes)
Scale (variety of production sizes from mainstage to chamber)
Story-oriented (approach to the work)
Technology and visuals (innovative impact on productions)

The following opinions, gathered in my recent 2021 interviews, address how the industry has developed in this century and look to the future.

DIVERSITY, POPULAR, SOCIAL RELEVANCE, STORY-ORIENTED
Mark Campbell:

> I feel that in the last twenty years in American opera, the libretto has been pushed forward more. Let's tell stories that first of all reflect what our country looks like. And one thing that's happened more recently is race-wise, let's tell stories that reflect our population: black, Latinx, like everything — gay, trans. That's one thing I think has been great and that comes from the libretto. Music is an abstract art form. It cannot make a statement about race. It really can't. The libretto does. So, it has to come from the libretto. And so I do think that a lot of what has been happening in the last twenty years in opera

is happening because we're looking at the librettist's work. And librettists are saying, 'it's the words that are conveying these messages that we need to hear.' Music can't really do that, it can make the message stronger and more emotional. And that's why we go to opera. I also think the training has changed. It's not about just hitting notes. It's about telling a story. And that involves texts and analyzing text the way any actor does, or any director does. I mean, we love the high notes; those are great. But now we know they have to be earned in a story. That's what's always been going on in populist opera. So now it's just a little bit clearer.

DIVERSITY, POPULAR, SOCIAL RELEVANCE

Michael Korie:

We really have to address the inequities that have been prevalent in the opera world: not enough women composers, not enough women librettists, not enough persons of color. And we have to start getting rid of the vestige of racism. I'm sorry, *Madame Butterfly* has beautiful music, but it's almost impossible to watch. And there's no way around it. *Aida*, all these great works, they are just really difficult. And so we want to hear new stuff about new experiences. That's very, very, very important. Finally the MET is opening its season with an opera by a black composer, the first time in its history.[480] It's crazy! Crazy, crazy, crazy. So we have a lot of work to do, the opera world, that will define it. And I think, like *The Grapes of Wrath*, those will be story-entered, story-oriented, and socially conscious. How could they not be? They have to be. These are things — maybe just to be simplistic — but it's things we want to see. Things we want to hear about. In troubled times, contrary to popular opinion, I don't think people want light entertainment. They go to the theater and the opera to commune with other people and other experiences and to try and reach an understanding of, 'why are we going through this?'

DIVERSITY, POPULAR, SOCIAL RELEVANCE

Anthony Freud:

I think to a wonderful degree, the reason it has been possible for there to be so many new commissions around the U.S. and North America is because we are creating pieces for audiences. And I do think — and I'm oversimplifying now and generalizing — but surely having come from my European roots and having been responsible for an opera company in the U.K., […] I think what really distinguishes the trend and quantity and vibrancy of the U.S. commissioning scene for longer than has been the case in Europe — and I think

[480] Korie, Freud, and O'Leary all mention Terence Blanchard and Kasi Lemmon's *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* (2019; OTSL) which opened the MET's 2021-2022 season in October. This is the first opera in the company's history written by a black composer. Freud specifically references this new opera since Lyric Opera of Chicago is a co-producer and will give its third revival in March 2022. The opera is based on the memoir of *New York Times* black journalist Charles M. Blow, chronicling his childhood trauma and overcoming his pain. Freud is proud of Lyric's involvement producing this revival along with the MET. The pandemic allowed the companies to do this "sooner than might otherwise have been possible. But I'm very proud of the fact that we are giving that wonderful piece an ongoing life. And that's a really important role for companies to play. And of course, from a business point of view, and again, the two are linked, there is nothing higher risk that a company can undertake than a standalone, large scale new commission. But if two or more companies are actually partnering then the financial risk is moderated."

it's changed in Europe. I think there is a fascinating intersection on all sorts of levels, artistic and business, between the opera scene in Europe and the opera scene in the U.S. — but I think European opera companies realize that the frequency and regularity of commissioning on this side of the Atlantic was actually the direct result of companies and commissioners, as well as composers and librettists wanting to communicate to audiences. And, of course, not every work created in the U.S. is a great work. But as I said at the start of our conversation, I think quantity is really important alongside quality, because as we've said, we are not able to take responsibility for the heritage, the future for our creations — for selecting which of our creations becomes the heritage of the future. But if we don't commission enough, if there isn't enough variety of both subject and scale and style in those creations, the chances of our 2020s world being relevant to the world of the 3020s is going to shrink. And so I really celebrate the fact that in the U.S. for a long time now, we have really created a large quantity of new work of great variety. And I think, yes, a lot of that new work is telling American stories. I think that's fantastic, because, we want our art form to be relevant. We want our art form to resonate with contemporary audiences. Now I think our focus needs to be to diversify the range of stories that we tell. And the range of storytellers that we engage to tell those stories.[…] I think it's the success in being able to commission so much as a cultural nation that has provided us with a really strong foundation from which to embrace and celebrate a new focus on diversity.

DIVERSITY, SOCIAL RELEVANCE, STORY-ORIENTED

Timothy O'Leary:

New American opera today is so incredibly diverse, which is one of great things that's happening. I certainly notice that a lot of producers', like I am, primary interest is in stories of the present and recent past. […] Opera has gone through all kinds of time. There's always been a diversity. Like when the verismo composers were creating works about the times in which they lived themselves and works that were about, for lack of a better word, the common person. And then we've gone through all kinds of phases and trends about this. There definitely was a time in the American operatic canon, where we were creating works that were based on the distant past or the great novels of the American canon. There was a point that I reached where I thought, 'We have enough eighteenth and nineteenth century stories in the opera canon. We need stories of the modern era, however you define that.' So, we tended to look at from World War One on, which was the era in which we were commissioning and producing — the stories of that era, whether they were historical or entirely fictional. So that's an element that I've noticed. And then certainly, of course, the most important thing that's been happening is the diversity of who's creating opera. Artists from different genres, and then also women and people of color, who are increasingly the creators of the works that the public is most excited about. It's an important trend. It will take — we've been at this for more than four hundred years — it's going to take some time before a balance is achieved. But it's important that we're focusing on this intentionally in the meantime.

AMERICAN COMPOSITIONAL VOICE, DIVERSITY, SCALE, STORY-ORIENTED
Patrick Summers:

> I would say by far, the quality that I'm feeling now, is diversity. And diversity in all kinds of meanings of that word. Americans have had very narrow definitions of the word diverse for a long, long time. And now we're getting a truly diverse set of voices at the table. And, thus, a truly diverse set of stories and scales and everything. One of the last pieces I heard before the pandemic was Matt Aucoin's opera *Eurydice* with a libretto by Sarah Ruhl. And written for an enormous orchestra — I mean, very, very large orchestra but absolutely magnificent. Just magnificent. This young American composer. And in a world that's the total opposite of Jake but truly stunning work. And I don't think that work would have been possible twenty-five years ago. I don't know that we would have had a mind like Matt Aucoin's twenty-five years ago that would have risen to that point. I do think, Jake, as I started this conversation, he's not solely responsible for that at all. No one's saying that, and I'm not saying that. But I do think Jake's popularity with the public and his innate sense of drama and narrative and empathy — great, great qualities that were not part of academic music — I do think he has changed that conversation.

DIVERSITY, SCALE, STORY-ORIENTED
Eric Simonson:

> I think economics is defining American opera. I'm finding that the people commissioning operas are asking for more manageable pieces. I know that composers and librettist are hungry to write and compose pieces that they know will be produced again. I once joked with Ricky and Michael, what if they made an opera so big no one could produce it? Because that's what it felt like *Grapes of Wrath* was. Despite the fact that it was awesome and this great artistic achievement, it's like, 'Guys, no one's going to produce your opera. It takes four trucks to move this scenery.' And now, librettists and composers know that they have to compose an opera that's going to fit in two trucks. I mean, we talk about that. We actually talk about that! And better if it can fit in one truck! […] There's a cognizance that there are many stories out there, and some of them are not being told. So people are opening up their minds to that kind of storytelling. Different stories, different voices. It's definitely going to have an effect. What won't change, what will never change, is that there are certain elements of story that reach the human heart and the human mind. And if it's a good story, if it's a story well told, then it's a story worth hearing. Those elements — they reach everybody. They reach every person. Regardless of who they are: sex, race, ethnicity, religion. And those are the stories that I think will never go away. And those are the stories I think we have to really aspire to tell.

AMERICAN COMPOSITIONAL VOICE, SOCIAL RELEVANCE, SCALE, STORY-ORIENTED
Kevin Newbury:

> There's a whole bunch of us that are telling very American stories. Certainly, Beth Morrison Projects is one of the leaders right now. I work with Beth on Prototype Festival a lot. Greg Spears is my main collaborator composer. We've done several shows together. *Fellow Travelers*, I think, is the most exciting new piece that I've been a part of that's truly a part of the canon now. We're doing two more pieces with Tracy K. Smith, both original stories, for Santa Fe and for Cincinnati next summer. So there's a lot of really exciting

new voices in the opera world right now. And I think we're just kind of blowing it wide open. Missy Mazzoli, David T. Little, Mason [Bates], there's a lot of great, exciting composers right now. And we're largely telling stories that feel very contemporary and reflect the times that we're living in right now. And I think another trend that I'm sure you're discussing and realizing is the chamber opera scene. Scaling things down. A lot of companies are taking that prototype-Beth-Morrison model and having a second or third stage. Doing site specific work, certainly at Philadelphia Opera and their O Festival. I think we're moving away from everything being in the mainstage in a 2,000-seat theater and trying to do things that are much more intimate. […] I'm really into things defying genre, which is what I do like about *Steve Jobs*, electronic opera and traditional opera combined. But I'm really interested in what are the things that are bring together multiple disciplines and aren't just the kind of *de rigour* for how we presented opera for the last century.

AMERICAN COMPOSITIONAL VOICE, SCALE

Elkhanah Pulitzer:

There are people in the field who are passionate about moving away from the canonical kind of 'A' title programming that was going on for a really long time and started to feel, I think, ossified and entrenched. And so that appetite, I would say, over the last twenty years has started to snowball, and you've got people breaking new ground by commissioning more. A lot of companies are commissioning. So there's been a whole lot of talk about how does one do that? How do we cultivate and develop new work and essentially, share the table. Then you get into all the issues around representation and who's at the table and whose voices are being cultivated and supported and lifted up. And so, it's a really — it's a very dynamic, exciting time. And I think there's also this sort of up-ended scenario where sort of scrappy, outsider, downtown kind of endeavors to make work are now leading in the field and are impacting the larger establishment organizations and pushing their appetite to take more risk and to do new things. And I think with it in tandem, there's also this delight and enthusiasm around the discovery of American compositional voice, which also was sort of underplayed in this bias towards the sort of European cultural exaltation of like, 'Wow!' and so you've got a whole myriad of young American composers who are getting breaks and making work and getting second commissions and third. […] I'm super excited and passionate about the level of, what would have probably ten years ago been called, disruption.

AMERICAN COMPOSITIONAL VOICE

Stephen Mager:

I just think you have to come back to lyrical characteristics. I believe that they are not out of style or out of date, but there's an academic pressure — there has been one for my entire life. A colleague of mine, who's a composer in Texas, wrote me a note recently. And he said that he had a chip on his shoulder about academics because when he was in grad school composing in a lyrical vein, he was kind of shunned (he's more my age). Now, of course, when I was at IU for my doctorate, which wasn't all that long ago, the attitude had changed. And so, there was no longer an expectation that you pursued a certain style.

They're always looking for something new to happen with the music and so forth. I think it comes down to coming back to some tried and true principles.

POPULAR, SOCIAL RELEVANCE, STORY-ORIENTED

Dale Johnson:

I think the world of opera has changed. I don't think people have lost their interest in opera. I don't think they've lost their interest in new opera. I think people go to the theater for many, many, many reasons. And I think that the world of opera has to discover those reasons: why each particular audience is going. […] I think you have to be careful with preaching to the audience, and you had to be careful with lecturing. Because a lot of that audience just wants to go in there and hear the good tunes and be moved emotionally and all that sort of thing. They don't want to be lectured. And so I think there's that really interesting balance that's going on right now. Here in the Twin Cities, we've had horrific things happen in the last year [2020]. And it'll be interesting to see if those events lead to some really creative music-making and opera-making. I think that it's a perfect opportunity to create something. […] The arts do have a responsibility to talk about the human condition. I really believe it.

POPULAR, STORY-ORIENTED

Allison Felter:

I think there are a lot of American narratives being told today. And I don't think there's a shortage, actually. I don't see too many revivals of *The Great Gatsby*. There's a lot of realism right now — it's sort of exhausting. But telling real stories and, of course, most of those tend to be tragic. We could really use a dose of some farcical, playful, positive stories on the stage. Comedy is the hardest to do, and we really could use some laughs, I think. I'm hoping some clever people are rising to that challenge. Yeah, the American narrative: we are not a shy people. We are telling our story in spades.

POPULAR, TECHNOLOGY AND VISUALS

Jake Heggie:

Look how the popularity of movies affected the opera stage. Poulenc said this, at some point, 'you can't escape the impact of movies on what's happening in the theater.' And now with all the technology that we have and the immediacy, there's even more of that. But also we want to do opera in a way that is appealing and engaging for an audience of today, the same way we did fifty to a hundred years ago. That's the whole *deus ex machina* in Baroque opera: when the God would arrive in a chariot. Everyone was looking for that theatrical thrill, you know? And so, what is the theatrical thrill for now? It's very visual. And it usually has to do with projections or screens or some kind of visual magic in that regard. It's inescapable. And I'm excited, actually, this past year, even though it was challenging, opera companies have had to become very creative and get to know that technology better. And now they're going to be able to incorporate it better into what they do. So I think it's actually really exciting. And it's opened the doors for a lot more possibility and a lot of different kinds of ways of telling stories in different size spaces, as well as in the opera theatre and the opera house.

TECHNOLOGY AND VISUALS

Rick Jacobsohn:

> Certainly, the addition of sound amplification, and that started with Mark [Grey]. The more complex projections — these really dramatic projections that we can now have. […] Projections and lighting are two things that really have come so far. And the LED walls, obviously, that's something new. And this was all kind of stolen from rock and roll and theater. […] We can scale it down for opera, and *Doctor Atomic*, I guess, is the perfect example of that as well, with all these amazing projections and the sound design. And *Nixon in China*, there's some really cool stuff going on. I guess John Adams is sort of the guy that the started all that. *Ainadamar* as well.

The major topics these cultural agents espouse — namely polystylistic compositions that hold social relevance through a story-oriented thrust while being flexible in scale and employing technology creatively — corroborate my core argument. Familiar narratives in twenty-first century opera act as a cultural means to connect with audiences. Through an unquantifiable balance of these elements, new works embodying these topics are more likely to receive revivals.

I invoke the ideas of linguistic anthropologist Elinor Ochs to further examine the quotes above. Ochs emphasizes temporal sequences related to recalling life events aloud. Temporality informs how the interviewee senses time, and this "phenomenology of time sometimes leads [them] to leap from a past experience to its implications for present and future existence."[481] In the interview process, the speaker expresses his/her present thoughts but they are intrinsically tied to a remembered past as well as a projected future. Therefore, the complex concept of discussing past creations lives in a space that represents present, past, and future simultaneously. Though innovation is valued in the present, artistic administrations are often still concerned with the new creation becoming a part of an enduring repertoire and, thus, considered a classic in the future. And this desire to contribute to a historical canon manifests in narrative temporality. This preoccupation with opera's legacy and continued preservation is more prevalent in the opera

[481] Ochs, "Narrative Lessons," 285.

industry than other musical genres due to high financial stakes and historical pressure. A commissioning perspective must consider what will validate the fiscal investment and risk; therefore, a work that impacts through timely, diverse dramaturgy might have a chance at an enduring life.

Topics for Further Study

Beyond the widespread concern for sharing these diverse and timely subjects, other interviewees note the need for more emphasis on educating the next generation. Jake Heggie elaborates on the rarefied art form of opera:

> It hasn't had a place in elementary schools or high schools for so long on a broad level. It's a real struggle to find a way into people's psyches and to get them to show up, because it is an art form that demands you show up. That's what the performing arts are all about — that interaction between performer and audience, that vibration that happens in the room. And so getting people to show up is a big part of whether a piece is going to be successful or not, you know, in terms of however you measure success. But if people don't show up, it's just not going to happen. So that's our big assignment as a field in American opera, is to get it back into schools somehow. And make it an essential experience. That the arts are essential to who we are as Americans, as human beings, engaging with each other, learning empathy. I think part of the big cultural divides we see now is because there haven't been the arts in the schools for so long. When I was growing up, you had choir, you did a musical, you did plays, you had art class, you created things together. Yes, you had sports. But that was about winning. Whereas, the arts are about community and building and doing something that demands the best of all of us. Setting your differences aside and showing up for each other. And that has kind of been lost, which explains a lot of the divides and a lot of the anger and the anguish. And so I think our job in the arts is to try to do what we can to get that back into schools.

Heggie's sentiments allude to collective musicking as was broadly referenced by O'Leary in Chapter 4 and Johnson in Chapter 5: there is power in the physical resonant sensations experienced as a group in live music performances. Felter echoes Heggie's concern, observing how previous generations learned music appreciation as a standard course in K-12 education: "You can't even find it in a high school curriculum now, even if you're a music-oriented person."

The implementation of opera in schools, and arts education in general, is a matter for further study, yet in terms of opera companies offering music education, family operas and restructured departments are contributing to empower this area. Campbell has two family operas premiering in 2022 because he wants families to attend opera together. Just like *Dream of the Pacific,* Campbell stresses these are not children's operas but rather operas designed to connect to the entire family. This provides an avenue of exposure from an early age to experience opera as "an embracing art form." Pulitzer also clarifies there has been a major evolution in the status of community engagement and education departments from 2004, when she wrote *Dream,* to now:

> In the grand scheme of big grand opera, historically, the big houses with the bigger budgets were the big heads of everything. And the aspiration was to get to the place where you could work in that kind of context — where there's a lot of resources and support and you can kind of do big super ideas. And then the conceit in that hierarchical structure was that education is sort of, I would say, the kind of redheaded stepchild. That has changed tremendously — the whole landscape of that. Even the idea of pedagogy, like people who are entrepreneurial, who are twenty years old, who are not finishing college, who are essentially starting their own businesses and are just doing it entirely in a different way. And social media leveling the playing field in terms of hierarchies of access, and even around what is defined as sort of 'the goal,' right? Like, 'Where are we going? And what is the sort of apex of the accomplishment in terms of a sensibility around opera?' And in storytelling, etc. So, all that is shifting very dramatically right now. […] I would like to hope that progressive leadership is now questioning where community outreach and education falls inside of the sort of overarching mandate of what they're doing.

The community-focused departments at HGO and OTSL are exemplars of this change, expounded upon in chapters 4 and 6. Though the derogatory term "community outreach" has widely been replaced with "community engagement," OTSL's informal department discussions may coin "community learning" as a better representation of future goals.

Overall, this document centers on shifting operatic conventions and evolving commissioning practices in the first twenty years of the twenty-first century. With the colossal global effects of COVID-19 on the performing arts industry in 2020, the post-pandemic world

will continue to change the ways in which operagoers engage with the art form. An increase in digital streaming, for example, provides localized professional performance to an international audience. Topics like mediation and liveness, out of the scope of this document, are ripe for further examination. Adding to the forecasted future presented in this chapter, arts administration expert and impresario Kaiser's 2015 book, *Curtains? The Future of the Arts in America*, also predicts particular trends about the arts in America from 2015-2035: less live performances and more digital on-demand viewing, which will in turn impact the donor base and cause an even bigger divide between the large, visible institutions and the local, grassroots organizations. Additionally, the cost of seeing live theatre will sky rocket. He predicts technology's impact will continue to change the way people engage with classical music, if at all, and formal arts education in public schools may be cut entirely:

> Over the coming two decades, the trends that began (or have been accelerating) since the year 2000 will create a new arts ecology in this country and abroad. Improvements in technology coupled with new distribution methods will alter both arts institutions and arts programming. A second generation of children without substantial arts education in the schools will reduce demand for the classical arts. And the age of our donor base and audience will create financial instability throughout the sector. Of course, people will always have a need to express themselves – regardless of race, economic status, or education level. […] There is no scenario which suggests that arts-making will stop.[482]

Kaiser prophesized these outcomes six years ago, and with the destructive impact of the pandemic on society, economy, and the performing arts sector, in particular, his predications are manifest.

[482] Kaiser, *The Future of the Arts in America,* 57.

CHAPTER 9 - CONCLUSION

Through collaborative commissioning practices and musico-dramatic unity, the transhistorical opera has emerged as the prevailing trend of the early twenty-first century. Beyond a significant increase in the quantity of new works being produced at American theatres since 2000, the trend toward audience-centric opera in the first two decades can be witnessed through music drama that is story-driven and rich in melodic motives. Building on this set stage, companies must stay committed to commissioning; likewise, opera organizations need to continue to revive new works from the recent past. From the quantitative and qualitative analysis presented here, it is evident that familiar narratives cultivating connections, along with polystylistic musical soundscapes, are key fundamentals contributing to a new opera's sticking power.

Those Responsible for the Shaping of Twenty-First Century American Opera

I set out to answer an overarching question: "Who is responsible for the shaping of twenty-first century American opera?" Though I do not claim my findings as exhaustive, researching the four pioneering theatre companies generated a list of impresarios and creative team members who have had a hand in solidifying the commissioning practices of the twenty-first century. Through impressive leadership skills, Charles MacKay, Timothy O'Leary, and Anthony Freud are three general directors with enormous influence over twenty-first century commissions at multiple institutions. After two decades at OTSL, MacKay served another decade at SFO. His tenures at both of these institutions speak volumes. Not only did he establish solid

business models but he was responsible for the renewed emphasis on new works.[483] In fact, the increase in commissions from American composers at SFO directly correlates with MacKay's administration. O'Leary continued and expanded MacKay's work at OTSL before starting his tenure at Washington National Opera, a company also dedicated to commissioning. After bolstering HGO's community impact and continuing Gockley's legacy, Freud now serves at Lyric Opera of Chicago, yet another pioneer company with a rich history of supporting new work. Though retired now, Paul Kilmer at OTSL and Dale Johnson at MO were highly impactful artistic administrators at their given theatres shaping the progression of opera programming over the last forty years. Lastly, current Artistic Directors Patrick Summers at HGO and James Robinson at OTSL have created dynamic new works and continue to do so. In addition to institutional leaders, wordsmith Mark Campbell has certainly influenced the style of in storytelling via libretti, striking a balance between captivating yet informal language through succinct syllabification. Of the four composers examined in this document, Gordon and Heggie are two prolific operatic composers influencing the popular and polystylistic characteristics effecting operatic composition on the whole.

Though not interviewed for this project, conductor Michael Christie is also notable for participating in the production of two of the case studies as well as advocating for new works. Christie was the conductor for the premiere of *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* and also conducted the Michigan Opera Theatre's revival of *The Grapes of Wrath* in 2019, in addition to directing many new works at both OTSL and MO, where he was Music Director from 2012-2018. Other influential figures during this period of new creation include: Eric Simonson, David Gockley,

[483] Revealed after case study selections, MacKay was the general director during the commissions of both *Dream of the Pacific* (OTSL) and *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* (SFO).

Kevin Smith, Perryn Leech, Leonard Foglia, Allen Moyer, Gene Scheer. Of the fourteen people who I interviewed extensively, Kevin Newbury stands out as the only person who has worked at all four pioneering theatres. When asked to describe his experiences staging new and canonic works at these different theatres, his response was one of humility and excitement about the future of opera:

> I am honored to be part of opera's future and really defining what that is going to look like. […] Just doing pretty period pieces, for their own sake, I think it's not so interesting right now as we look towards the twenty-first century. So, I love doing world premieres. […] These companies that are so committed to doing brand new work are the ones that I tend to gravitate towards. But I approach them the same way: it's all about telling a clean, clear story, like what is the best way to communicate the narrative? I think with a new piece, you have more freedom in a way because you're telling the story for the first time.[484]

Like Newbury, Heggie too emphasizes clear storytelling as a critical guiding principle in the creation of new opera.

In regard to the institutions shaping contemporary creations, the numerous companies committed to new operas have improved the overall commissioning process. Through trial and error, workshop processes are now more solidified. Workshops are expected, and collaboration amongst creative team members is valued. Comparing the practices shared in the interviews to twentieth-century conventions, I contend collaboration is at the heart of the current process. Though the composer is, of course, highly regarded for his/her musical prowess and vision, an opera takes a village to create, refine, and produce. Librettists are key to the partnership, and it is becoming common practice to credit their names alongside the composer. Mozart was a genius, yet it was when he worked with Lorenzo Da Ponte that he crafted the three most enduring and

[484] Newbury, Interview with author.

beloved operas of his *œuvre*. Teamwork is essential to the massive, multimodal creative endeavor that is opera.

Company and Case Study Convergences

Convergences between the companies presented themselves abundantly through this research. While MO and HGO present annual stagione seasons, OTSL and SFO adhere to a roughly six-week festival system. Though neither system is inherently better than the other, the festival does benefit the marketing and funding of new commissions. Furthermore, in the twenty-first century, each company has established an initiative dedicated to the production of new works. HGOco's *Song of Houston* in 2007 and MO's New Works Initiative in 2008 led the way. Shortly after, in 2009 OTSL's *New Works, Bold Voices* garnered high praise for its model, and SFO more recently joined the ranks in 2017 by leading the company consortium Opera for All Voices. From 2000 to 2019, HGO commissioned the most new works with its fifteen mainstage productions (not including an additional twenty-eight HGOco commissions) in comparison to OTSL's ten new works, MO's eight, and SFO's seven. In addition to a clear commitment to commissioning, all four theatres show concern for connecting to their local communities through both their repertoire and specialized events. New works are a contributing component for opportunities to foster these community connections with contemporary art innately holding the potential to emotionally resonate with listeners. Familiarity in new opera is also a contributing factor to building relationships with new communities and sparking intrigue in new potential operagoers, too.

Comparing the case studies, a number of parallels emerge. Spanning the last twenty years, all four operas have story-driven structures with the potential to engage, and despite being

produced during different economic periods, all were either sold out or well-attended at their premieres and subsequent revivals. *Dream of the Pacific* marks the beginning of the century with a concerted effort to culturally connect through American history. Korie's "stealthy" opera, *The Grapes of Wrath,* continues this concept on a more universal level by using a cultural piece of literature that balances twentieth-century history with contemporary relevance. *Three Decembers* forgoes American identity and rather focuses on intimate familial relationships. In a more competitive new works market, fifteen years into the century, *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* capitalizes on a famous figure who impacted societal communication. Their narratives demonstrate the trend in contemporary opera towards non-elitist audience pleasers with music enhancing drama. Campbell professes that there is a "tremendous amount of art in creating populist opera."[485] He recounts a time when a producer approached him after a premiere and dubbed the opera "an audience pleaser." Though this critical comment was meant to disparage his work, Campbell welcomed it. When the theatre sells out, people are attending and experiencing opera, and he views this as a positive outcome.

All four operas have a common thread in terms of the principal characters: three is the ideal quantity. Though *Three Decembers* only has three protagonists in total, the other operas boast large casts, but the librettists zoom in on three characters critical to the storytelling to create personable connections with the audience:

Dream: Lewis, Clark, Sacagawea
Grapes: Ma, Tom, Rosasharn
Three Decembers: Madeline, Charlie, Bea
Steve Jobs: Steve Jobs, Laurene, Kōbun

[485] Campbell, Interview with author.

The narrative theme of the journey is another manifestation in all four operas. While *Dream* and *Grapes* track physical expeditions, *Three Decembers* and *Steve Jobs* follow the maturing, transformational journeys of its main characters. Conversely, while three of the operas are linear in these trajectories, *Steve Jobs* avoids the linear quest to instead embrace a non-chronological experience. Connected to the quest concept, Pulitzer (OTSL *Dream*) and Simonson (MO *Grapes*) both reference Joseph Campbell's monomyth framework and the hero's journey as influential. Lastly, the librettists and composers I spoke with (Campbell, Heggie, Korie, Mager, and Pulitzer) all emphasize detailed structure and balanced contrasts in their dramatic pacing. The dramatic pacing then informs the music of all four scores. Though these operas cannot be grouped together in one overarching musical style, the four composers are polystylistic, each uniquely crafting a fusion of idioms.

Finally, my comparison of the dramatic content of forty commissions along with the survey results from revival companies reveal favored fundamentals, namely social and dramatic impetuses, by artistic administrators and creatives. The trend towards geographically-grounded American dramatic content increased in 2013 and persists. Historical content continues to be the dominant source material for new operas in the twenty-first century. However, it is more nuanced than the blanket category of "history." Many of these histories represent a more recent past, in particular the second half of the twentieth century. Codifying plot trends at a more detailed level would be ideal for a future study. Furthermore, if a creative team desires their opera to be revived, it is evident they should consider scale. The fiscal considerations, from size of musical forces to set and costumery demands, should present malleable and affordable options. Chamber operas are often desired for the economically feasible elements that allow companies to produce thrilling new work on a budget. While a cordial relationship between creative team and

artistic administration allows for adjustments and amendments of the work to fit the needs of the venue and singing artists. In an ever-changing social and technological landscape, influential opera companies remain critical to our art form's preservation, and more pertinently, continuation through the commissioning and reviving of new works by living artists. The heritage of opera is in the balance and disruption is afoot. But as Johnson said, "we owe it to the audiences."

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Cincinnati Opera Website. https://www.cincinnatiopera.org/opera-fusion-new-works

GuideStar Nonprofit Database Website. https://www.guidestar.org/

Houston Grand Opera Website. https://www.houstongrandopera.org

Opera America Website. https://operaamerica.org

Opera Theatre of Saint Louis Website. https://opera-stl.org

Operabase Performance Database and Website. https://operabase.com/en

ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer Website. https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/

Minnesota Opera Website. https://mnopera.org

Santa Fe Opera Website. https://www.santafeopera.org

Wise Music Classical Performance Catalogue
https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/performances

Newspapers, Magazines

Classical Singer
The New York Times
OPERA America Magazine
Opera News
MinnPost
The New Yorker
The Wall Street Journal
The Washington Post
Santa Fe Reporter
St. Louis Public Radio

APPENDIX A: RECEPTION HISTORY

Modeling the organization of reception history presented in Robert Fink's "After the Canon" in *The Oxford Handbook of Opera* the following sections include a comprehensive bibliography (as of October 2021) regarding the reporting on, critical reception, and published reviews for each of the four case study operas.

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APPENDIX B: FOUR THEATRES SAMPLE OF CODIFIED PLOTS

Year	Co.	Opera	Source Material					Context			Characters			Nationality
			Literature	Play	Film	Primary Source	Original	Historical		Contemporary	Celebrity Status	Royalty, Upper echolon	Common, Everyday	
								Fiction	Non-fiction	Contemporary				
	HGO	*Cold Sassy Tree*	1					1					1	American
2000	OTSL	*Tale of Genji*	1					1				1		Chinese
2001														
2002	OTSL	*Loss of Eden*				1			1		1			American
	SF	*Madame Mao*				1			1		1			Chinese
2003	HGO	*The Little Prince*	1									1		French
	OTSL	*Dream of the Pacific*				1			1		1			American
	HGO	*The End of the Affair*	1					1					1	British
2004	HGO	*Salsipuedes, a tale of Love, War and Anchovies*						1					1	Caribbean
2005	HGO	*Lysistrata, or the Nude Goddess*		1				1						Greek
2006	HGO	*Send (who are you? I love you)*					1			1			1	American
	MO	*Grapes of Wrath*	1					1					1	American
2007	OTSL	*Anna Karenina*	1					1				1		Russian
2008	HGO	*Three Decembers*		1						1			1	American
	HGO	*Brief Encounter*		1	1			1					1	British
	SF	*The Letter*		1	1			1					1	Malaysia
2009	MO	*Adventures of Pinocchio*	1								1			Italian
	SF	*Life is a Dream*		1				1				1		spanish
2010	OTSL	*The Golden Ticket*	1										1	British
2011	MO	*Silent Night*			1				1		1			French
2012														
	SF	*Oscar*				1			1		1			British
	MO	*Doubt*		1				1					1	American
2013	OTSL	*Champion*				1			1		1			American
	HGO	*A Coffin in Egypt*		1				1					1	American
	HGO	*A Christmas Carol*	1	1				1				1		British
	OTSL	*27*				1			1		1			American
2014	SF	*Cold Mountain*	1					1					1	American
2015	MO	*The Manchurian Candidate*	1		1			1					1	American
	HGO	*Prince of Players*		1					1		1			British
	HGO	*It's a Wonderful Life*			1			1					1	American
	OTSL	*Shalimar the Clown*	1							1			1	India
2016	MO	*The Shining*	1		1				1				1	American
	SF	*The (R)evolution Steve Jobs*				1			1		1			American
	HGO	*The House without a Christmas Tree*	1		1			1					1	American
2017	MO	*Dinner at Eight*		1	1			1				1		American
2018	OTSL	*An American Soldier*				1				1			1	American
	HGO	*The Phoenix*				1			1		1			American & European
	HGO	*Milagro del Recuerdo*					1	1					1	Mexican
	SF	*The Thirteenth Child*	1					1				1		German
	OTSL	*Fire Shut Up in My Bones*	1			1			1		1			American
2019	MO	*The Fix*				1			1		1			American
		Totals	16	10	8	11	2	20	13	4	13	7	19	

APPENDIX C: *Dream of The Pacific* Themes and Motives

The *Dream of the Pacific* score includes an index of the major themes and motives. In addition to chronicling these, Mager's personal archives also supplied a chart depicting where the thematic material occurs in each scene.

Dream of the Pacific, music by Stephen Mager, words by Elkhanah Pulitzer.
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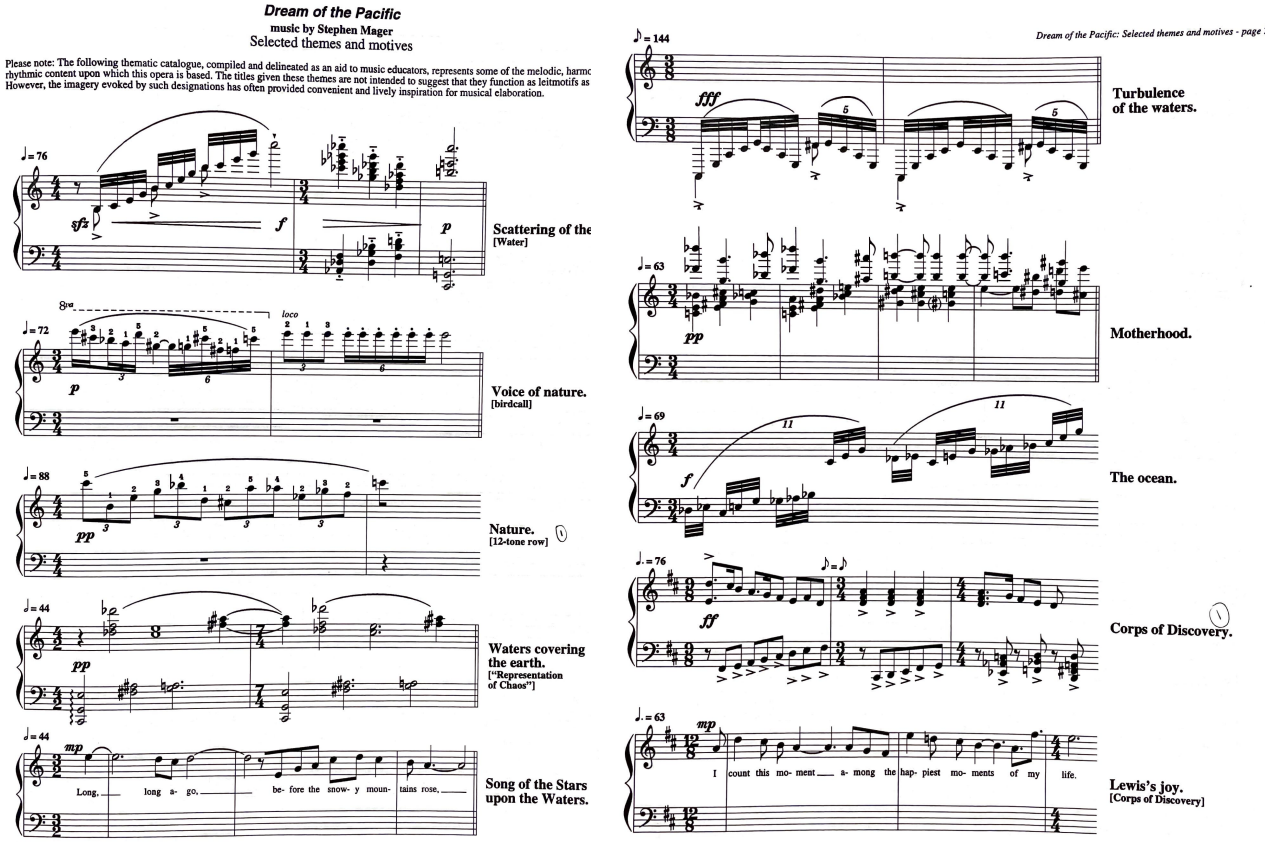
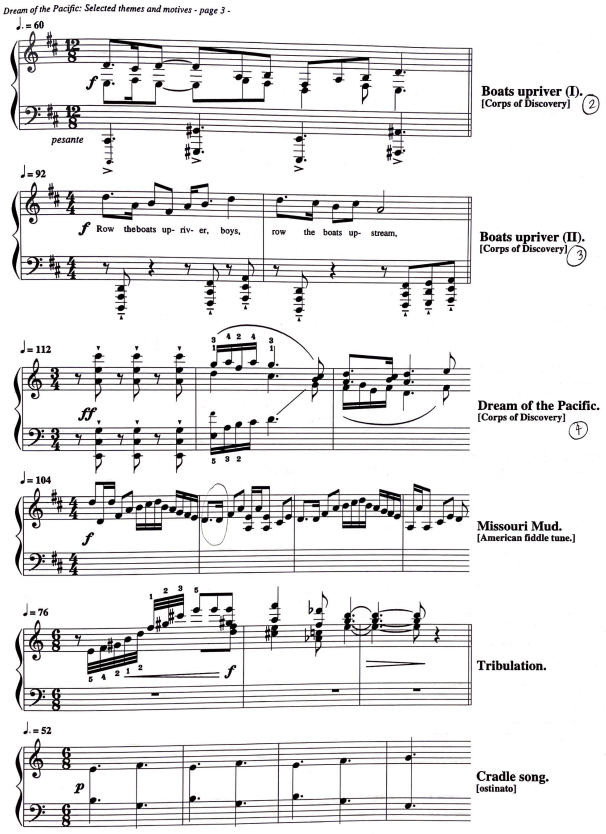
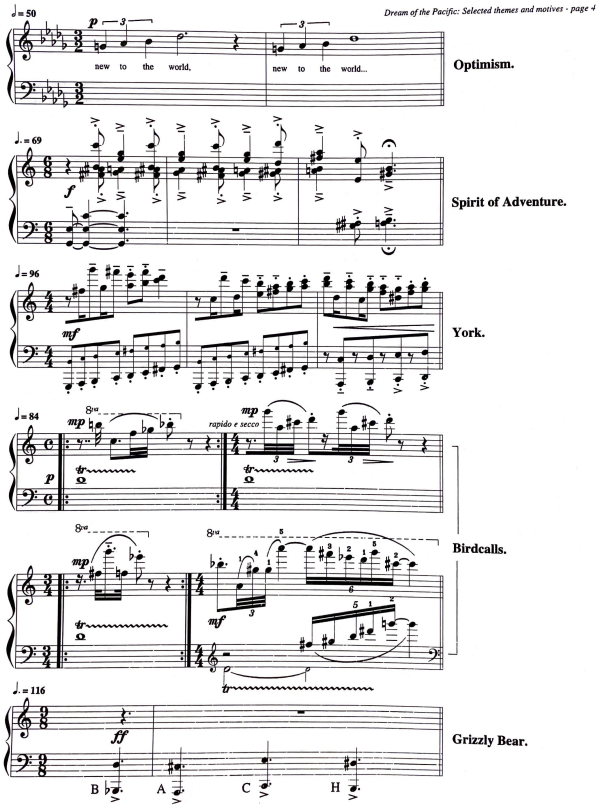
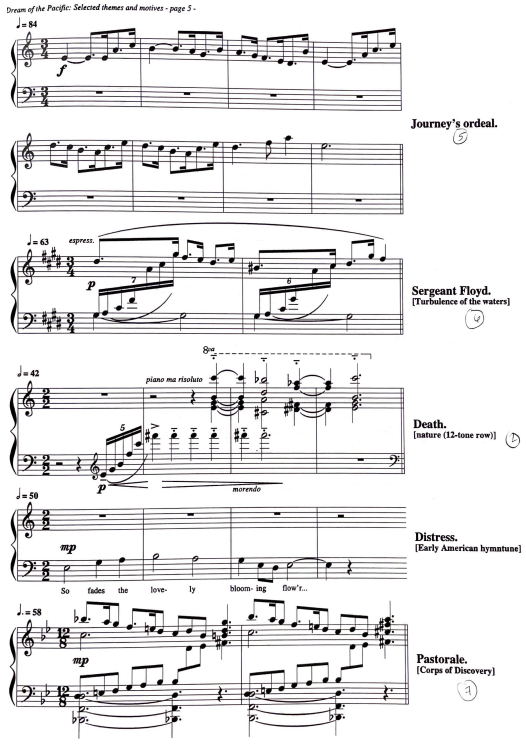
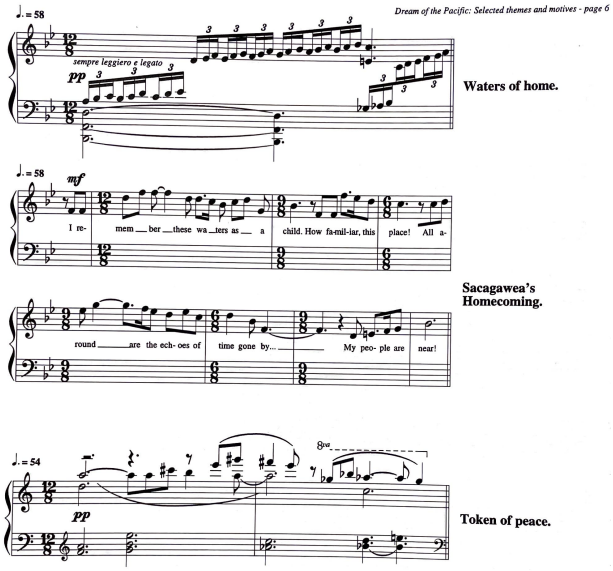
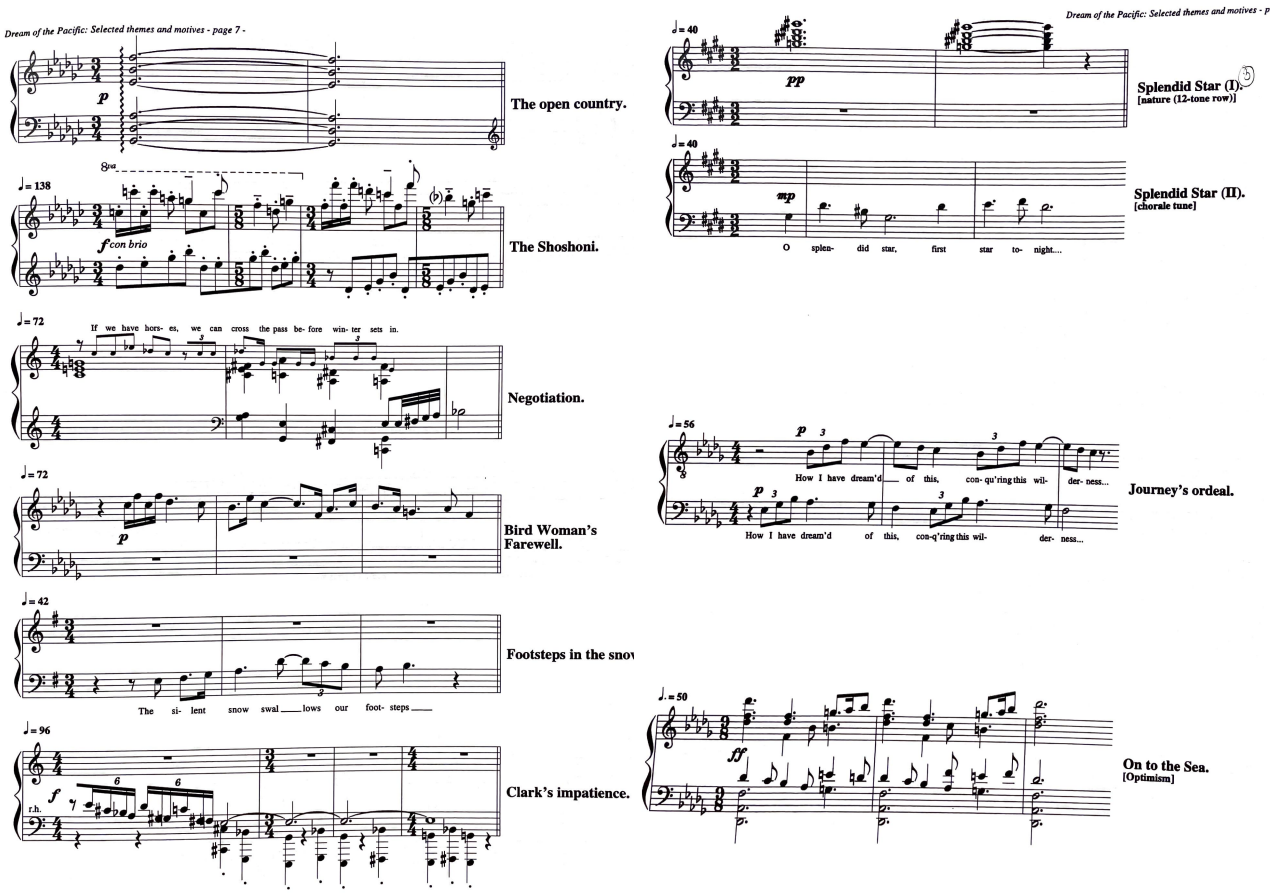


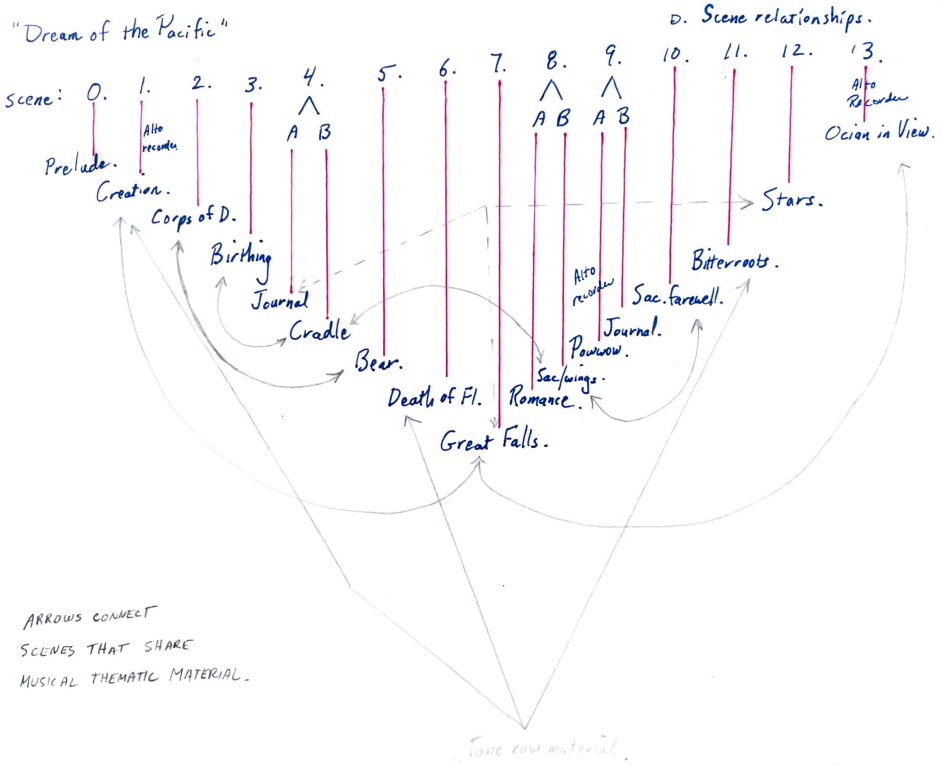

♩= 60
pesante
Boats upriver (I).
[Corps of Discovery] (2)
♩= 92
Row theboats up- riv- er, boys, row the boats up- stream,
Boats upriver (II).
[Corps of Discovery] (3)
♩= 112
Dream of the Pacific.
[Corps of Discovery] (4)
♩= 104
Missouri Mud.
[American fiddle tune.]
♩= 76
Tribulation.
♩= 52
Cradle song.
[ostinato]


♩= 50
new to the world, new to the world...
Optimism.
♩= 69
Spirit of Adventure.
♩= 96
York.
♩= 84
rapido e secco
Birdcalls.
♩= 116
B♭ A C H
Grizzly Bear.


♩= 84
Journey's ordeal. (5)
♩= 63
espress.
Sergeant Floyd.
[Turbulence of the waters] (6)
♩= 42
piano ma risoluto
morendo
Death.
[nature (12-tone row)] (7)
♩= 50
So fades the love- ly bloom- ing flow'r...
Distress.
[Early American hymntune]
♩= 58
Pastorale.
[Corps of Discovery] (8)


♩= 58
sempre leggiero e legato
Waters of home.
♩= 58
I re- mem ber these wa ters as a child. How fa-mil-iar, this place! All a-
Sacagawea's Homecoming.
round are the ech- oes of time gone by... My peo- ple are near!
♩= 54
Token of peace.


Dream of the Pacific: Selected themes and motives - page 7 -
The open country.
The Shoshoni.
Negotiation.
Bird Woman's Farewell.
Footsteps in the snow
Clark's impatience.
Dream of the Pacific: Selected themes and motives - p
Splendid Star (I).
[nature (12-tone row)]
Splendid Star (II).
[chorale tune]
O splen- did star, first star to- night....
Journey's ordeal.
How I have dream'd of this, con- qu'ring this wil- der- ness...
On to the Sea.
[Optimism]


"Dream of the Pacific"
D. Scene relationships.
Scene: 0. 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9. 10. 11. 12. 13.
A B A B
Prelude.
Creation.
Alto recorder
Corps of D.
Birthing
Journal
Cradle
Bear.
Death of Fl.
Great Falls.
Romance.
Sac/wings.
Powwow.
Alto recorder
Journal.
Sac. farewell.
Bitterroots.
Stars.
Alto Recorder
Ocian in View.
ARROWS CONNECT
SCENES THAT SHARE
MUSICAL THEMATIC MATERIAL.
Tone row material.

APPENDIX D: Institutional Review Board Outcome Letters

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01

Date: July 26, 2021 **IRB#:** 13506

Principal Investigator: Danielle Herrington **Approval Date:** 07/23/2021

Exempt Category: 2

Study Title: Cultivating Connections in Twenty-First Century American Opera: An Analysis of Four Pioneering American Theatres

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- Notify the IRB at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Aimee Franklin, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Final Report – Inactivation

Date: December 06, 2021

To: Danielle Herrington

IRB#: 13506

Study Title: Cultivating Connections in Twenty-First Century American Opera: An Analysis of Four Pioneering American Theatres

Inactivation Date: 12/06/2021

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the Final Report for the above-referenced research study. You have indicated that this study has been completed and should be inactivated. This letter is to confirm that the IRB has inactivated this research study as of the date indicated above.

Note that this action completely terminates all aspects and arms of this research study. Should you wish to reactivate this study, you will need to submit a new IRB application.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB at (405) 325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Aimee Franklin, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board

APPENDIX E: Limited Sample of New American Operas Produced 2010-2012

In the early outset of the project, I commenced the analysis of theatres and repertory by looking at a small sample. To consider what organizations were advocates of recent American opera, I used the NAWD Archive to track which companies premiered new operas between 2010-2012. Beyond the year stipulations, the following parameters were implemented: American premieres and "opera" designation by the creative team.

I cross-referenced the works with their online tertiary sources and websites to fill in missing information in the NAWD Archive and also track revivals of those works in the eight years following, 2012-2020. Musicals and Canadian operas were excluded from this comparison, though NAWD does include both.

Yellow indicates between 2 to 5 revivals.
Green indicates 6 or more revivals.

Company	Year	Opera Title	Composer	Librettist	Acts	Revivals	Companies Reviving	Grants
American Opera Projects	2011	*Nora, In the Great Outdoors*	Daniel Felsenfeld	Will Eno	?	0		Unknown
American Opera Projects (with San Francisco Opera)	2012	*Love/Hate*	Jack Perla	Rob Bailis	70min	0		Andrew W. Mellon, Zellerbach Family Foundation
American Opera Projects	2011	*Brooklyn Cinderella*	Nkeiru Okoye		?	0		Unknown
American Oper Projects (with New York City Opera)	2011	*Séance on a Wet Afternoon*	Stephen Schwartz		?	0		Unknown
American Repetory Theatre	2011	***Death and Powers***	Tod Machover	Robert Pinsky	1	**2**	Chicago Opera Theater and Opera Boston, 2011; Dallas Opera 2014	New Works Exploration Grants,2011
American Lyric Theater	2011	***All Wounds Bleed***	Chirstopher Cerrone	Tony Asaro	1	**2**	Tulsa Opera, 2013; Chicago Fringe Oprea, 2019	Funded by New Music USA and The Composer Librettist Development Program, both 2011; New Works Forum Showcase, 2012
Ardea Arts – Opera out of Bounds	2010	*Cat: The Opera-Musical*	Kitty Brazelton	Georg Plimpton	1	0		Jane A. Gross Trust, Jaffe Family Foundation
Bard College Conservatory of Music Orchestra	2010	*Vinkensport, or The Finch Opera*	David T. Little	Royce Vavrek	1	1	Opera Saratoga, 2018	Unknown
Berkeley West Edge Opera	2011	*Caliban Dreams*	Clark Suprynowicz	Amanda Moody	2	0		Unknown
Opera Boston	2010	***Madame White Snake***	Zhou Long	Cerise Lim Jacobs	4	**2**	Beth Morrison Projects, 2016 & 2019	Unknown
Beth Morrison Projects	2012	***Dog Days***	David. T Little	Royce Vavrek	3	**2**	Fort Worth Opera 2015; Los Angeles Opera 2015	New Works Forum Showcase 2014; New Works Exploration Grants 2015
Boston Lyric Opera	2011	*The After-Image*	Richard Baeudoin	Richard Baeudoin (after Rainer M	1	0		Unknown
Center City Opera	2011	*Danse Russe*	Paul Moravec	Terry Teachout	1	0		Unknown
Center Stage Opera	2011	*Marie's Orchard*	Philip Westin	Dylan F. Thomas	2	0		Unknown
Center for Contemporary Opera (and Long Leaf Opera and San Antonio Opera)	2011	*Secret Agent*	Michael Dellaira	J.D. McClatchy	2	0		Unknown
Center for Contemporary Opera	2010	*The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*	John Eaton	Estela Eaton	2	0		Unknown
Chelsea Opera	2012	*The Mark of Cain*	Matthew Harris	Terry Quinn	1	0		Unknown
Cincinnati Opera	2012	***Song from the Uprorar: The Lives and Death***	Missy Mazzoli	Royce Vavrek	1	**18**	Evolution Contemporary Music Series, 2013; Central Michigan University, 2013; Philadelphia Opera, 2013; Kent State University, 2014; NOW Ensemble with Da Camera of Houston, 2015; Los Angeles Opera, 2015; Milwaukee Opera Theatre, 2016; Chautauque Opera, 2016; Chicago Fringe Opera, 2016; Beth Morrison Projects, 2016; Cincinnati Opera, 2017; Opera Ithaca, 2018; Musiktheatertage Wien, 2018; Rochester Fringe Festival, 2018; Ensemble Eutopia, 2018; Wesleyan University, 2020; Verdigris Ensemble, 2020; California State University, 2020	
University of Connecticut	2011	*The Wooden Sword*	Shelia Silver	Stephen Kitsakos	1	2	SUNY Stony Brook Opera, 2011	Winner of Raymond and Beverly Sackler Prize in Music Composition for Opera, 2007
Dallas Opera	2010	***Moby-Dick***	Jake Heggie	Gene Scheer		**9**	Calgary Opera Association, 2012; San Diego Opera Association, 2012; San Francisco Opera, 2012; Los Angeles Opera, 2015; Dallas Opera, 2016; Utah Opera, 2018; Pittsburgh Opera, 2018; Opera San José, 2019; Chicago Opera Theater, 2019	New Works Sampler, 2011; The Opera Fund: audience Development 2012; New Works Exploration Grants, 2012/2013/2016
Dicapo Opera Theatre	2010	*God Bless Us Everyone*	Thomas Pasatieri	Michael Capasso	1	0		Unknown
Empire Opera	2012	*Sweet Dreams*	Waundell Saavedra	Waundell Saavedra	?	0		Unknown
Empire Opera	2012	*Rumpelstiltskin*	John Alan Rose	Michele Coppola Ames	?	1	Guerilla Opera, 2020 (postponed due to COVID)	Unknown
Encompass New Opera Theatre	2011	*Angel of the Amazon*	Evan Mack	Evan Mack	2	1	Boston Metro Opera, 2011	Unknown
Florentine Opera Company	2010	*Río de Sangre*	Don Davis	Alicia Partnoy, Kate Gale	3	0		Unknown
Fort Worth Opera (with American Opera Projects)	2010	***Before Night Falls***	Jorge Martin	Dolores M. Kohnen	2	**2**	Developed by American Opera Project, 2005; Florida Grand Opera, 2017	Unknown
Glimmerglass Fesitval	2010	*A Blizzard on Marblehead neck*	Jeanine Tesori	Tony Kuschner	2	0		New Works Exploration Grants, 2012; The Opera Fund: Repertoire Development, 2014
Gotham Chamber Opera	2011	***Dark Sisters***	Nico Muhly	Stephan Karam	100min	**10**	Opera Philadelphia, 2012; Music-Theatre Group, 2012; Boston University CFA, 2013; Pittsburgh Opera, 2014; Vancouver Opera, 2015; Third Eye Theatre Ensemble, 2016; Boston Conseravtory of Music, 2017; Oklahoma City University, 2017; Opera Fayetteville, 2019; Miami Music Festival, 2019	The Opera Fund: Repertoire Development 2011; New Works Forum Showcase, 2011; The Opera Fund: Audience Development, 2012; New Works Exploration Grants, 2012

Company	Year	Opera Title	Composer	Librettist	Acts	Revivals	Companies Reviving	Grants
Guerilla Opera	2011	*Heart of a Dog*	Rudolf Rojahn	Rudolf Rojahn	1	0		Unknown
Harvard University	2010	*From Sandover*	Matthew Aucoin	James Merrill	1	0		Unknown
Harvard University	2012	*Heloise and Abelard*	John Austin	Christine Froula	?	1	Center for Contemporary Opera, 2015	Unknown
Houston Grand Opera	2010	*A Way Home*	Ethan Frederick Greene	Irene Keliher	1	1	Opera Southwest, 2012	Unknown
Houston Grand Opera	2010	***To Cross the Face of the Moon / Cruzar la Cara de la Luna***	José Pepe Martinez	Leonard Foglia	?	**4**	Arizona Opera, 2014; Fort Worth Opera, 2017; Houston Grand Opera, 2018; El Paso Opera, 2019	New Works Exploration Grants, 2015; The Opera Fund: Audience Development, 2017
Houston Grand Opera	2011	*Courtside*	Jack Perla	Eugenie Chan	?	0		Unknown
Houston Grand Opera (with University of Houston)	2012	*From My Mother's Mother*	Jeeyoung Kim	Janine Joseph	?	0		Unknown
In Mid Air Productions	2010	*The Tell-Tale Heart*	Robert W. Butts	Robert W. Butts (Edgar Allen Po	1	0	Suite played at Baroque Orhcestra of New Jersey, 2018	Unknown
Indiana University Jacobs School of Music	2011	*Vincent*	Bernard Rands	J.D. McClatchy	2	0		New Works Forum Showcase, 2015
International Festival of Arts & Ideas (TheBrooklyn Academy of Music, The John F. Kennedy Center Abe Fortas Memorial Fund,TheCenter for the Art of Performance at UCLA,TheSecrest Artists Series atWakeForestUniversity, and Hancher Performances at theUniversity of Iowa	2012	***Love fail***	David Lang	David Lang	60min	**2**	Beth Morrison Projects, 2015; Gertrude Opera, 2020	Unknown
Ithaca College	2012	*The Wolf by the Ears*	Dana Wilson	J. Robert Lennon	3	0		Unknown
Julliard School	2012	*Heloise and Abelard*	Stephen Paulus	Frank Corsaro	2	0		Unknown
Juventas New Music Ensemble	2011	*Light and Power*	Isaac Schankler	Jillian Burcar	2	0		Winner of The American Prize in Opera Performance, 2012; 2nd place in the National Opera Association 2010-2011 Opera Production Competition
Kentucky Opera	2010	*New York Stories*	Daron Hagen	Hagen and Barbara Grecki	3	2	Chicago Opera Theater, 2011; Butler Opera Center, 2012	Unknown
Lehigh University	2010	*The Life and Love of Joe Coogan*	Paul Salerni	Kate Light	1	0		Unknown
Los Angeles Opera	2010	***Il Postino***	Daniel Catán	Daniel Catán	3	**4**	Opera Saratoga, 2016; Virginia Opera, 2019; Opera Southwest, 2020; Opera Santa Barbara, 2020	Opera For the Eighties and Beyond, 1988; New Works Sampler, 2010; New Works Exploration Grants, 2011
University of Maryland	2010	*Shadowboxer*	Frank Proto	John Chenault	?	0		Unknown
Opera Memphis	2011	*A Midsummer Night's Dream*	Michael Ching	William Shakespeare		0		Unknown
Metropolis Opera Project	2011	*One Hot Kitchen*	Kristin Heyner-Wyatt	David Caudle	?	0		Unknown
Metropolitan Opera Guilde	2012	*Twice Upon a Brithday*	Frank Schiro	Michael Ching and Shawn Churc	?	1	Tulsa Opera, 2015	Unknown
Minnesota Opera	2011	***Silent Night***	Kevin Puts	Mark Campbell	2	**15**	Opera Philadelphia, 2013; Fort Worth Opera, 2014; Cincinnati Opera, 2014; Calgary Opera Association, 2014; Lyric Opera of Kansas City, 2015; Opéra de Montréal, 2015; Atlanta Opera, 2016; Michigan Opera Theatre, 2016; Piedmont Opera, 2017; Glimmerglass Festival, 2018; Minnesota Opera, 2018; Washington National Opera, 2018; Austin Opera, 2019; Arizon Opera, 2019; Utah Opera, 2020	The Opera Fund: Repertoire Development, 2011; New Works Exploration Grants, 2012/2013/2015/2017; The Robert L.B. Robin Director-Designer Showcase, 2013
Music-Theatre Group	2010	*Saturnalia*	Susie Ibarra	Yusef Komunyaka	1	0		Unknown
Nautilus Music-Theater	2010	*Untold Lies*	Robert Elhai	Jim Payne	?	0		Unknown
Opera New Jersey (with American Opera Projects)	2011	*The Family Room*	Thomas Pasateri	Daphne Malfitano	1	0		Unknown
New Orleans Opera Association	2010	*The Awakening*	James Stepleton	Andrew Joffe	2	0	(some scenes performed at Encompass in 2000)	Unknown
New York City Opera	2011	*La Machine de l'être*	John Zorn	John Zorn	1	1		Unknown
Opera North, Inc.	2012	*Transitions: Sung Stories*	Leslie Burns	Jules Tasca	?	0		Unknown
Operamission (with American Opera Projects)	2010	*Margot Alone in the Light*	Clint Borzoni	Emily Conbere	1	0		Unknown
Prairie Fire Theatre	2010	*Fertile Ground*	David Vayo	Nancy Steele Brokaw	?	0		Unknown
Rhymes with Opera	2011	*Criminal Element*	David Smooke	David Smooke	1	1	Rhymes with Opera, 2013	Unknown
San Francisco Opera	2011	*Heart of Soldier*	Christopher Theofanidis	Donna DiNovelli	2:45	0		New Works Exploration Grants, 2012
Santa Fe Opera	2010	*Life is a Dream*	Lewis Spratlan	James Maraniss	3	0		Unknown
Schenectady Light Opera Company	2011	*Puss in Boots*	Peter de Mets	Laura Andruski	?	0		Unknown
Seattle Opera	2010	*Amelia*	Daron Aric Hagen	Gardner McFall	2	0		The Opera Fund: Repertoire Development, 2006; The Opera Fund: Audience Development, 2007
Skylight Opera Theatre	2011	***The Rivals***	Kirke Mechem	Kirke Mechem	2	**2**	Bronx Opera Company, 2014; University of Montana, 2017	Unknown
Opera Theatre of St. Louis	2010	*The Golden Ticket*	Peter Ash	Donald Sturrock	2	1	Atlanta Opera, 2012	Unknown
University of Texas at San Antonio Lyric Theatre	2010	*A Brief History of Root Vegetables*	David Heuser	David Heuser	3	0		New Works Sampler, 2011
UCLA Department of Music	2010	*The First Lady*	Kenneth B. Wells	Kenneth B. Wells, Gayle Patterso	?	0		New Works Exploration Grants 2012
UNC Chapel Hill	2012	*Salt*	Missy Mazzoli	Erin Cressida-Wilson	1	1	Brookyn Academy of Music, 2012	Unknown
UrbanArias	2012	*Positions 1956*	Conrad Cummings	Michael Korie	3	0		Unknown
Opera Vista	2010	*The Silent Prince*	Somtow Sucharitkul	Somtow Sucharitkul	2	0		Unknown
Vulcan Lyric (formerly Center City Opera Theater)	2012	*Slaying the Dragon*	Michael Ching	Ellen Frankel	2	1		New Works Exploration Grants, 2012
Washington National Opera	2012	*A Game of Hearts*	Douglas Pew	Dara Weinberg	1	0		New Works Forum Showcase, 2014
Washington National Opera	2012	*Charon*	Scott Perkins	Nat Cassidy	1	0		Unknown
Washington National Opera	2012	*Part of the Act*	Liam Wade	John Grimmett	1	1	One Ounce Opera, 2016	Unknown
Wet Ink Ensemble	2012	*Voices from the Killing Jar*	Kate Soper	recognized poets	8 mvts	0	Long Beach Opera, 2021	Unknown
WHOpera Group	2012	*The Apostle*	Gamma Skupinsky		1	0		Unknown
Wolf Trap	2011	***The Inspector***	John Musto	Mark Campbell	2	**2**	Boston Lyric Opera, 2012; University of Houston Moores Opera Center, 2017	New Works Sampler, 2011; New Works Exploration Grants, 2011; The Opera Fund: Audience Development, 2012
Yale College	2012	*Dragonbone Storyshow*	Mark Sonnenblick	Brendan Ternus	?	0		Unknown