

AGMAzine

Official Publication of the American Guild of Musical Artists

A New Day is Dawning

**Featuring
Empowering
Stories
from
AGMA Artists**

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FALL 2021

The American Guild of Musical Artists

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Written By
Tim Smith
MMRC Chair,
AGMA Governor,
Chorister

Greetings Readers!

My name is Tim Smith, and I am Chair of the Membership and Member Relations Committee (MMRC). Following the Board of Governors National Election is always a great time to reintroduce what MMRC does to assist and support AGMA Artists.

Following the Standing Committee selections, I was re-elected as Chair, Megan Marino was re-elected as secretary, and Katharine Goeldner was elected Vice-Chair. The whole committee is made up of 21 elected AGMA governors (plus 3 non-voting staff members), spanning every AGMA category. To see who is part of MMRC, or to contact us, you can visit the Standing Committee page here: <https://www.musicalartists.org/board-and-committee-members/standing-committees/>.

Our focus is always on how we can best reach AGMA Artists across the country and globe. One of our main duties includes editorial oversight of this lovely magazine (which seems to be getting better and better with each new issue!). We also help to brainstorm the creation of recruitment strategies, manage member complaints we are made aware of, and receive and review reports from Area Committees and Caucuses.

Speaking of Area Committees...elections are underway! AGMA is a national union, without a system of locals. Membership Areas create structure for member connection across different companies and a pathway to broad member engagement with our union. The self-nomination window closes November 30, and soon after, the voting window will open. Members in good standing who wish to serve as a member of their Area

Committee should self-nominate themselves! AGMA members will continue to receive updates about this process throughout November and December.

MMRC is here to help! We are delighted that AGMA is staying in touch with members more than ever and there have been major improvements to how AGMA keeps the entire membership updated.

For over a year, there has been a monthly newsletter, and now there is a newsletter archive so you can revisit past newsletters whenever you may need to (MyAGMA login required). AGMA's professional staff has also been posting recaps of the Board of Governors meetings for over a year too. These recaps appear in the newsletter and also on the website, where they are called the *Summary of Actions*. A month following each Board meeting, the approved *Summary of Actions* is made available for member review. To access this more in-depth summary of the Board meetings, you will need to first login to MyAGMA and visit the "Document Library" of the MyAGMA Portal.

AGMA's social media channels are updated regularly so be sure to follow! Oh, and in case you missed it, AGMA launched its "New and Prospective Member Resource" Page in June. This is a resource that even a longstanding AGMA member will find useful! Later in the magazine, you will be able to read a whole article about this lovely page.

Speaking of the MyAGMA Portal, while you are there, please make sure that your contact information is up to date. You should also make sure musicalartists.org is a "safe sender" for your email accounts.

On behalf of MMRC, I just want to say that we really hope you enjoy the latest issue of *AGMAzine*. The submissions and contributions were amazing, and we can't wait to see what happens next! If you have story ideas or want us to focus on a specific topic or theme, please do not hesitate to reach out via email mmrc@musicalartists.org.

-Tim Smith ■



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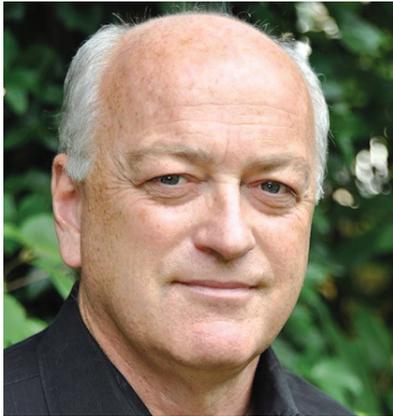
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AGMA
RELIEF FUND

Joint Message from Ray Menard and Len Egert



AGMA President Ray Menard



National Executive Director Leonard Egert

A portion of this letter was emailed to membership on Labor Day 2021.

Dear AGMA Members:

We have two words that we want to say to everyone cautiously but OPTIMISTICALLY: “WE’RE BACK!!!”

That’s not to say that we ever really left. Throughout the pandemic, though our stages and studios were closed, AGMA Artists continued to sing, dance, create, and fight for what’s right, fair, equitable, and ethical in this world. We have accomplished so much and should be proud of our work.

AGMA Artists have been working around the clock, with many members securing relief payments or payouts of canceled contracts, maintaining existing employer-provided health insurance, and working with companies on safety protocols that have allowed collaborative work to begin again. The *AGMA/SDC Return to Stage and Performing Arts Playbook* is a recognized and highly regarded document throughout our industry and beyond. Later on in this magazine you will read all about everything AGMA has been able to achieve alongside our Medical Expert Advisory Panel.

AGMA continues to bargain for tangible change within our companies and has won some very important anti-racism

protections and processes in many of our contracts. As an example, we hope by now you all have seen the video that outlines the full scope of DEI proposals and gains in the new CBA with the Metropolitan Opera. The video features the DEI Committee members of the Met AGMA Negotiating Committee! We encourage members to review any number of AGMA contracts by logging into MyAGMA. From the MyAGMA dropdown menu, members will find “Contracts & Agreements.”

AGMA has not stopped working to combat sexual harassment in our workplaces and are happy to share with you that AGMA has relaunched our joint task force with OPERA America to create industry-wide guidelines to prevent sexual harassment. Facilitated by the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS), this diverse group of performers, stage managers, directors, hair, makeup, and wardrobe artists, arts administrators and other leaders in the opera industry are working together to create a first-of-its kind collaborative approach to eradicating sexual harassment in the Opera industry. This group is in the process of creating a new system of reporting and on-going education centered on preventing sexual harassment and redressing the harms it has caused throughout the industry, with the goal of making our workplaces safe and welcoming for all.

As members of AGMA, your work, whether in an official AGMA capacity on the AGMA Board of Governors, within an AGMA Caucus or Committee, as a Union Delegate, or by your individual activism, helps ensure the future of the Performing Arts and will hopefully forever change them for the better. You are returning to an improved industry because you demanded the industry hold itself accountable. These improvements are directly tied to your dedication. That’s the beauty of work like this; if each generation does better than the one that came before, equality, safety, and justice will advance, resulting in the expansion of access, protections, opportunity, and representation for all.

AGMA Artists have repeatedly shown that we know how to turn times of despair into times of hope. Now seems like a perfect moment to recommit to building a better future for all workers. We are AGMA and we will continue to press on.

It has been a great joy to see so many of you back at rehearsals and inside the studio. Your perseverance in pursuit of your passion inspires countless people. For those who have experienced their first opening night back, we don’t need to tell you how much our audiences are happy to see us once again!

We have witnessed and heard stories of standing ovations that go on for nearly ten minutes, and how AGMA Artists have been brought to tears alongside those watching just from the sheer magnitude of what it means to be BACK. *That* is what great art does for us as individuals and as a society. It helps us to pause, to take time to think, to reflect, to remember the good, to remember the horror and to realize that by pulling together, we are resilient and we, as individuals and society, have the capacity to get through times of crisis.

May you all stay safe, healthy, and well!

Ray Menard, AGMA President
Len Egert, National Executive Director ■

AGMAzine Takes Home GOLD

AGMAzine, the Union's long-standing publication, has earned a Gold Award in the 2021 MarCom Awards.

The MarCom Awards is an international creative competition that recognizes outstanding achievement by marketing and communication professionals. Entries come from corporate marketing and communication departments, advertising agencies, public relations firms, design shops, production companies, and freelancers.

AGMA was recognized for its 2021 Winter issue of *AGMAzine* entitled "The New Frontier". In this jam-packed issue, stories of creativity and perseverance were featured. Through interviews and personal essays, a number of AGMA Artists provided touching stories about how their lives have changed throughout the pandemic.

The magazine is put together by the



Membership and Member Relations Committee (MMRC), AGMA's Director of Communications Alicia Cook, and Personnel Administrator and *AGMAzine* Designer Denise Baker.

There were over 6,000 entries from 41 countries in the MarCom Awards 2021 competition. Entries receiving scores of 90-100 are Platinum Winners. Scores of 80-89 are Gold Winners and 70-79 are Honorable Mention Winners. There may be no winners or multiple winners in a category.

The Gold Award is presented to entries that exceed the high standards of the industry norm. Approximately only 24% of entries were Gold Winners.

MarCom Awards is administered and judged by the Association of Marketing and Communication Professionals. The international organization consists of several thousand creative professionals. The Association oversees awards and recognition programs, provides judges, and sets standards for excellence.

This is the first award *AGMAzine* has won. ■



AGMA Receives AFL-CIO Charter

In March of 2021, AGMA received a direct charter from the AFL-CIO.

Previously, AGMA was affiliated with the AFL-CIO and its Department for Professional Employees (DPE) through its membership in the Associated Actors and Artistes of America (4As). Receiving a direct charter is a distinguished honor for AGMA, as this formal association with the national federation of labor unions signifies that AGMA has earned a seat at the table alongside the other major unions fighting for workers' rights in the entertainment industry and across all sectors of our country.

"We are so proud that the talented Artists from AGMA have joined our federation in the fight for working families," said the late AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka. "Over the past few years and most recently throughout the pandemic, AGMA has made substantial progress in their efforts to improve the lives of its members. Their addition to the AFL-CIO will make all of us stronger. Welcome to the family."

President Trumka, who sadly passed away five months later on August 5, presented the charter to AGMA President Ray Menard and National Executive Director Len Egert.

"Receiving a direct charter is a major highlight to what has been a tremendously difficult year for AGMA, and for all of our performing arts colleagues across the globe," said President Menard. "As President of AGMA, I am honored to be here as witness to this proud moment in our union's history. As an AGMA member, I am excited to learn what the next chapter will bring us as part of the AFL-CIO. Thank you."

This moment marked another important step in AGMA's march toward

modernization and strengthening our union. This charter will help the Union better represent its members through its own individual voice. AGMA will be in a much better position to push for the priorities that uniquely affect its members.

"We are joining and harnessing the collective power of an increasingly active labor movement," said Len Egert, National Executive Director. "Like our sister unions, AGMA is a national union that represents members all over the country. So, to become a full-fledged part of the AFL-CIO, is a truly humbling acknowledgment of all the hard work AGMA has done over the last few years to become a major player in the entertainment industry. We couldn't be happier." ■



The logo for the AFL-CIO is displayed in a white box. It features the text "AFL-CIO" in a large, bold, teal-colored sans-serif font. Below it, the words "AMERICA'S UNIONS" are written in a smaller, teal-colored sans-serif font.

IN MEMORIAM

Karan Armstrong, *Soloist*

Norman Bailey, *Soloist*

Carmen A. Balthrop, *Soloist*

Edward Berkeley, *Stage Director*

Laurence Broderick, *Chorister*

Rev. James Croom, *Soloist*

Jacques D'Amboise, *Dancer*

Patrick Dupond, *Dancer*

Carlisle Floyd, *Director/Composer*

Carla Fracci, *Dancer*

Jake Gardner, *Soloist*

Edita Gruberova, *Soloist*

Mary Ann Heitzig (Sugar Rydzski), *Chorister*

Lila Herbert (McGill), *Chorister*

Patricia Heyes Dokoudovsky, *Dancer*

Antoine Hodge, *Soloist*

Jean Kraft, *Soloist*

Dorothy Lister, *Dancer*

Christa Ludwig, *Soloist*

Meredith Mizell, *Soloist*

Michael Mout, *Chorister*

Mary Ellen Moylan, *Dancer*

Jane Powell, *Soloist*

Gianna Rolandi, *Soloist*

Eileen Schauler, *Soloist*

E. Wayne Shepperd, *Soloist*

Andrew Sinclair, *Director*

Joseph Sundstrom, *Chorister*

Stephen Terrell, *Director*

Pauline Tinsley, *Soloist*

Graham Vick, *Stage Director*

Patricia Wilde, *Dancer*

Danrell Stephan Williams, *Chorister*

James Wilson, *Chorister*

Teresa Zylis-Gara, *Soloist*

2021 National Election

On June 1, AGMA, in partnership with AGMA's election vendor Global Election Services, tabulated and released the results of the 2021 National Election. The official Board roster on the AGMA website was also promptly updated to reflect the results.

AGMA wishes to thank all its members who voted and made their voices heard in this important election. Once again, a big congratulations goes out to AGMA's newly elected and returning Board of Governors members. Thank you to all candidates for their interest in serving on the Board. AGMA members' continued participation in the Union's democracy makes AGMA better and stronger.

The summer was busy and productive for the Board as they participated in numerous training sessions, including ongoing sessions surrounding Governance, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), and Robert's Rules of Order. An exclusive Board Orientation Resource Page was developed to ensure that new and returning members of the AGMA Board of Governors have access to the orientation materials and information they need to succeed as a member of the Board. Located behind the *MyAGMA* portal, the *Board Orientation Resource Page* includes important information, including recordings of orientation webinars Governors might have missed or want to revisit.

In this special issue of *AGMAzine*, readers will be able to become better acquainted with AGMA's leadership, so keep reading!

LOOKING AHEAD TO THE 2023 NATIONAL ELECTION

While the next AGMA National Election is not until 2023, AGMA wishes to remind its members of new eligibility requirements for National Elections stemming from recent changes to AGMA's Constitution. AGMA's Constitution can be accessed through the *MyAGMA* portal under the "Policies and Procedures" section.



The nomination period for the 2021 National Election began on February 1, 2021.

While the AGMA Board of Governors has not yet determined when the Nomination period will begin for the 2023 National Election, members interested in running for AGMA Office, or a seat on the Board of Governors in 2023, are advised to keep the eligibility requirements in mind when updating their Employment Category and Region with AGMA's Membership Department. Members are encouraged to update their information **by December 31, 2021**.

All potential Nominees and Candidates are responsible for reading, understanding, and complying with the full eligibility requirements contained in the Constitution and Bylaws (located on the website, *MyAGMA* login required).

AGMA will continue to send updates to members as additional information about the 2023 National Election becomes available. Please reach out to elections@musicalartists.org with any questions! ■

AGMA to Launch Demographic Census in 2022



AGMA is set to distribute its first demographic census in its 85-year history in early 2022.

In January 2021, members of AGMA staff and leadership met with the Facilitators of the AGMA Black Caucus, who offered several suggestions as to how AGMA can begin to redress racism and racial disparities union-wide within AGMA, signatory companies, and industries. A demographic census of AGMA's membership was recommended.

Approved by the Board of Governors and born from the resolution *Directing Immediate Action on Anti-Racism and Anti-Discrimination Initiatives*, this demographic census will allow AGMA to better analyze and understand the impacts of racism, sexism, harassment, and other forms of discrimination on its members—including ableism, body shaming, and ageism—so that AGMA can work to find and implement solutions.

A Census Working Group (CWG) composed of a diverse subset of AGMA Governors (including three members of the AGMA Black Caucus) was formed and tasked with making a recommendation to the AGMA Board of Governors by the May 2021 meeting on an initial demographic census of AGMA's members. In May, the CWG proposed a third-party outside of AGMA be brought on to facilitate and manage the Census.

During the CWG's presentation, they shared that a major benefit of using a third party is specialization. There are dedicated businesses that exist as thought leaders in that area and spend their working lives creating and administering censuses and surveys. They explained that a census expert would go beyond just gathering basic demographic information and help AGMA frame the Census questions in the best way possible.

The use of a third party would address any legal, technical, or administrative concerns related to administering a demographic census and maintaining voluntary self-identification data. This ensures responses to this census (unless where otherwise

explicitly noted) will be kept confidential and anonymous, and answers will only be reported in the aggregate. Identities/Identifying characteristics within the confidential portion of the Census will not be shared with AGMA.

The CWG specifically recommended AGMA partner with Savanta. Savanta, a BIPOC-run data, market research, and advisory company with vast experience with working on projects involving DEIA, specializes in the creation and management of censuses, surveys, and more.

The Board approved the use of Savanta's services, and the work got started. Over the next few months, the CWG worked directly with Savanta on drafting the Census.

Though the Census will be a deep dive into the sensitive and important topics addressed at the start of this article, the Census will also collect various demographic information including race, national origin, gender and sexual identities, and religion. There are also sections on mental health, the impacts of the pandemic, and space for members to provide feedback to the Union on AGMA-related topics.

Following distribution of the Census, participants will also have the opportunity to voluntarily participate in a limited number of "deep dive interviews" with a member of Savanta's team for a more comprehensive look at what the Census covered.

For each completed census, AGMA will make a charitable donation to the AGMA Relief Fund, to help AGMA Artists in need. AGMA will share more information soon on this history-making initiative.

Members of the Census Working Group:

Michael Belle, Aleta Braxton, Helena Brown, Antuan Byers, Cosmo Clemens, Blanche Hampton, Megan Marino, George Scott, Matt Woodbury ■

Welcome Back, Panic

By Earl Hazell, AGMA Board Member and Soloist

OVERTURE

First, we panic. And by “we,” I mean me.

ACT ONE

Panic never comes first, of course. Interesting things happen outside of me all the time; things that should never make self-referential terror more than a sneaky supernumerary in the operas of my neuroses. It was 37 and one half years ago, for example, (or the first quarter of 2020, for those no longer keeping COVID-19 time) when a reoccurring hurricane of fear flooding my bloodstream joyfully subsided, not grew. All my singer rituals and strategies, musical and (very) non-, led to one of the most coveted gigs of my career: the Lyric Opera of Chicago production of Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung*. I remember talking with Alexis (dramatic mezzo, professor of Voice and Diction at the University of Alabama, and my wife of eleven years) as I was packing for the flight to O’Hare; a flight that was scheduled to insure I’d be right on time for the first rehearsal under the leadership of Michael Black, Lyric’s cool & esteemed Chorus Master. I joked with her about *hanging out* with “old friends” while I was there working, like the Wotan of Wotans, Eric Owens (whom I almost never get to see regularly and hadn’t worked with since the Francesca Zambello production of *Porgy and Bess*). Or the superlative Brünnhilde that is Christine Goerke (who has always been too kind and magnanimous to remind me, on Facebook, that since we hadn’t officially met, we’ve yet to become actual friends). The jokes came from the smile in my heart; the smile that itself came from peace of mind. A peace of mind telling me that nothing, *nothing*, could change the sweetness of this gig, and the reborn perfection of my professional life it was heralding. A few weeks after that conversation with Alexis I flew back home, as a two-week break from the



Earl Hazell alongside Evans Mirages, Artistic Director, and the production team of Cincinnati Opera

rehearsal schedule coincided with reports of some alleged virus out of Wuhan province spreading through Europe and the continental United States. I flew home from Chicago in March of 2020 to Birmingham, *en route* to Tuscaloosa, to enjoy my break with the Wife...and never flew back. O brave new world. As the Lyric offices—and then the company, and then Chicago, and then all of America—shut down, panic was gone. There was no time to feel anything but disbelief.

Panic, however, is a principal role in all of my psyche’s operas, regardless of the backstory provided by the rest of the world. COVID silenced Wagner’s voice in Chicago, but Panic dusted off his own personal arias in the dressing room of my head well before the *Götterdämmerung* rehearsal period even began. (His annoying little voice in my head, much as I hate to admit, is partly responsible for any and all of the success I have achieved. I might as well write him a decent review.) He ironically pops up in the good times of my career more than the bad. He repeats, like a mantra, that I pulled another *Ocean’s Eleven* on anyone who hires me, and I better quit now before I get found out; pushing me with his reverse psychology to prove him wrong. Any party thrown by my self-confidence when I book a gig always

leaves a gigantic mess for my impostor syndrome to clean up *well* before a gig even begins, while he watches—as if Panic is a Reality-TV show producer who, knowing what’s going to happen, secretly brought all the liquor, for ratings.

A smile always returns to my face, nonetheless, because it’s the cleanup after the party in my head that gives me the focus and drive to do the work that matters. At this point in my career, Panic is less of a nemesis and more of a friend. Never at first, naturally, but soon after it makes my eyes dart left and right too quickly to be healthy and raises the hair on my arms, I speak my truth into re-existence and do *this*.

ACT TWO

I woke up one morning in late March of 2020, however, to realize the entire world had much bigger fish to fry. There was no *this* to do—and there wouldn’t be for most of the next 18 months. Never did it occur to me that I could miss Mr. P, my anxiety on steroids, the way nearly a year and a half of being off the road without him made me. Alexis, given she could neither teach class nor individual students in person, joined me as we went about the business of building not just a life but a world in our apartment. We,



Earl Hazell alongside Morris Robinson, bass at *The Met Opera* and Artistic Advisor, *Cincinnati Opera* (center) and Shawn Okpebholo, composer.

out of necessity, built a little city of fragile peace (population: three); one that Liebchen, our seventeen-year-old black (attention-hog) cat, loved most of all. My intuition told me that the entire season ahead of us through next summer was going to be a wash by early May (despite the forced optimism of innumerable General Directors across the country), so we'd better enjoy the abundance of time we have by beautifully inhabiting the physical space of our home. And we did. We were never so close and never so appreciative of having each other to lean on. We were also never uncomfortable with spending nearly 24 hours of every single day together (when not in Zoom meetings and rehearsals), given how easy I am to live with.

No, really. Just ask her.

ACT THREE

You could practically hear the [intro to Act III of *Porgy*](#) (where the community begins to rebuild Catfish Row while honoring in song those who didn't survive the hurricane) when [Cincinnati Opera](#) contacted me about the triumphant return to the stage they had planned for July of 2021. And by "you," I mean "we." Team Hazell, i.e. Alexis and myself, after more than a year away from the stage, were offered chorus contracts for *Carmen* (with J'Nai Bridges, and Stephen Costello as Don Jose), *Tosca* (with Ana Maria Martinez, and

Quinn Kelsey as Scarpia) and Barber (with Chris Kenney); contracts which we joyfully and hungrily accepted. However, soon afterward, "Cincy" Opera also offered me a part in a new opera workshop, built around the embryonic work of the Nigerian-American composer [Shawn Okpebholo](#). The offer hit my soul upon reading it the way the sounds of Spring must awaken hibernating bears. A role, a brand new, still developing, supporting role: now I'm *really* back! While Alexis drove me to the airport in June (the workshop process began about a week and a half before their Summer season), I smiled to myself, knowing that nothing could change the sweet perfection of this gig, and all that it entailed.

Nothing except the reflux that made me sound like a stuck pig about an hour into the first rehearsal. The little bit of over-the-counter GERD medication I needed to sound halfway decent, while recording solos and small ensemble work for my Church job every Sunday during the COVID hibernation, is not what my angry vocal folds needed for me to channel Samuel Ramey or Ferruccio Furlanetto while doing anything, in front of anyone, as a principal artist of any kind.

Hi Panic, howya been?

FINALE

The presence of mind to consider how central my abject fear of failure has always

been to anything I could call success in my career was a foreign concept when I got to Cincinnati. (Who has time to philosophize when every time you open your mouth, you feel as if you sound like Miles Davis arguing with the head of Columbia records?) The terrified singer in me, who could barely spell his own name with capital letters in my mind, cloistered himself in a hotel room in Cincinnati, drank hot tea like it was going out of style, ate nothing but kale-heavy salads, and downed maximum strength Pepcid tablets like they were Skittles. All just so I could sing musical lines worth hearing as the Nigerian oil magnate Okojie—proud father and father-in-law to the lead characters—for Cincy Opera's workshop, *The Dowry*. Being rusty after more than a year on the sidelines was an understatement. Mr. P was on his way downstage like nothing in this world, upstaging me in the process.

Presence of mind came afterwards. After my voice healed and woke up; after the music got my neuroses out of the way of my technique; after putting my ego back in its cage and discovering this wonderful character, written into joyful existence by librettist Deborah Brevoort...the artistic success of the production team, which welcomed me as a member, made Shawn Okpebholo, the composer and Evans Mirages, CO's Artistic Director feel like it was Christmas morning upon the conclusion of our performance; beautiful in spite of me (or so I often felt). Presence of mind also gave me the gift of reflection: the ability to step back and see how secretly valuable my fear of letting everybody down has always been to whatever team of which I've been a part. And that reflection came in full, not after the congratulations from all who loved Shawn & Deborah's work with me singing one of the principal roles, ironically, but while watching the principals of *Tosca*, *Carmen* and *Barber* as I was singing in the chorus of the "Cincy" Opera productions weeks afterward. The multi-faceted team of artists for all three of those jewels of the opera canon came together, [in an open-air venue](#); one that threatened to be drowned out by thunderstorms straight from the Old Testament the entire time we were in Cincinnati

but never was, as if God Himself stopped the rain on cue because He wanted to see these productions come alive as much as we did. I got out of my own head and my own way, completely, by focusing on how best to support others—like Henri Venanzi, Chorus Master and longtime friend—and letting the art of our community stretch its wings in the process.

That presence of mind, and the reflection it gifted, re-revealed my truth. Waking up next to Alexis in our Airbnb apartment on the other side of town days later, I saw how my journey through the wilderness—from Lyric’s fallen *Ring* cycle in March 2020 to Cincinnati’s risen *Barber* in July of 2021—showed me myself. Principal or chorister, new work or old, being an opera singer isn’t a compulsion for me; it’s a divine privilege. It returns my focus; it clarifies my purpose; it gives me life. Underneath all my fear and anxiety surrounding this career is a well of love for the art deeper than my imagination; one that has led me around the world several times over (that’s another story), and returns me to the spirit of gratitude inherent to

working again as the business in America reawakens and transforms.

EPILOGUE

In late July of 2021, during the final days of Cincinnati Opera’s summer season, my preparations to join the Chorus for San Francisco Opera’s production of *Fidelio* were complete. This Basso Cantante was back in the Zone, back on the road, and back in “The Life.” I remember joking with Alexis (my wife of now twelve years) as she drove me to the airport: how I couldn’t wait to *hang out* with not just old singer friends from SFO, but the Rocco of Roccas, Eric Owens (whom I hadn’t seen since the opening night of the Met production of *Porgy* [and won’t get to see in October either—missin’ him again]), and the incomparable Russell Thomas (who, up until we finally met this summer [thanks to his brilliant Cavaradossi in CO’s *Tosca*] has always been too kind & magnanimous to ever remind me on Facebook *that we had yet to become actual friends*). The jokes came from the smile in my heart, with me practically hearing

the music of Prince while thinking of the many beautiful people in this business that I have come to know. Indeed, it was a smile that came from peace of mind; a peace which knew that, with my return to SFO in general and working under the institution within an institution that is Ian Robertson, Chorus Master in particular, nothing—*nothing*—could disturb the unchanging sweet stable perfection of this gig, this company, and this wonderful professional life. As soon as I find my *Fidelio* score—which I’m pretty sure I left in the airport in Cincinnati...

Hello, Panic; I heard you warming up. Welcome back, old friend.

Let’s do this.

Recently elected to the AGMA Executive Council, Earl Hazell, Basso Cantante opera singer, producer, writer, and native New Yorker, is on the Board of Governors—Soloist, So-Cal region—and has been a proud member of AGMA since 2008. ■



AGMA reps from The Dallas Opera sing for a dear friend and colleague’s memorial. Pictured (left to right): Kyle Hancock, Matt Woodbury, Dana Goodnuff, and Chris Harrison (TDO AGMA Choristers)

Never Give In/Never Give Up



By David Cangelosi
Soloist

Over the years, I have written many articles for AGMAZine. None, however, have been as important as the following:

March 15, 2020, brought to an abrupt end what was to be my busiest year in 25 seasons. That busy schedule stretched heavily from 2019 to deep into 2021. Major bookings in New York, Chicago, Washington, Dallas, Amsterdam, and the crowning achievement—a role debut and house debut at *Teatro Colón* in Buenos Aires—were all canceled one by one. A familiar story for all of us. The Performing Arts just stopped...but I refused to give in OR give up.

I had finished an Artist-in-Residency, a major Gala Concert, and an aspiring-singers' mentoring weekend at the Classical Vocal Institute I run in Montgomery, Alabama when the dominos began to fall. I went from singing in the world's greatest opera houses and concert halls to singing free "wellness concerts" from the balcony

of my downtown Chicago high-rise and on open church lawns because I refused to give in OR give up.

I masked up (often double masked) and, as soon as permitted, I went to museums, movies, aquariums, and restaurants. All time-stamped for entry and socially distanced. I cooked and delivered food to my senior citizen friends who were too afraid to go out, and even made goofy "lock-down exercise videos" with my wife. Then—as permitted—I drove several times to my hometown of Cleveland, Ohio to see my parents who are deep in their nineties. (I would not be kept from them.) Protocols followed, yes...but I refused to give in OR give up.

I have heavily invested into my retirement accounts since my early twenties, so I sharpened my skills regarding money management during the long months of lockdown. My wife and I gathered funds from past savings and purchased an adjacent condominium at one of the lowest points for downtown real estate I can ever remember. We will renovate and combine the units eventually because I refuse to give in OR give up.

I have watched some friends go back to school while others took different jobs. Some have retired from the Industry, as others have had to move from the big cities (namely New York). None of

these folks have necessarily given in OR given up either, as the Performing Artist still lives within them. However, circumstances dictate that certain people must do certain things at certain times. I respect everyone's individual decisions. I also mourn the loss of several colleagues and friends due to this heinous virus.

Then something seemingly miraculous happened on April 1, 2021. I was getting my second dose of the Moderna vaccine when my agent of 26 years called. He informed me that he had a contract offer from the Metropolitan Opera for the Fall of 2021. I thought it was an April Fool's joke...but my manager would never be so cruel. You see, he too refused to give in OR give up.

I am no star, I am no hero, I am no genius, I am no visionary, and my choices may not be your choices...but I *am* a guy who simply refuses to give in OR give up, and I heartily encourage the same for all. ■

LA Opera's First Indoor Act Back

By Tim Smith, MMRC Chair, AGMA Governor, Chorister

Los Angeles Opera held its first live, indoor, and in-person concert since the COVID-19 pandemic on June 6, 2021. LA Opera's version of Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*, held at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion (DCP), is also the first opera company to present live and indoors since March 2020. The cast featured tenor Russell Thomas, LA Opera's Artist in Residence, as Oedipus, mezzo-soprano J'Nai Bridges, as Jocasta, John Relyea as both Creon and the Messenger, bass Morris Robinson as Tiresias and tenor Robert Stahley as the Shepherd.

The production was first captured as a recording project, with the Orchestra coming in the weekend of April 17 to lay down their track, the reduced-size Chorus on the weekend of April 24, and the Soloists arriving the week of June 1. Actor Stephen Fry recorded the narration in London, and Matthew Diamond directed the stream production which featured animations from Manual Cinema, an Emmy Award-winning performance collective, design studio and film/video production company. In addition to the live concert, the production was streamed for free on LAO's website between June 17 and July 18.

It was a very different experience preparing and executing this piece. Chorus rehearsals were conducted over Zoom from our homes. Everyone had to have a PCR COVID-19 test the day before arriving at the theatre and masks were required whenever we were not singing. LAO had contracted an outside vendor to monitor health and safety and COVID-19 compliance. We had to complete a health screening questionnaire prior to work and be cleared. Upon arrival, our temperatures were taken, a KN95 mask and ID badge were issued and we were directed to the appropriate "zone" to wait in. Since we would be unmasked while singing, crew/staff not in our "zone" were



Animation still from LA Opera's "Oedipus Rex," created by Manual Cinema.

required to stay 12-feet away from us at all times. We had two 3-hour rehearsals at the DCP on Friday, April 23, to put the piece together prior to the recording sessions on April 24 and 25. While six hours might seem like ample time, there were new "COVID-19 catches" to wrangle with. LA County mandated that we could be on stage for only one hour, then clear for an hour to let the air fully circulate, then follow up with a final hour of work. Additionally, there had to be a two-hour block with no one inside the theatre and repeat the whole process for the next three-hour time block. It was surreal to see the entire stage at the DCP spaced out to accommodate the 16 Choristers—with about 16 feet of space between each singer, and with Chorus Director Grant Gershon atop a very tall podium at the foot of the stage leading us through the piece.

"The experience of stepping onto that stage and performing live, with an in-house audience, had a new, special meaning for me. The amazing opportunity to be a live artist again, after 15 months, in a hall that many of us call 'home', and with many colleagues I consider family, made this experience cathartic and brought exponential joy. What can I say—It was amazing to be back." Todd Strange, Tenor

"I wasn't prepared for the amount of emotion that Oedipus Rex stirred in me. The fact that we were onstage, rehearsing, and eventually performing, was the most satisfying moment of this pandemic. The whole



Russell Thomas sings the title role in LA Opera's June 6, 2021, concert performance of "Oedipus Rex."

experience brought me to tears multiple times, a state that I don't often find myself in. The best part is I felt safe. I knew the LA Opera was doing everything they could to ensure we were protected. Working on this project in a job I love at a company I love was like coming home." Whitney McAnally, Production Stage Manager.

Several of my colleagues also do studio recording work, so they were comfortable with the recording process. For those unaware, here is how it works: we each had a wireless headset to hear not only the Orchestra track, but also a "click track" to keep time and midi cues to lead in entrances. It took a bit of adjustment, but once we got the hang of it, it worked well. It was very odd not to hear our colleagues, and to simply "trust the booth" to reassure that balance was good. While we did record the piece from start to finish, it was broken up into bite-sized chunks or "cues," which would then be stitched together in post-production. A very wild experience! It was great to be back to work with my colleagues and in the theatre. During our long intermission the past year and a half, Zoom was good to help us maintain our creativity and connection, but as we all know, nothing compares to live and in-person.

Since the city of LA's COVID-19 numbers were trending so well, it was determined that a live presentation could be safely held, with all of the forces on stage—with the Orchestra, Chorus,



James Conlon conducts LA Opera's June 6, 2021, concert performance of "Oedipus Rex." Morris Robinson sings the role of Tiresias (center photo) and J'Nai Bridges sings the role of Jocasta (right photo), in LA Opera's concert performance of "Oedipus Rex." All photos above credit to Lawrence K. Ho

Soloists, and Music Director James Conlon conducting. To be COVID-19 compliant, everyone on stage had to be vaccinated and distances were established and maintained. The 80-piece orchestra was spaced out across the entire stage, with each member having their own stand and those who could wear masks, did (strings, percussion, piano). The brass were further spaced and at the back of the stage. DCP's orchestra pit was raised and held the singers and Maestro Conlon. The DCP can hold ~3300 seats, but only 25% capacity was allowed. Anyone wishing to attend the free concert had to either be fully vaccinated (2 weeks after their last shot) or show a negative PCR COVID-19 test. All attendees had to wear masks, regardless of vaccination status. Those who were vaccinated could sit in the Orchestra section, while those who

were not (and any vaccinated person who did not feel comfortable) were kept in the Founder's Circle or higher and spaced appropriately. It was a nice rush to sing in front of a live audience and they were very appreciative of our efforts.

"The process was rewarding, yet nerve-racking! I was both honored and flattered to be a part of this project. What was interesting however, was singing to a pre-recorded click track. Being in the Opera House and recording ALMOST felt like a performance. I think the most bizarre aspect of performing during the pandemic was the notion of recording. As a live performer, the nerves are high, but the moments are instantaneous and then they are gone...only to be part of someone's memory. When you record something, or do a live stream, the thought of this lasting forever and perhaps being representative of you as an artist forever and ever

is somewhat unsettling. I constantly found myself 2nd guessing everything I did for those sessions, yet I was very glad to be involved."

Morris Robinson, Bass

LAO picked Oedipus for several reasons—the relationship of Stravinsky and Los Angeles, the fact that the piece was less than an hour long (which would help get people used to sitting for future productions), and the subject matter of a city coming out of a plague.

"It was a great pleasure to work in this format. Now that the pandemic is under control here, I'm not sure if we'll ever do a production in this format again, but it was highly successful and did justice to the piece. I'd love to do another."

Robert Hovencamp, Bass

You can view photos here: <https://www.laopera.org/galleries/gallery/102> ■



LA Opera Chorus returns to work! Photo credit: Jennifer Wallace. Tannhäuser chorus rehearsal (Fall 2021).

Searching for Identity and Building Business



By Kristine Covillo Lynch
Dance and Former
AGMA Governor

I was, and perhaps I still am, a professional dancer in New York. Prior to the pandemic, I took a little break from performing. I have danced professionally on Broadway and in dance companies, working under AGMA contracts with Ballet Hispanico, The Metropolitan Opera, and Houston Grand Opera. I took a pause when I became pregnant with my first child. After my son was born, I contemplated going back to performing, but then quickly had another child. During my pregnancies, I went to graduate school to pursue Nonprofit Management. After graduating though, I once again felt compelled to go back to performing.

Then a global pandemic hit.

Now things are starting to open, and it seems like we may slowly be moving out of pandemic land. I no longer “need” to dance. I have acquired new skills and have enough household savings to survive without performing. But I still want to dance. It is hard to pinpoint exactly why I still feel drawn to it. Is it the attention, joy, or the adrenaline rush of performing? Is it missing the game of auditioning and booking jobs? Or is it because “dancer” has been my identity for nearly my entire life, and I don’t know who I am without it? Probably the latter.

I find myself constantly questioning my identity. Am I still a “dancer” if I’m not performing professionally? Am I okay with going by other monikers now? Could “mother,” “teacher,” “choreographer,” or “administrator/director” be my new appellation? I love all these things, but could these new titles replace my old identity of “dancer?”

I don’t have the answers to these questions, but what I do know about myself is that I can’t sit still. I must always be in forward motion, both literally and figuratively. This need to propel myself forward did not go away when everything shut down during the pandemic. This inner propulsion moved me into teaching dance again, and starting a business for online dance and fitness instructors.

During the shutdowns, I noticed a number of my dancer colleagues building their own fitness and health empires. It was amazing to see, but it made me realize that not everyone had the same opportunity to build the businesses my friends had. Not everyone has the time and money to build a fancy business website. Not everyone has celebrity friends or investor backing. Not everyone has thousands of social media followers.

I wanted to help everyday people build their empires without breaking the bank. I also wanted to help my friends who were struggling to manage their children, side hustles, and teaching businesses, all while juggling multiple apps like Google Calendar, SMS, Zoom, and Venmo.

That is why my husband and I developed the platform Zipclass together. Zipclass is an online platform that allows instructors

to schedule, teach, and get paid for their online dance and fitness classes, all from one easy place. It is free to use for instructors (students pay a small platform fee at checkout). It allows all my dancer, singer, yoga, Pilates, and personal trainer friends to connect with their students around the country and monetize their social media followings. Finally, it gives the power back to the teacher. Instead of having studios and gyms dictate when they teach and how much of a cut they receive, my fellow instructors can teach when they want and collect 100% of their earnings.

My title may or may not be “dancer” these days, but I guess I can add “entrepreneur” to the list now. ■

Music Heals Minds Los Angeles



By Nandani Sinha
Soloist

Hello, AGMA friends and colleagues. My name is Nandani Sinha but please call me Nani. I am an opera singer and the founder and Executive Director of Music Heals Minds (MHM) Los Angeles. Before I tell you about MHM, I would love to share with you a bit about the genesis and creation during the pandemic.

I am the daughter of two incredible parents who braved leaving the old world of Europe and Asia to create their family and future in the new world, America. That led to so many pioneering opportunities for them and their family. My father was a Professor of Sociology and one of the smartest people I know. My mother is equally brilliant and pursued her passion in Psychology.

We lived in New York and our family



Mrs. and Mr. Sinha

grew. I followed my passion for music with a degree in Operatic Performance and traveled the world to sing with opera companies and in festivals and concert

halls on almost every continent.

I moved to Los Angeles to continue my work in opera and made this beautiful city my home. A short time later, my father was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease and his version of the disease also brought forth Parkinsonian Dementia. This brilliant man, who I had looked up to my entire life, was fading before my eyes. Every visit home to New York, I saw a decline of cognitive function and recognition of me as his daughter. This led to the day where I was a stranger to my own father. He was frightened of me and would only find calm and peace in my presence if my mother was also there. My mother was his "person." The only "person" in the world who he recognized and depended upon solely. My poor mother was exhausted and overwhelmed like all caregivers in this position. Not only was she my father's everything, but she also had to be the bridge between my father and his own beloved children.

One day while visiting with my dad, and running out of conversation because of his difficulty to remember words and events, I sat in my parents' living room and started singing along to the songs on the radio. My father loved the radio and had it on at all waking hours. I sang along to famous arias sung by operatic legends and suddenly a light flashed in my father's eyes and he started singing along, conducting and talking about when he had seen this opera or that singer at the Met or New York City Center.

I was stunned. I thought I had lost my father, but he was still there! My dad was still there. I sobbed with relief and hope.

Unfortunately, his cognitive progress did not last long, and we were back to his decline, but every time we sang or played music that he knew, he was animated and active again. The music also brought him a sense of calm and peace that he did not

experience unless he was in my mother's company.

I returned to Los Angeles and my mother would take my father to the Met Live in HD broadcast at the movie theatre and my father would always pick out the mezzo-soprano and tell my mother all about his opera singer daughter and how she sings *Carmen*. Music was the gift that brought my father back to us. I did some research, consulted Music Therapist friends, and learned that because music is related to one of the five senses (hearing), it is regulated by the brain. It makes sense to utilize music listening to stimulate cognitive function in the same way that we use physical therapy to regain mobility and physical function in our limbs, muscles, and joints.

Additionally, I found music can also be used for more than just your loved one as a kind of healing.

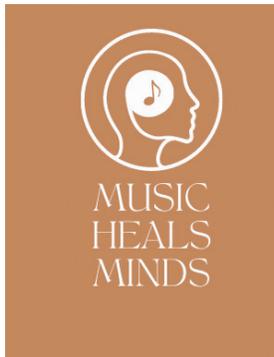
We know that caring for a loved one causes caregivers to experience heightened stress. Studies have shown that listening to music increases melatonin secretion (a hormone linked to mood control), reduced aggression and depression, and improved sleep. Using music to deal with these frequent issues voiced by caregivers might be beneficial.

When I returned to Los Angeles, I decided that since I could not be there daily to sing for my dad in person, I would commit to volunteering in Enliven Units throughout Los Angeles. Enliven Units are the memory care units in nursing homes and senior residences. I sang with companies such as Songs By Heart, Rancho Los Amigos, City of Hope, Los Angeles Opera Connects and Alzheimer's Los Angeles. It has been my pleasure to be a part of creating music programs that help people with dementia, Alzheimer's and brain injury to connect with themselves, the world and their caregivers in a



meaningful way again.

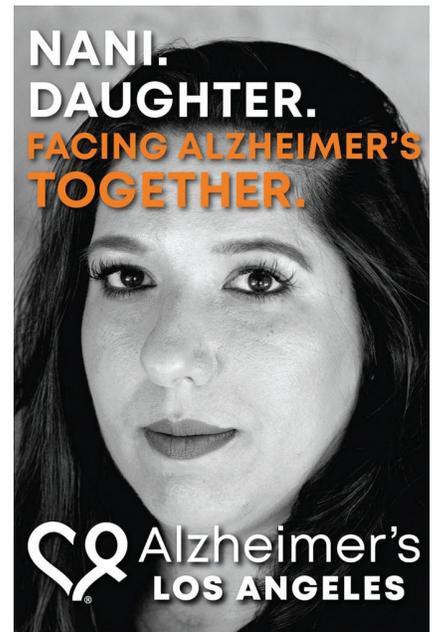
My father passed in June of 2015, and even though he passed and I was not able to engage with him musically anymore, I had built strong relationships and bonds with memory care communities in Southern California. I decided to honor my father and his legacy of a pioneering spirit by continuing my work and fulfilling a



need in this community for engaging and exciting programs. One of the hallmarks of my programs is that I bring to these communities songs in over 15 languages. I have brought songs to communities in Mandarin, Korean, Russian, Spanish, French, Gaelic, Finnish, Dutch, English, German, Hawaiian, Latin, Italian, and many more because my career as an opera singer prepared me to learn and have fluency with many languages. It is wonderful to bring music, but it is even more special to sing a song to someone in their native tongue that they associate with their childhood. These memories trigger such animation and clarity in cognitive function.

Due to the pandemic all my operatic work had been cancelled. I found that the memory care communities I had been singing for were also shut down for safety reasons. So, I shifted over to a virtual model privately for them. I also went public with this model weekly with Los Angeles Opera Connect's *Music to Remember* and monthly with Alzheimer's Los Angeles *Memory Mornings*, for the Alzheimer's and dementia communities at large. We spend Tuesday and Thursday mornings providing music, space, and some entertainment and relief to patients and their caregivers.

I am so proud to be a part of the LA Opera and Alzheimer's LA programs and am proud of our efforts in pushing this type of community service work forward and making music a part of the healing journey of dementia, Alzheimer's, and traumatic brain injury sufferers and their



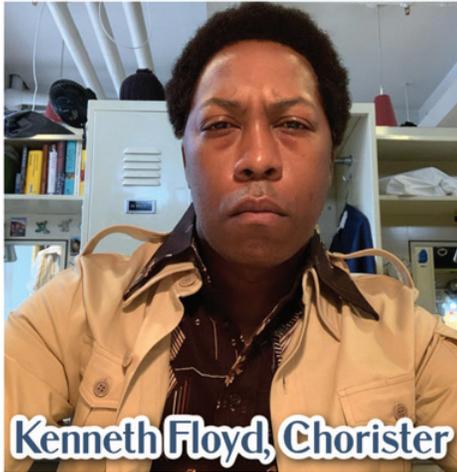
caregivers.

When I was a child, my father always told me, "Whatever you do, just make sure it's your job to leave the world a little bit of a better place than when you entered it."

So, this is my way of being able to do that and still work on my craft. I cannot tell you the calm and joy it brought to my life during this incredibly awful time in our history. I am very grateful for every song and session with these beautiful people. ■

Fire Shut Up in My Bones from a Singer and a Dancer

Interview conducted by AGMA's Director of Communications Alicia Cook



Kenneth Floyd, Chorister



Jōvan Dansberry, Dancer

Following an “intermission” that went on for what seemed like an eternity, opening night of the 2021–22 Met season optimistically arrived. Coming back from the shutdown notwithstanding, opening night was a historic occasion—it marked The Met’s first performance of an opera by a Black composer and Black director. The Met reopened its curtains with Terence Blanchard’s *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*. “*Fire*,” for short.

AGMA members Kenneth Floyd, Chorister, and Jōvan Dansberry, Dancer, were both featured in the production.

“I have long admired and followed Mr. Blanchard’s career via his film scoring and when I heard we were opening the season with his opera, *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, I was so elated.” expressed Kenneth Floyd, who has been a part of The Met Chorus since 2005. “The notion that, through the racial turmoil the nation was enduring while battling a global pandemic, and a grueling contract negotiation with The Metropolitan Opera formalizing many DEI initiatives, they would be opening the season with an opera about an African-American man, written by an African-American composer, and with an all African-American cast, was a bold move toward The Met becoming an industry leader in bringing diversity,

equity and inclusion to the stage and in programming.”

In March 2020, Floyd returned from a 10-minute break during a music rehearsal of *Simon Boccanegra* and learned those 10-minutes were going to extend much longer, due to COVID-19. He took a job as a COVID-19 Disinfection Technician on the set of a new Apple TV show. He was promoted after six months to the position of PPE Administrator and finished the run with the production company in July 2021, just in time to make history at The Met.

“There are going to be grand productions such as *La bohème* and *Turandot*, but it’s exciting to be a part of new productions that move outside traditional boundaries,” Floyd said. “I’ve enjoyed the film scoring of Terence Blanchard and Nico Muhly and now their operas are so accessible to the audience. Now if only we can get Howard Shore to compose an opera of *Lord of the Rings*. Ha!”

Floyd was featured in *The New York Times* in an article which chronicled the production from rehearsal to opening night. In the article, Floyd was quoted as saying that the performance felt “different because of new faces in the auditorium.”

“Growing up in the South as a young singer of classical music, often there

wasn’t much diversity in the audience at my recitals other than my family members and a few senior African-American women from my church who supported me.” he explained further to *AGMAzine*. “Usually, looking out into The Met’s audience during a performance, one could still see that lack of diversity. But this time, even before the curtain went up, the scene on the plaza was consumed by a sense of arrival and proudness on this historic night.”

Jōvan Dansberry was coming off the successful run of *Porgy and Bess* at The Met, as well as performing in *Le nozze di Figaro* and *La traviata*, when he got word that they’d be closing down. During the shutdown, he honed his acting skills, taking virtual acting classes and seminars and was cast in a few film and television projects. Dansberry was also involved in working to bring theater back, as a member of the Associate Board of Classic Stage Company (CSC), as well as The Met/AGMA Negotiating Committee.

“I still have such a hard time putting into words how momentous opening night of *Fire* was for me. There are so many layers,” Dansberry said. “Here we are, back on stage after a complete shutdown for 18-plus months. After the country has been truly shaken by a racial awakening, the first production to launch The Met season is this historic and incredible production led by The Met’s first Black composer and first Black director. And not only do I get to help create this historic moment, I get to be in the room with the actual composer, which is so unusual for a Met production. Watching Terrance work and make changes in real time was truly remarkable. I also got to perform with 11 dancers that I have also looked up to and been inspired by for years, but never got to share a stage with all together. Lastly, there are so many aspects of *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* that I can relate to as

a gay Black man. It gave me so much joy and pride to be a part of the telling of that story on The Met Opera stage.”

Dansberry has been a Dancer at The Met since 2014. Dancing at an opera house, compared to dancing at a ballet company, sometimes raises some eyebrows.

“I have spent a lot of time trying to explain to family and friends what I do when I say, ‘I’m a dancer at The Met Opera.’ They usually ask, ‘You’re an opera singer?’ and my new response is ‘Not yet!’” Dansberry shared with a laugh. “All kidding aside, what is truly unique about The Met Opera is that you are getting the best talent from all the Arts together on such a grand scale; the best singers, orchestra musicians, dancers, costumes, sets, and so on. For me, what is so important and transformative about incorporating dance and movement in these productions is that dancers are the physical essence that gives the music and story more life.”

Preparing for this production was no easy feat. Music rehearsals started early in the preseason and *Fire* was rehearsed alongside the other responsibilities of Met Artists.

“Before rehearsal started, I was nervous,” admitted Dansberry. “With the Delta Variant surging, we were wondering if we were going to have to shut down. After being out of practice for 18 months, I

was wondering if I was going to be able to retain choreography. But when I walked into the room, I saw so many familiar faces who were all available at the same time, because of the pandemic, to create magic together. We started with the Step number, and that required us to have a sense of brotherhood right away.”

While returning from a long hiatus would be emotional under any circumstances, for the Artists of The Met, their reunion was bittersweet because one of their own was missing. Chorister Danrell Williams, who unexpectedly died during the closure, was honored and remembered, and was there in spirit.

Opening night arrived and like Floyd and Dansberry described, it was a night to remember. *The New York Times* reported that the performers received an unbelievable eight-minute ovation.

“*Fire Shut Up in My Bones* is truly an extraordinary work and I think it’s so well received for many reasons. It’s groundbreaking for telling a Queer Black story, the representation of a Black fraternity on The Met Opera stage, as well as the dynamic movement that we don’t often get to see in an opera. I think it exhilarates the audience because they don’t often get to experience something like that. I hope that those people who did experience it left The Met with a lasting impression

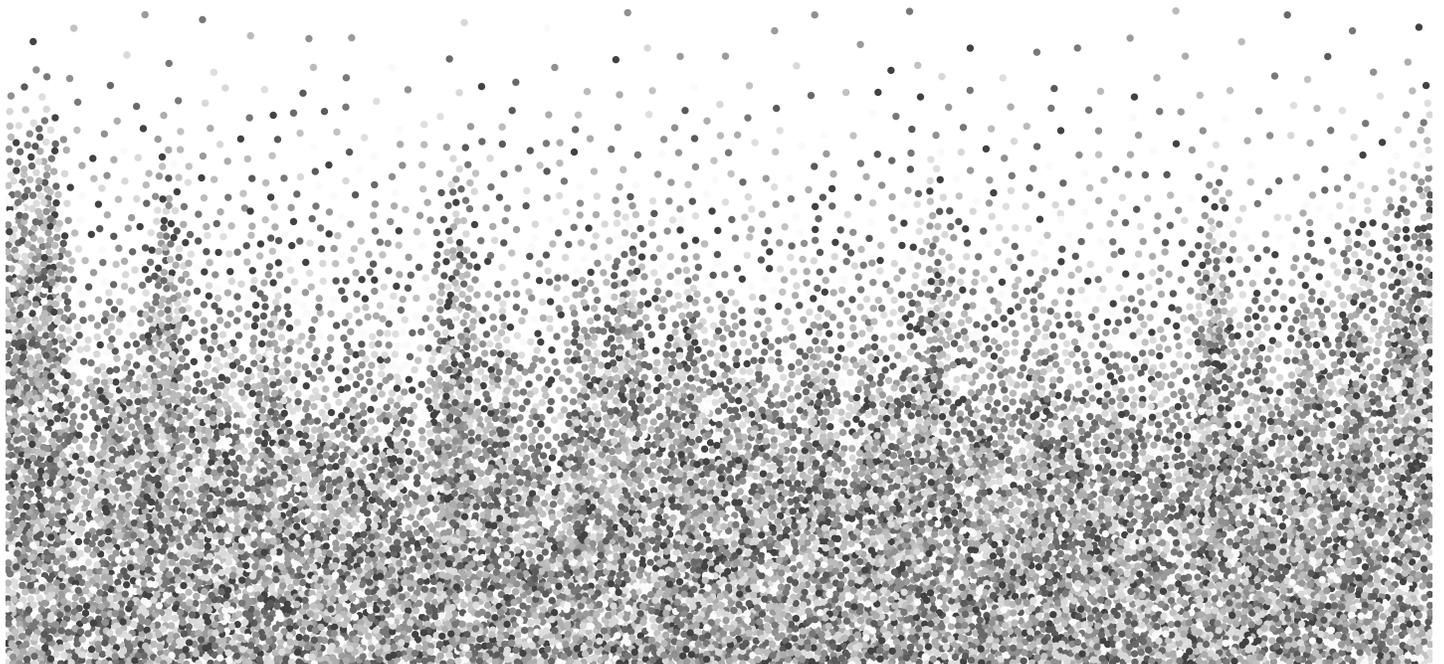
that there is a place for these stories to be told on a grand scale.”

At press time, Floyd and Dansberry were looking forward to safely completing the season at The Met.

“My hope for the future of opera is that it keeps finding ways to bring people inside,” Floyd said. “We need to keep educating so others realize that the genre is more accessible than they originally thought. I hope opera companies find ways to diversify their programming, so their audiences will see themselves reflected and know that they belong in the room.”

“I believe large Arts institutions often have been afraid to challenge norms,” added Dansberry. “My hope is that more well-established institutions can help propel new stories, storytellers, and Young Artists to the forefront. As for opera, I think we must realize that it can and should be for everyone. We have seen so many first-time opera goers with *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*. This is because we are telling a story about a community that hadn’t up to this point had a voice on that stage before – and there are so many more stories of others to tell!”

Readers can keep up with Kenneth Floyd and Jovan Dansberry on Instagram at @kennethefloyd and @jovan_dansberry. ■



Get Familiar with the AGMA Staging Staff Caucus

By Staging Staff Brian August, Eric Sean Fogel, and Jacqueline Reid



Jacqueline Reid, Eric Sean Fogel and Brian August

AGMAzine Note: AGMA encourages and embraces participation at the member level. Various member groups have organized and formed official AGMA caucuses to help bring to light areas of concern that a particular constituent group might have. Current AGMA caucuses include the AGMA Black Caucus, the AGMA Dancers Caucus, the AGMA Opera and Concert Choristers Caucus, and the AGMA Staging Staff Caucus. Below, the facilitators of the AGMA Staging Staff Caucus share all they have accomplished and hope to achieve in the year ahead.

The AGMA Staging Staff Caucus (SSC) launched in April 2021 and has been hosting monthly meetings ever since. Covering all Directors, Choreographers, and Stage Managers in both opera and dance, we look to cover topics that affect our entire membership. We've had a solid attendance record but hope that more of AGMA's staging staff members can join us this fall!

Our initial kickoff in April was a great success, where we discussed the goals of our caucus and future bargaining priorities for all staging staff nationwide. Another meeting was devoted to COVID-19 safety at summer festivals during which members spoke to their experiences (Kim Prescott even Zoomed in from the outdoor dress rehearsal at Opera Theatre of

St. Louis!). One of our goals is to further communication across all our job categories, and we feel that direct member involvement is how we can achieve this.

The next meeting focused on the start of our DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) work and we welcomed two incredible guest speakers. Narda Alcorn and Lisa Porter are friends, colleagues, and writing partners. We became aware of their work in the Summer of 2020 with their Howl-Round article "[We Commit to Anti-Racist Stage Management Education](#)" and we were so thrilled they were able to make time for the Staging Staff Caucus. A few weeks after they spoke with the caucus they were featured in an incredible [New York Times](#) article. We learned so much in such a short time from them. If you missed their moving talk and discussion don't worry, they will be back!

We closed the first quarter of the Caucus with a member-driven discussion about what returning to work has been

like and how we are all going about preparing for the fall season. We wrapped another meeting with a conversation about the use of honorifics in signage, paging, and paperwork. This discussion was incredibly useful to hear how our members are making steps to be more inclusive while providing guidance for those who are unsure where to even start.

We introduced our *Contract Comparison* and *Cheat Sheet* group projects that we hope you can all participate in. We're calling upon all our staging staff colleagues to help fill out our comparison documents that will facilitate better bargaining and help new colleagues as they come into these companies. To participate, please email us directly for access to these documents at stagingstaffcaucus@musicalartists.org.

As we look toward the future; we will be hosting meetings devoted to "union 101," dance/touring dance, staging staff technology, Intimacy/Fight Directors, and more.

All AGMA Staging Staff in good standing are encouraged to join our conversation! We hope that you can find the time to join us at our next meeting on December 20. This spring we will be hosting a National Staging Staff Week of Service, where our members will get out in their greater areas and give back to their communities.

If you'd like to get more involved with the Caucus, please reach us at stagingstaffcaucus@musicalartists.org – we hope to see you soon! ■

AGMA

STAGING STAFF CAUCUS

Cajai Fellows Johnson Takes Her Talents to the Met Gala

Interview conducted by AGMA's Director of Communications Alicia Cook

When the pandemic took hold in March 2020, New York-based AGMA Artist Cajai Fellows Johnson was performing as an ensemble member in *Frozen on Broadway*.

Suddenly, the curtain unceremoniously closed due to COVID-19, and the dancer/singer/actress found herself filling her time other ways. She did a lot of yoga with her partner, performed ballet on her kitchen counter, learned to do her own box braids, and cooked a lot at home. When winter in shutdown appeared, she snowboarded over 20 times, a favorite pastime that usually was put on hold thanks to her hectic performing schedule.

Flashforward to September of this year, and Fellows Johnson is back to work, in a major way.

With the return of the Arts came the return to the Met Gala, arguably one of the most exclusive and biggest fashion events of the year. The Met Gala, formally called the Costume Institute Gala or the Costume Institute Benefit and also known as the Met Ball, is an annual fundraising gala for the benefit of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute in New York City. Anna Wintour has served as Chair since 1995.

Fellows Johnson was a part of a company of about 25 Collina Strada-clad dancers at the Met Gala. The performance was featured in *Vogue*. According to the article, dancers “wove in and out and on top of dinner guests’ tables” as Broadway songs were performed. This signaled the reopening of Broadway.

“We had an audition that was just listed as a charity event, and it was a self-tape. Very top secret. I didn’t know what I had booked until I got the call that it was booked!” she shared. “I have to say it was pretty cool to be a part of the Met Gala in such a way. It’s such an exclusive ‘hush hush’ event and to be inside and literally

dancing on the tables was so fun.”

Fellows Johnson, along with the other dancers, received a “thank you” note from Anna Wintour herself. “That was DOPE,” she exclaimed. “The energy of the email felt very casual and personal. We also met her at a rehearsal. She was totally delighted at the product and was excited for us to liven it up!”

Fellows Johnson is the juggernaut of extending talents beyond just one realm of the Performing Arts Industry. Throughout her career, the multi-talented Artist has been on stage as a professional dancer at both opera houses and dance companies, and on Broadway. And, she has some advice for those entering an industry, say, like ballet, that might not realize how they can apply their talent in other genres and venues. “I would say to really hear when people say to not limit yourself. I actually have limited myself a lot in my life and once I have been pushed out of several comfort zones, it’s always benefited me,” she shared. “The discomfort of something new and difficult is really worth what you get out of the difficult work on the other side. Even as I hear that back, I think about how often I received a similar message and rolled my eyes; but really, it’s true.” Fellows Johnson is not taking for granted being able to return to her work and passion and she has no plans on slowing down. “It has been a truly wonderful experience coming back into live performance and I brought my cat Dobby with me,” she said, with a smile.

At press time, she is currently in rehearsals for Bizet’s *Carmen* at the Houston Grand Opera with direction and choreography by Rob Ashford. Along with her cat, she has returned with strengthened hopes for the Industry overall.

“We had a long time during the pandemic to rethink dance, opera, theater,



etcetera, especially when it comes to inclusion in race, gender identity, and body type,” she said. “Since coming back, some institutions made progress and it seems some others did nothing. I hope we continue to have conversations and make changes in the Arts that let people feel included as well as teach others more open ways of thinking!”

Readers can keep up with Cajai Fellows Johnson on Instagram: @cajmahal ■



From Clown to Carpenter: *The Story of Beppe*



By Eric Ferring
AGMA Board
Member and Soloist

Lyric Opera of Chicago's production of *I Pagliacci*, staged, recorded, and filmed in June, was released to the public online in August without charge. The Lyric has been one of many companies leading the way by producing vast amounts of online content for their loyal audiences in the Chicago/Midwest area, in addition to reaching opera-loving audiences across the United States and abroad. As a recent Ryan Opera Center alumnus (2018-2020), I was especially heartened to see

to what is now our beautiful, fully staged film. As we've all undoubtedly learned, flexibility is the name of the game in COVID-times. Led by the joint vision of Maestro Enrique Mazzola and the artistic administration at The Lyric (shout out to Cory Lippiello), this production seeks to show the characters of *Pagliacci* in a new light. In the first half of the film, viewers see us as ourselves (and in our own clothes!). Then once the "show" begins, we transform into a black & white, 1950's, *The Honeymooners*-esque show-within-a-show. If you are looking for a clown, you will find no painted faces or red noses here! Instead, you will see stagehands, carpenters, housewives, and a whole studio audience (performed by the one and only Lyric Opera Chorus) in the new, stunningly renovated seating at Lyric.

This was one of my first substantial



Exterior view of Lyric Opera of Chicago

day as the Lyric Opera Orchestra, Lyric Opera Chorus, principals, and staging staff were fully reunited for the first time since March 2020, and I was back "home" since graduating from the Ryan Center that same month.

I know I can speak on behalf of my colleagues and say that we are so excited to share this film with you, and I cannot wait to share the stage with each and every one of you in the coming months and years. Stay strong, stay healthy, stay imaginative, and keep making music!

Eric Ferring has been on the Board of Governors—Soloist, Midwestern Region—the last two years. He serves on the Administration and Policy Committee (APC). He has been a member of AGMA since 2015. ■



Lyric Opera of Chicago orchestra and stage

the Ryan Opera Center artists take center stage and shine in much of Lyric's season content this past year.

This particular production, directed by Peter McClintock, was originally conceived as a concert outside. As the world began to heal and vaccination numbers were on the rise, the production moved indoors, from a semi-staged production

performances and my first one back on a real stage in quite some time. Albeit a bit different than normal without an audience and with the intrigue (and confusion) that comes with a film set, you could still feel the potent electricity of performing with your colleagues every time they said "ROLLING!" Tears were in my eyes during our audio recording

COMBATING THE PANDEMIC WITH SCIENCE

In June of 2020, AGMA and Stage Directors and Choreographers Society (SDC) announced that they had engaged an Expert Medical Advisory Board to assist with COVID-19 safety planning and ensure that their members are protected.

Dr. Mark Cunningham-Hill, Dr. Laura S. Welch, and Dr. Stephen J. Anderson have multiple decades' worth of experience in protecting the health of employees and maintaining healthy workplaces. These experts worked with AGMA and SDC leadership to help identify safety concerns in the ever-changing COVID-19 environment, to ensure that safety concerns are addressed and best practices are implemented before artists return to work at AGMA's 60+ signatory companies and SDC's employers.

At the time of the announcement, the Executive Directors of AGMA and SDC shared a joint statement that read, "AGMA and SDC are ready to work together with our team of doctors and our signatory companies to navigate the complex decisions surrounding reopening. With the expertise of Dr. Cunningham-Hill and his colleagues, we are confident we will identify the risks, outline ways to protect everyone, and achieve an agreement for a safe reopening. We are confident that we will emerge from this crisis with the utmost focus on our members' health and safety."

In August of 2020, the unions released the first edition of the *AGMA/SDC Return to Work and Performing Arts Playbook*.

Word of the high-quality guidance of *The Playbook* quickly reached the entertainment industry as a whole and requests poured in for the unions to share *The Playbook* far and wide. Originally intended as an internal tool for AGMA and SDC, the unions were happy to make it widely available to the industry at large, because "we are all in this together."

The Playbook reflects the consensus recommendations of the Expert Medical Advisory Board and is updated as the



science and circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic dictate. It is currently in its fourth revision.

Each AGMA signatory company operates under different circumstances and conditions in terms of the type of work they do, the types of artists they employ, the layouts and conditions of their rehearsal studios and stages, their geographic location, the terms of their collective bargaining agreement, and more. The *Playbook* serves as AGMA's foundation for evaluating each signatory's proposed COVID-19 safety protocols and working with them to finalize safety plans that mitigate as much risk as possible and allow our members to return to work safely.

In addition to *The Playbook*, AGMA and SDC, alongside their medical experts, hosted a series of webinars for their unions' members, each focusing on the unique challenges of specific disciplines, including dancing, singing, directing, and choreography. Over 1,000 members tuned in live for the in-depth presentations and discussions. AGMA members can revisit these webinars by visiting that section of the website, behind the *MyAGMA* portal.

Beginning in December of 2020, AGMA and SDC began releasing "guidance" documents between *The Playbook* revisions. Together they released a Special Guidance on the surge (Dec. 2020) and on vaccinations and testing (May 2021).

In August 2021, AGMA, separate from SDC, released a guidance on the Delta Variant and in September 2021 AGMA released a guidance for productions

including children under 12 years of age. In November, AGMA released its Updated Guidance on Masking/Testing for Dancers.

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.

All documents described above are available here: <https://www.musicalartists.org/sdc-agma-playbook/> ■

Introducing The New & Prospective Member Resource Page

For first-time members or those thinking of joining AGMA, this resource page will jumpstart their AGMA experience. The important information compiled here will come in handy for current, and longtime members, as well.

Unveiled in June 2021, this page will take the place of paper

packets and will be updated as needed.

A one-stop shop, the *New and Prospective Member Resource Page* houses information on what a union is, what it means to be an AGMA member, how to apply for membership, information on dues, who the elected leadership and staff are, and much more.

The page includes a complete orientation video as well as an instructional video for how to access and navigate the *MyAGMA* portal.

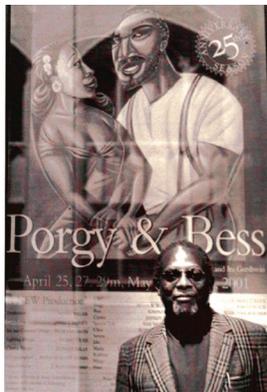
We recommend that all members bookmark the *New and Prospective Member Resource Page* in their browsers for easy reference at any time. If you know of anyone who is curious about AGMA and looking to learn more about the Union, please share the URL with them.

<https://www.musicalartists.org/new-member-information/> ■



The Drama of *PORGY AND BESS*: Director's Notes

By Henry Miller, Director



A 2001 photo of Henry Miller in front of the Academy of Music in Philadelphia where *Porgy & Bess* was staged in 2001.

Published Aug. 2000 in the Indianapolis Opera Education Guide to *Porgy and Bess* and for The School District of Philadelphia

and The Opera Company of Philadelphia.

From the very beginning it was the dramatic elements in DuBose Heyward's 1925 widely acclaimed novel, *Porgy*, that made his wife, Dorothy Heyward, an aspiring dramatist, confident that her husband's book about what was then called "Negro life" belonged on the stage. It took Mrs. Heyward more than a year to convince her husband that *Porgy's* star-crossed lovers (Porgy and Bess), two homicides, its almost explicitly sexual, coercive seduction scene, and its epic South Carolinian storm harbored enough dramatic power to overcome the racial and racist conventions entrenched in mid-1920s American theatre. Heyward's book, about a coastal community of poor Southern Negroes,

had won national acclaim because of its sensitive, non-patronizing, yet sympathetic treatment of its predominantly black characters. A poet, a native South Carolinian, and son of a genteel poor mother who had lectured on the Gullah culture of South Carolina's blacks, Heyward had a lifelong sensitivity to his African American subject matter, and he knew that, historically, there had been no such sensitivity in mainstream American theatre.

So, Dorothy Heyward worked secretly on a stage adaptation of her husband's book, and it was many long months before she summoned the courage to show him the fruits of her labor. When she showed Heyward her manuscript, he was finally convinced that it was time to change

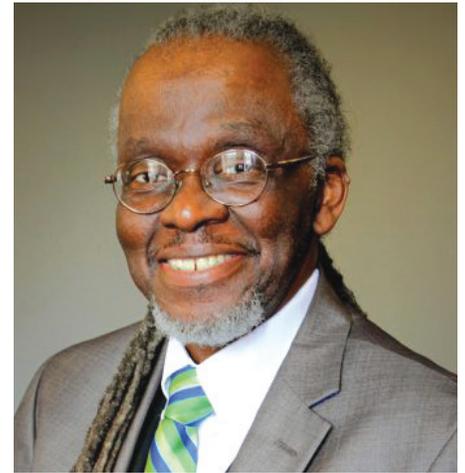
mainstream theatre's depiction of African American subject matter; and, in 1927, *Porgy*, a four-act drama by Dorothy and DuBose Heyward, became the Theatre Guild's new hit play in New York City. *Porgy*, the play, laid the groundwork for *Porgy and Bess*, the opera (Ira, Gershwin's brother, with DuBose Heyward, wrote the opera's lyrics). Initially, the Heywards had pursued the prospect of presenting *Porgy* as a straight dramatic play with some trepidation. Like Dorothy Heyward, George Gershwin had seen the dramatic potential in Heyward's novel and had, shortly after its success, written the Heywards about the possibility of adapting the novel into an opera. The Heywards feared that presenting *Porgy* as a play would dampen Gershwin's interest in it as an opera. But Gershwin, a true man of the theatre as well as an extraordinary composer of uniquely American music, informed the Heywards that he was encouraged by their plan to first adapt *Porgy* to play form; the completed play would, he said, become the dramatic foundation of his proposed opera.

By 1925, Gershwin had used music on many occasions in the musical theatre to enhance and develop dramatic structure. According to Hollis Alpert, he was especially adept at repeating musical themes to tie together loose plots and sharpen vaguely formed dramatic events. Thus, between Mrs. Heyward and George Gershwin the issue of drama became central to the creation of *Porgy and Bess*; their concerns with the mastery of the techniques of dramatic storytelling (plot, characterization, and the magnification of dramatic event) insured that *Porgy and Bess*'s libretto, as Conductor James Carner has noted, would be no "mere device for presenting beautiful music." Moreover, Gershwin's attention to dramatic detail was, in many ways, a return to the very foundations of operatic form. It calls to mind Richard Wagner's 19th-century concerns with opera as "total theatre," and takes us back to the beginnings of the opera in the late 16th century. The Camerata of Florence, a fraternity of the city's noted artists, had, after all, created opera with the intention of recapturing, in

Wagner's words, the apparent "total artwork" structure of classical Greek drama, a drama in which music played a major, perhaps dominant, role. To ancient Greek audiences the dramatist Sophocles was first known not only for his great beauty, but also for his mastery of dance and the flute. Our word "orchestra" comes to us directly from the ancient Greek stage; it was the circular space just in front of the stage or playing area where, apparently, even in Greek tragedies, musicians and dancers performed. Greek choruses, of course, were almost always composed of dancers and singers who could also recite dialogue. For the 16th-century Florentines, the obvious presence of so much music on the classical Greek stage meant that the glory of ancient Greek drama could not be recaptured without music—a lot of music. Thus, they created The Opera.

The "bill of divorcement," so to speak, between drama and music which soon overtook the performance of the operatic form was a definite step away from the Florentines' original intent. And perhaps, in the long performance history of the opera, it was Richard Wagner in the 19th century and George Gershwin in the 20th who, more than any other major composers, return us to the Camerata's original goals. It is certainly almost beyond question that with *Porgy and Bess*, Gershwin single-handedly established American opera as a dramatic as well as a musical art form.

I have recounted all of the above to underscore the injunction that the stage director of *Porgy and Bess* who forgoes the apparent ancient inseparability of music and drama insisted on by Wagner and Gershwin proceeds at his or her own risk. To be sure, in *Porgy and Bess*, the conventions of performance which attach themselves to any work that has held the stage for sixty-five years can make Gershwin's called-for a marriage of music and drama a rather daunting task—a task which, by the way, must also account for the shifts in the perceptions of contemporary audiences. Further, despite all the hurdles it had jumped in presenting, for the first time, an all-black-cast opera in 1935, the original production of *Porgy and Bess* was



Above is a photo of the late Felix Cochren (1951-2019), designer of both the set and costumes for the co-production of Porgy & Bess. It was the first time in long history of this all-black opera that the set and costume designer, and the stage director were African American.

not wholly free of both the theatrical and, in some instances, literary conventions which mainstream audiences and readers associated with Negro life. The insensitive conventions of Negro performance in mainstream theatre which Heyward had feared early on were not altogether overcome.

Perhaps, in an effort to gain success with what they knew would be white critics and mostly white audiences, the Heywards and the Gershwins, superficially at least, left room in their libretto for Negro performance conventions consistent with the widespread and mostly stereotype-ridden view of Negro life. *Porgy*, for example, can be performed as a poor Negro cripple and an eventual back-stabber (he kills Crown with the proverbial knife) for whom we should feel an essentially patronizing pity; Bess could easily be a loose and rather fickle woman totally under the sway of her need for drugs and rough sex. Crown's portrayal could be limited to the delineation of an almost inexplicably insensitive "big black buck," and Sportin' Life can be a basically harmless and cowardly mulatto, a bantamweight gadfly who, chiefly because of Bess's fickleness, ends up with the girl. These were all Negro performance conventions with which the mainstream theatre establishment of the day felt comfortable, and that mostly white audiences could easily identify with what they felt to be the prevailing authenticity of Negro



The powerfully romantic photo of the late Arthur Woodley (1949-2020) as Porgy and Ms. Kishna Davis as Bess from the co-production by the Indianapolis Opera and The Opera Company of Philadelphia. The production was part of the 25th anniversaries celebrations of both opera companies.

life. It mattered not, in the still severely segregated world of 1935, that what was often taken for authentic Negro life was, in reality, authentic Negro theatrical performance conventions inherited, ironically, first from the early 19th-century white, blackface Minstrelsy, then from the Negro Minstrelsy beginning in the 1860s, and, finally, from early 20th-century Negro musical comedy. The accepted and prevailing conventions of Negro performance and Negro authenticity in 1935 were most often a case of Life imitating Art rather than one of Art imitating the depth and diversity of African American life.

However, in defense of whatever compromises the Gershwins and the Heywards made to get *Porgy and Bess* to the stage, it must be recalled that few seminal theatre works ever attained the stage without accommodating the performance conventions of their day. Looking forward to the 20th century while still in the 19th, in *A Doll House*, Ibsen supplied his audience and critics with at least the outlines of a villain (Nils Krogstad), an innocent heroine (Nora), an old faithful servant (Anne Marie, a nurse), and the traditional young leading man (Torvald Helmer, Nora's husband). All of these character types were, of course, modern, three-dimensional psychological re-workings of the two-dimensional stock characters which 19th-century European

theatre had inherited from the 18th-century *commedia dell'arte*.

In a very real sense, Gershwin and the Heywards appeared to have followed Ibsen's lead. In 1935, looking forward to an historical moment when African American art and life would be judged a major contribution to the American cultural mosaic, Gershwin and the Heywards manipulated the mainstream Negro theatrical conventions of their day to create the work that was to become the beginning and foundation of American opera. Fortunately, in this production of *Porgy and Bess*, we can look anew at the issues of drama with which Dorothy Heyward and George Gershwin were so vitally concerned, and we can do this unencumbered by the performance and literary conventions of 1935. We can ask real questions about the opera's text and dramatic structure using only the performance codes lurking in its music, in the lyrics of both its full and truncated arias, and in its sequence of events. We may ask, for example, is *Porgy and Bess* primarily a story of star-crossed lovers—a theme close to Richard Wagner's heart—or a realistic socio-dramatic investigation of a small Southern black community? If, as we are told, Porgy has a special, innate wisdom, then how is it that he falls in love with the essentially fickle Bess? Is Bess fickle or is she a vulnerable and complex woman who has insight into her own personal tragedy? Is her attraction to Crown primarily about sexual desire or about protection in the unsavory world which many uneducated, poor, but beautiful women must negotiate? What does Crown's heroism tell us about the true nature of his character? Is Crown or Sportin' Life the villain of the piece? Is Sportin' Life, again as we are told, really a New Yorker? Is he weak and ineffectual or dangerous and clever as are most New York pimps and drug pushers?

In this production of *Porgy and Bess*

we will be answering all of the above and many other vital questions which bear upon the ancient and enduring issue of the marriage of music and drama in the operatic art form. Happily, the beauty and power of George Gershwin's music has given *Porgy and Bess* the longevity which affords us this unique opportunity. We will certainly try to make the most of it.

Sources:

The Life and Time of Porgy and Bess: The Story of an American Classic by Hollis Alpert;

The History of the Theatre, 7th edition by Oscar G. Brocke ■



AGMA Abroad: Dancer Tom Boettcher Ventures Half a World Away

By Amisha Patel and Ruth Steinman (members of Tom Boettcher's staff)

AGMA dancer/actor Tom Boettcher should get an award for “most exotic adventure” of the COVID-19 era, landing a hemisphere away from Manhattan in New Zealand. We asked Boettcher how he ended up in the place everyone wants to be, a starkly wild yet beautiful country that has successfully limited community outbreak of the virus. “For me, it was a good time to find inspiration abroad, so why not head in the opposite direction, to almost Antarctica?”

Boettcher noted that, “performers are challenged to innately understand timing, both on stage and in their lives. Under my circumstances, my ‘call’ to a new venue means contributing to the artistic community in broader ways.” Boettcher has performed in multiple productions with the greatest artistic companies around the world. His dancing role in Bejart’s *Bolero* for Paris Opera Ballet’s Summer US Tour complemented performances in multiple Mariinsky Ballet, Royal Ballet, ABT and Joffrey productions in Chicago, Washington, D.C. and New York. He has even hammered the anvils in Lyric Opera Chicago’s production of Verdi’s *Il Trovatore*, but his latest endeavor marks a different kind of rhythm in a very different place.

Following productions in Chicago and Manhattan, Boettcher made a stopover in his hometown of Wilmington, DE (yes, coming from that small state, he has had a variety of interactions with the current POTUS), before heading to Dunedin, on NZ’s South Island. “This charming town is just about as far south on the globe as most humans prefer to live, yet still be able to partake of a performance by RNZB (Royal New Zealand Ballet). The climate is often challenging, but the people are hearty and friendly. I just wish they drove on the “right” side of the road.” Part of the attraction is nearby University of Otago’s

neuroscience program and close access to the massive fjordlands of the west coast.

But what is he working on way down under? “I am looking to perfect neuromuscular methods applied to movement, whether on stage, in competition, or just walking to Washington Square.” Few of his fellow performers know of Boettcher’s parallel career at the renowned research organization Bell Labs, or his numerous innovations in applied human stance and movement. He is a Mensan who has authored the international fitness best-seller *Core Training: For Greater Strength and Better Health*, as well as several works on computation, human quantification, and innovative data structures. “On-stage performance is only one aspect of what I do, similar to many fellow dancers. We understand that more is expected of us than stage work alone. Dancing as art is a bridge to reaching the mind and enhancing the body. That applies to anyone and everyone. We are entering an era when audiences will ask more in terms of interaction and connection.”

Boettcher and his research colleagues have provided guidance and technological intercession to some of the greatest athletes in the world. Many have thrived in the Olympics and Formula One races due to his insights. “All competitors, Olympians included, are similar to artistic performers. We all have to be ready and on call at an announced, scheduled time. . . Races and matches are not unlike our productions on stage, all done in front of audiences, under pressure, and we must all summon our best in the moment.” Boettcher is already known worldwide for record-setting open water butterfly swims in Lake Michigan’s Big Shoulders Race, the Escape from Alcatraz, Brooklyn Bridge butterfly crossing, Hudson River extreme fly swims, and a Montreal all-fly at World Champs, a FINA



His dancing role in Bejart’s *Bolero* for Paris Opera Ballet’s Summer US Tour.

first. He knows what it is like to be an athlete under pressure.

Boettcher’s work on the neuromuscular basis of stance and movement has been profiled in the WSJ and applied to clientele from a variety of disciplines. His talent fits uniquely in a country that loves and respects all varieties of athletic endeavor. NZ’s Olympic Swim Coach has already sought his input for technique and method insight in preparation for the Tokyo 2020 Games. Boettcher surprised NZ’s extreme athletics community last January 2021, becoming the first to swim Lake Wanaka’s “Ruby” Open Water 2.5 Km race all butterfly, quite an accomplishment in sub-60-degree fjord land mountain water.

What can we expect as a result of Boettcher’s latest endeavors? “Innovation, always. If you are looking for the latest really exciting biomechanical insights, Paralympics are where it’s at now. We have some nice work going on there. You will see some really inspiring individuals facing seemingly insurmountable odds. Physiological innovation is happening all over the place, at every level. Terrific human stories. Massive courage and mastery of self, it’s all there. Just imagine if we created some dynamic choreography around the powerful core body movements these athletes are already deploying. We all have a great deal to learn from each other.”

“Racers and artists care about similar body challenges: risk mitigation and performance optimization, delivering our best on cue and in maintenance of ongoing capability,” he added. “Solid careers have few secrets, just meticulous, nonstop reinforcement of excellence in strengthening and alignment work. This is the same stuff I have taught to all ages starting at Ruth Page Ballet in Chicago and the same stuff I do myself each day. Honestly, it can be a grind, but there is no substitute for consistently working hard and working right”.

Even in a city with relatively close proximity to Antarctica, Boettcher is never far

from the teaching world of dance. He and partner Xiaowen Yu conducted a waltz demonstration over Zoom following a worldwide Scottish Country Dance lesson led by Yu, who is a certified instructor in this unique discipline. “It may interest our AGMA colleagues to discover that Scottish is close to ballet in its technique and method specifications. And everyone can enjoy the classical lines of an elegant waltz.”

Boettcher’s adventure will soon be completed and his return will mirror the retreat, or easing, of travel impediments, aiming to attend a neuroscience

conference Stateside. “I am looking forward to getting back on stage in the major venues, as well as catching up with AGMA colleagues. We all have a challenge as performers to fill the house, draw our crowds back, help them understand the beauty of our endeavors the way we do, and maybe even benefit from our insight for their own health and well-being. For all of us, three key words: “back on stage.”

Tom Boettcher can be reached via email: tom@infocus.com. ■

Lyric Opera Stage Artists Earns 501(C)(3) Status



Three co-incorporators of LOSA Cathy Dunn, Tyler Lee, and Pam Williams

September 7, 2021, Lyric Opera Stage Artists (LOSA) received the exciting news that they are now an official 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.

“Reaching this status is a dream come true that will allow LOSA to keep up our important mission while also expanding into new and more ambitious territory,” said Cathy Dunn, LOSA Board President and AGMA member since 1991. “We strive to serve our community of Chicagoland in a meaningful way. Now being able to receive donations and apply for grants will propel LOSA to the next level. This has been an exciting development for all of us.”

She added, “We cannot thank Bob Downs enough, a friend and longtime

LOSA and Lyric supporter. He donated his legal expertise and helped us with this process, pro bono.”

LOSA was formed in 2018 and was incorporated in 2020 by co-founders Cathy Dunn, Tyler Lee, and Pam Williams. It is a “pro Artist” service organization of current and former members of the AGMA shop at Lyric Opera of Chicago, including Choristers, Principal Artists, Ryan Opera Center Artists, Actors, Dancers, Choreographers, Stage Management, and Stage Directors. All members of LOSA are volunteers and do not receive compensation. It is led by a volunteer board of nine people, including LOSA members and co-founders Dunn, Lee, and Williams, as well as Amanda Runge, and non-members Bradford Newquist, Reid Taylor, Judge Kenneth Wright, Sam Ramey, and Dan Pyne.

LOSA aims to give back to the community by bringing opera to people who otherwise might not have been introduced to the art form or can no longer attend at the opera house. LOSA has participated in many community outreach

programs including volunteering at food banks, hosting concerts in senior centers, and sponsoring a tee-ball team. An excerpt of its mission statement reads, “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 congratulate LOSA for achieving such a significant milestone in their important work. As the performing arts emerge from the restrictions of the past 18 months, LOSA’s focus on bringing the power of music and theater to as wide an audience as possible is even more critical,” stated Elizabeth Hurley, Chief Advancement Officer, Lyric Opera of Chicago.

Since its formation, LOSA has put on over 140 performances (this includes over 100 virtual performances throughout the pandemic), partnering with numerous senior living residences and senior community groups as well as many nonprofit organizations throughout Chicago. LOSA has organized special fundraising concerts that supported Bushfire Relief for Australia, By the Hand Club for Kids, OPRF



Infant Welfare Society, and local food banks.

All of this was accomplished by members of LOSA volunteering their time and reaching into their own pockets to cover expenses, with some of the partnering organizations paying accompanists outside of LOSA directly.

With its official 501(c)(3) status, LOSA is actively planning new ways to reach the community, especially when it comes to

raising funds for future outreach projects and providing assistance to Lyric Artists. A benefit concert is in the works.

“Artists supporting Artists is something we love to see at AGMA,” said Len Egert, National Executive Director of AGMA. “We applaud the AGMA members who have done so much wonderful work as part of Lyric Opera Stage Artists and congratulate them on this great achievement.”

Tax-exempt donations can be made in

support of Lyric Opera Stage Artists by visiting www.lyricoperastageartists.org/donate/ or sending a check to LOSA at 924 N Euclid Avenue, Oak Park, IL 60302. Any AGMA Artists at Lyric Opera of Chicago, whether or not they are currently under contract at Lyric, are encouraged to become a part of LOSA. For more information, email communications@lyricoperastageartists.org. ■

Making Sense of Board Governance...I Hope: *My Quest to Conquer AGMA's Board Handbook*



By **Andres Garcia**
AGMA Board
Member and Dancer

When I was first asked to consider joining AGMA's Board of Governors, I wasn't sure what I would be getting myself into. Having no prior board experience, I was unfamiliar with what a board was, let alone what one did and how one operated. Outside of mandatory annual Board meetings at Boston Ballet and hearing the phrase “*The Board*” thrown around at fundraisers and across the table when negotiating, I wasn't sure what my specific duties and responsibilities were going to be.

Fortunately, after joining, I was able to get acquainted with the help of my fellow Board members, some AGMA-provided Board materials, and a significant number of Google searches. While no *Board Source* search replaces on-the-ground experience, I've always been interested in how AGMA can improve the onboarding process to make the transition to the Board easier for incoming Governors.

AGMA's Board is a volunteer board,

made-up of AGMA members who are passionate artist advocates. The Board dedicates their time to improving the Union and the working lives of fellow members. I know firsthand how daunting it can be to get familiarized and comfortable with the many important and intricate duties and responsibilities of the Board and, more than anything, I didn't want that feeling to intimidate or discourage those wishing to serve. The strength of AGMA's Board lies in its ability to provide working members the opportunity to serve at the leadership level. So, when presented with an opportunity to help improve the onboarding experience for the incoming class of AGMA Board members, I jumped at the chance.

Like many artists, the pandemic forced me to confront what a future without performing was going to look like. Abundant free time is not my preferred natural state, so I used the forced time away as an opportunity to continue my education. After graduating in May 2020 with a degree in Liberal Studies and Business, I figured I would forge ahead with pursuing a Masters, which led me to Northeastern University's Nonprofit Management Graduate Program. Having grown up, volunteered, and worked in performing arts' nonprofits and nonprofit labor organizations, a future career in the nonprofit

sector seemed like a natural fit and one that would allow me to bring my experiences as an artist and Union leader to my education. My *Legal and Governance Issues in Nonprofit Organizations* course was the perfect avenue to take coursework from the (virtual) classroom into the real-world for broader application. It was in this class that I got the push I needed to start developing AGMA's new and improved Board Handbook.

While I wish I could say I took the initiative all on my own, tackling the AGMA Board Handbook started as a course assignment. Initially instructed to develop a Board Handbook that covered the legal requirements, duties, and obligations of nonprofit board members, I recognized the opportunity to turn the project into something bigger, more detailed, and more valuable to the Union. Coincidentally and unbeknownst to me, AGMA had already set the goal of revising an updated Board Handbook that was to be ready for roll-out for the upcoming June 2021 Board Term. With six weeks to write, a lot of ground to cover, and the blessing of AGMA's staff, I took on the Herculean task of updating and rewriting AGMA's Board Handbook.

Having gone through the onboarding process and experienced the challenge of finding my footing as a Board member, I

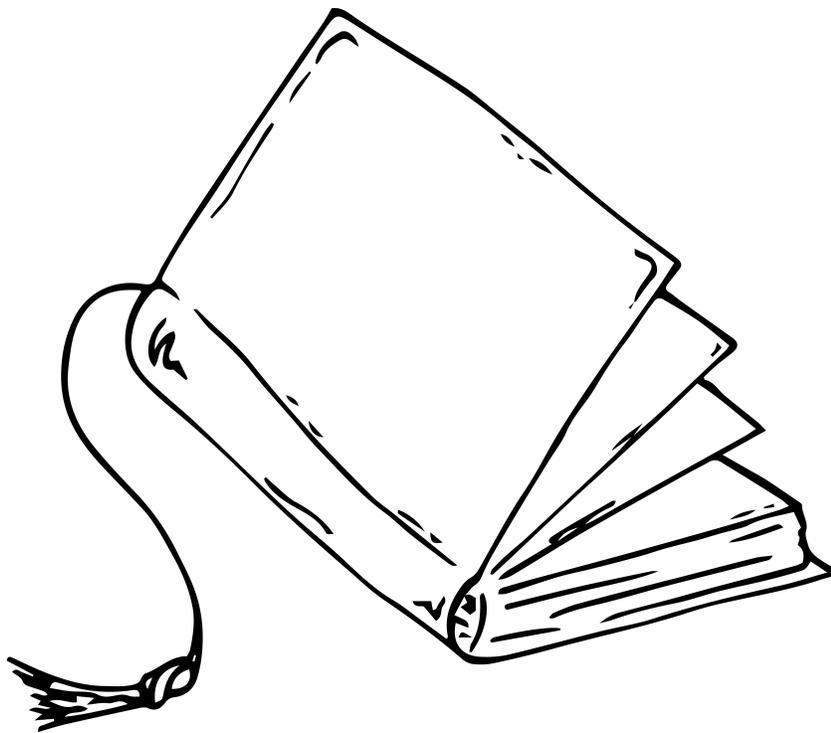
knew I could bring a unique perspective to what could otherwise be a long and boring document, and I wanted to go beyond simply updating what was already in use. More than anything, I wanted to develop a comprehensive and informative resource that would equip incoming (and returning) Board members with the information needed to understand how AGMA and its Board operates, while remaining approachable, engaging, and user friendly.

In charting my course, I wanted the Handbook to flow and to lead new members through the complex and intricate layers of the Union's governance. Starting with background covering AGMA's 501(c)(5) status as a non-profit labor organization, I chose to work from the top down, moving from the Union's governance structure and Board categories,

to the legal and fiduciary duties and responsibilities of the Board, to the legal, Constitutional, and ethical responsibilities of the Board's individual Officers and Governors. It was within this framework that I was able to explain and bring clarity to best practices, challenging legal concepts, common pitfalls, and standard guidelines and ground rules. It was also within this framework that I was able to bring empowerment, a sense of duty, and the high-minded ideals of ensuring that AGMA's Board leads ethically and morally in the service and for the benefit of AGMA's members.

Throughout my service as a Governor, I've developed a love and appreciation for the work of the Board and its many nuances and quirks. But it was through the process of rewriting AGMA's Board Handbook that I was able to reflect on

and share this love and passion with like-minded Artists called to service to make our workplaces and industries better. While the final Board Handbook is substantial and a source of great pride (though it may have given me carpal tunnel), I'm most proud of the positive impact it will have on the Union and the legacy I've been able to leave, long after my time on the Board ends. In writing the new AGMA Board Handbook I developed a deeper understanding and appreciation of AGMA, and in the process, learned a lot about myself and what has drawn me to Board service. I hope, as new Board members sit down to read the Handbook, that they will find the same sense of purpose and, if I've done my job, a sense of comfort and preparedness as they take that transitional leap to the Union leadership. ■



Getting to Know Baritone Ethan Vincent

Hailed as “a rising star” by the Philadelphia Inquirer, Ethan Vincent is rapidly gaining recognition as a versatile artist with a “robust baritone voice and compelling stage presence” (Chicago Tribune).

The 2021-22 season is filled with role and house debuts for Mr. Vincent, including Riolo in Daniel Catán’s *Florencia en el Amazonas* at Lyric Opera of Chicago (where he once worked in the sales department!); singing Don Fernando in *Fidelio* with the Los Angeles Philharmonic; and taking on Schaunard in *La bohème* with Cincinnati Opera to round out the season.

Mr. Vincent has garnered numerous awards from around the globe including 1st place prize winner and Sergio Franchi Music Foundation Award recipient of the Rising Stars Vocal Competition at Vero Beach Opera; the 1st place winner of the Young Patroness of the Opera Competition; the second prize winner of the Cooper-Bing Competition in Columbus, Ohio, the 2019 Nicola Martinucci Competition in Lucca, Italy; and the third prize and audience favorite award winner at Paris Opera’s Mozart Awards Competition. In addition, he was a 2018 national semi-finalist in the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions.

Mr. Vincent hails from Kansas City, Missouri. He attended the Academy of Vocal Arts in Philadelphia. He holds both a B.A. and M.A. in Voice Performance from Northwestern University. While at Northwestern, Mr. Vincent was awarded the coveted Bienen School of Music Eckstein Full Scholarship Fellowship and was the dean’s choice to sing for President Barack Obama.

AGMAzine caught up with the busy Artist to talk about his life throughout the pandemic and what his future holds. Alicia Cook, Director of Communications at AGMA, conducted the interview.

—
Alicia Cook (AC): Thanks for chatting with us, Ethan. We need to start



somewhere, so let’s start in March of 2020. Tell us what you were doing right before the pandemic took hold.

Ethan Vincent (EV): I had just finished covering the role of Tomsy in *The Queen of Spades* with The Lyric Opera of Chicago right as the pandemic began to take shape. I was scheduled to make a house debut with Opera Philadelphia in *Madame Butterfly* and then to return to the Lyric again to cover Ezio in *Attila* later in the fall, but both productions were either canceled or postponed due to COVID-19.

Despite the pandemic, however, I joined Tulsa Opera and covered the title role in their production of *Rigoletto*, which was performed outdoors on a baseball diamond. I then had the opportunity to travel to Taiwan to make my international debut as Marcello in *La bohème* with the Taichung National Theater. COVID-19 cases nearly dissipated in Taiwan at the time, which allowed people to go about their daily lives. When I arrived in Taiwan, I was required to quarantine for two weeks. I lived in complete isolation enjoying the three meals a day that magically appeared at my hotel door in a plastic bin. I spent my days creating electro-pop music on my Mac, sketching, and watching a copious amount of the Travel Channel until the episodes began to

repeat themselves. Somehow, I managed to not lose my mind...completely.

The National Theater had no problem filling the auditorium to capacity with a fully masked audience. This production of *La bohème* strayed from the traditional take. I had a great time splattering buckets of paint on the back wall of the theater at the top of the show, creating a modern art piece that served as the backdrop for the rest of the opera. I remember watching Shao-Chia Lü conduct on the black and white backstage monitor prior to my first entrance. The glow of the eager eyes of the covered-mouthed mass behind him spoke a thousand words over to the strange dystopia we were collectively experiencing together; Something I will never forget.

AC: Wow. You’ve been BUSY. Your recent part with Santa Fe Opera was that of understudy. Can you speak to us about what that’s like? How do you prepare? If you are preparing to take the stage in the absence of the other Artist, talk about what your day-to-day is like.

EV: I prepare the same way to cover a role as I do when I am hired to perform it. Tackling a large role can be a daunting task and can be overwhelming if you don’t know where to start. Learning HOW to prepare is just as important as being prepared as a singer. Being efficient not only with your voice but also with your time can save you from a lot of trouble down the road.

For me, the text is the first place I start. Much of my time is spent absorbing the meaning and pronunciation of the text. I received incredible diction instruction and musical coachings from the renowned staff at Santa Fe Opera. It definitely takes a village, especially for a large role like Eugene Onegin. I was able to test my knowledge of what I was learning when I filled in for a few rehearsals and then ultimately sang the final dress

rehearsal on the Crosby Stage. Nothing forces growth and challenges me more than getting to sing in costume with an orchestra. You learn about trusting your voice, how to pace, how to listen, and how to adapt quickly to problems that can arise on stage.

The other challenge that a cover faces is the continuous pressure of needing to be prepared to sing at any time in any situation whether in rehearsal or live performance. It's like the famous saying goes: "Luck is what happens when opportunity meets preparation." Sometimes you only get one shot to prove yourself. Being a cover helps to prepare a singer for those times when you get a call last minute or don't have the luxury of having months to prepare for something. Being able to deal with that pressure can make or break an artist. Keep your voice in shape, learn from your colleagues, review the role frequently, and all will be alright.

AC: While preparing for this interview, I read a lot about you! You seem particularly drawn to characters and roles with arcs and growth, where they develop greatly from where they started. Is this because you can relate to such growth? From what we've read, you have had a number of personal and professional changes.

EV: I was drawn to opera because it is hard to do. In my life, I am most afraid when I feel like I am not being challenged, so I am drawn to roles that push me as an actor and singer, yes, but also as an individual. I find a lot of fulfillment in being able to either personally relate to the characters that I play or in being able to LEARN how to relate to them by being open to the parts of me that maybe I am afraid to feel on a regular basis. I think that in order to be a good actor, you have to be curious and observant of how you and those around you live, but in order to be great, you have to be able to exemplify and amplify humanity in a way that moves people to action.

I think that arc and growth are not only what makes a character in a story interesting, but what also make a person an interesting and exciting artist as well.

There is an incredible amount of catharsis in being able to bring what you are personally learning as an individual in life to the characters that you play on stage. There certainly is an ebb and flow and a seamless heartbeat to life on and off the stage.

AC: In a recent interview with Santa Fe New Mexican, you speak of identity issues and facing prejudice ever since you were a child, including someone calling the police just because you were jogging in your neighborhood.

EV: I was adopted as an infant and raised in an incredibly loving home in a predominantly white community. For me, nothing constantly felt out of place, per se but I do remember being maybe five or six years old when a girl in my class stuck her tongue out at me and asked me snobbishly, "Why are you brown?"

I remember being puzzled and confused by that. My mom had such a gentle and reassuring way of explaining my adoption to me. I never felt out of place in my family, and it wouldn't be necessarily accurate to say that I felt racially discriminated against as a child. However, when you are a child, you might not be able to pick up on some of those things. I don't think it was until I was a bit older that I started to realize some of the nuances of race and hate in our country.

When I was sixteen, I was pulled over by a state trooper for a speeding ticket on an empty highway in the country. I panicked when I saw him turn his lights on, so I quickly and nervously pulled over, but on the left side of the highway.

He yelled, "Get out of the f****ing car!" His hands were clenching his firearm. He got into my car and drove it to the other side of the highway and then screamed, "Get the c**** over here! Do you even speak English?"

The next 15 minutes of my life, I sat in the passenger seat of his police cruiser as he explained to me the hardships of the life of a law enforcement officer and how I only make his job that much more dangerous and cumbersome.

Since then, yes, I have felt moments of discrimination on many levels. "Go back

to your country!" a guy at a bar yelled at me once. "I'm from Missouri," I laughed. Another time, I was standing in line waiting for a bus in Port Authority in New York City when a heavily tatted Latino male approached me to ask for something in Spanish. "No hablo español. Lo siento," I said. His eyes lit up like a volcano full of hate. He told me he'd shoot me and mimed a gun. "Traitor," he yelled.

It was one of the times that I realized that I was stuck in the middle. Too brown to be white, but also too white to be brown. I think that as I've gotten older, I have always been searching for a true sense of identity in a world where it feels as though you have to choose one. I am constantly bombarded with intrusive questions by nosy patrons at opera galas and parties.

My name isn't exotic enough to satisfy the expectations. "You need to change your name to something more exotic," I was told once. "It'll be good for your career."

There's something incredibly odd in the comfort I feel when I am surrounded by Hispanic individuals, but it is also coupled with the extreme fear of being rejected by them, especially when I am such a mystery even to myself. I find solace and ease in pretending to be other people. The librettos and rich poetry tell the secrets and backstory of who they might be. The easy part for me as an actor is then filling in all the gaps and missing parts of who a person is. I do it every day, and I'm good at it.

AC: Thank you for sharing your story, so transparently and raw. As a one-of-a-kind Artist, what do you think you bring to the opera industry? In the interview, you mention you're competitive, so we thought this would be a fun question to ask! What sets you apart from the rest?

EV: I think I've pondered and suffered over that question before. "What makes me different?" I think maybe the thing that makes me different is that I don't claim to be. Music just keeps me present. I need music more than I think music needs me. I think maybe one of the things that I bring to the table in the opera industry is



that I consider myself an actor first and a singer second. Opera loses its thrill when singers play it safe and become obsessed with only making pretty sounds. I think I'm willing to push the envelope dramatically to find something raw and real that people can somehow relate to.

AC: This fall, you will perform the role of Riolobo in Daniel Catán's *Florencia en el Amazonas* at Lyric Opera of Chicago, where you worked in the ticket office while attending Northwestern. This seems like it could be a full circle moment for you!

EV: Lyric Opera of Chicago will always be near and dear to my heart. It feels good to return to the same team but in another crucial part of the Company. I learned so much and was treated so well working for the sales team. Fun fact and side note: I sold tickets to the premiere of Jimmy López's *Bel Canto* and went on to star opposite Julianne Moore in the film

version just a few years later. I am incredibly excited to sing Riolobo. From what I have heard, the role is very athletic and demanding physically, and the music is incredibly lush and whimsical.

AC: You will also head to Los Angeles to sing with the Philharmonic in 2022. What do you look most forward to the most, with that opportunity?

EV: I am really excited to work alongside Gustavo Dudamel this coming season. I am most excited to grow as an Artist by having the opportunity to rub shoulders with the finest and most passionate performers alive. It is truly a dream come true to be able to learn in this way.

AC: We are very excited for you! Do you have a DREAM leading role you hope to step into one day? Is there one production you are dreaming of joining?

EV: One of my dream roles is actually

Sweeney Todd. I love Sondheim and think he is such an honest artist. I love the darkness and twisted nature of that role and think it would be so much fun to give it a try. I would also love to do another Joseph De Rocher in Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*. I had the opportunity to do it while I was a student at NU (in the Chicago premier), but would enjoy returning to it.

AC: What are your ultimate goals in the opera industry? Where do you see yourself in 5, 10 years? Do you plan ahead?

EV: I see myself entrusted with incredible opportunities and experiences both personally and vocationally. I see myself singing various roles across the globe in, hopefully, all of the beautiful spaces that are meaningful to music lovers. There is a rich history of opera around the world. I would find it a dream come true to leave my footprint in those halls next to those of some of my idols. ■

Journal Entries During Hurricane Ida

By Julie Condy, Board Member and Chorister



Photos of Julie Condy and her home when it was built in 2011

AGMA Governor and New Orleans resident Julie Condy lived through Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Sixteen years to the day since Hurricane Katrina made landfall, Hurricane Ida arrived. Here, she shares her experience with Hurricane Ida in these personal entries.

August 28, 2021

It's nearly August 29 and time for another major hurricane in New Orleans.

Sixteen years ago, we were still using flip phones and Facebook was a toddler. It took days and weeks following Hurricane Katrina to find out information on the New Orleans Opera chorus and our family and friends.

Back then, my house in New Orleans was flooded in the great man-made flood thanks to shoddy workmanship by the Corps of Engineers. We rebuilt our home in 2011. Yes, it took nearly six years!

Our 2011 house is as "hurricane proof" as you can get. Structurally insulated panels that withstand a Category 5 storm. Metal roof. Windows for high winds. Plus, our house is raised nine feet off the ground which is a good eight feet above the Katrina water level which was the level of Lake Pontchartrain just north of New Orleans (which was eight feet in the middle of the street and four feet in the house which sat for two weeks).

We will be fine, as we face Hurricane Ida. A neighbor has a whole house generator that we can plug into.

Evacuation routes both east and west are jammed bumper to bumper going 10 MPH! That is according to my Facebook friends who are evacuating. Some folks are staying though since the brunt of the storm is predicted further west. That projection should not change based on the weather conditions. Here winds

of 70-90 mph are predicted. Not so bad.

So, we are battering down the hatches under the house now.

This evening will be a wine and cheese party for the neighbors who are staying! When the power goes out, my husband Stephen will break out the working Victrola's to play Caruso and Galli-Curci along with Jelly Roll Morton by flashlight.

All in all, the entire area is much better prepared. At least at our home we don't need to have an axe handy to punch a hole in the attic. (Seriously, that saved a lot of lives after Katrina.)

August 30, 2021

Ida was rough. Opera singers are brave. This was beyond me. It started at 9:30 a.m. and by 4:00 p.m. I was praying aloud to calm myself. For hours. The roar and pounding rain were terrifying and relentless. The storm music in *Rigoletto* was from a puppy of a storm. This noise far exceeded any wind noise that I have ever heard in my 60+ years of living in South Louisiana. (Yes, that is dramatic, and I do sing opera, so superlatives fit both me and the situation.)

The wind was coming at our home from due east horizontally so the noise level in the front portion of our home was chilling. Natural surround sound at horror-film level! My husband was unfazed throughout, though. He kept moving me to different rooms with less sound effects. By 8:00 p.m., he moved me to the bedroom at the back of the house where the sound was less forceful.

By 10:00 p.m. Ida was finally moving away from us. Slowly the roar drifted into the distance. First it was no longer surrounding the house. Then it drifted further away. By midnight the roar was still solidly audible, simply the eeriest sounds I have ever heard. We were inside a very large tornado for over 14 hours. By 2:00 a.m. there was blessed silence. I specifically remember saying to my husband, "Do you hear that? No sounds. Finally gone."

August 30, 2021 Part Two

UPDATE: Water is back though there is boil water advisory. We have limited power through a neighbor's generator. Was able to sleep this afternoon. The President has declared Ida as a disaster, so FEMA funding is available. Our house (built for hurricanes with FEMA money) held up like a champ. No damage. We have cell service with Verizon.

The storm has passed but still breezy. Minor fence damage and a few downed limbs. No power or water. Cell phone batteries charged yesterday so have phone power. Our neighborhood did well overall. The pumping system installed by the parish worked quite well. Water rose in the streets and the pumps got it down before it got too high. Neighbors are helping neighbors.

That was a storm that did not want to leave! Our house was constructed on raised concrete columns to withstand a hurricane and came out fine. In 2012 during Hurricane Isaac, it shuddered once. In 2021 Ida shuddered her on and off for over 14 hours with winds at times more than 100 miles per hour horizontally pounding against the front of our home.

Oh, yes, our two cats slept through the entire ordeal.

Some family members in Louisiana have damage to their homes with missing shingles and downed fences. A friend's family in Houma lost their roof while they were in the house! The wind noise was terrifying. Nature is a wonder. We will come together to support each other in the coming days.

August 31, 2021

If you are fleeing Louisiana, you are NOT a refugee. You have a home though inhospitable at the moment. You have a place and a country.

You are an EVACUEE. We went through this terminology battle after Katrina.

We are evacuees.

For us, that starts tomorrow. We'll be on the road to Memphis. We will get through this! The neighbor with the whole house generator is leaving and now so are we.

September 1, 2021 Part One

Seriously, this situation is devastating. Stephen [my husband] and I drove through Metairie and saw lots of minor damage with roofs missing shingles, fences down, utility poles leaning, signs down and lots of downed trees. The big problem for Orleans and Jefferson parishes is the lack of utilities. No power and a trickle of water with a boil water order. All of the seven electrical transmitters that feed Orleans and Jefferson are down including one that fell into the Mississippi River.

Not possible to live in those conditions.

The overall emergency response has been very good. It takes 72 hours to mobilize the resources necessary. Today, food, ice, and water were in larger distribution much faster than after Katrina in 2005. A neighbor went to a distribution site and gave us two bags of ice. Came in handy!

The business and education interruption are so distressing. Schools are on hold for at least two weeks. Businesses who were suffering due to the pandemic are going to be in for more financial dire straits.

But we got off easy. In other parishes, there is total devastation. For us it will take several months to come back to normal. For those parishes, it will take five years or more.

MSNBC showed the flooding in Laplace. Horrible. (Saw that footage via smartphone not via cable TV.)

Glad we have a natural gas cooktop, so we cook up some morning java.

This morning was crazy. Generator cut off. Got it back then found out that this kind neighbor, Ronnie, decided to leave on Tuesday. So, no more fan after that.

We have to leave. Unlivable. Spent several hours locating

accommodations in Memphis near family. Pet friendly does not mean cat friendly. Booked one hotel to find out they did not take cats! Yikes! Hilton Hotels hooked us up.

After we packed, we visited with neighbors who are staying put and they emptied our freezer of food to cook for those remaining. Discovered frozen shrimp from 2019. What a way to clean your fridge!

For lunch we had defrosted tamales and dinner was the rest of the strawberry ice cream with whipped cream, both on their last legs.

The sun is rising. Slept for a few hours but it is so very hot. Made lists of what we need to bring by lantern light. Maybe that will help us speed up our evacuation.

September 1, 2021 Part Two

We are in Memphis now for likely 14 days. We will visit with family here. My granddaughter is in the school play and we will be here for it.

We call it a "hurri-cation."

Glad we are out of it. Now to calm down. I am definitely on edge. Fourteen hours of howling winds really worked on my last nerve. Ronnie has a friend with a business at Port Fourchon where Ida came ashore at the Gulf of Mexico. His business had a wind meter that clocked 184 MPH!

October 29, 2021 Epilogue

Two months ago, the world of South Louisiana was turned upside down and inside out by Hurricane Ida. Today, blue roofs (roofs covered in blue tarps to protect houses from further damage) dot the New Orleans metropolitan area. My home has a metal roof and only a piece of flashing was moved aside by the winds. Houses with traditional roofing materials are in a world of disrepair. The City of New Orleans was spared by and large of major damage. The New Orleans Opera Association is handling damage to both their Scenic Studio and to the Opera Guild Home, an historic mansion which was donated to the company several decades ago. Louisiana to the south and west of New Orleans was not spared from horrific damage. Google it and it will break your heart.

My husband Stephen and I returned to our home on September 11 after being gone for 10 days. On the bright side, we were able to empty our refrigerator rather than return to something rather gross and unappetizing. Will insurance pay for those 10 days of evacuation? Good question. We have submitted it to the insurance adjustor. Still waiting.

Several New Orleans chorus members had damage to the roof of their homes. But New Orleans was fortunate – this time.

Remember how we emptied out our fridge? Turns out that there are two chefs who live in our neighborhood who emptied out their restaurant freezers. Seems that the stouthearted souls that stayed on via generator power ate like kings with premium steaks and lots of seafood.

Remember those howling winds? Turns out that those were sustained winds of over 100 miles per hour for hours blowing

horizontally.

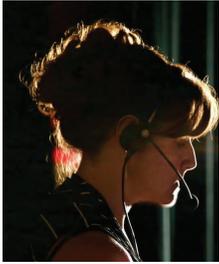
After going through Katrina, I naively thought this would not happen again in my lifetime. Then to see Ida wreak devastating havoc in the Northeast. Crazy! Two months later, I am back to normal (whatever that means). Moral of this story: Don't stay for a hurricane. Even with a generator, life is super hard in a sub-tropical climate without any power for days. No, I am not considering leaving my hometown. Just will never stay for a

hurricane again!

If you would like to make a contribution to help South Louisiana, Second Harvesters Food Bank for Southeast Louisiana is a quality choice. Their efforts are ongoing to help people get back on their feet. The food need is still great since many families are paying additional housing costs since they cannot live in their homes and/or have lost their livelihoods.

<https://no-hunger.org/disasterresponse/> ■

Representation Matters



By **Whitney McAnally**
Production Stage
Manager, Los Angeles
Opera

“Representation matters.” These are not new words and these days we are all navigating the best way to be as inclusive as possible in our daily lives. How do we do this? It seems so simple and yet, there are so many small habits we all have that need adjusting.

The most obvious in the opera house is the use of “Ladies and Gentlemen” but

extends to paging the Chorus or Supers and even Principal Artists. It is often up to the staging staff, especially the Stage Managers, to set the tone in the room and onstage. This summer at Santa Fe Opera, at the encouragement of the Production Stage Manager (PSM), Hester Warren-Steijn, we began using full names for Principal Artists and vocal type to address the Chorus. While it's certainly more to say, I've found that it feels like the right direction to go in. Once I returned to my home gig at Los Angeles Opera, I realized I wanted to make the same transition here and several of my other colleagues at LAO were already doing the same. As PSM, I've asked the rest of the staging staff to make these adjustments as well.

The shift has been easy and one that, hopefully, allows for additional conversations to take place, conversations that I feel are incredibly important. My hope is this one gesture makes each of the performers feel seen, feel included, and feel open to say how they identify so we can support them in a way that enables each person to do their best work.

Whitney McAnally joined the LA Opera staging staff in the fall of 2012 and became PSM in 2019. Throughout her career she's worked across the nation at AGMA and regional AEA theater houses. She spends her summers at Santa Fe Opera and is proud to be a member of AGMA for over 20 years. ■



An AGMAzine Exclusive Interview with Nicole Cabell on Curating *I Dream a World*



© Erika Dufour

In summer 2021, Opera Theatre of Saint Louis (OTSL), in partnership with the Missouri Historical Society, held a city-wide celebration commemorating Juneteenth with *I Dream a World*. The outdoor production, curated by soprano Nicole Cabell and baritone Will Liverman, beautifully blended music, song, and spoken word and received rave reviews. This event was presented free to the public and then streamed at no cost between September 3 – 30.

AGMA's Director of Communications Alicia Cook had the great opportunity to speak with Nicole Cabell about the whole experience.

Alicia Cook (AC): Thanks so much for taking the time out of your schedule to speak with *AGMAzine*. Let's start at the beginning! How did this all come together?

Nicole Cabell (NC): Will [Liverman] and I were approached by OTSL to curate an evening in honor of Juneteenth, as we were both singing in William Grant Still's *Highway 1, U.S.A.* the same season.

AC: How is working with Will? Fun I bet.

NC: Will and I had worked together very briefly on an album that Alyson Cambridge and I recorded for Cedille Records

in Chicago several years back. Will sang a trio from *Così Fan Tutte* with us on the recording. I didn't get the opportunity to truly know him then, but I'm so grateful to have collaborated with him for six weeks this summer in *Highway 1, U.S.A.*

Will is a colossal talent, and a wonderful colleague and new friend! It's always a pleasure to sing with someone who is considerate and creative on stage, and Will certainly fits the bill.

AC: That's so great. How did you go about curating this program? How did you pick and choose? This was such a robust event! The program included a wide range of musical modes to reflect and celebrate the Black experience in America -- from opera to gospel to jazz to even spoken word poetry.

NC: Initially, working off of the Juneteenth theme, Will and I were discussing basing the music around freedom, specifically emancipation. We cast a wide net in considering who would sing in the concert and what music would be included. As we had a limited time frame to work with, we excluded many selections and fine-tuned the concert to include music composed by Black Americans, featuring Black singers. We envisioned a variety of different genres in order to add shape and texture to the program. Our final product included operatic arias, spirituals, art song, jazz selections, ensemble repertoire, spoken word featuring local St. Louis poets, a string quartet, and a special commission from Joshua Brian Campbell, who composed the song "Stand Up" from the movie "Harriet", which was nominated for an Oscar.

AC: As curators, did you also name the event, *I Dream a World*? The title song, "I Dream a World" was composed by Damien Sneed, and I see on Spotify that

Will is the vocalist on the track. Why did this particular selection become the title of the evening and were there any other titles you had considered? What does *I Dream a World* mean to you?

NC: We did consider other titles, but we thought "I Dream a World" perfectly captured what we were trying to say with this concert. There is an inherent optimism in this title and the poetry itself, juxtaposed with our current reality, which is trying to move in the right direction despite the battles we continually fight. We dream of a world that can live up to our potential as a society.

AC: Beautiful. Thank you for sharing. You had mentioned needing to exclude some pieces due to time. Were there any performances you had hoped to include, but it didn't work out?

NC: Yes. We were hoping to feature dance numbers, but because of our time and stage limitations, given the outdoor event had a social distancing structure to the staging, we sadly had to scrap that idea. We were quite happy with the overall product, and it was fascinating to discover so much excellent music that I hadn't heard before. It was kind of amazing how much music we couldn't include in the program because we were trying to keep the concert within 90 minutes, but that's good news for future iterations of this program!

AC: Speaking of other iterations...given the great success of the event and how much you seem to have enjoyed it, do you think you will curate works in the future too?

NC: This concert with OTSL was the first real opportunity to curate a concert that I'd been offered. Of course, I have curated my own piano and voice recitals, but that is a common skill most singers

develop and nothing quite as complex as this concert. I'd be happy to curate in the future, but I must say I'd love to collaborate with others rather than take on a project like this by myself.

Feeding off of others' points of view was crucial to this project, and working with Will in particular was invaluable. I hope I am able to work with him again in the future, both in performance and behind the scenes. Will and I also had the pleasure to work with members of OTSL and the Missouri History Museum as well choosing the artists and general program construct.

AC: Teamwork makes the dream work. In addition to curating the program, you and Will performed as well. Tell us about that. How did you balance the role of curator with your role as a performer?

NC: Curating *I Dream a World* with Will gave us the opportunity to work together before we started rehearsals for *Highway 1, U.S.A.* We were able to get to know each other, and our relationship as colleagues grew even stronger through the operatic process.

We don't often get to work with our singer colleagues behind the scenes, so

it was really wonderful getting to know another side of Will. We have hopes to sing and possibly record together in the future.

It was actually quite refreshing to be involved with an opera company both behind the scenes and in front of the public, and balance was certainly possible in this case given the short length of *Highway 1, U.S.A.* We had a bit of extra time for our Juneteenth concert, which was a luxury.

AC: *I Dream a World* was presented free to the public. Did you see a big turnout? Can you share any responses you recall witnessing? Broadway World gave it a glowing review!

NC: We were very happy with the turnout, given it was about 95 degrees and humid outside! The audience was quite enthusiastic, especially at the end when everyone stood for "Lift Every Voice." We heard from dozens of audience members afterward that really enjoyed the program, especially the discovery of so much music they'd never heard.

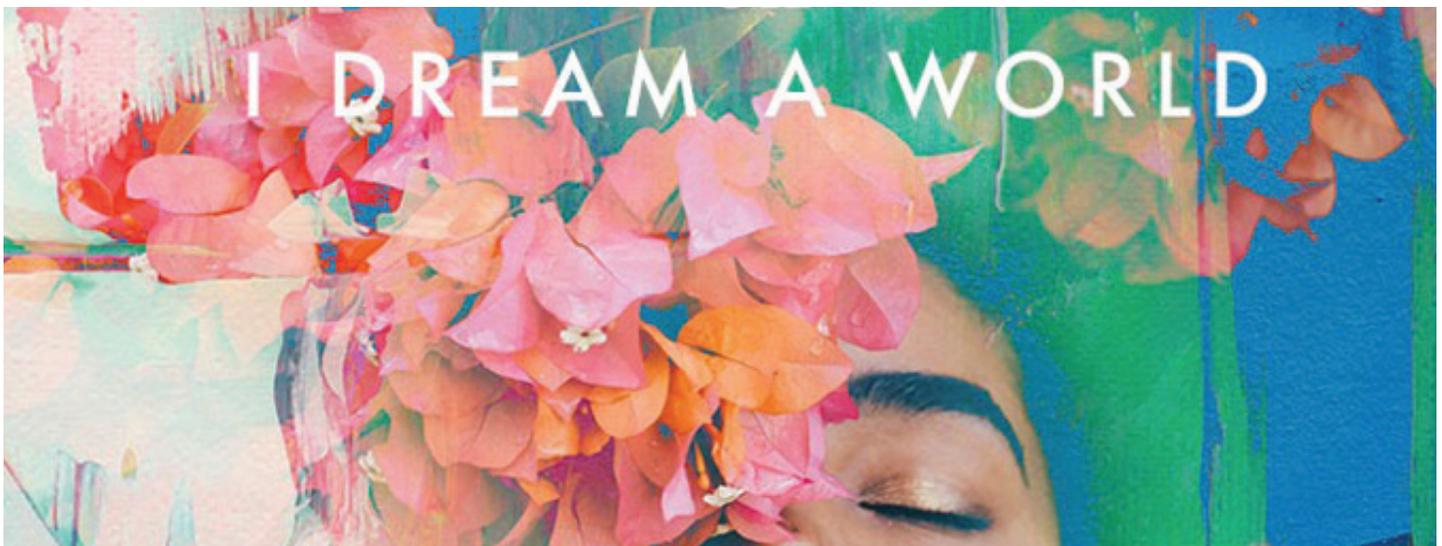
AC: This program was designed to commemorate Juneteenth, and included all Black composers. What does Juneteenth

mean to you?

NC: Will and I programmed music we felt highlighted the Black American experience in all its complexity and depth. The interesting, beautiful, sometimes tragic, sometimes exuberant music on display is a snapshot of what we have to offer, fueling hope for the future of our contributions to music and art.

It was an immense pleasure to curate this program, especially in light of Juneteenth becoming a federal holiday. To me, Juneteenth represents hope. While we have such a long way to go toward achieving the imagined "American Dream" for everyone, Juneteenth was a major step in the right direction.

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About Nicole Cabell: Nicole Cabell is the 2005 Winner of the BBC Singer of the World Competition in Cardiff and a Decca recording artist. She is one of the most sought-after lyric sopranos of today. Her solo debut album, "Soprano" was named "Editor's Choice" by Gramophone and has received an incredible amount of critical acclaim and several prestigious awards, including the 2007 Georg Solti Orphée d'Or from the French Académie du Disque Lyrique. ■



On Returning to The Met for the First Time

By Michelle DeYoung and Matthew Polenzani, Soloists



Below, Michelle DeYoung and Matthew Polenzani describe returning to The Met for Verdi's Requiem. The concert marks the first performance inside The Metropolitan Opera House since the March 2020 closure.

"I had the enormous honor of singing the mezzo solo of *Verdi's Requiem* with The Metropolitan opera and Yannick Nezet-Seguin for the 20th commemoration of 9/11. This production also marked the re-opening of The Met following the COVID-19 shutdown. So, it was filled with emotions and love.

Being a former Young Artist of The Met, and having sung there many times, it is a home for me. Being back in New York City and at The Met was a wonderful experience just because of that; but also, working with Yannick, Ailyn, Matthew, and Eric was a love fest. The chorus, orchestra, staff, and crew were so incredible, and so supportive and encouraging.

This was one of the greatest experiences of my career, before we even put on the concert. While we were backstage preparing to enter, the Chorus entered, and the audience gave them a standing ovation. The emotions were already flowing with us all. Yannick is such a beautiful human being, but also an incredible musician, and a singers' conductor. He was "in" every moment and every word, feeling the music, the words, the pain. He is such a generous colleague and gave each Soloist room for them to be musical and let

their voice sing.

Professionally it was fabulous...but it was so much more than that. It felt like we were sharing this pain and healing together with everyone in the audience and those who were watching from home on PBS or listening over the radio.

I am not a "Pollyanna" about COVID-19. I had a huge amount of amazing work canceled along with everyone else. I have lost loved ones to the virus. Our business has suffered greatly, many agencies have closed, and opera houses and symphonies folded. There has been a lot of fear and despair. I long for it to be over, and for things to become our "new normal." I think we are slowly getting there; but I also think there are things to learn from this experience. Maybe it's a chance for us to learn compassion, kindness, and to see that we are never alone when we are riding through storms." - Michelle DeYoung

"This Requiem was everything I think I, and many others, hoped it would be. The whole week felt emotionally charged, and all of us felt a little strange being back in the house for the first time in ages. I was nervous even walking onto the stage, which is not normal for me. Usually once I'm in the theater, I leave the nerves behind, but this was not that type of occasion.

It felt a lot bigger, and not just because of the occasion for the concert, which had a giant emotional load before any of us had even heard of COVID-19. But after 18 months of the doors being closed at one of the greatest artistic institutions in the world, the evening took on an even greater significance.

The best news is, the artistic level of the orchestra and the Chorus is such that as they started playing and singing, I felt calmer. They inspired all of us to be just as great as they are. I'm grateful to them, and

to Maestro Nezet-Seguin for his inspired leadership. I felt blessed to be sharing the stage with such amazing colleagues like Ailyn Pérez, Michelle DeYoung and Eric Owens. It was an unforgettable evening, and I am so glad I was able to be a part of it." - Matthew Polenzani



Policy and Bylaw Changes with Members in Mind

AGMA members, like all performing artists, have been severely impacted, and continue to be affected, by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In Fiscal Year 2021, a great deal of AGMA members did not pay their dues and fell out of good standing. Of course, this was mostly due to the lingering effects of the pandemic and the vast majority of membership having not yet returned to work.

AGMA, having acknowledged this extremely sensitive situation, has constructed a way to create processes that are both manageable for suspended members and fair to the members who did pay their dues throughout the pandemic.

During the November 2021 AGMA

Board of Governors meeting, the Board approved one Bylaw change and two new Policies relating to member dues.

- Bylaw Language Pertaining to Reinstatement Fees Removed
- Initiation Fee Payment Plan Policy
- 2021 Reinstatement Fee Forgiveness Policy

Members can view this pertinent information in greater detail by visiting the “Policies and Procedures” section of the AGMA website and reviewing “Policies of the AGMA Board of Governors” and “AGMA Constitution and Bylaws” (MyAGMA login required).

The Reinstatement Fee Forgiveness Policy applies to AGMA members who

were suspended after February 1, 2021 for non-payment of dues who reinstate their membership by January 31, 2022. If you wish to take advantage of this new policy and reinstate your membership, please contact membership@musicalartists.org.



Support the AGMA Relief Fund

The AGMA Relief Fund was established in January 1945, at a meeting of the AGMA Board of Governors “to aid Artists who have fallen upon bad days.” Today, the AGMA Relief Fund is a 501(c)3 not-for-profit charitable organization, and a separate entity from the American Guild of Musical Artists with its own Trustees. The Actors Fund administers this program nationally and provides comprehensive social services to AGMA members.

The AGMA Relief Fund is 100% dependent on donations (which are tax deductible!) in order to confidentially provide both financial and other temporary, emergency relief to AGMA members. Throughout the past 20 months, AGMA Artists have depended upon the AGMA Relief Fund more than ever.

The Tuesday after Thanksgiving is Giving Tuesday, a global generosity movement that unleashes the power of people and organizations to transform their communities and the world. Each



year #GivingTuesday provides an opportunity for friends and supporters of the AGMA community to come together and support the Relief Fund’s longstanding mission of helping AGMA Artists.

On #GivingTuesday, and every day, there are a number of ways you can support the AGMA Relief Fund.

- 1) Donate! Make a gift of any size to the AGMA Relief Fund
- 2) Encourage others to participate! Show this article to your network of friends who love and support the Arts
- 3) Spread our message! Post about the

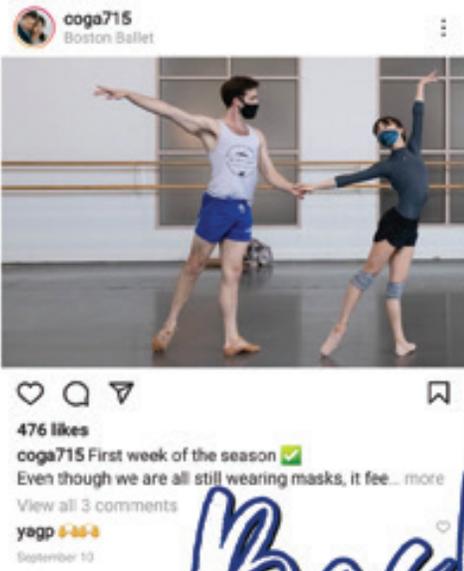
AGMA Relief Fund on your social media platforms

Please consider assisting the AGMA Relief Fund on #GivingTuesday by sharing our efforts with your network and/or making a gift of any size. We thank you in advance for being an AGMA Relief Fund advocate.

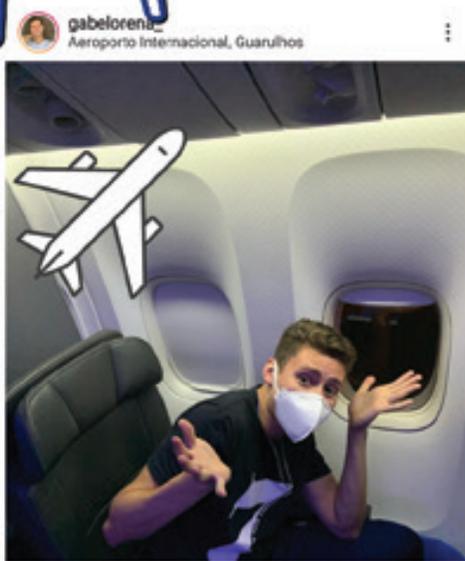
As a reminder, any AGMA member in good standing (and/or on honorable withdrawal) is entitled and encouraged to apply for hardship assistance through the AGMA Relief Fund.

Please visit agmarelief.org to learn more or begin the application process. ■





Back to work!



AGMA

AMERICAN GUILD of MUSICAL ARTISTS

RESOURCES FOR AGMA MEMBERS

AGMA COVID-19 Resource Page
access through the AGMA homepage

The AGMA Relief Fund
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
www.unionplus.org

*Union Plus provides the opportunity to
earn your college degree at no cost
and helps union members
through times of uncertainty
with unique Hardship Help benefits.*

**AGMA Retirement Plan
and AGMA Health Fund**
www.agmafunds.org
212-765-3664

The Actors Fund
www.actorsfund.org

*The Actors Fund provides
comprehensive social services
including:*

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

Actors Federal Credit Union
212-869-8926

Member Services:
mresources@actorsfcu.com

Lending Services:
lresources@actorsfcu.com

**AGMA New and Prospective
Member Resource Page**

www.musicalartists.org/new-member-information