

AGMAzine

stories of creativity

The New Frontier

and perseverance

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The American Guild of Musical Artists

P.O. Box 908
New York, New York 10108
(212) 265-3687; Fax: (212) 262-9088
www.MusicalArtists.org

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**Written By
Tim Smith**
MMRC Chair,
AGMA Governor,
Chorister

In this jam-packed issue, we are proud to share with you members' stories of creativity and perseverance as AGMA enters *The New Frontier*.

As we brainstormed ideas of what our theme should be, MMRC kept coming back to the topic of how our members are finding new and creative ways to practice their Art—as well as finding new revenue streams and exploring new passions while we wait for our industry to come back to life.

2020 was a year that none of us could have ever begun to imagine, even in our worst nightmares. COVID-19 caused cancelation after cancelation and setback after setback. This has really done a number on more than a few of us. Added to this was the emotional rollercoaster of the national elections, all while many finally began to understand and start to address the racial divides and inequities in this country. So much of what the future holds is still unknown. Yet, our Art must go on and we still have to provide for our families. AGMA has been there every step of the way, and for that, we are eternally grateful.

On a positive note, AGMA approved a thorough and much-needed update/overhaul of AGMA's Constitution and Bylaws, as well as fixed a bug in our website. Next time you log in to your MyAGMA portal, you'll notice you are successfully redirected to your Personal Portal! The Board of Governors presented and approved numerous resolutions and policies, the most recent being the Resolution Directing Immediate Action on Anti-Racism and Anti-Discrimination Initiatives. Members can access ALL of AGMA's policies by visiting the "Policies and Procedures" section of MyAGMA. Oh, and it's an election year at AGMA! To learn how to run for AGMA office, visit the "2021

Board of Governors National Election" webpage, also behind MyAGMA.

The National Office is always willing to help all AGMA members and direct you to the proper place for help, but please know that your elected leaders are also here for you. Never be afraid to reach out and ask a question or raise a concern.

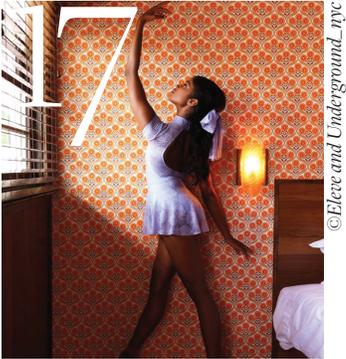
The response to the "New Frontier" theme has been tremendous and we hope you are as moved by the articles as much as we are. A special shout-out is in order to Katharine Goeldner for leading the charge, as well as her interview with soloist Elise Quagliata and her multi-artist compilation entitled "What's Your Muggle Job?"

As you flip through these digital pages, you will hear about how our fellow members have found/discovered/created new ways to teach and work on Zoom, as well as reimagine directing opera in a safe and socially-distanced way, be it at a drive-in movie or a parking garage! Several members share their experiences of taking advantage of the education benefit from Union Plus (if you have not already looked into this—please do).

You will also be moved (and maybe inspired) by the touching tribute to the late RBG from director Francesca Zambello, or once you read about what chorister Doug Purcell has been doing at Mount Sinai Hospital.

We celebrate Director of Communications Alicia Cook's first year with us and really enjoyed her interviews with dancers Francisco Estevez, Antuan Byers, Sean Omandam, and Nardia Boodoo, as well as soloist Janinah Burnett.

I must also express my extreme gratitude for the tireless work that goes into making *AGMAzine*. *AGMAzine* is YOUR magazine. No issue could be possible without contributions (blurbs/thoughts, articles, and pictures) from YOU. I am grateful that you take the time to share your stories with us. Thank you so much, everyone, for your part in making each issue a reality and a keepsake from a very hard time that we faced head-on. Talk about perseverance! ■



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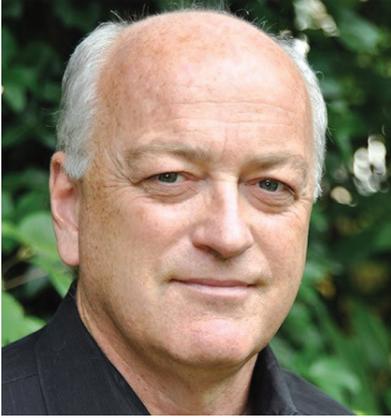
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Joint Message from Ray Menard and Len Egert



AGMA President Ray Menard



National Executive Director Leonard Egert

A version of this message was emailed to AGMA Artists in December 2020.

If you are reading this right now, pause. Take a deep breath and exhale.

2020 was a year none of us expected or would ever ask for. With one crisis after another, we are all mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausted. And yet, we also saw innovation, resiliency, solidarity, and JOY during this trying time.

We saw Misty Copeland dancing with Elmo on Sesame Street and John Holiday doing a magnificent job on NBC's "The Voice." We saw dancers and singers protesting proudly in the streets, turning their sewing machines into mask

creators, making the great outdoors their new stages, providing master classes, and launching their own digital series. AGMA Artists have remained in the spotlight on a regular basis, advocating for our industries and spreading hope at a time we need it most. Most recently, in a touching example of union solidarity, several members have stepped forward with offers to pay, or "sponsor," the Basic Dues of AGMA members in need.

We also wish to publicly acknowledge the AGMA Artists who have become unbelievable advocates for the AGMA Relief Fund during a time when you yourselves are directly impacted as well. We once again thank Renée Fleming, who

was honorary chair of this year's Holiday Drive. And, to the many, many other Artists who linked the AGMA Relief Fund to their live streams or social media posts, the Fund has received donations because of your efforts. Thank you. You all inspire us.

2020 was, without a doubt, a year we were all ready to leave behind. We mourn the losses of this difficult period, but we look toward 2021 with hope—hope that we will get COVID-19 under control, hope that society will return to some level of normalcy, and hope that we can soon return to the joy of sharing our art with live audiences.

As 2021 presses on, AGMA will continue to make progress on our goals and continue to tackle the challenges facing AGMA as a labor union in the 21st Century. AGMA has fought for Artists for more than 80 years and will do so for as long as opera, dance, and choral work are performed in America.

Len Egert, National Executive Director

Ray Menard, AGMA President ■



Constitutional Referendum Recap

Toward the end of 2020, AGMA held a Constitutional Referendum and on December 18, AGMA was pleased to announce that the Board of Governors Revision of the Constitution had been approved by the AGMA membership. The vote was 1,380 for the Board of Governors Revision, 512 for the Petition Amendments, and 75 for neither. Additionally, the Petitioners' proposal to increase dues by raising and then eliminating the dues cap, along with a temporary reduction in the initiation fee, was rejected 1,316 to 636.

With 1,981 total votes cast (some members did not vote on both questions), AGMA saw a record-breaking percentage of members take part in this referendum.

Since then, the comprehensive overhaul of AGMA's governing document has been in effect.

"We all share a strong belief that coming together in union is necessary and that participation in the Union is vital. To all AGMA Artists: the referendum is over and we are still AGMA, one union, fighting together for all of our members and for the future of our industries. We must remain united," said AGMA President Ray Menard in his December 18 email message to the membership.

The Board of Governors Revision makes AGMA stronger, more efficient,

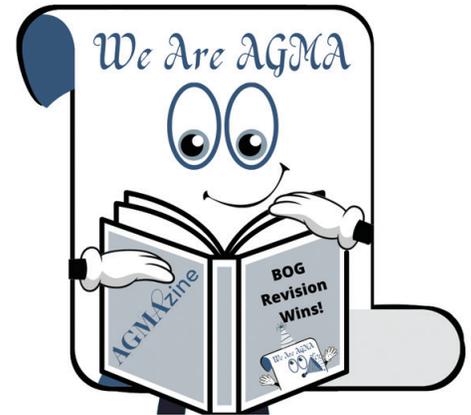
more inclusive, and more equal and just. It was written by AGMA members for all AGMA members and provides the Union with the foundation and the tools needed to create a more perfect Union. The Revision is a continuation of the progress AGMA has made in recent years—progress that has allowed AGMA to fight for our members during COVID-19.

Following the approval of the Board of Governors Revision of the AGMA Constitution by the membership, the official Bylaws were approved at the December regularly scheduled Board of Governors' meeting.

To view the revised Constitution and Bylaws:

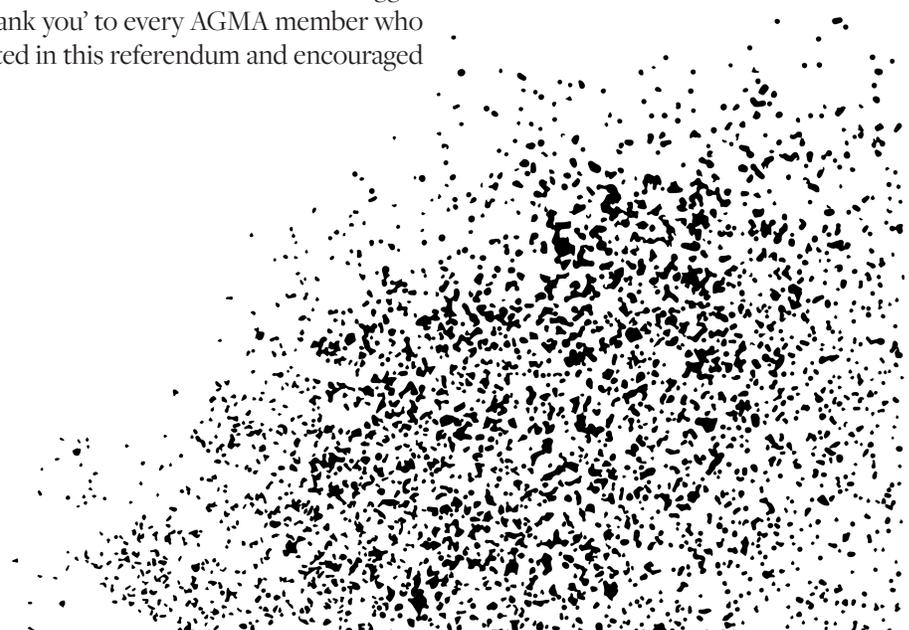
- Login to [MyAGMA](#)
- Visit the "Policies and Procedures" section of MyAGMA
- Select "AGMA Constitution and Bylaws"

In a December 21 email, National Executive Director Len Egert and President Menard wrote, "Thank you to all of the members of the Board that participated as well as the AGMA Senior Staff, staff attorneys, and outside counsel for their diligent work and commitment to this effort. We wish to extend an even bigger 'thank you' to every AGMA member who voted in this referendum and encouraged



their colleagues to vote as well. Your voice was heard. None of our future progress would be possible without you."

Flip to page 34 to read our constitution's new preamble! ■



Power in a Pandemic: Now is the Time to Be a Union Artist



By Griff Braun
Director of Organizing
and Outreach

As we move into 2021 and the COVID-19 pandemic approaches the one-year mark, the future of Performing Arts in the United States remains uncertain. For AGMA Artists, the last 10 months have been a time of tremendous loss, frustration, and fear, with the questions of “When will I get back to work?” and “How will I survive until then?” always front of mind.

During this difficult period, however, AGMA Artists have been able to secure relief payments or payouts of canceled contracts, maintain existing employer-provided health insurance, and work with their companies on safety protocols that have allowed many Artists to begin to work again, though in a limited way. Across the country, AGMA members have been coming together in virtual bargaining committees to meet with management representatives, discuss the effects of canceled work on the artists, and bargain to try to mitigate the worst of those effects.

Have the results been uniformly good? No. Have some companies been more forthcoming than others? Absolutely. Are many AGMA Artists still struggling? Without a doubt. But the ability to bargain as a group and to discuss all aspects of this crisis with the employers has resulted in critical help for many, many Artists.

The reason AGMA Artists have been able to do this is obvious but extremely important to emphasize in this

moment—AGMA Artists are members of a union. They are speaking with one voice in their shops, advocating for their needs, and helping to ensure the survival of opera, concert dance, and choral performance in the U.S. It is important to recognize, particularly during this pandemic, that this does not happen in the absence of a union.

Artists in non-union companies are at the mercy of their employers, not only financially, but also in terms of their health and safety. In this extraordinary moment, when the governments of many states and cities across the country simply do not take COVID-19 seriously, many non-union Artists are having to choose between their health and safety and their jobs. That kind of no-win situation for individual Artists stands in stark contrast with the ability of AGMA Artists to face this crisis together, and use their collective voice.

As we look ahead, with COVID-19 vaccines being rolled out across the country (albeit unequally and too slowly thus far), there is a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel. The Federal Government has approved a stimulus bill with a portion focused on segments of the Performing Arts (the Save Our Stages Act); Andrew Cuomo, the Governor of New York, has directly addressed the need to revive the Arts and Cultural industries, and Dr. Anthony Fauci has optimistically predicted that live theatre could resume “[sometime in the fall of 2021.](#)”

With the prospect of returning to the stage within the year, what can we do to ensure that AGMA emerges from this crisis stronger and better prepared to face whatever the future holds? The answer is: organize. By growing—more union companies and more union Artists—AGMA members can create an even stronger

collective voice in our industries.

Faced with the grim reality of COVID-19, on top of already [stagnant wages](#) and [growing economic inequality](#) and [diminished worker safety protections](#), many working people across the United States are awakening to the value of unions, with approval ratings for unions in 2020 [nearing a 50-year high](#). This has led to organizing in seemingly unlikely workplaces like [Google](#) and [Amazon](#), in spite of [increasing efforts](#) by many employers to prevent it.

While current labor law makes it difficult for workers in the United States to unionize, AGMA has had recent success with the Artists of Nevada Ballet Theatre, Music at Westwood, Oregon Ballet Theatre, and others. The process is simple on paper but requires time and strategic effort. Central to every organizing campaign are confidential conversations with individual Artists—giving them the time and security to talk about their workplace issues and their concerns and fears about unionizing. Building support and solidarity within a shop can be a slow process but it is essential, both to ensure that the Artists win the union and that they are in a strong, unified position to negotiate a first contract and begin advocating collectively for their own safety and well-being.

The best way for AGMA to connect with and help organize Artists at non-union opera, dance, and choral companies is through our members. If any AGMA members reading this have friends or colleagues who are working in non-union companies and houses around the country who would like more information about why now is the time for artists to organize and unionize, we ask that you please point them to the [Organize! Page](#) on the AGMA website. There they can also fill out the Organize! Contact Form

and an AGMA staff member will reach out to them for a confidential first conversation.

The survival of the arts in

the United States is inextricably linked to the survival of the Artists. By coming together in union, AGMA members are

fighting to ensure that Artists have a voice in the future. As we slowly turn our attention back to the stage this year, let

us also amplify that collective voice by organizing and welcoming new companies and Artists into our union. ■

Twilight: Gods—A Welcomed Pandemic Production from the SMs

By Stage Managers Nan Luchini, John Coleman, and Hailli Ridsdale

A favorite aspect of any production for most Stage Managers (SM) is foreseeing problems before they arise, and the pandemic production *Twilight: Gods* at Michigan Opera Theatre (MOT) came with several hurdles for the seven-person SM team of Samantha Greene, Alaina Bartkowiak, John Coleman, Christine Elliott, Nan Luchini, Hailli Ridsdale, and Colter Schoenfish and Assistant Director (AD) Alex Gedeon. The team managed the outdoor production of the Prologue and five scenes on the surface lot and five levels of the Detroit Opera House parking structure in late October, in Michigan, from 3:50 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. The audience remained in their vehicles, began in the surface lot, then drove through the parking structure listening to different radio stations for each scene.

The first week of rehearsals began with the production's SM, AD, and two Assistant SMs planning how to ensure the safety of the performers, instrumentalists, and crew, as well as the audience and parking staff. From check-in with COVID-19 forms, pens, sanitizer, and thermometers, to dressers and sound, there were needs to consider along with the actual production elements. Additionally, MOT provided for all Artists, Supers, Stagehands, and Instrumentalists to be tested for COVID-19 before arriving and took extra precautions to ensure that people traveled safely with as little chance for exposure as possible.

All the crew wore face masks. Additionally, face masks and shields were worn by the one sound crew member who mic'd each singer, the one wig/make-up Artist who did full wigs and make-up on only two singers, and by each dresser. Every level of the parking structure had its own designated stage crew members to deal with props, electronics, audio, and special effects. There were space heaters on every level for orchestra members and each singer in their designated tent/area for downtime. The MOT Technical Department and Crew were amazing at handling the needs of the production.

Music rehearsal took place on the stage of the opera house where everyone was masked. Only the singers were allowed to remove their masks and only when they sang. There was an additional deck added over auditorium seating to extend the stage, allowing the singers to keep a safe 25'+ distance when singing. Spacing rehearsals were able to take place on the designated



Stage Managers Hailli Ridsdale, Samantha Greene, John Coleman, Christine Elliott, Nan Luchini, Alaina Bartkowiak, and Colter Schoenfish

floors of the parking structure with all instrumentalists with mics, and singers with ear monitors and mics from the beginning. Instrumentalists wore masks unless they had a wind instrument to play. Shields were put in place to keep the instrumentalists isolated when playing.

Once the rest of the SM team arrived, we all met and talked through the run of the show as if we were an audience member, so we understood how the flow of the show was expected to happen.

Some challenges included reminding the singers to either put their masks back on and/or social distance on breaks. Most opera singers do not use ear monitors, so they had to learn to use them in order to have the live feed of the orchestra in their ear instantly, rather than relying on a natural sound delay. Since we rehearsed each floor separately and only with the people designated to the specific scene, singers mentioned they had a difficult time being only around the people on their floor and not seeing the rest of the production or other singers. The Technical Department worked with the sound crew to ensure that individual mics on singers and instruments would keep any downtown Detroit ambient sounds from coming through the radio signals that broadcast to the cars, along with ensuring all the necessary

power, lighting instruments, electrical and audio cables were obtained.

Almost 40 masked “parking attendants” and extras, wearing black coveralls with yellow reflective bands and carrying flashlights, did everything from directing traffic and holding signs for radio station changes and driver reminders; to directing the audience where to park, opening/closing curtains, and performing movements. The drivers were directed to always keep their car windows up so communicating via signage was necessary. After the first invited audience dress rehearsal, we realized there was a need for more signs to show the radio station frequency and to remind drivers to turn headlights off or put their car in accessory mode to minimize exhaust fumes.

Usually, the entire show is called on headset and everyone is in their place top of show; however, the Sixth Floor SM was inside the opera house calling “places” and making sure singers were mic’d, while the Prologue and First Floor SM were already performing. And once the Sixth Floor started their FIRST rotation of vehicles an hour after the Prologue first began, the Prologue was starting their intermission. Each individual floor SM threw

verbal/visual cues to crew and orchestra; however, on the headset, SMs on each level gave warnings to the next level for ends of scenes and called sound cues to the sound mixer running radio music streams for every level. Each SM needed to know what happened on the floor before them and the floor after them, along with their own floor in order to understand the domino effect of scenes and ensure the audience experienced a seamless show. If a scene finished too early, cars were left sitting listening to the transition music loop until the next floor finished, which then would back up every floor behind them.

Even with the challenges of the audience trying to park in the appropriate parking configurations and paying attention to enhanced sanitizing and social distancing, the ability to work on production again safely and successfully was an experience that will live with us all. *Twilight: Gods* was truly a new experience and perfect for any stage manager to tackle. Being hyper-aware, communicating, foreseeing problems, and keeping people safe are the basic skills of any SM; and we’ve learned the pandemic has only helped strengthen those skills. ■

© Mitty Carter / Michigan Opera Theatre website



Stage Managing Our Way Through the Pandemic (Standby Friendship! Friendship...GO!)

By Brian August and Yasmine Kiss



What started in career anxiety has deepened into stronger collegiate bonds and developed enduring friendships.

Yasmine Kiss (YK): When we were in our final performances of our March opera, the news regarding the virus began trickling in. By the time we were closed and a week away from starting our next production, the talk had turned to force majeure. Two weeks after that, most stage managers we knew were enrolled in career classes at The Actors Fund and learning how to create good-looking LinkedIn profiles. We are, in a word, practical. Practical, though, doesn't also account for the emotional journey of losing your life's work seemingly overnight.

Brian August (BA): I was in prep for the final show of my first season at Houston Grand Opera (HGO) when we shut down. Thankfully, HGO kept us employed for a few more weeks doing remote tasks, but eventually, we were laid off. The next few weeks were full of worry and speculation, but I was grateful to my friends and colleagues for all of the Zoom cocktail hours. I kept hoping that my summer work would be maintained, but as it became obvious that we wouldn't see live opera for a while, I contemplated what to do for the next few months.

YK: I have spent 25 years living through my day in three-hour segments. In three hours, we must stage a scene through the end of Act 1, we must figure out how to schedule a work-through of half the opera and fit two costume fittings around it, or in three hours we must create all the light cues for the second half of our show. All these segments end our days, mostly, in a sense of satisfaction. The goal was set, the effort achieved, and I could come home to consider other pursuits without that nagging sensation of things left uncompleted. The pandemic, though, threw us into an abyss of time and lingering tasks. Looking for work is not a three-hour segment. It is an endless road forward with no clear edges, and it became challenging to get that same sense of

satisfaction. I spoke with friends and colleagues, all experiencing the same journey.

BA: Our lives are dictated by a rehearsal schedule, and I plan all my personal to-dos around the free time I have out of the opera house. Suddenly, the due dates for tasks could just be "eventually" and I realized I needed more structure. Through some initial trial and failure, I eventually found a routine. Many of my stage manager friends were encountering the same problems, and it was refreshing to discuss problems like this with them.

YK: Brian and I have never met in person, and yet, through the magic of opera and its shared productions, we have struck up a friendship through the years. We understand each other because of our professions, but we know each other through our work. How I write cues in my score is different from how Brian writes cues. We are an interconnected mass of Post-its and highlights. As we all began to struggle with the Who, What, Where of the global pandemic, we set up Zooms with other production staff colleagues throughout the country, sharing tips, techniques, and résumé critiques. We were finally able to put faces to colleagues we've known only through the echoes of their work. What started in career anxiety has deepened into stronger collegial bonds and developed enduring friendships. As weeks turned into months, we cheered each other on as jobs were gotten (realtor, hospital administrator, personal assistant, and others), college classes were taken (bookkeeping, project management, business school), and personal achievements were unlocked (cooking triumphs, closets organized, and gardens planted).

BA: Even though Yasmine and I have never met, it feels as though we have. Our Zoom meetings turned into a real friendship between many of us, and I look forward to seeing my new friends and colleagues every few weeks for an hour. We've become so supportive of each other's endeavors and offer suggestions when someone is stuck; it's the perfect combination between a national conference and a kaffeeklatsch. I enrolled in the free college program through AGMA/Union Plus as a way to keep focused and occupied. I also kept busy with training for a 10K, and with 6-8 hours a week of volunteer phone banking for President Joe Biden and Michigan Senator Gary Peters. I also took up work co-creating The Atlanta Opera's COVID-19 protocols, and stage and production management work with a local Baroque chamber ensemble. In September, I co-stage managed the Houston Grand Opera digital production of *Vinkensport* and the transition to film was a whole new world. We filmed

on location, so suddenly I was focusing on shot lists instead of scene shifts. The switch took a few days to get used to in a COVID-19 world, but I'm grateful that my training allowed me to pivot so easily. I have been lucky during a period of great difficulty.

YK: Without this opportunity to hit the pause button on our frenetic lives, we would not have had the time to commit to each other and deepen our understanding of one another. I look forward to when we are all able to come back into a new normal of show production. I think that

Zoom may be with us to stay, from this point forward, and it will be great to continue our new connections. I've been told that Opera is "dying" for my entire career, and yet we continue to persevere. I can't wait to see the Art that is being created in homes across the world during these pandemic times. It will be a pleasure to work on it, and to connect with my colleagues across the country about it!

BA: As stage managers, we're not used to standing still; it's literally "go go go" all the time. While we are all anxious to get back to work under safe conditions,

I have been trying to appreciate the time to tackle odd projects, learn new skills, connect with old and new friends, and enjoy a temporarily diminished sense of responsibility. I appreciate the *AGMA/SDC Return to Stage and Performing Arts Playbook* and how it is keeping our working members safe, and look forward to the days when we no longer have to use it. I know that even in a post-COVID-19 world, the friendships we made during this time will be here to stay. ■

Francisco Estevez: Entrepreneur Plus MORE

By *Alicia Cook*



Francisco Estevez

Last March, Principal Dancer Francisco Estevez was getting ready for Colorado Ballet's last production of the season. A great triple bill, Estevez tells *AGMAzine* it was the type of production that all dancers looked forward to putting on. Then, the dancers were called to an all-company meeting. It was there, in the main studio, that they learned the Company was shutting down until further notice. Almost a year later, as COVID-19 continues to rage throughout the country, they still wait in limbo.

Since then, Estevez has been trying to remain positive and busy, which grew exceedingly difficult to do as the months passed.

"I have always been one to focus on solutions rather than be bogged down by problems, but battling cancer definitely put things into perspective," Estevez shared, having faced down cancer not once, but twice, in the past. "I do not know if it made me stronger, but it definitely helped me to appreciate the present and make the most of the time I do have."

In that light, once the pandemic took hold, he decided to focus on what he could control: projects he could work on by himself.

A brilliant photographer and creative thinker at heart, Estevez committed part of his new-found time to invest in his dance photography business (@candidly-created on Instagram).

If you follow any Colorado Ballet dancers on social media, you've likely seen a photo Estevez has taken. In 2011 he began shooting when he won a dance competition in Spain and used some of the winnings to purchase his first camera. He never looked back. He was even the photographer for the Colorado Ballet Academy for many years; but like many Artists with other jobs or passions or diverse income streams, his photography business was shut down at first too.

"I lost a third of my yearly revenue

due to canceled photography jobs," he said. Then, he pivoted. "As things started to open up later in the year, I decided to move to a new studio that allowed me to expand my offerings and I even outfitted it with mirrors and marley so I could teach private ballet and continue to train in a safe environment."

Whenever the time to retire comes, Estevez plans to make photography his next career.

In addition to all of that, Estevez saw a need in the market and created Artflix, a non-profit arts streaming platform for organizations to use as a cooperative resource.

"The inspiration behind Artflix was to try and find a viable solution that could help Artists during this difficult time," he explained. "I was looking around the country and heard of companies on the verge of collapse and dancers without health insurance and I wanted to do something that seemed simple and could help members, companies, and copyright holders finally see the revenues that reflected the value of Arts' content. It is a large undertaking, especially with Arts organizations, but I am still hopeful that this can help Artists with the right approach."

Much like the similarly named

Netflix, Artflix is basically a streaming service for Performing Arts companies.

“Artflix does not sell specific content. It sells *access* to content,” he explained.

There is no buy-in by companies other than providing content. 100% of net profits return to participating organizations in two ways: 50% is equitably distributed and 50% is variably distributed based on metrics such as views, engagement, and the like. This variable revenue distribution incentivizes companies to supply a variety of content, quality content, and recognizes the value that larger organizations bring to the platform in terms of viewership.

The plus for Artists during a pandemic that stripped them of their work? These revenues are then passed onto Artists (hopefully) as salaries and/or negotiated fees.

“Furthermore, Artflix gives control to companies and Artists over what goes on the service. This allows for educational content to reach wider audiences rather than just what is popular,” he added.

Estevez has begun seeing some success with the platform but admits he sees a major issue, stating, “The problem right now is that every company is approaching streaming individually and differently. Therefore, companies are diluting the market at the moment. Without a unified approach, it is not yet possible to maximize the revenue potential of digital arts entertainment.”

Discussions surrounding streaming and digital content are just two ways the pandemic has opened up the dance world’s eyes more, and some things are harder to face or acknowledge.

“I think that the pandemic has pointed out many of the systemic inequities that have been overlooked for generations, including race and harassment at all levels of the ballet hierarchy,” he stated. “Many of these issues have been ignored because the rigid and outdated autocratic structure of a ballet company does not give room for Artists to have real input to make change at an organizational level.

“This is especially evident in Arts organizations because companies often enjoy a geographic monopoly in the job market and artists do not speak up because of a need to prioritize job security over personal and professional wellbeing,” he continued.

So, what can be done once the return to stage takes place?

“I think that the lasting positive effects of this pandemic depend on how leadership responds and takes ownership of creating positive change for the arts industry,” he said, matter-of-factly. “The performing arts are notoriously stubborn because they seldomly compete with other companies to become better stewards of their art form. Unless leadership takes an active role in using this time to evolve, positive change won’t ever come.”

When discussing the return of live productions, Estevez lights up because, to him, dance will always be more than just a job.

“The Arts represent nearly \$800 billion of the U.S. Economy and over 4% of the U.S. GDP. Beyond purely economic reasons, the Arts contribute greatly to the development of children and youth and are present in almost everything we see and do from the movies we watch to the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade.

All the things we value have Art incorporated in them and it is important to educate people to recognize this fact in order to create a cultural appreciation for them.”

Until Estevez can take to the stage again with his peers, he will continue taking photos, building Artflix, and working toward earning his associate’s degree in Business Management, thanks to AGMA’s partnership with Union Plus.



Photo of dancer Tracy Jones, his wife, posing in “Shadows and Dust” series (2016).

“Being able to connect with my wife and our little puppies in new ways is a positive outcome of this,” Estevez said. Estevez is married to Tracy Jones, former Colorado Ballet Soloist, with whom he co-owns Ballet Private, where they coach and train dance students. “We have always worked together but seldom had time to enjoy our home as much as we do now. We are also very excited to be expecting our first child this spring!” ■



Elise Quagliata in Conversation with Katharine Goeldner

©Cat Lundgren



Elise Quagliata, Soloist

Soloist and AGMA Board member Katharine Goeldner has known fellow mezzo-soprano Elise Quagliata since mentoring her as a young artist at Glimmerglass. Since then, Goeldner has been thrilled to watch Quagliata build a very successful, and varied, career. In this issue of *AGMAzine*, the two have a conversation about how Quagliata has been dealing with the fallout from the pandemic, homeschooling a young daughter, and facing new career challenges.

Katharine Goeldner (KG): Hi, Elise! Thank you so much for finding the time to speak with me for *AGMAzine* about how you've managed your work/life balance, when work and life have been put under one roof, now more than ever, thanks to the pandemic.

Let's start with the basics. We are almost one year into the pandemic that shuttered our industry overnight. How are you doing with all of this?

Elise Quagliata (EQ): Well, after almost a year, I think we've settled into a bit of a "new normal." It was extremely hard and jarring at first, losing our jobs, locking down, not traveling, not making art, not seeing family. We're in a groove now that is somewhat tolerable, certainly not where we want to be much longer, but

we're making it work.

KG: Take us back to March. What were you doing before the pandemic took hold? Where were you when you heard the news of the closures?

EQ: I was in the middle of rehearsals with Minnesota Opera. We were rehearsing Paola Prestini and Mark Campbell's beautiful new work, *Edward Tulane*, set to premiere mid-March. We knew COVID-19 was coming, but we were still full steam ahead, just with more hand sanitizer and being more mindful of our generous hugs. Sadly, on Friday, March 13, the administration called us in for a meeting and told us we would be going home. It was devastating and scary. We were sad to abandon this beautiful work but knew getting back home safely to our families was the priority. Minnesota Opera handled the entire thing with goodwill and aplomb. They got us all back home the following day and paid us our fees. Because, as this all started to sink in, I began to panic about losing this money. Future contracts were being canceled one after the next, theaters closing; losing an entire fee was unfathomable. But Minnesota Opera came through and took care of their Artists, and that was no small feat.

KG: How did life change for you?

EQ: All of my 2020 and most of 2021 contracts were canceled almost immediately. Losing that income was scary, as my family and I had just recently relocated to Miami, and that move was expensive. Then in April, my husband was furloughed without any pay. By June, we lost our health insurance, and by July he was officially laid off. So, we went from two incomes to zero and no health insurance. We lost everything within weeks, and without me finding ways to quickly navigate these social programs like unemployment (something we as Artists have

never been privy to), Medicaid and food stamps, we would have lost our home and our sanity.

KG: Wow. That is a whole lot of frightening change to deal with all at once, compounded by the fact that our world was turned upside down and we were all forced into the unknown. How did you make it all happen? Was scheduling key? You have a beautiful little girl and I know you've homeschooled her. How do you handle that—both when you were on the road, and now during the pandemic?

EQ: Well, the order of all that insanity (and it does look insane as I read it in black and white), is that we moved out of NJ, I took my daughter back on the road with me (she traveled with me for the first four years), and we homeschooled first grade during fall and winter of 2019. Scheduling was, indeed, key! It always is with opera kids on the road. My husband is French, so maintaining a bilingual education while on the road was important. I'm fluent, so I created a French/English curriculum. We would do about two hours of homeschool, I would leave her with the nanny and go to *Carmen* or *As One* rehearsals until 10:00 p.m., come back, teach myself photosynthesis in French till about 1:00 a.m., and start over the next day. It was a brutal schedule, and during that time on the road we decided to officially move to Miami and get our daughter in school. Sadly, after only three months in school, everything shut down and she was online for the remainder of the year.

KG: Was it important to you to stay creative during this time?

EQ: To be honest, no. I didn't sing for 167 days straight, which, after 20 years in this business, is the longest I had ever gone without singing. I was so depressed and inundated with bureaucratic tasks, never

mind online school, that singing was the furthest thing from my mind. When I did try to sing, I wept every time. I waited until I could sing without crying, and that wasn't until September. However, over the summer, I was given an opportunity to be the voiceover on a demo for two national commercials. I created a studio in my small closet and recorded the best I could. Luckily, the executive creative director liked my voice and hired me for both ads. I joined SAG-AFTRA and started booking other work. I bought a new microphone, some more serious accessories, and have created a more usable studio space. I have also had to travel a bit for family reasons and have had to be creative on the road while I record. I've made hotel closets into recording spaces covering myself with comforters. It's not ideal, but I'm trying to stay available, relevant, and creative. I have discovered I love this work, and I'm excited to learn more about it.

KG: On days that you struggled with the weight of it all, how did you stay positive?

EQ: Most days were so hard, but staying positive for our six-year-old daughter while she struggled with her "new normal," separated from other kids and play and fun, was imperative. We felt very lucky to be living in a city where we had easy access to nature and beautiful weather. We biked every day and enjoyed empty marinas watching nature return, free from boats and people. We watched sharks, manatees, and turtles enjoy the quiet. Those daily outings kept us feeling positive.

KG: You're back in rehearsals now for *Carmen* at Pensacola Opera. What's it like to finally be rehearsing again?

EQ: It is AMAZING to be back working! Our administrators, Jerome Shannon and Chandra McKern, have shown great leadership enforcing strict protocols, but the actual shows will not be masked for the singers. The orchestra, conductor, and chorus will be, but the principals will not be while on stage.

We all quarantined before and were

tested upon arrival. Our Don José, Adam Diegel, and I are living in a pod together so we can interact more directly. Creating a socially distant *Carmen* is a challenge, and the little interaction we could afford between DJ and Carmen was a necessity. Our director, Fenlon Lamb, has adeptly and creatively used the space well to create a believable staging while maintaining distance.

We are always masked in the rehearsal room, where all doors remain open for air flow (makes for a chilly process with 40-degree days!) and we can only use it for one hour at a time and then exit for 30 minutes of air cleaning. We also have no interaction with the choruses. The first time we will see them will be on stage. I have gone through about seven masks trying to find one that works for singing, but they're all awful. The way we use breath is just not conducive to mask-wearing. I can get through about one phrase of singing and then I'm out of breath, especially with a role as physical as Carmen. It's been a hard process with the mask, but I mark and take breaks when I can, head outside and try to catch my breath. It feels a bit like the last mile of a 5K all the time. These compromises are hard, but we are all committed to these protocols to keep us all safe. Putting on a great show SAFELY is the top priority here.

KG: Prior to COVID-19, a meaningful focus was placed on maintaining a work/life or work/home balance and the importance of keeping the two pretty separated. Now, many of us find ourselves singing, dancing, practicing, everything, from our home. Can you talk a bit about how that transition was for you? Is work/life balance still important? And, can it be maintained if we work and live under one roof?

EQ: I have learned that balance is a myth on a good day. In COVID-19 times, it's been difficult. We live in a small apartment, which generally suits us, but when I'm being asked to record an online Christmas concert and the only time is Sunday morning and my six year old is bouncing around, wanting to be in every shot...or having to record a commercial

in complete silence in my closet with life happening in the background in 1,000 square feet...or trying to practice and the piano is in my daughter's room and she has Zoom ballet...everything is just a little bit harder. Thankfully, I have really stressed to our family, and myself, how important it is to be present in this moment. It may sound trite, but truly thinking about each moment as it passes, "am I safe, am I fed, am I ok?" would often knock some sense into me and remind me how lucky I am to be with this beautiful little family every day.

More about Elise Quagliata: Elise recently sang the role of Carmen with Pensacola Opera. Before the COVID-19 shutdown, she was in production with Minnesota Opera creating the role of Pellegrina in the world premiere of Prestini's *Edward Tulane*. In recent seasons she sang Elle in Poulenc's *La Voix Humaine* with Des Moines Metro Opera, *Carmen* with Kentucky Opera and with the Chattanooga Symphony & Opera, Hannah After in *As One* with Pensacola Opera, Des Moines Metro Opera and Bay Chamber Concerts, the Minskwoman in Jonathan Dove's *Flight* with Des Moines Metro Opera, Emilia in Verdi's *Otello* with Austin Opera, and Zosia in the premiere of Jake Heggie's *Out of Darkness: Two Remain* with The Atlanta Opera.

A frequent interpreter of contemporary American music, Quagliata has sung the role of Sister Helen Prejean in Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking* in six productions. She originated the role of Joan Clarke in Justine Chen's *The Life and Death(s) of Alan Turing* with Chicago Opera Theater and sang the New York premiere of Wallace's *Hopper's Wife* as Hedda Hopper with New York City Opera.

A celebrated Carmen, Quagliata has been praised for her "fierce charisma with vocal finesse." She has sung many productions, including the New York City Opera world tour of *Carmen* in North America, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Other notable opera roles include Mrs. Lovett in *Sweeney Todd*, Maria in *Maria de Buenos Aires*, and Jo in *Little Women*, to name a few. ■

A Statement on Our Need to Create



By Kat Coyl
Fight Director

It has been my experience that the driving force behind any Artist is a need to create. Whether that need is fulfilled through performing, directing, scene craft, choreography, or composing does not matter.

There is a force inside of us that must create and share that creation with others. We have dedicated ourselves to the Arts because we must. We have become experts at adapting to change, working through strife, and dealing with the near-constant uncertainty for the future. We all do this not just to survive or to keep doing what we love; we do this because a life without the Arts, without the ability to create and share, is not an acceptable option. This is evident with every Artist, company, and ensemble who has strived and been successful in the past several months in

reinventing how we work, perform, and present our Art. We are a community of brilliant, determined, talented humans. The friends I have made in this community have been integral to my surviving this pandemic. As a community, we will survive, but now more than ever, we must ensure our community stays united and strong. Remember to continue to support one another. Remember that at our core we are all here because we refuse to accept a life without the Arts to which we have dedicated so much of ourselves. ■

We are the Dancers of the Met

“During this time away from the opera house, we have needed a sense of community more than ever. We have joined together to introduce ourselves to our audience and pledge to support each other as a community, reach out to diversify our audience, and deliver our own projects during this especially long intermission. This photoshoot includes just a handful of us that could make it to a chilly Halloween photoshoot at Lincoln Center, as our dancers have now spread out all over the country and world.”
– @MetOperaBallet on Instagram ■



©Jon Taylor

"Love the Color of Your Butterfly": Janinah Burnett Talks with *AGMAzine* About New Album

Janinah Burnett is a world-renowned performer sought for her timeless and refined vocal quality as well as her naked emotion. One of the few singers to perform roles on both Broadway and the Metropolitan Opera stage, Janinah most recently appeared as Carlotta Guidicelli in *Phantom of the Opera* on Broadway. Her album *Love the Color of your Butterfly* was released on February 12.

Alicia Cook (AC) for *AGMAzine*: Thank you so much for finding the time to speak with *AGMAzine* about what you have been up to the past year. First and foremost, we wish to extend our biggest CONGRATS on the release of your new album, *Love the Color of Your Butterfly*! So, let's start there! How did the making of this album go?

Janinah Burnett (JB): This process was glorious! I learned so much from the instrumentalists and so much magic happened in the studio. We truly found that the language of music is far more important than genre or style specifications.

AC: Did you start the process before the pandemic took hold?

JB: Yes, we recorded the music in 2018 and 2019 and did the mastering, artwork, etc., once the pandemic hit and we had an abundance of time. It was an artistic product born out of the depths of my creative spirit.

AC: *Love the Color of Your Butterfly* is such a beautiful title that can likely be interpreted in a number of ways. What does the title mean to you?

JB: This title is a phrase that my mother lovingly guided me with when she noticed I was comparing myself to others. She always encouraged me to use what I possessed in order to live my life to the very fullest. I interpret this phrase to mean



“love everything about yourself—the good, the bad, the ugly, and the sad. ALL OF IT!!”

AC: So great. Do you remember where you were when the title came to you?

JB: I believe I was in graduate school when I decided that this phrase would be a title that I would use in future musical endeavors.

AC: The album seems to be a hybrid of all your musical passions: opera, obviously, but also art songs, spirituals, R&B, and jazz. Would you say that is accurate? How have you blended all the genres?

JB: I would say it's more of a collage of all of my musical passions. I have taken some of my most beloved songs that I have sung and heard and presented them with jazz sensibilities in my creative way. The Artists on the album and I have done so by trusting our understanding of music to show us the way toward authentic storytelling, therefore creating a new picture out of many pieces of artful elements.

AC: Are there original songs in addition to the covers? We are really excited to listen to the Billie Holiday song on the tracklist.

JB: No, all of the songs are written by composers other than myself such as Duke Ellington, Fats Waller, Georges Bizet, Donny Hathaway, Giacomo Puccini, and Sade to name a few. I chose music that I had experiences with and that colored my butterfly in some way, shape, or form.

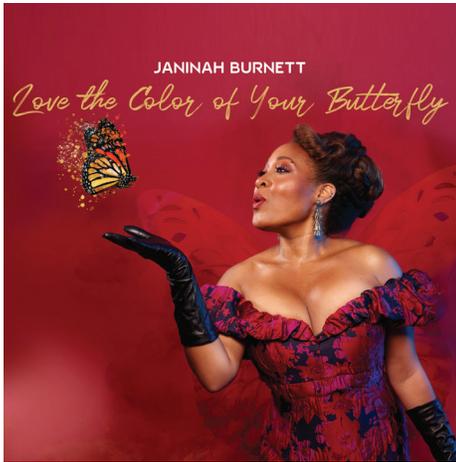
The *Strange Fruit* selection you refer to is actually written by Lewis Allan, whose actual name is Abel Meeropol. Ms. Holiday was so moved by the poetry he wrote that she decided she must sing it. The arrangement that we present on the album is by the amazing Joseph Joubert, who arranged it specifically for *Three Mo' Divas*, a show I had the distinct pleasure of premiering to the world.

AC: In *Broadway World's* article on your release, they state: “Releasing this album in early 2021, on the heels of 2020's harsh renewed spotlight on systemic racism in America, makes this a powerful universal statement of social consciousness.” Can you expand more on that? Especially in relation to your industry.

JB: “Love the Color of your Butterfly” as a statement not only encourages us to do more loving of ourselves, but more loving, period. In presenting this album, I want to highlight genres of music that are indigenously American: spirituals, jazz, and rhythm and blues.

This music is also the music of the movement for freedom, justice, and equality as it is born out of brutal circumstances, some of which are still evident today. I believe it is my job as an Artist and human being to acknowledge these circumstances and present commentary about them on the world stage in order

to broaden social consciousness. It is my intention to encourage hope and fortitude though the road we trod be stony. I will continue to do all I can to keep my eyes on the prize until everyone knows freedom.



AC: As you know, so many Artists across every discipline all over the world are hurting right now. We hope you've been doing as well as possible. Tell us how you've been coping during the COVID-19 shutdown.

JB: What I recognized during the COVID-19 shutdown was that being of

service really mattered to me most when people were suffering. I knew my gift was a part of that service.

So, I started a balcony concert series and every week I went out on my balcony and sang for my quarantined neighbors. I also posted the concerts to social media.

AC: We saw a few of those videos on Instagram! Any tips on staying positive during this time? We are sure Artists are eager to hear.

JB: I certainly believe self-care is not to be taken for granted. Take care of your heart, mind, body, and soul by doing what YOU like. This is a rare period in which our time is our own. Take advantage!

Also, I truly have been motivated by the creative methods in which Artists in the community have been creating with what they have at their fingertips. That's a big way to love the color of your butterfly; discover what you can do with what you have right here and now. I promise, the discovery will be more than you can imagine!

AC: Inspirational. The major undertaking of this album release notwithstanding, how have you been staying busy and creative... We know

you teach, did you shift to a virtual class?

JB: Yes, I have done virtual teaching and master classes. I also started Clazz Records, the record label from which I released *Love the Color of Your Butterfly*. This endeavor has truly kept me busy and I have learned so much about the music business from PR and marketing to social media development, product distribution, audience cultivation, and so much more!

AC: That's amazing. We are so excited to see what you do next. Is there anything else you want readers to know about *Love the Color of Your Butterfly*?

JB: *Love the Color of Your Butterfly* is a labor of love that encourages positivity!

More information: *Love the Color of your Butterfly* is available for purchase and is streaming on all major platforms. Visit www.janinahburnett.com for more information.

AGMA grows stronger with your valuable input. As always, we invite our members to submit articles and photos for publication in *AGMAzine*. All submissions should be sent to dbaker@musicalartists.org.

Sing, Play, and Lift Spirits



By Doug Purcell
Board member and
Chorister

Sing, play piano, and lift spirits. This is my Mount Sinai Volunteer Department *Music for Healing* assignment twice a week. I report to the Guggenheim Atrium off of Fifth Avenue on the Upper East Side, open the grand piano, and turn on my trusty iPad filled with American Popular Standards, Broadway, Pop, and light Classical music. There's no spotlight, no introduction... just me sitting on the piano bench, "tickling the ivories," and singing.

Before COVID-19, I had spent several months going around to patients' private rooms with a little electronic keyboard, softly crooning songs to help pass the difficult, painful times. There were quite a few wondrous moments when the healing power of music made them smile—or cry if they needed. After singing along with me for about a half hour, one woman exclaimed to me, "For 20 minutes, I totally forgot how much my leg had been hurting, and I haven't been looking for the next pill."

The most miraculous incident was a request by a family for their elderly wife and mother who had reached the end. They said she had not responded or even

acknowledged anyone in about three days, but they hoped that hearing some songs might ease her transition. The woman was on her side staring blankly at the wall when I entered. I nervously began the opening verse of Irving Berlin's "Always," and only looked up as I began the chorus. The woman had turned her head to look straight at me and began mouthing the words of the song. There were audible gasps from her two daughters, and a cry from her husband who stumbled to the bed and took her hand... as she clasped his in return. I was told she passed later that day, but the family was grateful to have had one more lucid moment with her to say their good-byes.

Incredible moments like these have had to be put on indefinite hold for obvious reasons.

Since May of this strange year, I've been in the atrium playing the piano and singing during the lunch hour, when many employees come to the lobby's circular planters to sit and have a few moments to themselves. The atrium soars to ten stories, with open walkways between the Center and West Towers on

every floor from the OR waiting room to the private VIP wing, and all the patient-care floors in between. There is, of course, a non-stop stream passing through the lobby, as patients and families head to see doctors and receive care. Sometimes people stop and listen for a little bit. Once in a while, someone will hesitantly come closer to thank me.

It is still very strange to find myself sitting at the piano in such a public space, accompanying myself as best I can. My whole singing career, I've had the privilege of working with some of the best pianists and organists on the planet. As a result, I've been very shy about sharing my *adequate* keyboard skills, and there are many colleagues that might not even know I play. But, since I started with the *Music for Healing* program, I have gotten over my hang-up a little bit. I like to think I've had as much healing and growth as I hope I've been able to share with patients and hospital workers.



Middleclass Artist



By Zach Finkelstein
Board member and
Soloist

My name is Zach Finkelstein and I'm on AGMA's Board of Governors as the Northwest soloist representative. I've been singing professionally as a soloist/chorister for ten years while working as a senior manager for a research and strategy firm, and I'm the editor of *Middleclass Artist* (www.MiddleclassArtist.com), an independent journalism site for Artists. Today I'd like to explain why I started *Middleclass Artist*, some of the key themes I've explored over the last year, and how my focus changed in the wake of COVID-19 and the rise of the Black Lives Matter opera movement.

Initially, I started *Middleclass Artist* to help emerging classical singers understand and cope with the challenges facing them in our industry. I wrote mostly about "Year One," that nebulous period after graduation when singers are at their most emotionally and financially vulnerable.

For example, an early article examined the breakdown of Artist fees on a typical gig, showing how traveling Artists, after fees and expenses, make less than 50 cents on the dollar from every freelance performance.

Through posts like "Million Dollar Voice," I showed how it takes time and money to develop and grow a business and that when you consider student debt and cost of living, it is impossible in the first few years to make a living from singing alone.

I explained how a music career is a marathon, not a sprint, and that the most important decisions you make as a professional Artist are how much you pay for

school and training and your cost of living in your early career. And I talked about my own experience as a singer/researcher, offering a viable long-term alternative to living out of a suitcase, not as a back-up plan or day job, but a dual career that reinforces and strengthens each track over time.

I also showed how my second career as an analyst provided me with critical skills (and a steady income) to preserve and grow my music business. I urged emerging singers to develop a second set of skills in tandem with their music training that played to their strengths and would help them in the difficult early freelance years.

Then COVID-19 hit, and everything changed.

On March 2, 2020, I posted the article, "COVID-19 and The Hidden Consequences of Force Majeure." It argued that the invocation of force majeure by companies would devastate Artists even at the highest levels of the business. In a follow-up a few weeks later called "The Road Ahead," I explained how Artists should be prepared to go 12-18 months without any performance pay.

It wasn't all doom and gloom. A piece called "The Unsung Heroes of COVID-19" highlighted 179 organizations that paid Artists despite force majeure. It provided critical evidence to furloughed singers and orchestra members. At least a dozen musicians reached out personally to say they cited the research to their leadership and it helped them get paid through the spring.

The more I investigated the American opera scene over the summer, the more I understood our industry's ethical failures to protect its poorest and most vulnerable members by establishing inequitable policies for emerging Artists and normalizing a culture of fear and intimidation. These issues, outlined forcefully by the Black Lives Matter opera movement, are merely

symptoms of systemic racism and white male supremacy from the conservatory to the stage to the boardroom.

Since then, I have focused all my resources on centering marginalized voices in classical music and tackling the systemic challenges in our industry, from discrimination in casting Black Artists to the exclusion and harassment of women in opera.

I hope to return to the stage safely once a vaccine is widely available, perform Bach Evangelist again with orchestra, and see my friends and colleagues and welcome them with open arms.

In the meantime, there's work to be done. ■



Nardia Boodoo: "Black Ballerinas are Beautiful"

Interview by Alicia Cook

"This has been a challenging time for dancers," Nardia Boodoo said at the beginning of her conversation with *AGMAzine*. "I discovered that so much of my identity is centered around my performance career. As dancers, we commit ourselves to the art form. I draw energy and inspiration from my colleagues and the Artistic staff. So much of my life revolves around this daily grind. COVID-19 interrupted that flow. Without the energy of preparation, self-mastery, and self-discovery, I felt lost and punished."

It is no surprise The Washington Ballet (TWB) dancer felt that way. Boodoo has been dancing most of her life. Beginning ballet at age 14, Boodoo was mentored by the legendary Arthur Mitchell. She was also the original lead for the piece *Black Iris* by Jeremy McQueen, and was selected to perform an original piece for the annual Service of Tribute on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day at the Washington National Cathedral.

Right before COVID-19, Boodoo was at TWB, about three weeks away from premiering *Swan Lake*, when she learned that TWB was going to close. Like many, Boodoo first believed she'd be back to work in two weeks.

"I had no idea of the magnitude of the disaster that was to come," she said, noting the pandemic's tremendous financial hit to the dance industry. "I believe the pandemic permanently changed the dance world. In a lot of ways, the dance world never really needed to evolve with technology, such as virtual access and streaming. We now know the importance of holding digital space and having a stronger presence on social media."

Boodoo is a person of influence on the stage and on social media and aims to inspire young dancers of all colors and races. Boodoo has advocated for dancers of color throughout her career and had her very own "Cinderella moment" when



she recently got to work with Maybelline.

"I never really saw anyone that looked like myself in ads growing up," the dancer/model recalled. "Working with Maybelline made me the most nervous because it's truly iconic. They booked me a suite at Hotel St. James in New York and a car service to the set. I started with hair by the renowned Brenton Kane Diallo. Then I had make up with the legendary Erin Parsons. It was a dream come true. I felt so lucky."

A signed model with Wilhelmina Models, Boodoo has starred in commercials and ads for Tory Sport by Tory Burch, Chanel, Estee Lauder, Reebok, Nike, Free People, and Banana Republic, to name a few. She has graced the cover of *Dance Spirit Magazine*, *VIP Alexandria*, and *The Village Voice*, has had multiple features in *Pointe Magazine*, and was featured in *The Ballerina Project* book.

To her, these are opportunities where she can further represent Black ballerinas on a major stage and in a major way.

"I am often in disbelief that major brands want me to represent them. I am not your typical bi-racial young lady. My father is Indian, and my mother is Black," she shared. "Representation matters. There are so many invisible systems put into place to keep Black people disenfranchised. Black families and individuals love Fine Art and are often discouraged from participation due to the lack of

representation. Ballet was not built on equity; it was created by and for the French court. We need a cultural resurgence. It's long overdue."

Boodoo is of course referencing the movement toward equality taking place, notably within the Performing Arts Industry. While a lot of work needs to be done, she remains "cautiously optimistic."

"I do not know what the future looks like, but we must make valiant efforts to create a better future. Right now, it appears that most companies are conversing and highlighting the major offenses. Black dancers are fearlessly using their voices and will continue to do so. Those who hold the power should listen and hold the companies that aren't moving in the right direction accountable," she said.

"Although this generation inherited these issues, it does not mean we must accept them. Things like unconscious bias and legacy casting impact us a great deal," she added.

The passionate Boodoo is often admired for her tenacity and spirit. She doesn't seem to tire. Throughout this tumultuous time, she has kept her heart light and her focus sharp.

"To steer myself away from that feeling of being punished, I began to view quarantine as an opportunity instead. I started taking college courses and am working toward an undergraduate diploma. I began studying and eventually received my Pilates Mat and Reformer certifications," shared Boodoo, who has practiced Pilates for years with a desire to help fellow dancers through instruction. "I have tried very hard to better myself in ways that would help me, and others, in this new situation."

While the situation is "new," Boodoo promises that it is not a permanent change. "We will return to the stage. All is not lost." ■

Personal New Frontiers



By Rose Sullivan
Met Chorister

I had a sense from the beginning that this was going to be a long road. Even last spring, it seemed unlikely that the Met would be able to reopen August 1 for the 2020-21 season and I had a feeling that I might be out of work into the fall, if not for the entire year. Once the shock wore off, I began doing some serious soul-searching—*what would I do if I could not make music? How would I support myself?* Staring into the unknown, wondering if, when, and how the Arts industry would ever recover, I knew I had to turn inward to discover what to do next.

In 2008, in a similar moment of crisis and transition, I stumbled upon Parker Palmer's *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. On page three, I found words that I still think of today: "Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am."

I am someone for whom a sense of vocation is essential. This is why I became a musician: to pursue something that inspires, challenges, and stretches me—something that draws me onward to become the best possible version of myself. Without that sense of meaningful investment—of purposeful motion toward a higher goal—life loses its color, my energy dries up, and there is less and less of me to share with my world. It is not really surprising, then, that from the depths of my soul-searching came the decision to become a certified life coach (CLC). In this way, I hoped I could create meaningful work for myself outside of music and with a schedule I could control,

both during my extended furlough and whenever the Met could safely reopen.

I began by availing myself of the incredible free resources available to me at The Actors Fund. I cannot recommend them highly enough. Countless times, I have discovered the support and information I needed in one of their free programs.

In the synchronous way things move when we set our wills into action and take even the smallest steps forward, doors opened and connections were made almost effortlessly from the moment my decision to pursue certification was made. One of my sister's high school friends is a successful coach and generously offered me an hour of her time to talk about her path. By the end of our call, she had talked me through her certification process, sent me a link for the next upcoming five-day intensive training class, and invited me to join her monthly coaching community call immediately after we hung up. I registered for the five-day CLC intensive training with Life Purpose Institute (LPI) the next morning.

When LPI calls this an intensive, they mean it. For five straight days in July, I was on Zoom all day, learning coaching tools and techniques, discussing ethics and code of conduct within the coaching industry, and most importantly, coaching and being coached. It was transformative and inspiring in ways I could never have imagined. It was also exhausting. In order to receive certification, we were also required to complete 12 hours of buddy coaching with a classmate, display competencies by coaching a different classmate in front of the group within a limited timeframe, pass a written final, and document sessions with at least three practice clients for a minimum of 12 hours. I wound up doing about 25 hours and was officially certified on December 7.

In many ways, I've been coaching myself and others informally all my life. Anyone familiar with the cycle of preparation for an audition or performance

knows something about self-coaching and the dedicated daily commitment required to succeed in either effort. That's who we are as performers and who we have to be in order to succeed and to survive. After nearly two decades of working toward my goal to be a professional opera singer and ultimately landing one of the most competitive jobs in my field, I know a lot about the highs and lows of pursuing one's dreams; about pivoting, resilience, and dedication; about finding and losing motivation—and how to get it back again. I also know what it's like to be a high achiever and a recovering perfectionist. What better preparation could there be for a coach aspiring to serve others in finding greater fulfillment themselves?

From the time I was young, I've had this driving inner force that says *more is possible* and I'm fascinated with trying to figure it out: *How do we get there? How do we get stuck? How do we get unstuck? What is required to draw nearer to those dreams that we hold so dear?* This is what calls me to coaching now: a desire to use my passion for vocation and my years of experience as an artist to help others uncover their own answers to these questions and lead lives of greater calm, clarity, possibility, and fulfillment, even in times such as these.

We begin 2021 facing great uncertainty, both in our industry and our nation. Standing on the edge of my own personal frontier, waiting to see what will happen in our industry, and preparing to launch my coaching business in earnest, I take comfort in knowing I can take action daily and find genuine joy in watching clients transform before my eyes.

There is tremendous power in one person creating and holding space for another. It is the power of any collaboration or creative act, a power that we all know so well. It is this power that we must continue to harness and to share in the days and weeks to come.

May we all be well supported in our transitions, our trials, and our transformations. ■

In Honor of My Friend, Ruth Bader Ginsburg

By Francesca Zambello, Director, Artistic Director of Washington National Opera

Ruth Bader Ginsburg was our greatest advocate and our greatest spokesperson. She carried this art form to a much wider public than we could have imagined. For me, she was a friend and advocate for almost 20 years. We became close in 2003 when I directed a production of Beethoven's *Fidelio* in Washington. The opera house was closed for renovations and we performed in Constitution Hall, which is famous because its owners, the Daughters of the American Revolution, wouldn't let Marian Anderson sing there because she was Black.

After the performances, R.B.G. wrote me a letter that it was the best *Fidelio* she'd ever seen. She said she thought I got close to what Beethoven wanted in this story of Leonore, who disguises herself as a man to rescue her husband from prison. She related to it as a woman and a feminist. "You told the story of what women do," she said.

She loved Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, and its finale, the Immolation Scene. We had a lot of conversations about Brünnhilde, and why it took a woman to save the world. That's what she said: Only a woman could do it; only a woman could change the course of history. She did always love pieces where the woman was the protagonist.

Her life was about understanding people's stories, and that's what we do. When you look at her great decisions—like the father who was trying to get child care support because he was a widower, and at that point, you could only get the support if you were a widow—those kinds of cases she made her career of are the stuff of opera. The underdog, the ill-served character: Manon Lescaut, Violetta, women who have to struggle their way to the top for survival. They connected to her sense of right and wrong and what is a humane way of living.

After *Fidelio*, we stayed really close. In D.C., I even put her in a speaking role in *The Daughter of the Regiment*. I would say she was someone who loved the "ABC"—*Aïda*, *Bohème*, and *Carmen*—but also more sophisticated and complex works. She came to every performance of Wagner's *Ring* we did in Washington. And she would often come to both the dress rehearsal and the first performance of things, and then also the last performance.

When her husband Marty passed, she would come more often. She would always bring someone with her, sometimes another justice. By the last few years, she would appear and come down the aisle and everyone would start cheering. I think that opera just gave her an incredible escape. Particularly after Marty died, it allowed her mind to go places it needed to go to rest from the incredible work that she was doing for all of us. If the tireless pursuit of justice is your day job, it helps to spend time at the Café Momus in *La Bohème* at night.



Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg as Duchess of Krakenthorp in WNO's opening night performance of *Daughter of the Regiment* along with principal singers Lawrence Brownlee, Lisette Oprea, Deborah Nansteel and Timothy Bruno, and the Washington National Opera chorus.

She came to Glimmerglass for nine summers and did a program called "Law and Opera with R.B.G." We'd had so many conversations about how, in many operas, there's a contract. What opera doesn't have a contract or wrongdoing? And so we would do scenes from operas and she would talk about the legal side. We'd do the Seguidilla from *Carmen* and she'd explain that that was plea bargaining.

We did *Scalia/Ginsburg* at Glimmerglass, about their friendship, and before Scalia died, there were many great performances, when we would have opening nights in Washington, and Scalia would sit on one side of the aisle and she sat in the other. They would be friendly and jocular and lovey-dovey at the opera, and you knew the next day they would be giving opposing opinions.

She had endless patience for giving to artists. She was very close to Larry Brownlee and Eric Owens. She really wanted to talk to performers, and talk about the roles, and the music and the characters. Alan Held was our Wotan in the *Ring* in D.C., and she loved conversations about the contracts Wotan makes. I think she had a passion for American artists. Our American Opera Initiative, which brought new works to D.C.—she was at all of them—good and bad.

She would quote a line back to you from a libretto—in the original language! I wouldn't say she was conventional, but she did not like things when they veered too far out of period. She'd say something like, "I don't know if they're going to like that in Washington." But it was always supportive, constructive criticism.

I remember after Kurt Weill's *Lost in the Stars* at Glimmerglass, being next to her and her just being visibly shaken and weeping from one of Eric Owens's greatest performances. She was very

emotional—I don't think she would hide it if she were moved by something; you would know it. If I didn't see her after the performance, I'd always get an email the next morning. She would always send a note about what she loved; who she loved; and "I guess you need to fix that." Like at the dress rehearsal of *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, the guillotine was terrible. So, she'd say something like, "I'm sure that will be working by opening." But always done with a spirit of kindness.

The irony is, we had to cancel our Washington National Opera fall season, but we were going to open with a new production of *Fidelio*. I told her I was doing it for her, as a gift. Eventually, we will produce it in her honor! ■

Dancer Sean Omandam Catches Up with AGMAzine



Sean Omandam, Dancer

Sean Omandam has been a part of Colorado Ballet since 2005 and has performed a variety of soloist and principal roles. These roles include: Puck in Christopher Wheeldon's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, White Rabbit in Septime Webre's *ALICE (in wonderland)*, Peter in Michael Smuin's *Peter and the Wolf*, Champion Roper in Agnes de Mille's *Rodeo*, Jester in Ben Stevenson's *Cinderella*, Whip Boy in Glen Tetley's *The Rite of Spring*, Max in Septime Webre's *Where the Wild Things Are*, John Darling in Michael Pink's *Peter Pan*, Green Man in Lila York's *Celts*, and Russian in Martin Fredmann's *The Nutcracker*.

Alicia Cook for AGMAzine (AC): Sean, thank you for speaking with AGMAzine today. Let us start this interview with the most obvious question. How are you?

Sean Omandam (SO): I am doing a lot better than I was at the beginning of the pandemic. At first, it was hard to not be so active and on the go 24/7, especially at the height of the efforts to shelter at home. Since then, I have found ways to safely

stay active, and I have been able to spend more time exploring my interests outside of dance. I also found the pandemic to be the perfect time to take advantage of AGMA's free college benefits through Union Plus. I am grateful to say that I am currently in my second semester working toward my Associates's Degree in Business Management.

AC: Describe your moments leading up to the pandemic. What was going on?

SO: Right before the closure of Colorado Ballet, the Company was rehearsing for a triple bill consisting of George Balanchine's *Theme and Variations*, Juri Kilian's *Petit Mort*, and Twyla Tharp's *In the Upper Room*. Mid-day on March 13, our Company Manager called an emergency meeting where our Artistic Director announced that the company would be closing due to the pandemic and the various closures the City of Denver announced earlier that morning.

AC: What an abrupt change. The theme for this issue of AGMAzine is "the New Frontier: stories of creativity and perseverance." On that topic, how do you think the pandemic has changed the dance world? What have you seen, whether at your company or in the dance industry at large, that points to your industry being innovative and creative during this time, in order to keep producing art?

SO: The pandemic has definitely changed the dance world, and it will

certainly have lasting effects. With live performances brought to a screeching halt, it has forced performing arts organizations to come up with creative ways to maintain engagement with their audiences. This has obviously led many organizations to a heavy reliance on online platforms and social media.

For years, these organizations have been looking for ways to foster growth with younger demographics, but they usually lack the resources or bandwidth to explore new strategies. Although they know that tapping into this segment is vital to ensuring the longevity of the organization, much of their efforts have gone into maintaining the status quo.

Much like how many of us have taken this time to explore new avenues, interests, and goals, this is the perfect time for organizations to explore the exact same thing. I am excited to see many organizations take a greater interest in videography and finding creative ways to translate our artforms from the stage to the screen. I personally think these changes were inevitable, but I am somewhat glad to see that the pandemic helped accelerate them.

AC: While on the topic of social media, your social media presence is great! We see that you have a passion for cooking. Do you view that as another art form that brings you joy? How did you get into cooking?

SO: Cooking certainly is another art form that I enjoy. I love being able to express myself in other mediums outside of dance. I particularly like that dining is an experience where both the cook and

the diner actively utilize all of their senses throughout the meal. I've always had an interest in food, but it wasn't until I started living on my own that I gained an interest in cooking. I longed for the Filipino dishes I grew up with as a child, but at the time I was only able to enjoy them either when my dad would cook them for me or if I went to a party hosted by Filipinos in my hometown. If I wanted to satisfy my desire for Filipino food on my own, I had to learn how to make it myself. I found recipes online and in cookbooks, I constantly asked my family questions about the food I wanted to make, and I tinkered around my kitchen figuring out what worked and what didn't. Slowly but surely, I was able to build up my repertoire of Filipino foods that I can enjoy on my own and share with my friends.

AC: You seem to dive completely into things that bring you joy, from cooking to getting outdoors to earning your degree. In 2020 and early this year, so much attention has been focused on elections and the importance of voting. On that topic, at the end of 2020, you posted a photo of yourself wearing your "AGMA Dancer" shirt with a caption that urged your fellow AGMA Artists to vote in AGMA's Constitutional Referendum, in favor of the Board of Governors Revision. As we learned soon after, the Board of Governors Revision of the AGMA Constitution passed! Why did you use your platform to encourage AGMA Artists to vote in the referendum? Or even, why do you feel it is important to vote and make your voice heard in your union?

SO: I am a firm advocate that participation in our union is vital in strengthening our rights as performing artists. I am an active member of my company, and I am always encouraging others to participate in union-related activities. In regard to AGMA's Constitutional Referendum, I felt it was important to advocate for the Board of Governors Revision. Their updates to the language and improvements on representation made the most sense to me. Social media was the easiest and quickest way for me to reach most of my fellow

AGMA dancers, and I knew that they were more likely to respond to a photo of me in my "AGMA Dancer" shirt than to an email blast. I was excited to see that the Board of Governors Revision passed, and I am proud to say that I was able to do my part in making that happen.

AC: Your voice definitely helped to spread awareness about the Referendum, so thank you! Something we are asking Artists during this time is the following: how have you been coping during the COVID-19 shutdown? Any tips on staying positive during this time? We are sure Artists are eager to hear. As you know, so many Artists across every discipline all over the world are hurting right now. We hope you've been doing as well as possible.

SO: As I previously mentioned, I started working toward my Associate's Degree, and I am grateful that has kept me busy during this time away from the stage. As much as dancers hate to admit it, our time in this profession is very limited. I believe it is important to actively think about what our lives will look like well before we take our final bow. As unfortunate as the shutdown is for the performing arts industry, it is the perfect time for all of us to explore our interests outside of the studio. Even after we make our return to performing again, we must make sure to actively and regularly stay engaged with those interests. Not only will it provide us with an outlet outside of our work and art form, but it will also provide us with an insight into the possibilities for our life after we retire from performing.

AC: So very well put. Thank you for sharing that with us. Since March, there has been a lot of debate as to whether or not the Arts are "essential" to the country. We know they are. Why do you think the Arts are oftentimes overlooked as an essential part of the country and economy? What would you tell someone who doesn't understand how integral and integrated the Arts are in our world and lives?

SO: More often than not, the Arts are overlooked because they are viewed purely as entertainment, but many people do not know how much the Arts affect

our economy. The Bureau of Economic Analysis and the National Endowment for the Arts recently released a report that the Arts contributed 4.5% to the country's GDP in 2017. That's more than agriculture and transportation. Most people also don't think about how the Arts also affect the communities they are a part of. Actor Kal Penn, who was appointed by President Obama to serve on the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, explains in an interview to NPR that people don't associate local Arts organizations with the restaurants and bars people go to before a performance, the transportation methods people use to get to a theatre, or the hotels that patrons and traveling performers may stay at before and after a



show. If people can understand this, then maybe they would be more inclined to invest more in the Arts.

AC: Sean, thank you for your time. We can't wait to see you back on stage!

More about Sean:

Sean Omandam is from Fresno, California, where he began his training with Shirley Winters. He later went on to train on full scholarship at the Harid Conservatory in Boca Raton, Florida, under the instruction of Victoria Schneider, Olivier Pardina, and Svetlana Osiyeva. Upon his graduation in 2004, he joined Colorado Ballet's Studio Company and was promoted to the Company in 2005. In 2007, he was a competitor and gala performer at the New York International Ballet Competition. In the summer of 2013, he was featured as a contestant on the premiere season of the South Korean television show, *Dancing 9*. *Pointe Magazine* featured Sean in their 2014 October/November "Dancer Spotlight." ■

Opera & Concert Choristers Caucus: A grassroots effort to improve the livelihoods of choral professionals



Ned Hanlon
Chorister

During the summer of 2020, while the performing arts industry struggled to come to grips with the implications of COVID-19, a group of AGMA choristers around the country started talking about the issues they confronted daily. Those early meetings were eye-opening for many reasons, but most importantly they showed the universality of chorister concerns.

Whether in an opera chorus, a symphony choir, or a small vocal ensemble, choristers are, by definition, a group of people who sing for another group of people; suddenly both sides of that equation were impossible in the new pandemic reality. But it was also clear that the issues that confront choral professionals are not exclusively COVID-19 related.

Choristers everywhere, from Miami to Los Angeles to Dallas, are fighting the same battles and overcoming the same struggles to make the job work. Out of these conversations and the recognition of mutual concerns, the Opera & Concert Choristers Caucus (OCCC) was founded with the aim of providing choral professionals a place to come together, talk about the issues in the industry, identify solutions, and enact necessary change through solidarity and collective support.

Through country-wide outreach, a diverse and representative group was formed. This founding steering committee developed a mission statement:

The Opera and Concert Choristers Caucus (OCCC) is a caucus of members of the American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA) whose concern and efforts are dedicated to the promotion of a better and more rewarding livelihood for the skilled choral performer and the enrichment of the cultural life of our society. To further these goals, the OCCC will:

- *Advocate for the interests of choristers;*
- *Facilitate communication and support between operatic and concert choruses;*
- *Increase chorister participation within AGMA on both the local and national levels;*
- *Identify common bargaining priorities;*
- *Provide a direct line of communication between members of the*

Caucus and AGMA leadership;

- *Encourage and support organizing efforts in non-union choruses; and*
- *Operate within the AGMA structure for the mutual benefit of both the Caucus and AGMA as a whole.*

From the very beginning, it was vital that the OCCC be *member-driven*. In October, the first virtual full-caucus meeting was held; all AGMA choristers were invited. After hearing directly from a large group around the country during the meeting, the Steering Committee developed a survey for AGMA choristers, with questions ranging from preferred meeting times and gauging interest in organizing non-union choruses to concerns and bargaining priorities for the future.

With this information in hand, the Steering Committee moved forward with planning an agenda for the winter and spring of 2021, which will include monthly meetings on a variety of subjects. The first was held in February and addressed AGMA agreements in the wake of the pandemic, media agreements, and the results of the November survey.

Future meetings will address topics such as: social media as a tool for strengthening choruses; helping Artists who participate in Young Artist (YA) Program choruses; health insurance for choristers; how choruses and choirs can be tools of social justice and anti-racism; organizing; health and safety, and harassment and bullying in the choral profession.

To put it bluntly, there is a lot to do. The industry is at a crossroads, with some organizations using the pandemic as a tool to undermine Artists' livelihoods. It is important that we as a community *grow* through this difficult period, not just go back to where we were last February. When we return, it must be to a stronger, better, and more sustainable, inclusive place. Collective action and solidarity can help us get there, and hopefully the OCCC can play a part in that. We look forward to engaging with all of our AGMA colleagues to make our union stronger. ■



How Lyric Opera Stage Artists are Finding Hope During a Pandemic



Pam Williams
Chorister

When I was first asked to write an article about Lyric Opera Stage Artists (LOSA) of Lyric Opera of Chicago's outreach activities, I wasn't sure what to write that hadn't already been said in one of our newsletter updates. But then I realized that people outside of the LOSA's AGMA shop may not have the foggiest idea what we've been up to. So, here is a brief history of our volunteer work and how 2020 changed everything.

Nearly three years ago, Lyric Opera Stage Artists was created, and I was part of the newly formed Outreach Committee, along with six of my wonderful colleagues. While we were all eager to get involved in outreach work, none of us had any idea what this would look like or where it would go. One of our committee members suggested we go sing for his mother's memory care community. That was the humble beginning that put us on a path of service to our Chicagoland communities that none of us could have imagined! That one concert, and the impact it had on its residents, led to concerts at two other partner communities. Before long, other senior communities began asking us to perform for their residents. We then started reaching out to other non-profit organizations to find creative ways to partner with them. This included performing live concerts for fundraising events, serving meals at soup kitchens for the homeless, organizing food drives, and working with the Greater Chicago Food Depository. Eventually, we were singing

regularly for our partner communities, performing 10-15 outreach concerts a year, all free of charge.

Then, the pandemic began. The Lyric Opera shut down. Everyone was hunkered down, and everything was closed. I struggled to see how we could continue our volunteer work in our communities until one day, one of our partners reached out to see if we would consider a concert through Zoom. This wasn't a medium I was totally comfortable with yet, but if it could help us continue our work, I was all in. I presented the idea to our committee and we went for it! Thank you to Gilda's Club Chicago for hosting our very first Virtual Outreach Concert. It was a Mother's Day program and it opened doors to a whole new world of bringing music and friendship back to the lives of the people who needed it most! The last line of LOSA's Mission Statement is: "By extending our talents and love of opera beyond the stage, we hope to bring the potential of music and theater to the lives of all those who need its lasting beauty and power." I believe that with all the challenges and difficult, sad things of 2020, LOSA was able to take on this mission in a new and hopeful way, reaching into even the most isolated places.

Since we began performing Virtual Outreach Concerts for our partner communities, we have been very busy! Not only have we been performing for our previous partners, but we've added new partnerships as well! BP—before Pandemic—we performed between 10-15 concerts a year. Since August 2020, LOSA members, along with our wonderful

colleagues from the Chicago Lyric Opera Orchestra, have already performed more than 40 concerts with nine different partner organizations and we are beginning 2021 with many more concerts on the calendar. With the assistance of AGMA and Business Rep Jimmy Odom, we presented our very first LOSA Virtual Holiday Concert free to anyone who wanted to watch via Facebook Live. It was a great success and put everyone in the holiday spirit!

I am so proud of the work we've been able to do up to this point, reaching into homes that were very isolated through most of the pandemic. I am also incredibly grateful to the Activity Coordinators at the various communities and nonprofits we have performed for who sought out the technology to make it possible for us to bring these concerts to their people. And I am particularly humbled and grateful for each and every generous LOSA member. This includes actors, stage management folks, singers, and also our dear colleagues from the Chicago Lyric Opera Orchestra, all of whom have jumped into this adventure with a generous spirit, while sharing their music, hearts, and incredible talents with the people who have had the least access to it during this time.

Lessons learned:

- It's never too late to learn something new, even if it is technology!
- Artists are incredibly generous!
- Opportunities are out there if you are willing to look for them.
- Music is alive and well. It may not look the way you expected.
- Pivot is not just a word used while moving a couch up or downstairs. ■

LYRIC OPERA STAGE ARTISTS



The Story Behind Valhalla Media Live

By Alexandra LoBianco, Soloist, and Nik Wenzel, Chorister



Alexandra LoBianco, Soloist, and Nik Wenzel,
Lyric Opera of Chicago Chorister

So, you've got an idea for a great new company and not only will it be the perfect venture to supplement your Lyric Opera of Chicago Chorus income, but it will also keep you busy while your partner is away doing guest engagements at opera houses around the world—great!

But even the best-laid plans have a way of taking unexpected turns—enter COVID-19.

Suddenly you and your partner have lost all of your foreseeable income and the “great!” becomes “aw, [expletive]!” This is exactly what happened to Nik Wenzel and me as we were in the midst of preparing the *RING* Cycle at Lyric Opera of Chicago last year.

Life has thrown us many curveballs since we met on Lyric's stage years ago. Nik and I had finally landed in a spot of home ownership while my career was taking some major steps forward and he was finally transitioning away from his web development work into one of his other passions, recording. We were finding our groove, just on the verge of not living in survival mode. Nik and I went so far as purchasing the initial equipment to get our business off the ground and papering local universities with fliers just the week-end before that fateful Friday the 13th.

So, what did we do when COVID-19

hit? We fell back into the uncomfortable familiarity of that same survival mode we had just hoped to leave behind.

We threw spaghetti against the wall and started to think about how we could help our operatic family during this unprecedented time. Thus, Valhalla Media Live was born. We made a very bold move to invest our own capital, lease equipment to upgrade any out-of-date tech, and jump straight into the deep end of trying to help. To put it bluntly, we bootstrapped the hell out of this. The goal was, and continues to be, to provide a place for companies that might not have the capital to create a whole player system and then provide them with the highest quality audio and video to enhance the experience. With the vast array of equipment available, we know how creative the process and artists can be if given a place to “play.”

The dream was and is to provide a “virtual playground” of inclusivity and freedom. We also strive to remind our audiences that we are professionals who deserve their investment. Ticket sales aren't just about getting the right seat, they also infuse a sense of investment into the event. We should really learn from the newspaper industry and their push to digital; they gave it away far too quickly and now struggle to get subscriptions.

Thanks to our combined knowledge and decades of experience, we have been able to partner with: individual Artists including Will Liverman and David Portillo; the incredibly forward-thinking Chicago Opera Theater, capturing and distributing their entire season; and the Metropolitan Opera Guild for an upcoming masterclass with Anthony Roth Costanzo. While assisting established companies and Artists, we have also provided a place for Young Artists (YA) to receive a warm, understanding, and safe space to record their audition packets. This time has been beyond challenging

for every section of our industry, which is why it has been part of Nik's and my mission to enable YA's to flourish and feel supported.

Being part of AGMA has been a huge help as we began deciding how to put Valhalla Media Live together. Nik has been a member of many negotiating committees and understands what it means to work in the trenches. While I, in the past, have been very “basic” in my response to the Union, I took on the responsibility of working for my fellow soloists as a committee member this summer. This time and opportunity, to see how and why the Union works together, has been invaluable.

All this to say that if it weren't for the years of experience Nik and I share with Union houses, I don't think we would be able to partner as well with other Union organizations and continue to hold the Union standard as we move forward with our company. It hasn't been easy, to say the least, but we put one foot in front of the other and keep going. This is the time when we get to change some of the narratives and reflect on our wants, needs, and desires, etc. Speaking for Nik and myself, it is essential for us to find a way forward that is inclusive of the digital marketplace and allows Artists the freedom to create. We are doing our best to help find funding and even partner together with companies for co-productions. It has been the ride of our lives so far, and that's saying something.

If you have any questions or would like to see about a collaboration with us, you can find our information at www.valhalla-media.io or www.valhallamedia.live. ■

Met Chorus Committee Tackles CBAs and College

By Lianne Coble-Dispensa, with Mary Hughes

In a contract negotiation year, the members of the Metropolitan Opera Chorus Committee are usually up to their necks in proposal brainstorming, AGMA shop meetings, and hours of getting up-close-and-personal with our CBAs and MOAs (collective bargaining agreements and memoranda of agreement). However, this is no ordinary negotiation year. The Met has been shuttered since March of 2020, and weekly paychecks came to a halt the first week of April. So, in the midst of long-term unemployment, some of the committee members have been searching for jobs, while four members have gone back to school for free, thanks to the Union Plus program!

For those that might be unaware of Union Plus, among many of its offerings, AGMA members have access to the incredible Union Plus Free College program. This program partners with Eastern Gateway Community College in Steubenville, Ohio, to offer 10 two-year associate degree programs and two certificate programs, free of charge, to union members looking to expand their skill set or broaden their educational background. Additionally, Union Plus offers four-year degree programs, also entirely online, available through Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio.

Read on to hear from the members of the Metropolitan Opera Chorus Committee who will be juggling term papers and homework assignments while they work with all Met AGMA Artists to negotiate a fair, equitable contract in the coming months.

Lianne Coble-Dispensa, Soprano
Full-time member of the
Met Chorus for six years
Chorus Committee member
Writer/coordinator for the Met
Artists newsletter and website

I still technically have one of the best jobs in the classical vocal industry. It's the one full-time opera position with what used to be the greatest job security: I'm a member of the Metropolitan Opera Chorus. However, when the Met closed its doors



due to the pandemic, I had a "come to Jesus" moment concerning what the next few years could look like. The future of the Performing Arts industry is murky at best. I looked at my short-term options and thought that the best choice during an extended period of unemployment was to make myself more employable elsewhere, should a career change become necessary.

A few Met Chorus colleagues had

already started associate degrees through the Union Plus program, which I knew existed, but had never seriously considered using. (After all, I already had a job!) I'd always been interested in law and at different points in my career, toyed with the idea of going to law school. Considering law school requires three years of full-time commitment (or four years part-time) and a whole lot of money, I took the next-best path and enrolled in an associate degree program through Union Plus to become a paralegal. I'm starting my second semester and have thoroughly enjoyed my introduction to the world of legal writing and practice.

The Union Plus program is an incredible opportunity to learn new things, expand one's skill set, and forge a new career path, all for free, and all entirely online. It's a great choice for unemployed members of the Performing Arts industry, but it's also an incredible resource for anyone in the greater AFL-CIO union family who is looking to continue their education and take charge of their future.

Mary Hughes, Mezzo-soprano
Full-time member of the Met
Chorus for 15 years
Chorus Committee member
Women's chorus delegate

Life during this pandemic has been about as unpredictable and uncertain as it could

be for my husband and me and our three young children. Our world changed on a dime and all of a sudden I was furloughed and the whole family contracted COVID-19.



Somewhere along the way, I started to apply for jobs, thinking that my delegate work with the Met Chorus Negotiating Committee could open some doors in customer service or administrative work. I joined the millions of newly unemployed people who were applying to the same jobs in industries that I have not been a part of since accepting a full-time position at the Met 15 years ago. It was demoralizing, but I didn't want to give up. I was homeschooling three kids, so why not have something that I could do while they were doing their version of school?

I'd always been interested in working as a paralegal, but life and music took me elsewhere. I'd known about the free

college benefits through AGMA and Union Plus but had not given the program much thought until I started talking about it more with colleagues. When I looked again in May 2020, I realized that for free, I could become a certified paralegal. This is an industry that is projected to grow in the years ahead and encompasses my interests in working in Immigration Law. I'm so glad that I took the plunge! I have always wondered what else I could do to supplement my income, and I have chosen a field that is challenging and interesting.

There's nothing as exciting as singing at the Met, but the opportunity to broaden my skills was too good to pass up, and the fact that it's a free benefit for all of us is golden.

Karen Dixon, Soprano
Full-time member of the Met
Chorus for 20 years **Chorus**
Committee member
Dancer delegate

The pandemic has shown me the tremendous vulnerability of the Performing Arts industry. I learned about the free college benefit through AGMA and Union Plus and decided now would be a good time to take advantage of it.

I chose to study Professional Office Management for several reasons. I have done office work for my husband's retail store for many years but have not had any



formal training. This degree will enhance the real-life experience I already have to benefit our store and offer more skills if I am faced with looking for other work opportunities.

The opportunities are endless in the

field of Office Management, as every form of work needs office personnel to support and maintain operations. I am deeply grateful that my union offers this incredible opportunity for its members to grow and enhance skills to benefit them and their families, whether or not there are difficult times like these.

Ned Hanlon, Bass
Full-time member of the Met
Chorus for seven years **Chorus**
Committee chair
Met AGMA Committee chair

Last March the Performing Arts world exploded, and we are still just barely beginning to pick up the pieces. Artists around the country were confronted with the reality that their industry was shut down and would be for the foreseeable future. It was in this context that I started looking around for things to do while there was no way for me to work. Improving and making myself more well-rounded through education seemed a natural fit.



Happily, I had heard about the Union Plus Free College Benefit and jumped at the chance. Given my work with our AGMA negotiating committee at the Met, I thought that the Management Degree with a Labor Focus was a natural fit that could put me in a place to be more of an asset to my colleagues when we did finally return to work.

Now I'm 29 credits in and very glad I pursued the degree. I'm taking Intro to Management, so I'll know how the bad guys think (Just kidding! Well, kind of.) and Contract Administration, which will serve me as a singer and as a union representative. The degree has helped give

me purpose and direction during this rudderless and uncertain time. I am greatly appreciative of the Free College Benefit for helping me to take lemons and turn them into, if not lemonade, then at least better tasting organic lemons!

Authors' Note: The authors would like to take this opportunity to publicly congratulate Ned Hanlon for winning an award sponsored by the Union Plus Holiday Giveback Campaign. One hundred exemplary union leaders, nominated by friends and union colleagues, were chosen out of a pool of over 1,000 worthy applicants. If you see Ned during a pandemic Zoom meeting, be sure to congratulate him on a job well done!

AGMAzine Note: AGMA members in good standing are eligible for a number of Union Plus benefits. From timely hardship help to health and insurance perks, from home and auto discounts to travel to education, thousands of union families save money every day by taking advantage of these exclusive benefits from Union Plus. Please visit UnionPlus.org for more information. ■



Introducing: Black Dance Change Makers

By Alicia Cook

We all know the phrase “you wear your heart on your sleeve.” Well, the minute Antuan Byers begins speaking, you not only can see his heart, you can see his passion and purpose. You can practically feel his desire to make the world a more equal and just place, as though his energy is so powerful that it is made tangible. If anyone is going to make a difference in the dance world and beyond, it is Antuan Byers.

“Right now is obviously a completely different moment for Artists around the globe. So much of our work is built around connectivity with fellow Artists and with our audience,” he began. “In addition to the pandemic, we’ve also been experiencing an incredible uprising, specifically in the United States, but also around the world. I think that has also been an additional factor that’s played a big role in how I’m doing right now: being responsive to what’s happening in our country to Black and Brown bodies and trying to figure out ways that I can contribute to making that better.”

At the beginning of June, on the same day as #BlackoutTuesday, a social media response to the tragic killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor, the Metropolitan Opera Ballet dancer founded Black Dance Change Makers, an online community that unites and uplifts Black dancers.

“While everyone was blacking out their social media profiles on #BlackoutTuesday, I felt like our community was running away from having conversations about these issues. I needed to talk, not post a black square on Instagram,” Byers recalled.

From there, the dancer reached out personally to every Black dancer in his phone that he could think of and scheduled a Zoom call that very same day. These support-like calls continued into

September and October.

“We were having such amazing conversations,” he said. “I started to brainstorm how I could expand this concept outside of just the people I knew personally and think about how I could continue this past the current moment that we were in.”

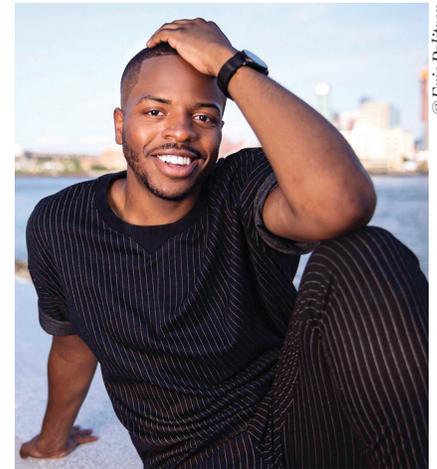
Already the host of *The LLAB* on the *Pod de Deux* podcast, a series on racial justice in the dance world, and a founding member of the AGMA Black Caucus, Byers knew of the major gaps in the Black dance community and wanted to help fill the void. An activist at heart, Byers jumped further into action and officially launched the Black Dance Change Makers app, social media presence, and website. In a time of social unrest and isolation, Byers aimed to bring people together to celebrate their Blackness and their art.

“You might be the only Black dancer at a company, or depending on what city you’re in, you might be the only Black professional dancer in that city, or in that county,” he said. “I saw a unique need within the Black community, to find ways to connect us and bring us together.”

Byers is the Founder and CEO of Black Dance Change Makers and works collaboratively on programming and development with a team that includes dancers Tamisha A. Guy, Alysia Johnson, Alisha Peek, and Fana Tesfagiorgis. Members of the platform, also known as “Change Makers,” have a community right at their fingertips, no matter where they are in the world. While, on the surface, members are all Black dancers, Black Dance Change Makers creates deeper bonds based on other interests, too.

Currently, Black Dance Change Makers offers 10 to 15 interactive events each month to its members to pick and choose from. Some of these offerings include “Conversations with Change Makers,” a

keynote speaker series featuring an industry leader; a book club; a music club that surrounds Black music and culture with curated playlists for any part of your day; viewing parties; “Brunch and Bump,”



Dancer Antuan Byers, Founder of Black Dance Change Makers

a virtual brunch complete with a DJ; a fitness club; cooking classes; and member-wide round table discussions. This is all made possible by a very low monthly membership fee.

“Although I felt like there were places to celebrate all of these things separately, there didn’t seem to be a single platform where we could celebrate those things together,” he stated.

Black Dance Change Makers also gives back to the community at large, recently holding a food drive in partnership with Feeding America as well as hosting a clothing drive.

At its heart, Black Dance Change Makers is a safe space for Black dancers to come together. To join, applicants must fill out a simple form, which takes all of 10 minutes. From there, the team properly vets the application and invites the applicant to attend a mandatory hour-long orientation session before officially

becoming a Change Maker. Priority consideration is given to Black femme and disabled dancers applying to be a Change Maker.

“I believe that femme and disabled dancers are two of the most harmed groups in our society, especially when you add the intersection of being Black as well,” Byers explained. “So, in my effort to continue to create space for those who are the most marginalized, it felt very important to me to make sure that we were giving priority application review to Black femmes and disabled folks.”

Nearly one year into the pandemic that shut down Byer’s production of *La Traviata*, he has found a new focus and purpose within the Black Dance Change



©Eric Pollitzer

Makers family.

“My community helps me cope with everything that has been going on,” Byers shared. “My community has been keeping me grounded, inspired, and levelheaded as this world continues to unveil its horrific truth right in front of our eyes.”

To learn more about Black Dance Change Makers, [visit the official page](#). Currently, the platform is offering a one-week free trial.

Drive-in OPERA: *A Dance of Pivots*

By Keturah Stickann, Stage Director

As a stage director, I’m a planner. I get my ducks in a row early, read sources, prep my score, and walk into my first rehearsal ready for what’s ahead. This was my plan when I was hired in 2018 by the San Diego Opera (SDO) to direct *La Bohème* in the



Joshua Guerrero in sound check during the first day on stage.

fall of 2020. I had no idea at the time that this piece and company that I knew so well would teach me the power of

adaptability and how to pivot on a dime.

All through the spring, I was greeted with cancellations, but San Diego Opera made the brave decision to go ahead and present *La bohème* live. SDO General Director David Bennett wanted to get people back to work. He wanted to employ a tech crew, singers, directors, and designers. I’m not sure if he knew how huge that was. Being back at work wasn’t just a paycheck, it was our careers continuing, it was our creative brains coming back to life. Being back at work for an Artist means that collaboration is happening, and that is a precious thing.

Despite the desire to create, SDO knew that the pandemic would put major restrictions on the how and where. I attended many Zoom production meetings concerning the idea of a drive-in presentation, reducing the orchestra and chorus, cutting the show down to 90 minutes or less, putting the chorus on a separate platform, etc. My score, so neatly prepared, began to look like

a disaster—Post-its full of changes and question marks as well as several sadly scrawled cuts marked in during the middle of one frenzied meeting—as the chorus master and I threw together a cut list over chat. This was not just one pivot; it was an entire dance of pivots.



Alexander Elliot and Joshua Guerrero in the outdoor rehearsal hall.

In August, AGMA released protocols for safely presenting work, which required 120 square feet of space per singer. Immediately, we had to pivot away from having

a chorus at all, as we could not create enough stage space even if they stood still. David began to work with AGMA to get permission to present *La bohème* without a chorus, and I began scrambling to find a way to tell the story of *La bohème* with no chorus and no human contact.

I think our brains open up in ways we can't predict when we are faced with challenges like this. My thought process at the time was nonlinear, searching for anything that might help to tell this story authentically while in such a separated state. I remembered reading in the source material that Henri Murger told his "Scenes of Bohemian Life" as memory tales of his youth in the Latin Quarter. Light bulb. What if we saw Rodolfo, ten years later, writing in his study? What if all the characters were memories, playing the scene from the deep recesses of his brain? What if Mimi was a ghost, still haunting him after so many years? I pitched the thought to David, and we both pivoted into new conceptual territory.

The missing chorus was now only a few orchestral echoes, the way we remember crowds when our focus is elsewhere. No props for anyone except Rodolfo, since he might remember the ridiculous way Musetta acted in public with Marcello, but not the color of the plate she smashed on the floor. Rodolfo would dive completely into memory a few times, but would mostly remain in the present, watching his past swirl around him. Mimi would float around Rodolfo's study in a constant loop from door to chaise, her spirit trying to remember why it was there. This "form follows function" adaptation had opened up a whole new way of telling this classic tale, and the ideas kept flooding in. The singers were also filled with solutions to problems as we worked. Joshua Guerrero and Ana Maria Martinez, Rodolfo, and Mimi, were incredible at figuring out how to connect without touching.

San Diego Opera hired a COVID-19 officer to help us stay compliant, and our rehearsals were outside, under solar panels in a parking lot in the desert. It was hot and windy, but we felt safe. I learned quickly how to give notes and demonstrate in a mask. Our next pivot was

arriving at the bayside Pechanga Center parking lot for on-stage rehearsals. The wet cold was a far cry from the desert, so we got boots for Ana Maria instead of slip-

On opening night, I came around the corner at the "places" call to face a parking lot of 500 cars, all honking and flashing their lights as a sign on the LED screens



Ana Maria Martinez and Joshua Guerrero, with conductor Rafael Payare, during tech rehearsal.

pers, used markers instead of tape so that spikes would stay in place, and figured out how to deal with anything not nailed down. There was no dark lighting time, so Chris Rynne and I sat in the shade during the sunny days and lit the show off of a rendering on a computer screen. For the first time in my life, I watched rehearsal from my car, with my assistant director on headset on the other side of the parking lot. I learned overnight how to make a shot list that could be understood by my video director, as I realized while sitting in that car that the audience would never really see the stage but would be watching

said, "Honk if you're ready for some opera!" I had been starved for this experience, but had no idea how starved the public was as well. I wept. Who knew that what we all needed was this experience of changing parameters, of storytelling on the edge of a cliff, of making live Art under incredible restrictions? The free-fall nature of it all reminded me of why I make opera in the first place. Oh, and not one person contracted COVID-19 during the two weeks we were on the ground. That was the best part. ■



ASM Hannah Blaile backstage during opening night.

the show largely from the LED screens all up and down the lot.

We Can Do It!

By Jamie Chamberlin, Soloist



A version of this article was originally posted on Ms. Chamberlin's Facebook page on January 21, 2021.

A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to submit an audition video for the virtual finale of *Celebrate America*. I had less than two days to get my audition in before the deadline and the instructions from producers were specific about the shot and recording technique. I worked hard to put together my "look" and concept, and also to sing the song "Lovely Day" well (which was a challenge for me in that key, as it was right on my belt break). I had no idea that the song would ultimately be sung by Demi Lovato or in what context my image might be used. I had to sign a release, of course, and I had a lot of faith

in Biden's Inauguration team and knew it would be great no matter what. There were no guarantees my audition would make it to the final cut, so when we saw that I *did* make the cut toward the end, we screamed!

My look: I decided to invoke the iconic image of Rosie the Riveter for a few reasons. The most practical of which is that during COVID-19, when I'm not leaving the house much, I had everything I needed in my closet and my "on-camera glam kit" to make myself into a modern-day Rosie... a denim shirt, my trusty bandana I've had since high school, my signature red lip, and a flower in my hair to complete the look.

I wanted to invoke the slogan "We can do it" and usher that concept into this new

era of social change. One of the positives that have come out of COVID-19 times for me personally is a new commitment to live my values in everything I do, and that includes my job as an entertainer and teacher. I'm sure I'll be having some great conversations with my students about the significance of a cultural icon like Rosie. My goal is to inspire them to think about the ways in which our choices as Artists, for example, to invoke iconic imagery like Rosie at the right moment, can have a positive effect on moving forward the dial of social change by then inspiring others to act and speak out.

To me, Rosie represents that no matter how or what we are able to contribute positively to society, it is valid and meaningful. I think about the women who took up jobs they might have never imagined themselves doing and lived the values of liberty and justice for all by stepping up and getting their hands dirty during WWII. I admire that so much! It was an homage to them and to our Healthcare workers who have done the same during this time.

So, I looked back to Rosie to help me look ahead to better times for all of us. I used my small platform to lead by example and share the idea that artists are powerful commentators and drivers of social change. These are my values. Together, WE CAN DO IT! ■



What's Your Muggle Job? Thinking Way Outside the Box



Top row (left to right): Sam Handley, Melody Moore, Jonathan Loy, Cree Carrico, and Malcolm MacKenzie.
Bottom row (left to right): Kristen Barrett, Julian Close, Marco Nisticò, Wolfgang Ablinger-Sperrhacke, and David Scoville.

AGMA members share how they are developing new skills, and using old ones in unexpected ways, during the pandemic.

Sam Handley, Bass-baritone

Several months before the pandemic, I was asked to consider taking on the role of Executive Director of the Green Lake Festival of Music. I was initially hesitant, having little administrative experience, and was still busy as a singer. However, great friends helped remind me of the many skills all experienced performers have that admins need, and at the top of the list are gratitude and generosity. None of us get where we are without help, and thanking our supporters is as important as it is to support those who need a little help themselves. We've all learned so many things as performers, and the skill of learning itself is probably my greatest carryover. However, in the end, it will be the grit—my absolute stubbornness to never quit—that will be most important.

Melody Moore, Soprano

Since being sent home from the Met in March of last year, I've bounced from a mortgage auditing job to receiving unemployment to delivering food to going back to school. It's hard to know what to do with oneself and, although people say "it'll all come back," the question is "who will I be when it returns?" To that end, I've invested in myself and am taking my WSET (Wine and Spirits Education Trust of London) Level 3 Theory Exam for Sommelier and expert certification in March 2021. I've also begun Enology and Viticulture (soil science and winemaking) studies at UC Davis; it's the best in the world and the study level matches that acclaim. I'm not bored...that much I can say.

Jonathan Loy, Stage Director

My husband and I were lucky enough to have purchased a country house in November 2019 in the Berkshires, where I also have an opera festival. So, when the pandemic took hold, we gave up our NYC apartment and moved to the house full time. Chris left his interior design firm in

the City and we started our own interior design studio, *Studio Riggleman* (hubby's last name). Having started a business once before, Berkshire Opera Festival, there was a little less fear involved this time, but only a little.

We are starting life anew. We have several clients and things are going well. Who knows what lies ahead?

Cree Carrico, Soprano

After a 10-year career in opera where I've graced the stages of venues like Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall, I lost everything to the pandemic. With all performances cancelled until summer 2021, I moved in with my parents and bravely expanded my talents into a new career field.

Healthy living became a lifestyle for me after a major weight loss transformation, and with a year and a half (at least) of time on my hands, I committed to inspiring others to make a lifestyle change in the way I had been inspired. I studied, tested, and successfully obtained my certification as a personal trainer

through the National Academy of Sports Medicine. With my experience, passion, and certification, I decided to share this with others and started my new business, *ButtaBeeFitness*.

ButtaBeeFit is a creative approach to fitness, focusing on core stability and strength used in everyday movements, and having a darn good time while doing it. Through creatively themed workouts, individualized personal training sessions, and goal setting for the whole human experience, my goal is to help you become the very best you can “bee.”

As someone who has lost 100 pounds, I recognize the challenges the fitness industry poses for us “normal people.” Many of us find ourselves intimidated by the idea of a “perfect body,” turned off by the competitive nature of group fitness, put off by Instagram influencers, and afraid or unsure of how to take the next step to achieving our health and wellness goals. The added challenge of gyms being closed due to the pandemic, makes these issues even more problematic.

With all this in mind, it is my personal passion, and now my business, to make fitness fun for everyone, you ***ButtaBee***lieve it, Baby! For more about *ButtaBeeFitness* head on over to our website www.butta-beefitness.com and YouTube channel.

Malcolm MacKenzie, Baritone

The final dress for Eugene Opera’s *Tosca* turned out to be as close to a performance as it was going to get. The state was locked down the following day and we were all sent home. Within a couple of weeks, it became clear I’d need to find something to do or I’d lose my mind. In the end, I settled on a small Ace Hardware near my home. I spend a lot of time in my shop when I’m home, building everything from motorcycles to robots, so I figured it would be a good distraction for a few weeks to be a Helpful Hardware Man. Ten months later, I know the regulars by name and can count change by feel. Working an essentially minimum wage job has been an eye-opener for me. Considered an essential business, the store has never closed even during the lockdowns when our only customers were tradesmen. The

small group of hard-working folks I see every day reminds me how lucky I’ve been to work most of my adult life at a job that I love. While I hope that soon I’ll be able to return to the stage and studio, I know that I’ll never forget my Ace Family and how we spent this year together.

Kristen Barrett, Stage director/ Stage Manager

During the pandemic, I’ve been working as an administrative assistant at a hospital in Chicago. It’s been my between-gig job for years, and they were happy to have an extra hand on deck as they dealt with the huge challenge the pandemic presented. I found myself helping in several different areas of the hospital, from scheduling patients to staffing nurses and other clinical staff. The skill set I use when stage managing and assistant directing comes in handy. With both jobs, I’m required to keep my cool in a high-pressure situation, and to see the big picture while still making sure every detail is done correctly. In the theater, that translates into a well-prepared and -performed show; in the hospital, it means that I’m helping deliver the best possible care to the patients. Being an “essential worker” has been a little bit scary, but very rewarding.

Julian Close, Bass

Interviewed by Katharine Goeldner (Mezzo-soprano/AGMA Board member, NY Area)

Rather than performing at Chicago Lyric and the Met as planned, British bass Dr. Julian Close (he holds a Ph.D. in Applied Physics) and his wife, the mezzo Rebecca Afonwy-Jones, have been spending the past year near the tiny village of Snead in Wales, helping to run Rebecca’s family farm and B&B.

Although he jokes that there isn’t much chance of short-term work in the field of Applied Physics during this pandemic, he says the skills he’s learned as a scientist, as well as a singer, have come in surprisingly handy during the lockdowns in the UK.

“You need the same regimented way of thinking, whether you’re learning music or attacking a job on the farm. And the skills I’ve needed as a performer—like handling

the isolation of being on your own on the road, the discipline, the self-motivation and nerves of steel—are the same skills needed to run a farm of this size,” he said. “We’re very happy to be living off the land and nature here. It’s all very self-sustaining farm work, really going by the idea of ‘use less, consume less.’”

Knowing how Brexit is complicating the already-dire situation of canceled opera contracts, I asked Julian how things are looking for our industry there. He tells me that the UK government has come up with some financial help for Artists, but the Artists’ union there has not fought for compensation for canceled contracts the way AGMA has.

“I hope they will step up the way AGMA is doing in negotiations, protecting soloists and other Artists,” he said.

Marco Nisticò, Baritone/Stage Director

My transition started before the pandemic. Singing had become much less rewarding for me. Worries about my voice started to outweigh the satisfaction of being on stage. I started stage directing and teaching while still taking singing gigs. Then I saw the posting for general director at Opera on the James, in Lynchburg, Virginia. I applied and got the job. Shortly after I moved to Virginia full time, the pandemic hit. My transition into administration was what we call “trial by fire.” Having to run a company in totally uncharted waters was challenging, but I learned a lot in a very short time. When the job of artistic administrator at the Sarasota Opera became available (due to the passing of the wonderful Greg Trupiano), we all felt that would be a very good fit. Now I am here, helping to get this season started. A new chapter. I feel very lucky.

Wolfgang Ablinger-Sperrhacker, Tenor

Interviewed by Katharine Goeldner (Mezzo-soprano/AGMA Board member, NY Area)

Since last August, the Austrian tenor has been lucky enough to be able to continue performing despite the pandemic. While

rehearsing *The Magic Flute* at the Paris Opera, he described the situation there: “The Artists were being tested weekly and rehearsing in masks. That has been bumped up to daily testing, which allows for Artists to rehearse without masks as long as those daily tests are negative. And of course, this can only work if all safety regulations are in place and working.” He added, “I was also part of the study done at the Munich State Opera by scientists from the Technical University of Munich, Munich’s Klinikum rechts der Isar, and the Bavarian State Health Safety Office, which found that a combination of proper masking, constant testing, and a mandatory 10-day quarantine for anyone who tested positive contained the contagion and prevented clusters.”

The pandemic, though, has allowed him to develop his formidable political skills. He has been extremely influential in the newly-formed freelance Artists’ movements in Germany, Austria, and France. With just one other colleague and a lawyer, he successfully negotiated with Austria’s opera festivals and the “Bundestheater” (Vienna State Opera, Vienna Volksoper, and the Burgtheater) for partial compensation for freelancers’

contracts canceled due to the pandemic. As he pointed out, “This includes our American colleagues, too, of course!” He is helping to lead the newly-formed Stand Up for Arts (Aufstehen für die Kunst), which is lobbying the Bavarian government for the reopening of the theaters when they allow other public institutions such as schools and churches to reopen, on the basis of Germany’s constitutionally-guaranteed Artistic Freedom.

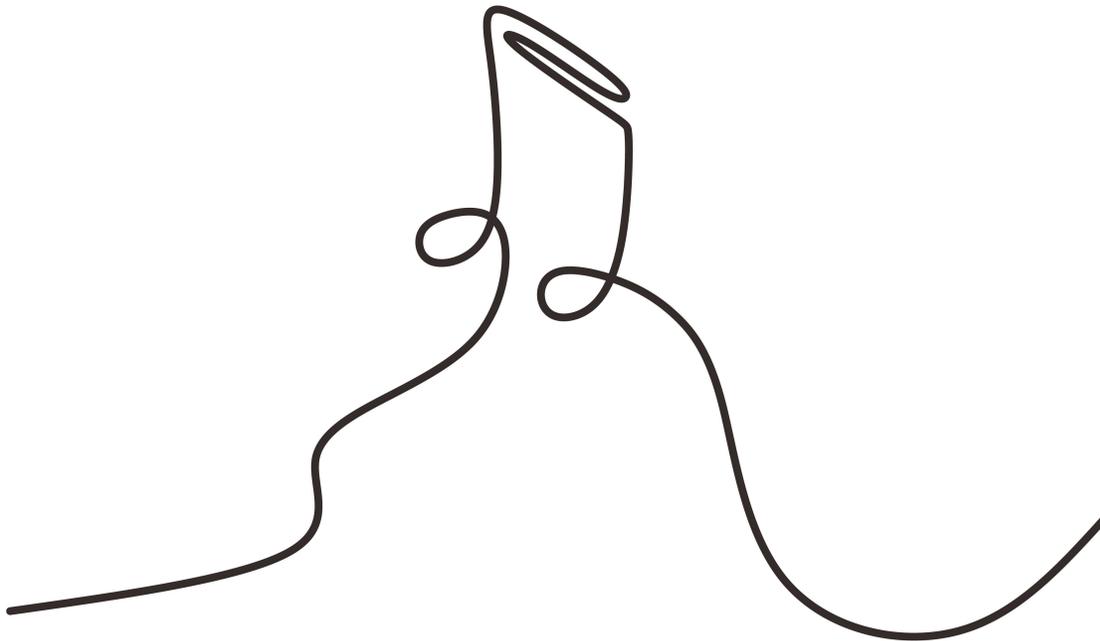
A proud member of AGMA, Wolfgang is excited to continue building a relationship between AGMA, our sister unions, and freelance artists movements in the EU. “Only international solidarity can move us forward and help get us safely back to work,” he said.

**David Scoville, Chorister,
Pittsburgh Opera**

In the “Muggle,” or non-musical world, I am a Surgical Neurophysiologist. Essentially, I use a barrage of different tests to monitor the brain, spinal cord, and/or peripheral nerves during surgeries where any of these structures would be at risk. This usually means brain, spine, and some heart surgeries, though it’s not limited to

these (I even monitor vocal cords during certain neck procedures). I’ve been at this job for about a decade but have lived with one foot in the Arts and the other in the Sciences for most of my adult life. I majored in both Biology and Vocal Performance in college, and even in high school, I remember sprinting from bio lab over to musical theater rehearsal (I somehow convinced my teachers to allow me to take both classes simultaneously).

In the wake of the pandemic, I find myself out of balance, with the musical side of me underserved and neglected and the healthcare side overburdened. In an effort to find a creative outlet, I’ve begun teaching vocal technique and communication strategies to my fellow healthcare professionals. In a sense, I’ve applied literal meaning to the term “singing through the mask” by teaching projection and diction techniques to doctors and nurses, allowing them to be heard and understood in noisy and chaotic environments while wearing heavy masks and face shields. ■



Our Constitution's New Preamble

We Are AGMA

We are singers, dancers, actors, stage directors, stage managers, choreographers, and other professional Artists who create and perform opera, dance, and choral and concert productions across the United States.

We come together in union, harnessing our collective strength, as we stand in solidarity with our fellow Artists. We call, with one voice, for dignity, respect, and justice in our workplaces; for safe studios, rehearsal rooms, and theaters; and for compensation and benefits that value our labor and enable us to create works of Art that delight, entertain, comfort, and

inspire audiences throughout the world.

AGMA is a union founded in hope, premised on the fundamental truth that Artists, like all workers, are stronger together. Tempered through trial, AGMA members have fought together and won, establishing industry standards that have protected, supported, and uplifted generations of Artists. As AGMA members, we are part of this legacy of unionism and activism, beneficiaries of the courage and perseverance of the leaders who came before us and stewards for the Artists who will one day follow in our footsteps.

Our union is and will be a force for

good, in our industries and in the wider world. We will continue to fight for our fellow Artists and, in so doing, ensure the future of the Arts in our nation. We will combat hatred, discrimination, and injustice, working together to eliminate racism, sexism, and discrimination from our workplaces and our communities. We will live and act in the belief that our collective efforts can have a meaningful impact on our profession, our lives, and our shared universe. We stand together in solidarity, as part of a larger labor movement, pushing toward a brighter, equal, and just future for all Artists and workers. ■

We Are AGMA

IN MEMORIAM

Scott Bergeson, *Conductor**

John Bills, *Chorister*

Robert Cohan, *Dancer*

Christiane Eda-Pierre, *Soloist*

Ruth Falcon, *Soloist*

BJ Fredricks, *Chorister*

Ernesto Gasco, *Soloist*

Charlene Gehm, *Dancer*

Thomas Hammons, *Soloist*

Susan Hendl, *Dancer*

Antoine Hodge, *Soloist*

Edward Hollingsworth, *Chorister*

Zizi Jeanmaire, *Dancer*

Betty Jones, *Dancer*

Sara Leland, *Dancer*

Rebecca Luker, *Soloist*

Rita Metzger, *Chorister*

Chelsea Miller, *Soloist*

Sarah Bryan Miller, *Chorister*

Elijah Moshinsky, *Director*

Carol Paumgarten, *Co-founder of Steps on Broadway**

Nina Popova, *Dancer*

Istvan Rabovsky, *Dancer*

David Romano, *Soloist*

Anita Terzian, *Soloist*

Gabriella Tucci, *Soloist*

Erin Wall, *Soloist*

Stanley Wexler, *Soloist*

*Indicates a distinguished individual in a related profession

Meg Marino Interviews the Cast of Seattle Opera's *Elixir of Love* Film on Returning to Work

Meg Marino, Board member and Soloist (MM): First of all, thank you all for agreeing to share your return-to-work experiences with your fellow AGMA members. I've been so inspired to see how different individuals and organizations have been pivoting since March 2020. I'm so thrilled Seattle Opera was willing and able to get creative and safely bring you all back to work, and explore the post-COVID-19 operatic landscape!

What did it feel like to finally get to do your thing again? Did you have any fears? How long had it been since the last time you were onstage?

Madison Leonard (ML): Stepping back into the rehearsal room was quite blissful for me. It felt like that big stretch you take after a five-hour road trip. Sure, there is some inherent stiffness and creakiness from the time away, but ultimately it was so comfort-ing to get back into it. I found myself giddy over the simple joys of this job like hearing the director describe our concept, listen-ing to the knockout voices of my colleagues, playing off of the instrumentalists and conductor, and wearing a beautifully crafted costume. It had been about nine months since I'd been on stage and I didn't know just how ready I was to get back.

Patrick Carfizzi (PC): It felt amazing to be back in the rehearsal room and on stage. Creating with colleagues again, hearing the sweet sounds of dueling pianos, watching the Maestro to shape a phrase together, re-imagining *Dulcamara* with our Director, and being inspired by the care and creativity of all involved was incredible. I was humbled, excited, and energized with an even deeper sense of responsibility to both the art form and the com-munity. The adjustments needed for COVID-19 just became part of the process, part of the work. If there were any fears, they were mostly associated with travel. Traveling at all during COVID-19 brings a bit of trepidation since the virus feels like it might be lurking right around the corner at any moment. That said, Seattle Opera and the entire team for *Elixir* did an amazing job keeping us all safe, aware, and informed while providing a vibrant environ-ment in which we could create. More than ever, we all needed to be a team to get the work done and teamwork is what makes the Arts thrive.

Andrew Stenson (AS): It was so strange! The first thing that struck me is everything seemed very quiet and still, like walking into a building after hours. Once we got into the room and started to rehearse, it was like riding a bike.

MM: Seattle Opera incorporated the AGMA/SDC Return to



Left to Right: Andrew Stenson, Madison Leonard, and Patrick Carfizzi

Stage and Performing Arts Playbook while developing their safety protocols. Can you give us a quick rundown of what arriving at the theater/rehearsal space was like? What were the protocols for, say, even walking into the building?

PC: Safety is all about protocols and risk management and, in my experience, we in theater have been safety-first focused for-just-about-ever. Having the Playbook along with the online seminars was invaluable. Science and the Arts again working hand in hand.

The daily process for me prior to heading to the theater/rehearsal room was: wash hands, temperature check at home, wash hands, mask up, take a walk to the theater touching as little as possible, temp check as we enter the building, wash hands. No one entered the building without a temperature check and a healthy dose of hand sanitizer. I like to think we all took our collective sense of discipline to new places.

AS: Plus, we do a brief questionnaire every day that asks if we have tested positive, been exposed to anyone who has tested positive, have any symptoms, that kind of stuff. Fortunately, this time around, Seattle Opera included us on the Envoy app, so you can do everything in advance on your device prior to entry.

MM: Once in the rehearsal hall, what precautions were being taken? Did you sit in pods/work stations? What was the protocol for singing, with or without a mask? Was there a limit on how many folks can be present in the room at any given time? Was there a limit to the lengths of rehearsal? Etc.

PC: Precautions started long before we entered the room with a safety training via Zoom. The company arranged for all of us to be tested every three days and there was a COVID-19 Monitor who coordinated logistics and was available for any questions that arose.

Cooperation between all involved was evident everywhere. For instance, the stage at McCaw Hall has been designated “essential” for Art making. I am sure that arranging for that was no small feat. Go, Seattle! All other measures were based on science and in many ways we became a small part of that science in real time.

In rehearsal, we each had our own dedicated space, tables at proper distance from one another, our own sanitizer bottles, an ample supply of surgical masks, and a “singer’s mask.” Masks stayed on for all rehearsals both in the room and onstage. We only took off masks onstage during taping and, even then, the moment we came off stage, masks went back on. Seattle Opera had a table set up for each of us backstage, too, at a proper distance with masks, sanitizer and our specific props. No one touched anyone else’s props unless they were sanitized. One of my favorite moments was sanitizing the Elixir bottle onstage for all to see before passing it to Andrew in our duet—a tip of a hat to times of Corona.

Limits on the number of people in the room were based on square footage of the studio or stage which, sadly, is the reason we could not have the incredible Seattle Opera chorus for this production. Time limits based on potential exposure were strictly observed for both rehearsals and taping. Hair, makeup, and costume artists always had PPE (mask, face shield, gloves). We couldn’t have a mask on while having makeup applied so the makeup artist and I established a fun ritual where we would enter the “cone of silence.” Do not utter a word, shallow breathing, doing whatever we could to protect each other. Stage Management, administration, technical, costumes... everyone had to be on the same page for all to stay safe and creating.

AS: The contact protocol is very rigorous but really top notch. We don’t share props, they are handled by gloved stage managers and either disinfected or replaced with a sanitary prop when it’s supposed to switch hands. We found a bit of difficulty maintaining consistent distance during *Elixir*, but for *Don Giovanni*, the first production under the new safety regulations, we had a grid system of 6’x6’ boxes taped to the floor. They eventually changed the grid for aesthetic purposes, but they left them as 6’x12’ rectangles. Six feet of distance at all times and 15’ in front of anyone who is singing/projecting.

At the Seattle Opera rehearsal center, we were UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCE to rehearse without our mask unless it was absolutely necessary, basically filming. All rehearsals MUST be masked. I think this is absolutely imperative to minimizing potential spread.

The AGMA/SDC Playbook dictates the percentage of capacity that can be used for a room depending on what “Phase” the company is currently in. Capacity is determined by a space allotment per person, and a greater amount of space is required for those exerting themselves, singing, or speaking loudly.

From what I gather, rehearsal length reduction is only a suggestion. For *Elixir*, we maintained 2:30 calls maximum with standard breaks. For *Giovanni*, toward the end, we began extending them to three hours. I still think this protocol has a long way to go.

There is guidance in the AGMA/SDC Playbook for how long it takes the HVAC system to filter out the room with 99-99.9% efficacy and I believe rehearsal times should be subject to some kind of formula based upon number of people present/HVAC efficiency for at least a rough guideline of when aerosol buildup could become a higher risk. Maybe this has been done, but I have seen zero research or data on the subject thus far.

MM: Singing in a mask...did you discover a “favorite mask style” that was most comfortable for your particular face shape? Have any awkward adjustment stories?

ML: I ended up rehearsing in the “singer mask” that Seattle Opera so generously provided for us. I liked the wire structure and thicker material because it made a sort of frame around my mouth and jaw, allowing me to take breaths and open up wider without a mouthful of material. If you’re comfortable singing your role looking like a platypus, then it’s definitely a great option.

PC: Singing in a mask, what an adventure! At home I had practiced singing with a KN95 but nearly passed out in my kitchen while trying to do so, so that was out. Center seam masks moved around too much for me. I found that surgical masks and three layer pleated cotton are the easiest to manage when singing. I tried the singer mask but found the lower jaw wire to be restrictive.

AS: Blue surgical masks, hands down, are the best. N95s are probably safest, but quite difficult to do anything but mark in. Doublemasking is also likely safer, but not only makes breathing much harder, it muffles sound pretty significantly in my experience. The Singers Mask is complete crap. If the purpose of a mask is to limit aerosol spread (an N95 fits snugly around your mouth and nose and nearly all air would be filtered through the mask in theory), the Singers Mask fits poorly. I’ve seen large gaps around the sides, nose, and lower jaw/neck in nearly anyone using it. Upon first glance, it looks about as effective as a bandana, which is no longer an accepted form of indoor masking in many jurisdictions. If the goal is to reduce droplet spread, the Singers Mask makes a decent case. If the goal is to reduce aerosol spread, the Singers Mask is ineffective.

MM: I understand that AGMA representatives were able to incorporate an experimental new payment structure for Soloists in this contract and 50% of the contract value was paid upon arrival. (Thank you, Seattle Opera, for being willing to try this!) This is HUGE for Soloists, as those of us who make our careers as primarily guest artists bear all the upfront costs (i.e., travel, lodging, role preparation, etc.). Can you speak to that?

ML: This new payment structure model was incredibly beneficial to help with the upfront costs that are inherent in every single contract we have as Soloists. I sincerely hope that this is a model

that can be carried out of COVID-19 times because it simply makes more sense and will be an extraordinary boon to artists who could use financial support before opening night—in other words, all of us.

PC: Pay structures are understandably unique to each company, their respective situations, and CBAs. For as much as the existing pay-per-performance structure makes sense in some regards, there is welcome financial stability and, one might argue, increased commitment from all parties in a 50/50 pay plan. On a more practical note, being paid electronically was great! Could we please get rid of paper checks? It's 2021. Save the trees!

AS: This is maybe one of the most important developments in COVID-19-era work. This up-front payment not only allows more flexibility in terms of your ability to roll out your own effective COVID-19 protocol (added expenses of delivery meals or groceries, added expense of hand sanitizer for personal use, and, depending on the contract, having to rent your own vehicle or have the expenses of using your own vehicle), but this security empowers Artists to make autonomous decisions without looming massive financial consequence.

MM: For Andrew and Madison, what's it like to stage scenes where your characters are supposed to be in love, but you need to remain physically distant? Did you guys have moments of frustration that the "old tropes" can't be applied now? Or did that liberate you to get creative and show affection in different ways?

ML: I was quite curious about how we were going to handle the climactic moment in this opera when Adina finally confesses her love to Nemorino, but our director David Gately navigated that with the perfect level of charm and humor that's so inherent to this opera. I actually enjoyed moving away from those time-old trappings of staging (e.g., "prom pose") and instead using the required distance between us to find fresh ways of communicating our characters' affection. That space and suspense can be really useful for building good tension between characters. And an odd bonus side effect? You'll never get your toes accidentally stomped on by boot-clad scene partners!

AS: For comedy, it can TOTALLY work. Honestly, the two characters are naturally pretty distant most of the show anyway until the last couple scenes, so David was able to remedy that by interrupting the payoff moment at the end of Adina's aria "Prendi per me sei libero" by having Dulcamara roll in right between them. Honestly, Madison is such a star that she's really magnetic from whatever distance, so it was a lot easier to feel a connection than I thought it would be!

MM: Patrick, how did you manage to patter and express yourself in that signature "Patrick" way we've all come to know and love in your mask? Having shared the stage with

you before, I'm going to guess that, as frustrating as it can feel at times, it was just another "MacGuffin" that inspired your creation and physicality.

PC: Thanks, Meg. So, the short answer is keep it simple and focused. Hopefully, good comedy is about subtlety, intimacy, and curiosity. Expression is read mostly from the eyes or my eyebrows—if you ask my mother—so my focus was on not overworking what wasn't masked. To that end, I found neutral mask work really valuable; though, "mask work" does seem to redefine itself in the COVID-19 era. The added narrations brought a nice touch to the storytelling. Specificity of gesture found multiple levels of minutiae, and that, of course, is part of the unique intimacy of theater. So, a lot of discoveries, a few surprises, and more learning to add to building future processes.

MM: Is there anything about your experience—epiphanies, new hobbies, messages of hope/or not (that's okay too, it's been really hard)—that you'd like to share with our fellow AGMA members?

ML: It really filled my cup to be around other Artists, in person, creating a show again. And the innovation and support from the leadership at Seattle Opera shows that it is possible, even in these complicated times. I hope that other companies can take a page out of their book and find ways to employ Artists and safely return to work.

PC: For all of the tragedy, struggle, and hardship we have been experiencing as a community, there has also been a lot of learning, listening, and hopefully, growth. As creatives, in all capacities and at all levels, we have been on a wild rollercoaster of emotions and challenges to our very existence this year. The only way we should, and even must, move forward is to continue to learn from the good and the bad, build on our foundations, and continue to create stories that humanity needs.

The Arts ARE essential.

AS: Trust and integrity are paramount to making all of this work. Lacking that, the protocol can never be perfect enough to account for human error or negligence. Before you take these gigs, think long and hard about the lives you will be affecting, both positive and negative, with your actions. This is the only way we can all keep this going and stay safe.

MM: Thank you, everybody, for sharing your experiences with our fellow AGMA members so openly and candidly, and for showing us that it is possible to open safely with integrity, creativity, and science."

More Information: You can see Madison, Andrew and Patrick take the screen in Seattle Opera's NEW film of Donizetti's *Elixir of Love*. More information can be found here: <https://www.seattleopera.org/on-stage/elixir-of-love-2020/> ■

Singing Through the Pandemic



Leandra Ramm
Soloist

Last March, when we all thought the pandemic would just be a few weeks and then things would soon be back to normal, I didn't think I would need to become a tech-savvy, self-taping whiz. But as those first few weeks passed and turned into months, I learned that I needed to upgrade my equipment and learn exactly how to create high-quality recordings and live broadcasts by myself from my home.

I decided to delve into the virtual world of performing because I truly missed singing with and for other people. Even though I have a husband and three small kids who are keeping me quite busy with Zoom school and alternating schedules, I still missed singing and that human connection, so I decided to jump into the virtual world!

As an AGMA regular member of the San Francisco Symphony Chorus, I am blessed to still be involved in virtual projects with them while maintaining a paid position. Most exciting was singing in "Deck the Hall," which aired on NBC Bay Area and Telemundo. I am truly grateful for this AGMA contract and grateful for AGMA's help in solidifying this contract for the 2020-21 season during these challenging times.

In my first few virtual performances, I just used my phone or computer. The quality was not great. I decided to purchase a Blue Yeti mic, a pop filter, a ring light, a green screen, and a Logitech webcam (and waited over a month for it to become available). I am happy to say that I have made more than enough money doing virtual performances to cover those purchases and more. (If you haven't

invested in equipment yet, I would say it's worth it!)

After I had my equipment set up and spent many frustrating hours figuring out how everything works (including FaceTime calls with friends and even sound engineer colleagues), I delved right in and sought out virtual opportunities.

I am grateful to say that I have been quite busy. I have performed a solo recital with Sparrow Live, founded by Fran Rogers, and am now a virtual Artist-in-Residence with them. I have performed with Moon River Opera in their virtual performance series on YouTube. I am currently working with Christman Opera Company in NYC in their Voices Raising Voices series, highlighting the work of artists and composers that are people of color, women, and/or LGBTQIA+! I decided over the summer to stretch my artistic abilities and performed a lead role in a straight play with the company Put Ur Play On Productions. I even composed a song that was turned into a film with Yonder Window Theater Company. (I stretched my creative abilities as much as possible.) I have done many virtual choir projects as well and was involved in the opera *L'enfant et les sortilèges* with VOPERA and the London Philharmonic Orchestra. I am also currently involved in the virtual production of *Norma* with A Little Knight Music Productions, coming out soon!

I would say the most artistically fulfilling project so far, however, has been working with composer Grey Grant on the pieces that she composed for me. This was fulfilling because I was able to accompany myself on music I never dreamed I would be able to play on the piano. Grey and I started working together because we were randomly paired by the Gabriela Lena Frank Creative Academy of Music for the #GLFCAMgigthruCovid program. We both were paid to collaborate and the songs she wrote blew me away. "Short songs to sing aloud" is a song cycle of four short songs to self-accompany

(three on piano and one on drum). I truly did not think I could do it and asked her if she could have a friend record the accompanying parts. I started practicing the piano part though, for fun and just to see, and slowly I started to get it. I then started singing my vocal line at the same time and surprised myself that I was able to do both. I am very happy with the end result and happy I stuck with it by practicing piano every day. Grey and I continued to work together on another piece, "Three Months In," which was even more difficult on the piano, and after practicing, I was able to play and sing that too. I feel like I gained so much confidence in my self-accompanying skills and use it often now when making self-tapes.

What has been so great about doing these projects is the human connection of it all. I have worked with composers, companies, and musicians I would never have met otherwise. I love how I can connect with anyone in the world and make music with them since, for the time being, location doesn't matter! What I'm most excited about is a full album I am working on that premieres the works of new composers. I hope things are better for all of us in 2021, but until then I will continue in this new virtual world. ■



LA Master Chorale Explores New Creative Frontiers

By Elyse Willis, Chorister, AGMA Delegate, Los Angeles Master Chorale



Facing the fallout from COVID-19-related cancelations, the Los Angeles Master Chorale (LAMC) continues its tradition of innovation in the realm of choral arts, even in the face of hardship. Our Artistic Director, Grant Gershon, and our whole team of leaders and management have worked tirelessly to create new performance opportunities for our singers, collaborating alongside AGMA and the Singers Committee to provide paid work for as many singers as possible.

The Master Chorale has released three stand-alone virtual choir performances since the COVID-19 shutdown: Alice Parker's joyous "Hark, I Hear the Harps Eternal"; Moses Hogan's stunning arrangement of "Abide With Me"; and "TaReKiTa," an original composition by our new Artist-in-Residence, Reena Esmail. The video for "TaReKiTa" includes our newly promoted Associate Artistic Director Jenny Wong conducting, and features Bharatanatyam dancer Shalini Haupt, along with a handful of our singers performing her beautiful choreography. Plans are in place for at least two more virtual choir videos this season,

ultimately providing paid work to every roster member of LAMC. To view these performances, you can visit the LA Master Chorale [YouTube channel](https://lamasterchorale.org/digital.php) or <https://lamasterchorale.org/digital.php>.

During the holiday season, LAMC produced and released an ambitious digital program entitled Holiday Karaoke, which combined elements of all of our much-beloved holiday concerts. The program included three new virtual choir pieces, representing an array of cultures and languages; archival footage of past holiday concerts featuring the full choir; and plenty of sing-a-longs for folks at home who were missing their annual opportunity to belt out "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" or "The Hallelujah Chorus." It also included many personal touches such as singer testimonials and footage of our singers' children and pets spliced into a particularly entertaining version of "The Twelve Days of Christmas," not to mention a brilliant in-character version of "You're a Mean One, Mister Grinch" by our resident basso profundo, Reid Bruton. The program was free to the public and streamed on our website during the

last two weeks of 2020. We received a great deal of positive feedback and thanks from people who are sorely missing live entertainment.

The LA Master Chorale remains committed to exploring new avenues by which to share choral music with our community and beyond. The challenges of virtual and digital performances are great, to be sure, but they also provide the means to extend our reach and influence to many more people than would ever be able to attend Walt Disney Concert Hall. This is also true when it comes to educational outreach, a particular passion of LAMC. In addition to using virtual technology to continue our existing educational programs—such as our annual High School Choir Festival, and the Oratorio Project, in which students write and perform their own original oratorio—LAMC has launched a new digital platform for elementary students. This platform consists of educational videos from our singers: some share performances of their favorite songs, and some give a series of lessons on a musical topic of their choosing. This is a wonderful new venture which we hope will inspire students to create music of their own, and it has also provided additional paid work for our singers during the pandemic.

We are truly grateful to the staff and Board of Directors at LAMC for doing their best to support us during this difficult time, while also keeping the organization afloat and ready for when we are able to return to the concert hall. In the meantime, we will continue to be creative and open-minded as we connect with new audiences and new generations of choral music lovers. Stay safe, be well, and keep a song in your heart. ■

AGMA Resources

The AGMA Relief Fund, The Actors Fund, Union Plus, and the AGMA COVID-19 Resource Page

AGMA members can apply for emergency assistance from the [AGMA Relief Fund](#). Additionally, The Actors Fund provides [counseling services](#) if members need other kinds of assistance during this incredibly challenging time, and [Union Plus](#) offers Hardship Help and more. We encourage you to sign-up for email alerts from Union Plus in order to receive Union Plus newsletters.

We also encourage members to visit the [COVID-19 resource page](#) on AGMA's website, which contains important information about other assistance, breaking news, and resources available for Artists during this ongoing crisis.

NEW: AGMA Supplemental Unemployment Benefit Plan

AGMA has established its own Supplemental Unemployment Benefit (SUB) Plan as an additional benefit for its members. Employees of signatories who contribute to the SUB Plan are eligible to receive payments from the Plan on top of any unemployment compensation benefits that they receive. The Plan must be funded by employer contributions that are negotiated into the Collective Bargaining Agreement. Ballet Hispánico is the first AGMA company to participate in the Plan, but we are hoping to negotiate the benefit with other employers as well. This could increase the financial security of our members during times of planned layoffs. Please reach out to AGMA Counsel John Ward (jward@musicalartists.org) and/or Wendy LaManque (wلمانque@musicalartists.org) with any questions.

AGMA Health and Retirement Funds Portal

Announced in November, the AGMA Fund Office member portal is live and available at portal.agmaretirement-health.org. This portal is set up to allow members to view employer contributions and eligibility directly. Initially, the portal shows contributions to the AGMA Retirement Plan; additional updates will allow members to see contributions and eligibility for the AGMA Health Fund.

Members who have provided their electronic consent should have received an introductory email. If you are experiencing a problem with the link in that email, please simply enter the portal address (portal.agmaretirement-health.org) and then provide the temporary user ID and login from the email. To sign up for the portal and to provide your electronic consent, please complete and return the [electronic consent form](#) to info@agmafunds.org and they will have the system generate your new login information.

COVID-19: A Collective Response Webinar Archive

Throughout the summer and early fall, AGMA and Stage Directors and Choreographers Society (SDC) proudly joint-presented

COVID-19: A Collective Response, a series of webinars addressing the safe return to work for both AGMA and SDC members. The first webinar in July presented an overview of the procedures and policies the two unions put in place to review performing arts organizations' plans for a safe reopening. This was followed by a series of individual webinars for dancers, singers, and staging staff, that addressed issues unique to those specific disciplines.

AGMA and SDC's team of medical experts were present at all webinars as were Len Egert, National Executive Director of AGMA, and Laura Penn, Executive Director of the SDC.

Members can access these webinars at any time by:

- Logging into [MyAGMA](#).
- From the MyAGMA dropdown menu, select: *COVID-19: A Collective Response (webinar series)*

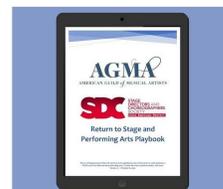
The AGMA/SDC Return to Stage and Performing Arts Playbook

AGMA and its team of medical experts have been working together to address the challenges of the safe return to work for AGMA Artists. The [AGMA/SDC Return to Stage and Performing Arts Playbook](#) reflects the consensus recommendations of the Expert Medical Advisory Board retained by AGMA and the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society (SDC). Now nearing its fourth revision, please note that this is a "living document" and will be updated as the science and circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic dictate.

From the onset of this life-changing pandemic, the economic security, health, and safety of AGMA members have been AGMA's top priorities. The overarching goal is to help the performing arts organizations in which you work to responsibly reopen so that you may safely return to work. With that in mind, the *AGMA/SDC Return to Stage and Performing Arts Playbook* helps to address the unique risks of singing, dancing, stage managing, and directing, by outlining the layers of protection necessary to mitigate these risks. Notably, the *Playbook* presents a step-by-step approach to reopening built on five levels linked to the prevalence of COVID-19 in the community and allows for increasing activities based on clear, common-sense criteria. ■

AGMA RELIEF FUND

The Actors Fund,
for everyone
in entertainment.



AGMA Relief Fund

A Holiday 2020 Message from Renée Fleming



© Decca, Andrew Eccles

Dear Friends,

Will you help me ensure that the Arts we love will survive this crisis?

Throughout history, humans have turned to music to celebrate milestones, to comfort us, and to create social cohesion. Every day, researchers discover more about the power of music and the Arts to promote our physical and mental well-being. And in the most practical sense, the Arts are crucial to our country's economic health. Last year, the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis and the National Endowment for the Arts reported that the

Arts contribute \$763.6 billion to the U.S. economy—4.2% of the GDP.

In March, performing Artists encountered a challenge unprecedented in our memory. Our opera, dance, and concert stages went dark, and are still silent today. Members of the American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA) remain out of work, unsure of when live performances can resume. Across the country, we continue to create however we can, sharing work through virtual platforms and social media, usually unpaid. And sadly, since the start of the pandemic, there has been little to no financial support directed to Artists. Thousands of AGMA members are struggling; forced to leave the cities where their careers are based. Even more alarming, many may be forced to abandon their dreams altogether. This would be an unthinkable loss for our society, especially at a time when we need the Arts so desperately. We must make it through this together, and that is why I ask for your help today.

The AGMA Relief Fund has provided financial support and other temporary

assistance to Artists in need for 75 years. Thanks to the generosity of donors, the Relief Fund was ready and able to help at the onset of this crisis.

Now, though vaccines are on the horizon, it is estimated that it will be months before they reach the general population. With the current wave of COVID-19 sweeping the country, another wave of grant applications threatens to overwhelm our resources.

Please join me in contributing to the AGMA Relief Fund this year, to whatever extent you can. Our goal is to raise \$1,000,000 to continue to help eligible Artists in need of food, lodging, medication, and other life-sustaining necessities. And please help us raise much-needed awareness by posting about the AGMA Relief Fund on your social channels.

We have all benefited from the gifts of previous generations, who shared their craft and mentored us. We need the Arts to continue illuminating what it means to be human, nurturing our economy and our very identity, and healing our communities when this crisis has passed.

I thank you in advance and wish you a peaceful, safe, and music-filled holiday.

Renée Fleming
AGMA Relief Fund
Honorary Holiday Chair ■

Winter Gala Trivia Night

To raise funds for AGMA Artists in need, the AGMA Relief Fund hosted its first-ever virtual Trivia Night on Thursday, February 11. The amazing banter and friendly rivalry brought together dancers, singers, actors, production staff, AGMA leadership, AGMA staff, and guests to have fun while raising vital funds to assist their AGMA colleagues. The evening resurrected the camaraderie usually found in dressing rooms and during rehearsals and performances.

Teams included "Glottal Attack," hosted by Megan Marino; Susan Graham's

"Graham Crackers"; Susanne Mentzer's team "Mentzas"; Eric Owen's team "Ringers"; "Fonteyn's of Knowledge," hosted by Ralph Ippolito; and "No Trini-T, No Shade," hosted by Rodell "RoRo" Rosel, to name a few.

Between trivia, players were treated to pre-recorded messages of encouragement from Anthony Roth Costanzo, Daniel Ulbricht, Sara Mearns, Sarah Daley, and Patricia Racette and Beth Clayton. Attendees also enjoyed pre-recorded performances: the Dancers of the NYCB showed the world premier of "Schmaltz for Two," choreographed by Janie Taylor; Artists of the Met sang "Solidarity Forever"; and Lisette Oropesa, accompanied by Louis Wendt, performed

Mercadante's "La Stella." Ms. Oropesa generously pledged to match gifts during the event, inspiring more match pledges and a flurry of donations that helped the Gala's organizers exceed their goal and raise over \$8,000!

The AGMA Relief Fund promises this was just the start of fun events to benefit AGMA members, so keep an eye out on social media and your inbox for the next event announcement. Please keep promoting the AGMA Relief Fund and support it through Eat4Art, AmazonSmile, and by donating through www.agmarelief.org. ■

AGMA Notice and Agency Fee Objection Policy

This notice and policy were developed to comply with applicable legal requirements. It will be published annually by AGMA. A copy also will be provided to individuals who are about to become subject to an AGMA collective bargaining agreement that includes a union security clause and to AGMA members who resign from AGMA membership.

Individuals who are AGMA members enjoy a number of benefits available to members only. These benefits include the AGMA Relief Fund; Union Privilege, insurance, health, and loan benefits; the right to attend and participate in Union meetings; the right to run for Union office and to nominate and vote for candidates for Union office; the right to participate in contract ratification and strike votes; the right to participate in development and formulation of Union policies; and the right to participate in the formulation of Union collective bargaining demands.

You have the right to decide to not be an AGMA member. If you make that decision, you forfeit the right to enjoy AGMA member-only benefits, including all of those listed above.

All individuals working under a collective bargaining agreement between AGMA and an opera, ballet, dance programming, concert, or other company producing operatic music, dance, concerts, or other types of productions containing a union security clause (referred to hereafter as an AGMA collective bargaining agreement) are required, as a condition of continued employment, to pay dues and initiation fees to AGMA. Any individuals covered by an AGMA collective bargaining agreement who elect not to be AGMA members nevertheless remain obligated, under the union security clause, to pay an agency fee to AGMA equal to regular AGMA dues and initiation fees, subject to a possible reduction as set forth below.

Each year, AGMA's auditors will prepare a report that verifies the breakdown of AGMA expenditures, by major categories of expenditures, between those that are devoted to "representational" activities and those that arguably are devoted to "non-representational" activities (the Audit Report). Representational expenditures include those for: negotiations with employers; enforcing collective bargaining agreements; meetings with employer representatives; member and staff committee meetings concerned with matters relating to employment practices and/or collective bargaining provisions; discussion of work-related issues with employers; handling employees' work-related problems through grievance and arbitration procedures, before administrative agencies or in informal meetings; union governance meetings; and union administration, litigation, publications, and professional services relating to any of the above. Arguably non-representational expenditures are those for: community service and charitable contributions; lobbying; legislative efforts and political activities; members-only benefits; external organizing; and litigation which is not germane to collective bargaining, contract administration or grievance adjustment or advancement of the employment-related interests of AGMA-represented employees.

The most recent Audit Report indicated that approximately 97.46% of AGMA's expenditures were devoted to representational activities.

A non-member has the right to object to financially contributing to AGMA's expenditures for non-representational activities. Any non-member who wishes to make such an objection must submit an objection between December 1 through December 31 (the Annual Objection Period) to the AGMA Membership Department Supervisor, P.O. Box 908, New York, New York 10108. All objections must contain the objector's current home or mailing address. Non-members who submit an objection within the Annual Objection Period will have their agency fees (and, if applicable, initiation fees) reduced for the 12 months beginning January 1 and running through December 31 to reflect only the portion of AGMA expenditures spent on representational activities. Individuals who have not previously been subject to an AGMA collective bargaining agreement with a union security clause and who decide to not become AGMA members, and AGMA members who resign their membership, will have thirty days from receipt of a copy of the AGMA notice and agency fee objection policy to submit an objection, and if they do submit a timely objection, their agency fees will be reduced for the balance of that calendar year. Non-members desiring to retain "objector" status must renew their objections during each Annual Objection Period.

The most recent Audit Report will be provided to non-members who submitted timely objections. Timely objectors have the option of challenging AGMA's verified calculation of the reduced agency fees/initiation fees before an impartial arbitrator appointed by the American Arbitration Association. In the event of such a challenge, a portion of the fees charged to such challengers reflecting sums reasonably in dispute will be held in escrow pending the arbitrator's decision. Details concerning the arbitration process will be provided to any objectors who challenge the fees they are charged.

Before anyone decides to become an objector, we would hope they would take into consideration that without the concerted political activity of the union movement many of the most important legislation that protects and benefits working women and men—such as the Social Security Act, the Family Medical Leave Act, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, minimum wage laws and the Occupational Safety and Health Act—would never have been enacted. The role of organized labor remains even more vital today. In our opinion, not only activities characterized as "representational," but also community service, legislative activity, lobbying, political activities, external organizing, and litigation related to broader issues of concern to Union members as citizens, are critically necessary for the improvement of working conditions of all members we represent. It is for this reason that we believe that it is essential for AGMA to support such activities that benefit all working people in the United States. We hope you will decide to be part of this important effort. ■

"This photo perfectly captures everything I feel when I walk up the Lincoln Center stairs and how I feel when I step on the Met stage: free."



© Jon Taylor

Cajai Fellows Johnson
@cajmahal on Instagram

RESOURCES FOR AGMA MEMBERS

AGMA COVID-19 Resource Page

Access through the AGMA homepage

The AGMA Relief Fund

For information or to donate:

www.agmarelief.org

The Actors Fund administers the AGMA Relief Fund:

New York:

intakeny@actorsfund.org
800-221-7303

Chicago:

intakeny@actorsfund.org
312-372-0989

Los Angeles:

intakeka@actorsfund.org
888-825-0911

Union Plus

Union Plus helps union members through times of uncertainty with unique Hardship Help benefits

www.unionplus.org

800-472-2005; 202-293-5330

The Actors Fund

www.actorsfund.org

AGMA contracts with The Actors Fund to administer the AGMA Relief Fund as well as to provide comprehensive social services including:

- Virtual Workshops
- The Career Center
- Financial Wellness
- Health Insurance
- Housing
- Social Services
- Mental Health services

AGMA Retirement and Health

Plan A, AGMA Retirement Plan, and AGMA Health Fund

www.agmafunds.org

212-765-3664

AGMA Health Plan B

866-263-1185 (Toll free)

516-394-9443 (Outside U.S.)

www.asonet.com

Actors Federal Credit Union

212-869-8926

Member Services

mservices@actorsfcu.com

Lending Services

lservices@actorsfcu.com