



Features

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Risky Business

In trying economic times for the arts, American Opera Projects commits itself to the trickiest of all ventures - creating new operas and selling them to the public. BARRY SINGER reports.



Executive director Charles Jarden and company manager Matthew Gray at the Fort Greene home

of American Opera Projects

Making new operas is an uneasy enterprise. No one - not the composers and librettists on the front lines, not the administrators and funders who succor them behind the scenes - really has a firm grasp on this business. New operas today demand musical savvy, dramaturgical savvy and marketing savvy in almost equal measure. They require audience analysis, along with readings and workshops - but in what proportions, and at what cost? In our slippery cultural epoch, it is especially hard to say.

For all that, American Opera Projects soldiers on. From a small warren of offices in a modest landmark building in Fort Greene, on the ever-gentrifying fringes of Brooklyn - a spot about as far from the vast stage of the Metropolitan Opera as one can get in New York City and still be within the five boroughs' confines - American Opera Projects grapples with the job of generating new American operas, one by one.

"Our mission has never changed," maintains Charles Jarden, the executive director. "It is to commission, develop and present new work. We don't do an opera that has been done elsewhere before - no remountings or revivals. The opera has to have worked its way through our channels, through our pipeline. Sometimes we bring the concept to the composer and librettist, sometimes we come to them with a commission and they tell us what they want to write. It works all different ways, but in the initiating sense it's always the same."

The roster of new operas given their premieres by American Opera Projects over its twenty-year existence is striking both for its rarefied range and for its rigorous anonymity. None of these operas has achieved anything close to name recognition, which is not to suggest that they have lacked for respect. AOP productions have reached the Lincoln Center Festival (*Tone Test*, music and libretto by Nicholas Brooke), the Annenberg Center in Philadelphia (*Memoirs of Uliana Rooney*, music by Vivian Fine, libretto and film by Sonya Friedman), Berlin's Stükke Theater and the Ensemble Theater am Petersplatz in Vienna (*Cigarettes and Chocolate*, music by Jakob Engel, adapted by the late film director Anthony Minghella from his 1988 radio play). They have been reviewed everywhere, including *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Still, how many people actually hear them?

"Our largest audience was probably for *Darkling*," answers Jarden. "*Darkling* [music by Stefan Weisman and Lee Hoiby, from a poem by Anna Rabinowitz] ran for sixteen performances at an off-Broadway theater before we took it to NYU's Skirball Center and then on tour to Germany and Poland. So maybe 10,000 people saw it, in sum. We've also done many free outdoor performances here in Brooklyn. At Coney Island we performed a piece called *Fireworks*, by Kitty Brazelton and Billy Aronson, on the boardwalk in front of the Wonder Wheel, with real fireworks after the performance. I would say probably 20,000 people at least walked by that one."



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In 1988, a theatrical director named Grethe Barrett Holby enlisted Charles Jarden to help her get her dream of an opera company off the ground. Holby had the odd idea that opera should somehow follow the example of New York's downtown contemporary dance community in its use of unconventional performance spaces, socially engaged subjects and, most fundamentally, its commitment to new work, with something original brought forth every season.

"I had just come back to the city permanently after many years working for the Santa Fe Opera," recalls Jarden. "Grethe and I were friends. She also approached Ed Corn, another friend, who had just left the NEA and was then working at Wolf Trap, and the composer Richard Peaslee, who actually was a very distant relative of Grethe's. We three agreed to help her formulate the initial mission of

AOP. Then Grethe and I began turning her kitchen-table idea into an organization, with a budget and a flow of money that wasn't just hand-to-mouth. It took about two years. Our first space on Broome Street in lower Manhattan was donated by Grethe. We became known there initially as 'the workshopping people.' We even produced a very early workshop of Jonathan Larson's *Rent*, just to give you an idea how far afield we ranged in those days. Finally AOP began to get real traction with arts foundations, and in 1996 we presented our first full production, *The Memoirs of Uliana Rooney*. We've done almost one world premiere a year since then. We use very prominent singers to work on these operas, convincing them to take a risk and run with us. The payback is that the works are written *on* them, for their voices specifically."

This, of course, distinguishes AOP from New York City Opera's VOX showcase series, which every year mounts complete readings with full orchestra of new operas by a spectrum of new and noteworthy American composers. Where VOX offers creators a chance to hear their work, AOP brings composers and librettists together with singers to initiate a work and then develop it collaboratively.

"Essentially, I raise the money and Matt organizes the projects and programs," explains Jarden, who nearly constitutes all of American Opera Project's full-time staff, along with company manager Matthew Gray. (Holby and AOP parted company amicably in 2002.) "We did have an artistic director," Jarden adds. "But he recently left, and we've decided not to replace him." This dollop of deadpan understatement would seem glib in someone less earnest than Jarden. After a pregnant instant, he elaborates.

"Steven Osgood stepped down as artistic director in January. We'd long been discussing his need to find more time and space for his own conducting career. What kept coming up for me, though, was the thought that we shouldn't replace Steve, we should expand on him with some kind of flexible platform that could access all the great ideas out there for new opera."

The new "platform" Jarden has settled on employs "Artistic Partnerships" with five guest curators, in a sense. They are the marvelously venturesome diva Lauren Flanigan; a gifted young British-émigré composer named Tarik O'Regan; OperaGenesis, the Royal Opera House's AOP-equivalent development entity for new work; a Brooklyn-based arts group called The Walt Whitman Project; and a record company as yet to be named.

"AOP has so many projects gestating at any given time," observes O'Regan, "so many workshops and readings going on. Other companies know what they're doing this season and maybe next season, but they really deal with a very limited number of new works. Because AOP is so widely committed, they're actually much more flexible about shifting direction if your piece changes. It reminds me of the way television networks develop and program pilots. It's a good model. You take some risk on a lot of different projects, and one of them at least is going to click."



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The fruit of AOP's reorientation is immediately apparent in its 2008-09 season, which features two unusually high-profile premieres, each starring Lauren Flanigan: *Operatic Monodramas*, a series of pieces for solo performer by the legendary Estonian composer Arvo Pärt, including his chamber opera, *L'Abbe Agathon*, in a new English translation; and *Séance on a Wet Afternoon*, a first-time opera effort by Stephen Schwartz, the equally legendary Broadway musical composer of such hits as *Godspell*, *Pippin* and the current smash, *Wicked*.

Stephen Schwartz?

"Let's face it," says Jarden, "audiences for Stephen Schwartz's *Séance* are coming to see Stephen Schwartz's *Wicked* and *Pippin* and *Godspell* on some level. What we're giving them, though, is something completely different. And so far they haven't been disappointed."

But is it fair to infer from this that American Opera Projects, in its current redirection, is looking to sell itself to a wider audience?

"Our first question with any new opera," insists Jarden, "has always been, 'Who cares?' Opera just doesn't exist anymore by itself, independent of the culture. A new opera has to work somewhere in this world today. Who is going to pay to come see it? Is it the subject matter that is going to bring them in? Is it the performers or the composer? Is it the venue or the festival that it will be associated with? Almost any piece that we've done over the years, you can chart why we did them. Each one had a reason. It can't be otherwise, because we don't have subscribers and a subscription season with *Figaro* and *Barber of Seville* as our main draws. Some of the reasons may not be readily apparent. We're doing Tarik O'Regan's *Heart of Darkness* because we believe Tarik is a visionary young composer with the kind of budding international career that we would

like to associate ourselves with. Tarik gets the word out for us - he becomes our ambassador. But we're also doing *Heart of Darkness* because people know it, they know the book, they know the title. So many of the pieces we've done were based on material that nobody had any identification with. Identification helps."

Yet name-brand recognition is hardly something American Opera Projects concerned itself with during its first twenty years. Jarden is unrepentant. "Look, we've had our successes and our misses along the way," he says. "This next period for us is a period of re-evaluation. We want our operas to matter. We're not just interested in hanging some pretty piece of art up there that, if it disappeared, no one would care. I believe if we don't continue to do this, there will be a void. Fort Greene will lose in that transaction, greater New York City will lose, and the country at large will not be as good a place as a result. This is important work we're doing. I know I may sound certifiable. But I'm right." □

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