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# Opera in the Age of Anxiety

**The worst financial crisis in decades has meant curtains for several regional U.S. companies. How drastically will other organizations need to rethink themselves if they are to survive? BARRY SINGER sizes up the situation.**

James Morris and Carol Neblett, Scarpia and Tosca at Baltimore Opera in 1989

It is rare in opera that a tragic ending truly comes as a surprise. The sudden, tragic endings that recently overtook Baltimore Opera Company, Connecticut Opera, Florida's Orlando Opera and Southern California's Opera Pacific certainly were shocking. But were they surprises? Only in a last-act operatic sense of willfully suspended disbelief.

What brought the curtain down on all of these longstanding regional companies, ostensibly, was the economy's unprecedented collapse. Crashing markets were, however, no more than a deus ex machina, stripping away any veneer of financial health that each organization may have projected to expose the desperately tenuous underpinnings of their daily operations. In each instance, seemingly in a matter of moments, the show was over.

How could it be otherwise? The Wall Street boom of the past decade had allowed opera companies across America to imagine that they were loved, even cherished institutions, basking in the bucks. When the inevitable bust came, opera, as an industry, was by and large unprepared for it. Now the deaths of these four companies seem but a harbinger, the first fatalities in a widely feared pandemic.

Opera Pacific was the first to fall, in November of last year, its demise a virtual blueprint for the troubles that would ultimately sink all four. Having served the parched precincts of Orange County, California, for twenty-two years from its base of operations in the city of Santa Ana, Opera Pacific had embarked optimistically on a twenty-third season, only to slam on the brakes after completing just one production (a not unsuccessful *Barbiere di Siviglia*). The remaining 2008-09 calendar was unilaterally canceled, including a widely anticipated West Coast premiere for Ricky Ian Gordon and Michael Korie's *Grapes of Wrath*, as well as Francesca Zambello's Lyric Opera of Chicago staging of *Salome* that was set to star Orange County's hometown girl, Deborah Voigt. Laid off on the instant were nearly all employees, up to and including the artistic director, conductor John DeMain, and the president and CEO, Bob Jones. The 20,000-square-foot former warehouse that had been the company's headquarters was hurriedly put on the block. Just like that, Opera Pacific was no more.

Attendance, apparently, had not been the biggest problem, though ticket sales certainly could have been better. With seats priced from $30 to $200, the cost of an evening at Opera Pacific was hardly beyond the reach of Orange County's prosperous resident population. Eerily, the most damaging development, long-term, may

**Jennifer Rivera and Brian Stucki, Rosina and Almaviva in Opera Pacific's 2008 *Barbiere*, the company's final presentation**
**Courtesy Opera Pacific**
**(http://www.operanews.org/_uploaded/image/article/oppacbarberlg9109.jpg)**
Jennifer Rivera and Brian Stucki, Rosina and Almaviva in Opera Pacific's 2008 *Barbiere*, the company's final presentation
Courtesy Opera Pacific

**Director James de Blasis rehearses Jeanette Scovotti (Rosina) and Ramon Vinay (Bartolo) for a 1967 gala performance of *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* in Orlando**
**OPERA NEWS Archives**
**(http://www.operanews.org/_uploaded/image/article/orlandobarberlg9109.jpg)**
Director James de Blasis rehearses Jeanette Scovotti

actually have been a lowering of ticket prices enabled by a very large single donation some years earlier. When the cushion from that donation was exhausted and the company was forced to raise ticket prices again, irate Orange County-ites took flight in droves.

(Rosina) and Ramon Vinay (Bartolo) for a 1967 gala performance of *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* in Orlando
OPERA NEWS Archives

Still, the most disastrous aspect of Opera Pacific's operation was a chronic paucity of donors. Timothy Mangan, music critic for *The Orange County Register*, puts it starkly: "Opera Pacific had no endowment. They were living hand to mouth for years." In fact, company finances rested upon the largesse of just three big givers, "three patrons [who] supplied something like ninety percent of donations," according to Mangan. A decline in support from this trio of loyalists following the nationwide downturn left Opera Pacific with nowhere to turn.

In quick succession, Connecticut, Baltimore and Orlando found themselves confronting similarly catastrophic balance sheets, due to the same fatal reliance on razor-thin fund-raising margins enforced by a lack of sufficient support from their respective communities. In February of this year, Connecticut Opera called it quits after sixty-seven seasons, stranding 2,000 subscribers without refunds or recourse. In March, Baltimore Opera liquidated itself after fifty-eight years, followed in April by Orlando Opera, closing out a fifty-one-year run. "Lower ticket sales, reduced contributions and defaults on pledged donations" were the causes in Orlando, according to president and CEO Jim Ireland, echoing (almost verbatim) his colleagues from Connecticut to California.

Money troubles at all four companies, however, had been long-standing. As Ireland acknowledged to *The Orlando Sentinel*, as far back as the summer of 2006, Orlando Opera had nursed a deficit of $589,000 on a $2.7-million budget. An ensuing fundraising drive secured commitments of $1.6 million that reduced this deficit briefly to $200,000, but when the stock market sank in the autumn of 2008, ticket sales and donations sank with it. Ultimately, as much as $750,000 in pledges was left unfulfilled.

Gabriel Bacquier (Germont) and Montserrat Caballé (Violetta) in Connecticut Opera's 1967 *Traviata*



Connecticut Opera, according to the Associated Press, had survived on a yearly budget of about $2.1 million, with ticket prices ranging from $25 to $100, before the company bank account was frozen in the wake of pallid turnouts for a November 2008 production of *DonGiovanni*. Rather than file for bankruptcy, the board simply chose to cancel its remaining productions (*La Fille du Régiment* in March, *La Bohème* in May), lay off its half-dozen or so full-time employees and enter into private negotiations with its creditors.

Baltimore Opera, on the other hand, opted for outright bankruptcy, filing for Chapter 11 protection in December on a debt totaling $1.2 million and canceling the balance of its remaining productions (*Porgy and Bess* and *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*) before succumbing in March to an all-out Chapter 7 liquidation of assets. Auctions, held this past spring, offered the bizarre spectacle of complete Baltimore Opera productions being unloaded en masse as eBay-style lots, among them *Aida* (set and costumes), *Cavalleria Rusticana/Pagliacci* (set only), *Dead Man Walking* (coproduction set), *The Siege of Corinth* (set only), plus something the auction catalogue referred to simply as "Renée Fleming (hard shell and set)." The top winning bid proved to be for *Tosca*, which had an asking price of $45,000; thirteen of the fifteen total lots (all but *Lady Macbeth* and *Siege of Corinth*) eventually sold.

"It seems Baltimore cannot support a six-and-a-half-million-dollar opera company at this time, though ten years ago the budget was eight million," observes former general manager Michael Harrison, who, during a twenty-year tenure, oversaw Baltimore Opera's rise and - as many on his own board came to believe - also its fall. "For the last several years, the cash-flow situation had been very troublesome," acknowledges Harrison. "In the fall of 2008, it became critical. When it became apparent that the funds to continue with the season were going to be almost impossible to identify, the board and I decided to sell our warehouse. Several offers were made, but a woman who had been a really major donor agreed to buy the property. She went back and forth on her offer, however, then declared, after having been my biggest champion for years, that she wouldn't buy unless I was dismissed. The board then asked me to take the title of artistic director and hired an interim general manager. They also hired the woman's personal attorney to represent them and, on his advice, voted to declare bankruptcy. The board had asked me to produce a plan to keep the company afloat and to raise enough funds to continue. However, the chairman refused to accept any plan that I created."

"Baltimore Opera did generally respectable, often exceptional work," maintains Tim Smith, music critic for *The Baltimore Sun*. "[Their] first-rate, intense *Lady Macbeth*, for example, in 2003, would have been welcome at just about any opera house. That was also a rare example of daring on the part of the company. Although the public ended up responding enthusiastically, management did not make the most of that success. There were a few adventures outside the standard rep after the Shostakovich, but not enough to change the overall conservative image of the company."

Clearly, deficit spending at all of these institutions did yield quality work and, on occasion, even venturesome fare. Inexorably, though, economics intruded upon aesthetics. "It was difficult over the years to focus specifically on eliminating the deficit while still trying to present an artistically viable product," concedes Connecticut Opera's former artistic director Willie Anthony Waters. "We cut our expenses on several occasions over the last few years, but in the end you can only cut so much before you jeopardize the artistic quality of the company. We reduced our productions from four to three. We eliminated staff positions. We even shared some administrative expenses with other arts organizations. [Still], the economic downturn was too much for us to sustain."

Leona Mitchell and Dolora Zajick, stars of Opera Pacific's 1988 *Aida*



Opera Pacific also tried to stanch its losses by paring performances - from six operas a year, six times each, to four operas performed four times. This winnowing of ambition in deference to fiscal restraint seems to have hastened rather than halted the downward spiral. "The cutbacks were perhaps financially responsible," maintains Mangan, "[but] they were artistically questionable. Certainly they led to a smaller presence for the company on the artistic landscape, and less brand awareness. Many folks didn't even know who Opera Pacific was, or that Orange County even had its own opera company. The name Opera Pacific was itself a problem. It didn't reflect that the company was Orange County's own."

David DiChiera ran Opera Pacific as its first general director from 1986 until his retirement from that company in 1996. (DiChiera remains founding general director of Michigan Opera Theatre, where he has served since 1971.) For him, the success of any regional opera company depends entirely on ties to the community. "Greatness on the stage is something all opera companies strive for," says DiChiera, "but you have to connect with your community. That is the bedrock. By the time I retired at Opera Pacific, we'd built a large corps of local volunteers, over thirty chapters, created not geographically but by interest - there were tennis people who supported the opera together with small donations and regular attendance, dining enthusiasts who went out to restaurants and then attended the opera. It may not have been chic or sophisticated, but it gave us a foundation. You need to let people feel a part of what you're doing. You need to build a pyramid structure of support, a large base of small local donors who become invested in you.

"After I retired, my successors dispensed with our outreach programs, because they felt they weren't up to the company's elite standards. And they walked away from our pyramid structure of financing, concentrating instead on just a few large donors. In doing so they alienated a large part of their audience by making people feel that they didn't count. I think the administration was constantly looking at the Los Angeles Opera and wanting to be like L.A. Well, you can't be like L.A.! Opera is *not* L.A."

At least Opera Pacific had the option of indulging more avant-garde impulses on occasion, mounting what Mangan describes as "a fair share of quasi-revisionist productions, including a surreal *FlyingDutchman* and a double bill of *Pagliacci* and *Carmina Burana*." Baltimore, Orlando and Connecticut had no such opportunity. "Our choice of operas was generally conservative and traditional, in response to the overwhelming desire of our audience," acknowledges Waters. "[Any] attempt to introduce contemporary operas - *Susannah*, *Ballad of Baby Doe*, for example - was not successful. We were committed to keep on trying, but finances did not permit us to be adventurous."

One wonders what impact the Metropolitan Opera's HD telecasts had on these troubled regional companies. Did the Met on the silver screen siphon off opera-lovers who might otherwise have been buying tickets for something live?

"We didn't feel the Met broadcasts had a negative effect on us," Waters maintains. "I attended several over the last three years, and most of the people there were Connecticut Opera subscribers. We noticed no reduction in ticket sales. As a matter of fact, our subscription renewal levels in the last two or three years were around 80 percent, which is high compared to national trends. In our case, I think [the broadcasts] were a positive thing."

"This is purely anecdotal," adds Mangan, "but in my opinion the Met broadcasts didn't hurt Opera Pacific. I even saw an Opera Pacific table set up at one of them."

No venue in Baltimore proper screened the Met's offerings until Baltimore Opera itself arranged to present the series last fall at the Lyric Opera House. The company's bankruptcy has now put an end to that.

Ruth Ann Swenson (Adalgisa) and Hasmik Papian (Norma) in Baltimore Opera's last production, a 2008 *Norma*
Courtesy Baltimore Opera Company/Michael DeFilippi, photographer

According to the nonprofit advocacy group Americans for the Arts, 10,000 arts organizations will probably just disappear in 2009. Several smaller opera companies have also closed, including Berkshire Opera. Layoffs and salary cuts abound in the industry - seventeen jobs slashed at Los

Angeles Opera, four expensive revivals gone from the Metropolitan Opera's 2009-10 season. Companies nationwide today cower in the shadow of what so stunningly transpired in Baltimore, Hartford, Orange County and Orlando, none more fearfully, perhaps, than New York City Opera, which, over the past two years, has lost its home, the David H. Koch Theater (temporarily), to renovations and its designated savior as general manager and artistic director, Gerard Mortier (painfully and permanently), to Mortier's own second thoughts about NYCO's financial future. According to *Bloomberg News* and *The New York Times*, during the fiscal year that ended June 30, 2008, revenue from ticket sales, donations and investments fell 23 percent to $32.9 million, while expenses increased 11 percent to $44.2 million, generating losses of $11.3 million that have forced New York City Opera to raid its own endowment, which now stands at $16 million, down from $57 million in December 2003.

Opera has never before confronted such an ominous numbers game - a beggar's opera of plummeting balance sheets played out beneath the looming omnipresence of the gallows. "Heartbreaking" is the word Waters uses to describe the end of Connecticut Opera, and heartbreaking it is.

But is this heartbreak a surprise, or merely the wrenching pain of fiscal responsibility imposed? The antithetical cultural currents that opera in the U.S. swims against are manifest and very nearly all-powerful. How large an audience for live opera can there possibly be in a nation that disdains music education for its children, abandoning them to the video screen, while plugging ears at all ages with iPod earbuds? Yes, regional opera companies represent a powerful tool for education and outreach. But with today's very real supply-and-demand issues playing an increasingly dominant role, how many regional opera companies *can* survive? □

BARRY SINGER *won a 2007 ASCAP Deems Taylor award for his most recent book,* Alive at the Village Vanguard.

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