

# AGMAzine

Official Publication of the American Guild of Musical Artists



## COAST TO COAST: A National Push For Change

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305 7th Avenue

New York, New York 10001

(212) 265-3687; Fax: (212) 262-9088

[www.MusicalArtists.org](http://www.MusicalArtists.org)

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**Sarah Cecilia Bukowski,**

Dancer and MMRC Chair



**Réka Echerer,** Dancer and

MMRC Vice Chair

Dear readers,

I am proud to introduce this Winter 2025 issue of *AGMAzine* as the new Chair of AGMA's Membership and Member Relations Committee (MMRC), alongside Vice Chair Réka Echerer, a fellow Dancer who also happens to be a trusted colleague and my frequent co-conspirator in all things AGMA at the Metropolitan Opera. It's our honor to serve you—our Union colleagues, friends, and community members.

As a writer and editor in the arts, I value *AGMAzine* as an essential outlet for showcasing the many aspects and stories behind our Union's artistic voices. In these pages, you'll encounter artists who reflect on their journeys to the stage, their experiences on stages around the country, and the power of their activism beyond the stage. Our stories of solidarity in action transcend differences within and beyond our AGMA signatories and regions, extending into the broader Labor Movement to foster a wealth of perspectives and possibilities. Our stories are a testimony: we are stronger together, and together we can learn from the challenges at hand to better face the challenges that surely lie ahead.

Special thanks to all the contributors who make this issue a dynamic and heartfelt read, to our new and returning MMRC colleagues for their care in stewarding these contributions, and to our always-stellar AGMA staff: Alicia Cook for her tireless generosity, Denise Baker for her creative eye, Joe Conceison for his cover design and interior graphics, and a special shout-out to our new Communications Coordinator, Eldee Eyimife, who you'll meet here through her insightful interviews with AGMA leaders.

As 2025 draws to a close, we welcome this as a time of reflection toward renewing our spirit of collective action. In the year ahead, we look forward to celebrating AGMA's 90th anniversary as an opportunity to foster strength and resilience to forge ahead in our national push for change, coast to coast. Happy reading!

In solidarity,

Sarah Cecilia Bukowski, Dancer and MMRC Chair ■



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# Message from AGMA President Ned Hanlon & National Executive Jeffrey Boyd

Photo Credit: J. Demetrie Photography



We are very excited to dive into the newest issue of *AGMAzine* with you. Since putting this magazine together is no easy feat, we would like to thank the team that made it possible: the Membership and Member Relations Committee, led by Chair Sarah Cecilia Bukowski and Vice-Chair Réka Echerer, and our fantastic staff, particularly Alicia Cook, Eldee Eyimife, Denise Baker, and Joseph Conceison.

The theme of this issue, “AGMA Coast to Coast, A National Push for Change,” serves both as a celebration of the inclusive character of our union, as well as a call to action for us all to continue the much-needed work so that all artists can have the protections of a union contract, and the freedom, fairness, and security they deserve.

Strides are being made. Organizing campaigns all over the

country, from Philadelphia to Memphis to Texas and beyond, have improved working conditions and compensation; AGMA caucuses, such as the new Solo Principal Artists Caucus and the Pride Caucus, have brought individuals together to increase advocacy and communication; expanded visibility in the broader Labor Movement has opened up new platforms for solidarity and assistance; and national bargaining priorities have moved toward more standardized contracts and helped artists make significant improvements through CBA negotiations in areas like upfront payments for soloists and better pay for early-career dancers.

It’s also important to say that we don’t need to be confined to our shores; in November, AGMA affiliated with the International Federation of Actors (FIA), which will serve to empower AGMA artists wherever they are!

Throughout this issue, you will read accounts of real and lasting positive change happening all over the country. Thank you to all the AGMA artists who contributed their stories; they are an inspiration and a rallying cry for us as we continue to push forward toward a performing arts industry we can be even more proud of.

Solidarity Forever,

Ned Hanlon & Jeffrey Boyd ■

## Bargainfest II: The Sequel Everyone Asked For

By Eldad (Eldee) Eyimife, AGMA Communications Coordinator

Every year seems to bring another marathon of contract negotiations for AGMA members across the country—so much so that last year’s whirlwind of bargaining sessions, victories, and picket lines earned the nickname *Bargainfest*. In 2025, *Bargainfest 2.0* kicked off, another nationwide effort that saw over 40 contracts simultaneously up for negotiation! The AGMAverse once again dove headfirst into the fight, collectively advocating for the improved working conditions and security every member deserves.

With every contract negotiated and ratified, artists have pro-

tected their rights and secured gains in key areas like compensation and benefits, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA), and health and safety, ensuring better conditions to pursue their dreams on and off stage.

### FIRST Contracts:

Amongst our *Bargainfest 2.0* wins, we are happy to celebrate FIRST contracts for the Artists of some of our newest signatory companies:





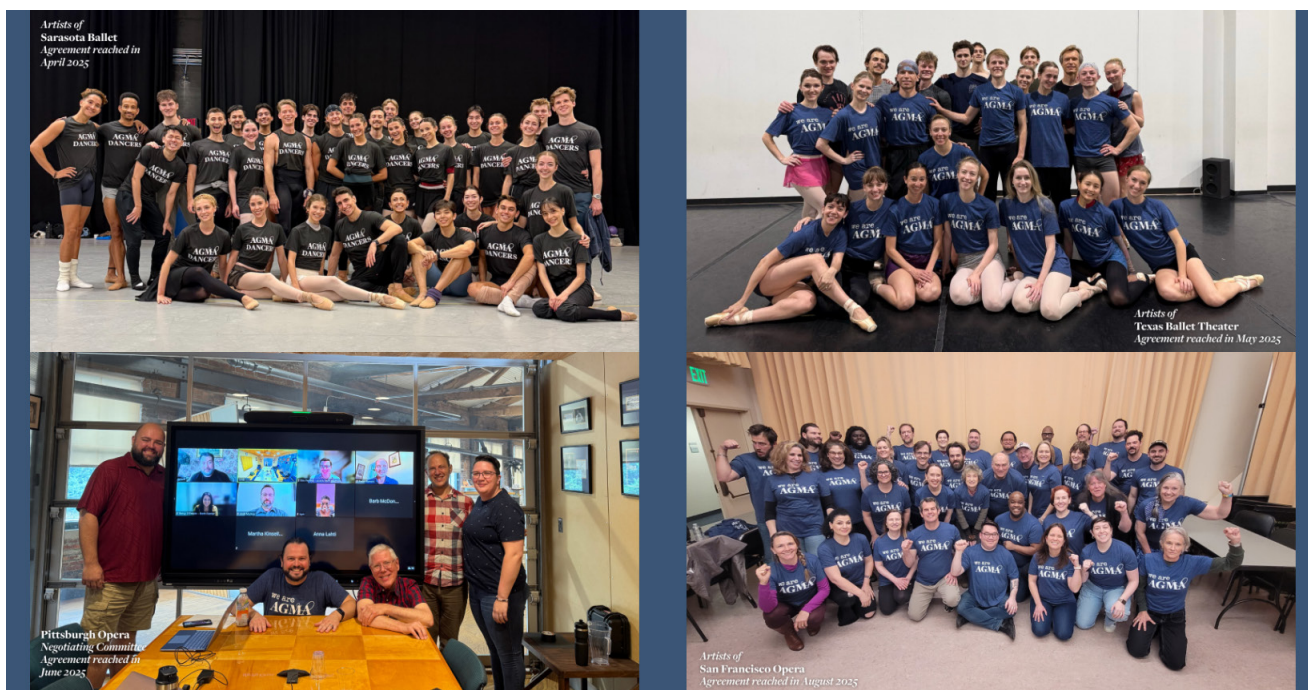
### Philharmonia Baroque Choir:

In May 2025, AGMA and the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra & Chorale made history when the first-ever CBA between them was ratified, and in turn, made the Philharmonia Baroque Chorale the only chorus to have a defined core and auxiliary roster, ensuring fair hiring and audition processes. This inaugural three-year agreement ensures a 5% wage increase; complimentary tickets per set; meal allowance; flat-rate, meal, and transportation reimbursements; improved sick, bereavement, and child leave policies; and inclusion of AGMA Smoke & Fog language.

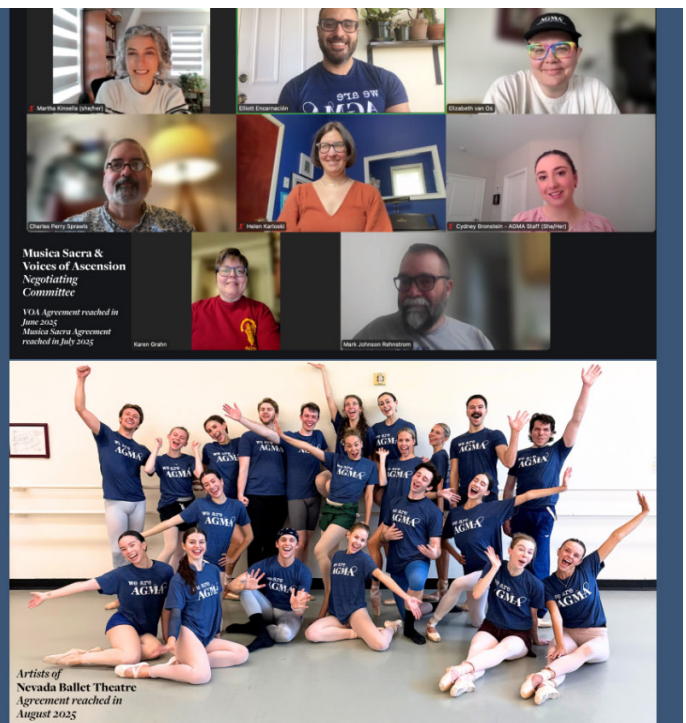
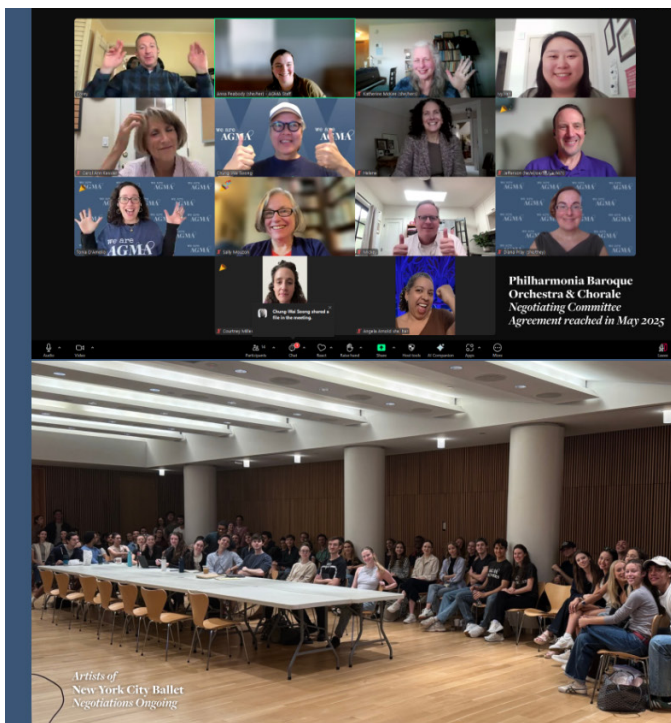
Read more about the Philharmonia Baroque Choir contract here: [www.musicalartists.org/agma-announces-first-contract-with-philharmonia-baroque-orchestra-chorale/](http://www.musicalartists.org/agma-announces-first-contract-with-philharmonia-baroque-orchestra-chorale/)

### Texas Ballet Theater:

The Dancers of the Texas Ballet Theater (TBT) broke new ground by securing the region's first union contract at a dance company in over 40 years. This great achievement was the perfect conclusion to the dancer's two years of bargaining.







With this historical 4-year agreement, the artists obtained (amongst others):

- **Compensation:** Significant raises, including a 50% wage increase for Apprentices, retroactive to the beginning of the 24-25 season; guaranteed 35-week seasons, a maintained and slightly expanded company roster, and new pay structures recognizing seniority and extraordinary risk, etc.
- **DEIA:** Protections for pregnant and parenting artists by allowing them to work as long as they are able and providing up to six weeks of paid leave at varying levels, with additional fully paid time for birthing parents; annual anti-discrimination training; accountability for visiting artistic staff; gender-inclusive facilities where possible; and requirements that costumes, wigs, tights, and makeup reflect and respect artists' skin tones, hair textures, and cultural identities; prohibiting harmful stereotyping and appropriation onstage; etc.
- **Health & Safety:** Physical and Massage therapy available at TBT's studio; AGMA smoke and fog language; Qualified fight and intimacy directors when necessary; etc.

Read more about the Texas Ballet Theater contract here: [www.musicalartists.org/agma-announces-first-contract-with-texas-ballet-theater/](http://www.musicalartists.org/agma-announces-first-contract-with-texas-ballet-theater/)

### **Ballet Memphis:**

The Dancers of Ballet Memphis were at the negotiating table soon after joining AGMA in January 2023. In April 2025, they ratified the FIRST CBA, signifying the start of a two-year agreement that guarantees them:

- **Compensation:** Increased minimum rates for entry-level by 5%; secured 3% and 2% increase in the 25-26 and 26-27 seasons, respectively; 11 paid holidays, etc.
- **DEIA:** Formalized annual DEIA policy review and training discussions; ongoing commitment to eliminate cultural appropriation and stereotyping in artistic choices; active recruitment of artists from historically underrepresented communities; guaranteed paid time off for religious observances; strengthened protections and accommodations for gender-variant artists; expanded pregnancy and parental leave, including one week paid leave for new parents, up to 15 total weeks of leave without loss of rank or pay, and guaranteed

reasonable break time and private space for nursing parents, etc.

- **Health and Safety:** Guaranteed Physical Therapy; access to water, ice, and first aid; suitable floors and surfaces; and a Fight Director and Intimacy training when necessary, etc.

Read more about the Ballet Memphis contract here: [www.musicalartists.org/agma-ratifies-first-agreement-with-ballet-memphis/](http://www.musicalartists.org/agma-ratifies-first-agreement-with-ballet-memphis/) ■

# Glittering Green Flags

By Emily Hansel, *Dancer*



©Robbie Sweeney

I've been a dancer freelancing in San Francisco for nine years, and this past July, I began working as a dancer at the San Francisco Opera (SFO)—my first AGMA job! During my first few days as a brand-new SFO employee, I received a barrage of important information and orientations from every imaginable department on campus. After I met folks from HR, admin, staging, costumes, wigs, and more, what stood out to me most was how adamant everyone was about imparting a version of this:

"If you encounter any issues in the workplace, we want to hear about it."

This may seem mundane, but to me it felt incredibly significant. Throughout the plethora of dance gigs and contracts I've had over my freelance career thus far, I've essentially been taught *not* to communicate about most problems I encounter in the workplace. The concert dance field is rife with unsafe working conditions, problematic power dynamics, and other harmful traditions. In many of my past jobs, I've been explicitly or implicitly discouraged from speaking up to voice concerns, articulate workplace issues, or share feedback. Besides a handful of extraordinary exceptions, I've usually found myself in work environments that uphold white supremacist, ableist, and sexist

norms where dancers are expected to tacitly comply.

I've witnessed innumerable situations where my dancer colleagues and I have been penalized for speaking up or pressured into remaining silent. We are harmed if we decide to speak up; we are harmed by staying silent. In many of these cases, this problematic pattern can be difficult to detect from the outside. There are plenty of dance companies that tout more honorable values publicly, but don't uphold them internally. I've listened to leadership telling the dancers they want us to share any and all feedback with them but later penalizing us if we do, essentially indicating that they do *not*, in fact, desire our feedback.

It's fair to say I've been scarred by such injustices in my past, non-union jobs. When I start dancing for a new company and hear leadership and staff say they want to hear about any issues that come up for me, I default to not believing them. But something different happened at SFO, and I somehow ended up believing every department representative who welcomed me during my first week.

During my first rehearsal, a stage manager insisted that if I ever so much as stub my toe on a set piece, even if it hardly hurts, I should let the staging staff know as soon as possible. This would allow folks to adjust the set piece and theoretically prevent the next ten people from stubbing their toes or worse. (So logical!)

In my first wig fitting, the friendly department head advised me to report any slight itch or allergic reaction to the default wig glue as soon as possible. They could order a dozen other adhesive options and test them out with me to make sure I never have to deal with any discomfort. (How lovely!)

In the locker room, as I was describing difficulties I faced at a past dance job, my union reps confidently assured me that no such situations would arise here at SFO. They said if any leader or choreographer at SFO acted in such an extreme way, I should immediately report it, and I could go to them if I needed help. Beyond the clear reporting protocols, I was encouraged by their insistence that something so extreme was very unlikely to happen in the first place because that kind of behavior is unacceptable here. (Wow, amazing!)

These simple messages of support may seem elementary, and it's true! Support like this should be considered



©Maximilian Tortorello

a baseline at any job. But since this has often not been my experience, these simple messages appear to me as glittering green flags welcoming me to a new kind of work environment.

It's very clear to me that the worker protections in place at SFO exist due to AGMA's presence and the hard work of our negotiating committee. I'm excited to be here and am optimistic that, even in the numerous non-union jobs that will surely exist in my future, I'll be inspired to invoke the power of collective action and worker advocacy that I'm experiencing right now. ■



# Power in Motion: What We Rehearse, We Can Win

By Antuan Byers, Founder/Director, Black Dance Change Makers; AGMA Dancers Vice President



The Summer Intensive was a first for [Black Dance Change Makers](#) (BDCM) this past summer, a focused weekend for dancers and culture workers to train together in political education, community care, and organizing skills. It turned impulse into infrastructure and tied our practice to material change. Come along for a run-through, holding the rhythm as we lay out the steps and the stakes.

## Impulse

We built the Summer Intensive to turn art into action. We honored the Black radical tradition that taught us to study, organize, and create. We did not gather to mirror the world back. We gathered to reimagine it and rebuild it together. Choreography sat next to strategy, so what began in the studio could live beyond the weekend. That power moves through our studios, our neighborhoods, our homes, and our shared future.

## Intent

The Summer Intensive was more than a weekend of workshops. It was a transformative space, a spark, a blueprint, a homecoming. People felt sharpened, seen, and set free. Though it was our first Intensive, it stands inside a long lineage of movement workers, cultural strategists, and freedom dreamers. From the Highlander Center and Combahee River Collective to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Black Youth Project 100, from Urban Bush Women to SLMDances. Rooted in curiosity, care, joy, and resistance, the Intensive called us back to our power and into action.

## The Warm-Up

In Black traditions across the diaspora, the altar serves as a space of ancestor regard and decision-making, where offerings and names keep our commitments visible. We began at the altar

because power needs a center. Beginning here gave the weekend a spine, rooted in our shared histories and futures. The altar is not décor. It is our first contract, the place where we name who we answer to and commit to how we will treat each other. We cleared a table, laid a cloth, and set fresh flowers. One by one, people stepped forward, placed one thing from their life, spoke one name aloud or held it in silence, and took a breath with the room. The altar transformed strangers into partners and prepared the room for the real work.

## Power In Motion

Power in Motion was one of the sessions at the Summer Intensive, a focused training and campaign-building practicum facilitated by the BDCM team, including Etana Sissoko, Alysia Johnson, and Morgan McDaniel. It sat alongside workshops that brought us into our bodies, made our shared lineage visible, practiced moving together through residue and repair, and invited us to imagine our role as artists in the world ahead. Guest contributors included Dr. Charmaine Warren, Sydnie L. Mosley, Eva Yaa Asantewaa, and Catherine Kirk, who guided this work with care and precision.

In our session, we moved through organizing fundamentals like Mobilizing versus Organizing, and Strategy versus Tactics, into the drill of problem, issue, demand, and then tested winnability. We anchored the work in the Dallas Black Dance Theatre fight, one I was deeply involved in. After the entire main company was terminated, AGMA staff and the dancers built a sequenced strategy that combined public letters, filings with the National Labor Relations Board, pickets, media campaigns, and a self-produced concert that helped carry their message of resilience. The conflict drew a federal complaint and later a landmark settlement. We treated that arc as a map that dancers, artists, and organizers can adapt for their own campaigns.

## What We Learned / Director's Notes

### Improvisation

Improvisation is our framework for revealing what was and what can be. If we want a world we have never seen, we must try moves we have never made. The studio is a lab where experimentation is disciplined, not random. We run short drills on problem, issue, and demand, then push past the familiar tactic to test an unfamiliar one. Spontaneity has a purpose. Exploration is bound by care. Trust is an active practice, built through spotting each other, naming clear roles, and radical consent that gives us permission to adjust the tempo when needed. Putting ideas in



our bodies first teaches us to pivot without losing the phrase, to hold direction when conditions shift, and to craft a strategy that breathes.

### Rehearsal

Rehearsal makes the work durable. We map power repeatedly, name decision-makers, and run one-on-ones until they read as partnering. Notes become edits that tighten the demand, refine the timeline, and clarify who moves whom.

This sits in a clear lineage. At Highlander, civil rights organizers rehearsed nonviolent sit-ins before stepping into hostile rooms, building skill, courage, and clarity through practice; in Nashville, Rev. James Lawson's workshops drilled role-plays so students could meet violence with disciplined nonviolence. We draw on contemporary scholarship—like Barker, Dale, and Davidson's *Revolutionary Rehearsals in the Neoliberal Age* and on Chenoweth and Stephan's empirical civil-resistance work, including *Why Civil Resistance Works*—which together show how disciplined, iterative practice turns uprisings into durable wins. Jessica Gordon Nembhard's *Collective Courage* complements this frame by documenting how Black cooperative organizing builds the democratic muscle and infrastructure that movements rely on in the moment and long after the moment has passed.

The lesson is consistent. Movements that train, iterate, and stage wins build capacity for larger fights. Just as there are hundreds of Intensives each year, sharpening our technical and artistic skills, we need just as many sites like the Untensive, committed to unlearning by way of care practice, political study, and collective transformation. That is essential to how we get free.

### Performance

Performance is the public test of all that practice.

Choreography becomes strategy when the house lights come up.

The Dallas Black Dance Theatre fight showed what disciplined performance looks like offstage. Across our union, we

have watched world-class artists perform outside the theater to improve their lives with the same rigor they bring to the stage. From AGMA Artists' role in the Metropolitan Opera recently receiving \$5 million in New York State funding, to newly ratified contracts at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and San Francisco Opera, the visible win rests on months of improvisation



and rehearsal that clarify the problem, cut an issue to size, craft a demand, and choose tactics that escalate with purpose to deliver material change.

### Finale

This is not a recap. It is a handoff.

We are artists. We know how to hold the rhythm, jump, and land together.

Improvisation opens the door. Rehearsal makes it durable. Performance delivers the win.

That is how change learns to stay.

### Encore ■



# AGMA Joins Unite Here Local 23 in Historic Houston Strike

*By Brian August, AGMA's Staging Staff Vice President*



This Labor Day, I had the pleasure of joining fellow union members and supporters from the Houston area as we marched on a picket line to support Unite Here Local 23.

These brave workers went on strike at the Hilton Americas-Houston, the first hotel worker strike in modern Texas history! Before joining the picket line, we all gathered at a brewery to hear from incredible, compassionate speakers, including leaders from Unite Here and other unions, as well as various community leaders. Their message was simple: Workers Over Billionaires. Not only were there inspiring speeches, but there was some great live music! I also got to meet a candidate for Houston City Council running on a pro-worker platform.

Shortly after, we all got our signs, marched down to the Hilton Americas-Houston, and joined Unite Here workers. This was a strong group, having already been outside for 10 hours that day. When we all showed up, there was great rejoicing as we more than doubled the size of the picket line. There was

marching, chanting (in both English and Spanish), drumming, a bubble machine, and a Mariachi band, even stopped by to offer support and some music!

Of course, we had our detractors. One hotel patron was so incensed that he began screaming vitriol at us. We did not engage or slow down. We stood together, side by side, supporting each other. I was the only AGMA member there that day and was so proud to meet new fellow union siblings from Houston.

At the end of the day, it was an event filled with solidarity, a powerful reminder of the importance of cross-union support, and an incredible way to spend my Labor Day. Showing up for each other across industries makes our entire movement stronger, because when hotel workers win, stage managers win; when teachers win, performers win; when any of us win,

all of us win. That spirit of showing up beyond our own workplaces is what keeps labor moving forward, and I was grateful to be part of it. ■





# “Solidarity Can Get You Everywhere”: AGMA Soloists VP Andrew Stenson on Cross-Union Solidarity



*AGMA's new Communications Coordinator, Eldee Eyimife, recently interviewed Andrew Stenson, AGMA Soloists Vice President, about the powerful speech he delivered in February at a postal workers union rally in Washington, D.C. Speaking both as an AGMA representative and from a personal place—given his family's ties to the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC)—Stenson voiced strong opposition to federal plans to privatize the U.S. Postal Service (USPS). Find his original remarks after the interview.*

**Eldee Eyimife (EE): How long have you been with AGMA, and at what point did you get involved in leadership roles?**

**Andrew Stenson (AS):** I've been a member of AGMA since 2009, but the pandemic was the big turning point for me. The union fought and successfully secured COVID protocols and advance payments for its members. As itinerant soloists, we shoulder significant upfront costs, so being able to rely on these protections was crucial, especially when contracts were canceled and we didn't know when the next job would come. This demonstrated AGMA's value and motivated me to run for an at-large Soloist seat on the Board. I then served on the Finance & Budget Committee and was eventually appointed to Soloists Vice President.

**EE: Your speech at the USPS rally in February was such a masterclass on what solidarity across borders and sectors looks like. How did your family's union background and**

**connection to the USPS empower you to take up the mantle and speak at the rally?**

**AS:** My parents were public educators and always part of a union. In fact, one of my earliest memories is bringing hot chocolate to my mother on a picket line during a teachers' strike in Minnesota. My wife also comes from a long line of USPS union workers. Her grandfather was able to build a life for his small army of children through his union job. Various members of her family have been or are employed by the USPS, so this fight for the labor rights of workers hit very close to home. I've seen firsthand how being in a union can change a family's life and make the American dream possible. These personal connections made speaking at the USPS rally particularly meaningful as an opportunity that couldn't be passed up.

**EE: The rally was held in Washington, D.C., and outside of your personal ties, doesn't affect your livelihood. How did your speech and participation in the USPS rally further the idea of nationwide solidarity and the need for us to show up for other union members?**

**AS:** Unions create generational opportunities through sacrifice and hard work. My wife just graduated from Georgetown Law, and I sing at the Metropolitan Opera—opportunities made possible by our families' union memberships. These middle-class jobs and opportunities wouldn't be possible without unions, which keep the American dream alive. The rally mobilized mail

carriers from across the country, with people from various locations like Detroit coming to Washington, D.C. There was solidarity from multiple unions and Congress members, including representatives from Hawaii. It demonstrated how people from all walks of politics and different unions could come together for a common cause and show the potency of coming together as a united front.

**EE: During your speech, you stated that “America runs on labor and not luxury.” What does that mean to you personally, and what can AGMA members take from it?**

**AS:** Workers make everything possible through their often invisible, behind-the-scenes work. These workers deserve their fair share, because nothing would be possible without them. The USPS campaign has done well, fending off privatization and negotiating a good contract with retroactive raises. Their inspired and enthusiastic members made this possible. They weren't asking to be rich, but for their fair share and a living wage. We're seeing similar progress in AGMA contracts through membership strength and solidarity.

**EE: What can AGMA members learn from the USPS fight about engaging in national labor fights and being vocal?**

**AS:** We are stronger together. Our recent fundraising campaign with the Met, which secured a \$5 million grant from the New York State Legislature, was possible because we've been part of the broader union community. Through the hard work of AGMA leadership, staff, and membership, we accomplished something alongside our sibling unions that was previously unimaginable. Our involvement and solidarity at a national level make these achievements possible. Solidarity can get you everywhere. We are stronger together. As workers, we are the foundation of making things possible, and when we speak with one voice, we are very strong.

**Speech Transcript:** Good afternoon, everyone! I'm Andrew Stenson, and I am the Soloists vice president at AGMA, the American Guild of Musical Artists. Thank you all so much for allowing me the opportunity to represent our nearly 7,000

singers, dancers, staging staff, and faculty, staff, and instructors in opera, choral performance, and dance who stand in solidarity with all the letter carriers in the United States.

This threat to the USPS is deeply personal to me. I come from a family of proud union teachers. Every opportunity I've had in my life was made possible by my parents' union jobs, and I know firsthand why it's better in a union!

My partner comes from a long line of USPS workers. Her late great-uncle was a mail clerk, her cousin is a mail carrier, her mother retired after 13 years as a mail carrier, and most impressively, her grandfather, John, spent his 32-year career with the USPS, supporting a family of eight and serving in two wars.

I have performed as an opera singer around the world and across the U.S., including here in Washington, D.C., but that success was only possible because of the foundation of union work. Likewise, my partner is completing her degree at Georgetown Law thanks to generations of opportunity provided by union jobs at the United States Postal Service.

We both learned the importance of hard work from our union upbringing. We benefited from the security and advantages gained through union work, and how union membership can fulfill the promise of the American Dream.

Now, the White House wants to dismantle OUR American Dream to further THEIRS. Today, we're here for the 640,000 USPS workers, including 73,000 veterans because once again, the White House wants to circumvent Congress and our democracy in an attempt to politicize and privatize a public service that every American depends on.

*[Crowd begins to chant: Hell no! Hell no!]*

The USPS isn't just a service. It's a lifeline for working people, powered by union labor, not billionaire greed. Postal workers keep this country running, delivering for every community, no matter the zip code. We stand with the union workers of the USPS because America runs on LABOR, not luxury.

And, to the White House we say: HELL NO!

*[Crowd begins to chant: Hell no! Hell no!]*

Hell no to dismantling the Postal Service!

Solidarity forever! ■









# A Stage Manager's Journey to Union Recognition at Boston Ballet

By Heather Olcott, Stage Manager



*In August 2025, AGMA and Boston Ballet announced the voluntary union recognition of the Company's Stage Managers. In this reflection, Stage Manager Heather Olcott shares her journey, and what this milestone means for her.*

If you had told the 18-year-old version of myself that I'd become a Stage Manager, my response would have been, "What is a Stage Manager?" Sixteen years ago, I was a freshman at Point Park University, on my way to earn my Bachelor of Arts degree in Dance. That version of me had no idea how those four years would end up completely changing my career trajectory. It was then that I learned about the role of a stage manager. I soaked up as much knowledge and hands-on training as I could, all while continuing my morning pliés and pirouettes.

By the time I graduated, I realized that I'm more comfortable calling spotlights than being in one.

From the time I began pursuing this new career path, I felt I was behind compared to others in the industry. For years, I hustled to gain credibility as a stage manager and grow my resume. I said "yes" as often as possible, wanting to expand my experience. In retrospect, my focus was so

intent on what to accomplish in the short-term that I couldn't comprehend the reality of my long-term dreams and goals.

In 2017, I landed the job as the Stage Manager with Dance Theatre of Harlem. It was the most prestigious opportunity and the most consistent job to date for me. During my time there, I realized that this was what I wanted to do for the rest of my career: stage management in dance, specifically. While I enjoy working on musicals and plays, my passion has been in dance since before I could walk.

As the industry resumed live performances in 2021, I decided it was time to take a leap in pursuance of my own career growth. Fast forward to today, in which I am in my fifth season as the Stage Manager with Boston Ballet.

Up until now, my entire stage management career has been non-union. I knew that AGMA existed and that stage managers can be part of AGMA, but I never explored more into why and how to join and what that could mean for me. It wasn't until I began looking at this job in the long term that I began to understand what a difference being part of the union could mean for me.

The decision to unionize took time, deep thought, and extensive research. The fact that Boston Ballet voluntarily recognized us so quickly speaks volumes about the importance of the work we do and the solidarity we share as part of the larger artistic team.

So, what does adding the stage management team at Boston Ballet to the AGMA contract mean to me? It means the opportunity to align with our industry colleagues on the terms and conditions of our work. It also means having representation for negotiations and the support of the Union behind me. In addition, having both dancers and stage managers

represented together underscores that we are partners in the same art form: one on stage and one behind it. Most importantly, it means setting the company and future stage managers up for success in terms of an equitable contract, securing longevity between the two.

I was given a wonderful piece of advice once: "The answer is always no, if you never ask." If you can be brave enough to ask, the answer might just be "yes." I want to thank everyone who supported me and encouraged me to have my voice heard. I am honored to be part of this monumental moment for AGMA and Boston Ballet. ■

# Vissi D'Arte: I Live for Art, but Also For Fair Wages

By Miki Yamashita, Soloist



I never thought I'd be singing the Countess in *The Marriage of Figaro* while wearing a neon hazard vest on Melrose Avenue in front of speeding Teslas, but that's what happened on a bright November morning in 2023, during the 118-day SAG-AFTRA theatrical contract strike.

As a multi-disciplined performer throughout my career, I've been privileged to enjoy the benefits and protections of multiple performer labor unions, and AGMA was the final union I joined when I worked as a Principal Artist with the Los Angeles Opera. After many years as a member of Actors' Equity Association, and joining SAG (Screen Actors Guild) and AFTRA (American Federation of Television and Radio Artists) pre-merger, I had a deep understanding of the importance of collective bargaining for performing artists, who are often the most vulnerable workers in the entertainment industry infrastructure.

I didn't become active in union service until I mostly transitioned away from opera to film and television acting. I discovered a grassroots organizing group for SAG-AFTRA actors called Solidarity, a strong network devoted to education and outreach, and when the union declared a work stoppage, I was nominated by this community to serve as a Strike Captain.

I joined an army of 300 Los Angeles local SAG-AFTRA members who had

also accepted the post, and after a few chaotic weeks of logistics and procedural challenges, we had a functioning system in place, fueled by the righteous spirit of 160,000 members demanding basic wages, working conditions, and residuals, as well as protections from the outright theft of our likeness and artistic work product that studios wished to crudely force feed into machines and regurgitate in the form of AI. For zero consent or compensation. Sure, Jan.

The outpouring of support from the industry at large on the picket line was palpable. Every day an A-list director or local business would donate a food truck or pizzas or gifts of other much-needed supplies as we spent hours marching back and forth in the blazing sun with picket signs and bullhorns. For the first time, the larger Los Angeles community and the American public at large were starting to understand that actors weren't just the millionaire movie stars dripping in jewels walking the red carpet, but were mostly rank and file workers just like them, who had to fight tooth and nail for a fair wage.

One of the creative, morale-building special events the Strike Captains would regularly organize were themed pickets. The puppeteers put together a colorful day of picketing with all their hilarious puppets; my fellow captain Katrina assembled a mobile dog-grooming day where members could bring their pets to be shampooed and pampered while their union owners marched on the line.

When I witnessed these themed pickets increase excitement and attendance, I was inspired to organize one of my own at the Paramount Pictures location, where I was stationed for the duration of the strike. I knew what I wanted to do: leverage my expansive network of LA-based classical singers, many of whom, like me, were members of both AGMA and SAG-AFTRA, and organize an opera singing concert on the street in front of the Paramount gate.

After receiving the blessing of my Paramount Lot Captains, I filled out the forms to request from SAG-AFTRA staff a definitive date for my opera-themed picket. We had no idea when the strike would end, so





I was anxious to set it up, and as soon as my selection of dates arrived, I chose the first available one, November 3.

I went on a rampage, texting every opera singer I knew in LA, and partnered with Jennifer Wallace, who was AGMA's Western Region Vice President at the time, to spread the word that an opera singing picket would be happening at Paramount. The news spread like wildfire and what happened next still makes tears surge to my eyes thinking about it two years later—I was inundated with AGMA singers, AGMA staff, SAG-AFTRA vocal contractors, my former LA Opera colleagues, and fellow Strike Captains blowing up my phone asking me how they could participate and support. And a few days into our organizing efforts, Jennifer received news that instrumentalists from the American Federation of Musicians were eager to participate, and even wanted to create a tiny orchestra to accompany the singers! I was overwhelmed with the deluge of goodwill that poured forth towards this strike effort and my tiny but mighty project.

By the morning of the opera picket day, I had a roster of glorious AGMA singers who were my friends and colleagues of many years including Ashley Faatoalia, Maria Elena Altany, Melodee Fernandez, and Glenn Fernandez, a solid group of brilliant AFM musicians including Marc Sazer, Sidney Hopson, Rahul Neuman, Joel Parman, and Alan Steinberger, a sound system to drown out the traffic, and even a piano rental service had jumped in to lend us a sturdy upright for the entire morning.

The picketers that day were enthralled. Many of my fellow SAG-AFTRA and Actors' Equity members made a point to do their shift at Paramount so they could support my mini-concert. By pure chance, SAG-AFTRA National Executive Director and Chief Negotiator Duncan Crabtree-Ireland and the negotiating committee visited the Paramount site that day, and were able to hear me and my colleagues valiantly wailing Puccini and Verdi over the deafening street noise while inhaling LA Metro Bus exhaust.



Singing with all the incredible artists Jennifer and I were able to assemble for this special day was exhilarating. Getting to share my classical artistic discipline with my fellow SAG-AFTRA Strike Captains, many of whom didn't even know I could sing at all, was a unique and profound way to express my gratitude for their partnership in the strike effort that, for all we knew, could drag into the holidays or even into 2024.

Singing opera has always given me a reason to keep getting up in the morning even in the toughest times of my life, but channeling everything I had—my talent, my union activism, my vast network of like-minded singers, and my will to serve my community—into a single event that celebrated the value of human-made art vaulted me into a whole new realm of personal purpose.

Five days after the SAG-AFTRA/AGMA/AFM opera picket, a tentative agreement was reached with the AMPTP (Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers), and the strike was officially suspended. The solidarity within SAG-AFTRA, as well as across so many labor unions, to fight for the entertainment laborer is something I will never forget. Now, every time I sing one of the arias I performed on the sidewalk of the Melrose Windsor gate of Paramount, I say

a silent prayer of thanks for every union member that showed up for me that day, and showed up for the American worker.

*Follow Miki on Instagram: @miki410 ■*



# Together We Will: Shop Solidarity in Action at the Metropolitan Opera

By Réka Echerer & Sarah Cecilia Bukowski, Dancers



## Interview subjects:

Natalia Alonso (Dancer)  
Richard Bernstein (Solo Plan Artist)  
Ben Bliss (Soloist)  
Antuan Byers (Dancer)  
Andrea Coleman (Regular Chorus, Committee Secretary 2024-25)  
John Coleman (Stage Manager, Committee Co-Chair 2024-25)  
Anne Dyas (Staff Performer)  
Marcus Shields (Stage Director)  
Claire Kuttler (Extra Chorus)  
Bobby Mittelstadt (Staff Performer)  
Lee Steiner (Regular Chorus, Committee Co-Chair 2024-25)  
Andrew Stenson (Soloist)

As AGMA's largest signatory company, the Metropolitan Opera's size and scale make it a unique workplace in many ways. But the AGMA Artists of the Met have a lot in common with fellow Artists in other AGMA signatories, adjacent sibling union workplaces, and the performing arts industry writ large. And like all AGMA signatory Artists, every few years we face the daunting task of bargaining the terms of our Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA).

This year's negotiations, which came amid the flurry of negotiations across the country in AGMA's second year of Bargain Fest, tested the strength, creativity, and solidarity of our Met-AGMA

Negotiating Committee. Buoyed by the steadfast and thoughtful leadership of AGMA National Executive Director Jeffrey Boyd, we rose to the many challenges along the way with admirable focus, generosity, and determination to secure key contractual gains that benefit every AGMA Artist in our shop.

Our 2024-2025 Negotiating Committee reflected the size and scope of our shop, with 28 Committee members representing over 1,100 shop members across nine work groups:





Regular Chorus, Extra Chorus, Dancers, Soloists, Solo Plan Artists, Staff Performers, Stage Managers, Choreographers, and Stage Directors. For many (Réka and I included), this was our first negotiation process, while others brought a wealth of experience from years—sometimes decades—of working at the Met or other AGMA signatories.

Met Dancer and Committee member Réka Echerer spoke with members of the 2024-25 Committee from each work group to get their perspectives on the negotiation process.

### How did you see solidarity in action throughout the negotiation process?

**Richard Bernstein:** We all fought for each group to have a win, and every group was helpful to the other groups to support that. That's where I felt the most solidarity in action—we all cared about what each group needed, and what the Met needed to hear about what each group needed.

**Andrea Coleman:** We were a strong team and were able to communicate in a positive manner—we all gave space for objection and discussion to see the different sides of the picture. And to get to consensus, to get through discussion and ask at the end, “Any objections?” and it's silent—everyone had agreed that we'd found a way forward. I think that's true solidarity.

**Antuan Byers:** In this negotiation, we weren't going to leave any of our work groups behind, and I saw how we were willing to take personal sacrifices for collective gain. Our shop-wide petition gained over 650 signatures to show our power across the table, and the exercise of doing the petition also brought us closer in the action of rallying our colleagues together.

**Claire Kuttler:** Preparing for negotiations was a really Herculean lift. The Committee did so much groundwork to understand the needs of each group and find ways to align what we were hoping to improve in terms of quality of life, wages, and working conditions. And then all that painstaking work paid off. It was a thrilling moment to get to an agreement.

### How did getting to know other shop members during the negotiation process contribute to your sense of solidarity?

**Natalia Alonso:** I always knew my colleagues were brilliant artists but during these negotiations, I learned how intelligent and thoughtful they are as well. I was touched by hearing the personal stories my colleagues relayed in support of our shop-wide petition. It's not easy to expose yourself individually in front of management, and yet so many of my colleagues generously gave real faces to the struggles artists have faced.

**Marcus Shields:** When we're put into a really intense, pressured situation, you see how people's brains work. I saw a tremendous amount of kindness among the Committee as humans having a



dialogue. A lot of empathy can be shared, and I find it really productive. In that sense it's a very healthy way to experience the complexity of AGMA and the Met. When you engage in dialogue like that, you can get to solutions that you wouldn't be able to get to with assumptions about the work of others.

**Lee Steiner:** It was eye-opening, inspiring, and frustrating. You meet all kinds of different people, including people you don't always agree with, but you have to engage, you have to find a solution that works for everybody. It took disagreement, it took getting into the weeds to identify what we all needed, and we started to recognize that we had more in common than we thought. I think we all started to get a clear picture that it wasn't going to happen if it was just each group for themselves—it had to be all of us.

**Bobby Mittelstadt:** One of the most interesting things about being on the Committee was being able to talk to other groups that we may not interact with on a daily basis, hearing their stories about their jobs and the conditions they work under, and



realizing how similar all of our situations actually are. So there's a feeling that you're in the trenches with people that you maybe didn't talk to as much before, so now when I see those people in the hallway, we see each other in a different way.

**Andrew Stenson:** It was really interesting to see how people's work rules affect their conditions, how much they make, and how complex an equation it is. Now that we know, we are better equipped to have strong solidarity. I've gotten to know so many people in the building since being a part of all these things, so it's become more fun to come to work. It's amazing how aligned our interests are and what we can achieve when we're all trying to make a better life for each other.

**How do you think we can strengthen our shop solidarity and our solidarity with AGMA Artists, our sibling unions, and the Labor Movement nationally?**

**Anne Dyas:** Anybody who has questions or wants to make changes, that's the moment to be a part of the group. Knowing that you have the ability to use our Union resources is so vital to creating a safe, sustainable workplace.

**Marcus Shields:** I work in other houses as a Director—sometimes they're AGMA and sometimes not. I'm sensitive to being in situations where institutional systems take advantage of people. That becomes something I try to address, leading a process that models ways of communicating across departments. Every show you do is an opportunity to make good work, to be ambitious, to push to the limit of what you're capable of doing as an artist, and also to take care of everybody.

**Lee Steiner:** Coast to coast, I think that's already happening when we pick up ideas from other shops' negotiations. There were moments in the negotiations when it was really helpful for us to be in touch with the other unions, [American Federation

of Musicians] Local 802 and [IATSE] Local 1, and there's more work to be done there. I'm hopeful that we can all recognize that negotiations are not a zero-sum game for the unions here—we're working together.

**Ben Bliss:** A lot of stagehands work at the Met, and every day, half or more of them are wearing union t-shirts. My perception is that they're deeply committed to and proud of their union. I would like to see that happen more with AGMA. We could all be more proud and involved and excited to represent ourselves within the Union, which is the only way that it works. It's important to get involved so you see how you can change things and get them to work better. Talk to people you disagree with and try to open up and understand where they're coming from.

**John Coleman:** Communication is really important, just keeping people informed. Making sure that every group has a voice, that we meet with each other, we are honest with each other, and we listen, so we can look for creative solutions that everyone can benefit from. I'm heartened by the public's perception that unions are actually good. So the national labor movement is moving in the right direction, organizing and giving people a voice.

**Andrew Stenson:** It's important to show how we can deliver for each other and inspire others. People are realizing that we can accomplish more together if we work together. There's a national, if not global movement, to recognize that and join a union. I'm seeing people who want to get involved on all sorts of levels that I never thought I would see, because they're seeing that there's progress, that there's something to be achieved, and that it's better if we do this together.

**Claire Kuttler:** We really have to fight. This is a tough time for the country, a tough time in the arts, and it galvanized us; it turned up the fire in us to forge ahead and give it our all. Being







willing to serve or consider serving on your local Committee or being an AGMA delegate are things that everyone can do, because as Artists we are all connected.

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Several Committee members highlighted a moment across the table when all work groups stood firmly behind the Staff Performers—our smallest work group—as they made their case for a substantial pay raise to reach a living wage. In another instance, a scheduling provision required Dancers, Extra Chorus, and Stage Directors to work together to ensure that everyone involved had the resources to get what they needed. Every Committee member singled out the end of negotiations as a high point—the handshakes across the table, the celebration of our hard work, and sharing the new agreement with our colleagues—and all of us felt truly proud of what we’d learned and contributed in the process.

These personal experiences and reflections from our Committee members show that shop solidarity across working groups is the first step to building broader solidarities within the performing arts and the labor movement at large, at a time when our sectors are experiencing increasing political pressure.

The Committee has already begun

preparations for negotiations for our next multi-year agreement with the Met. We are pleased to welcome some new members to the 2025-2026 Committee under the leadership of Co-Chairs Andrea Coleman and John Coleman. As

we face this next round, we are going in better equipped from our experiences of solidarity in action. Together we did, and together we will! ■





# Union Babies: Bringing Up the Next Generation

By Megan McFadden, Chorister



I didn't grow up in a union household. Quite the opposite: my parents seemed to think of them as corrupt or getting in the way. I fell into the labor movement by accident—both of the AGMA Delegates for the Opera Philadelphia chorus were stepping down, and there was a call for volunteers to fill the gap.

Not long after becoming a delegate for Opera Philadelphia, the organizing effort began in earnest at the Philadelphia Symphonic Choir, and I was able to be a part of that. Through that process, I started to witness unions supporting each other.

When we leafletted before a performance, we were joined by members of AFM, IATSE, and even a few Teamsters. This was also my first chance to expose my daughter to the labor movement. She was one at the time and happily wore her AGMA button, handing leaflets to concertgoers.

After that evening, she joined me in leafletting for Starbucks Workers United and on the picket line for TUGSA (Temple University Graduate Students' Association) at Temple University. Her little brother is nine months old, and he's already been on the line with AFSCME

(American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees) District Council 33 and was part of the Labor Day Parade this year.

At every action we joined, we were met with open arms. It didn't matter where you were from; all that mattered was that we were all there to support the cause. We never stayed longer than the kids had the attention and interest for. My daughter, in particular, loved picket lines with music and clapping. Labor actions have been my favorite way to show my children community.

My children will grow up knowing that our collective power across all unions is great and important. I am teaching them to look after others and advocate for themselves. My AGMA babies will hopefully grow up to fight for collective bargaining rights and fair contracts. Solidarity Forever! ■





# AGMA Vocalists and the Dream Orchestra of Los Angeles Unite for Wildfire Relief

By Jennifer Wallace, Assistant Regional Manager (former AGMA Chorister)



©Aaron Rapoport

On May 17, *Harmony for Hope*, a benefit concert supporting classical artists affected by the Southern California wildfires in January 2025, was held at the Aratani Theater in Los Angeles. A large chorus of AGMA members and four radiant AGMA soloists joined members of the Dream Orchestra and Heart of Los Angeles' (HOLA) Eisner Intergenerational Orchestra to raise their voices and

instruments in a powerful performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. As stated at the top of the concert: "Beethoven's Ninth is a testament to resilience, to unity, and to hope. And tonight, through the power of music, we are extending that hope to those who need it most." That spirit carried through every note of the evening.

The concert was sparked by an idea from LA Opera mezzo-soprano Veronica Christenson, who reached out to fellow AGMA member Daniel Suk—tenor and musical director of the Dream Orchestra—in hopes of making the event a reality. Suk quickly gained support from the nonprofit, HOLA, which secured the venue and managed ticketing and front-of-house operations.

Under Maestro Suk's inspired baton, the orchestra, chorus, and soloists delivered a performance that was both technically brilliant and emotionally resonant. Chorus logistics were coordinated

by LA Opera tenor Charles Lane, who trusted his professional colleagues to arrive ready to sing with only a brief rehearsal.

In a showing of true solidarity, every artist on stage donated their time and talent. Among them were performers who had personally experienced displacement from the wildfires, showing up to support others who had endured similar losses. One singer, when thanked for participating, said simply: "How could I not be here? Everyone has been so giving since we lost our home, and this was my first opportunity to do a little bit in return."

Proceeds were split evenly between the AGMA Relief Fund and the Guitar Center Foundation, ensuring support for both union and non-union classical artists. The evening stood as a testament to the power of music to heal, unite, and uplift. ■

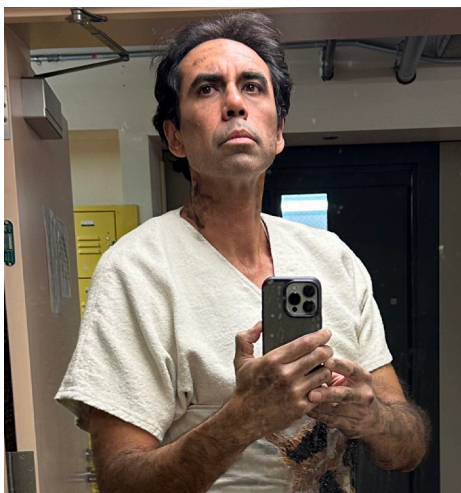


Just a few of the participating AGMA members backstage on May 17



# Honoring My Father in Solidarity and Song

By Troy Turriate, Chorister



*Troy as a Grail Knight in Parsifal (SF Opera 2025)*

My father, Carlos, was born in Peru, where his natural gift for singing once opened unlikely doors, like the opportunity to attend private school. But in the end, the weight of tradition and the expectations of a conservative Latin household pushed him away from pursuing music as anything more than a private joy. As my brother and I grew up in Florida and developed our own interests in music, my parents went with a different approach. They encouraged us, drove us to rehearsals, allowing us to form teenage rock bands — turning music into a shared family language.

I carried my generational musical

inheritance into college, studying vocal performance, but stepped into the tech world after graduation, seeking the stability I feared a music career couldn't offer. Now, in my early forties, as a professional musician and AGMA member, I feel that I am completing a circle for my father, and probably generations before him.

I owe my return to music and my father's dream to the security and solidarity that being a part of AGMA provides. As a union member, I hold the ability to build a life as an artist with support, protections, and a collective voice behind me. When I joined AGMA, it was during a time when collective action at the San Francisco Symphony was underway. I had been singing with the Symphony as a volunteer for a few seasons, and suddenly I found myself on the picket line. At first, I was hesitant to speak up, but the deeper I got into it, the clearer it became: as musicians, we are the best advocates for ourselves and our well-being; collective action is how we survive and secure a future.

Labor unions, like AGMA, allow musicians to build lives doing what we love with dignity. I think about artists I know who are raising families in San Francisco, one of the country's most expensive cities, and they can do that thanks, in part, to a union contract. Tenured singers who have spent decades performing can take

a step back when they choose to, because they've had stability and agency in their careers. That's something you can't just take for granted.

When I look back on my journey from my father's unrealized path, to the way music remained a thread through my lineage, to where I am today with the very practical solidarity of union membership, I come back to this:

I sing because my father was denied.

I sing because the music inside of me was patient and waited for me to return.

I sing because the tether didn't break.

It found its way back to me, and AGMA empowers me.

And now, when I walk into rehearsal or onto a stage, or when I stand in solidarity with my colleagues for fair and safe working conditions, I feel rooted in my lineage and in a movement that links our collective fight as artists to the broader struggle of all workers seeking fairness and respect.

## Dedication

This piece is dedicated to my father, Carlos, for his jovial character and unrealized vocal talent.

And to my mother, Claudia, whose lifelong love and passion for authenticity in music drove me to become a stronger artist. ■



*Troy's family and grandfather in their Tampa home (1989)*



*Troy's punk band rehearsing harmonies for a recording (1999)*

# Touching Veterans One Note at a Time

By Thomas Baker, Actor

I am a veteran of three U.S. military branches (Coast Guard, Navy, and the Air Force) simply giving back to other veterans with the peaceful pieces of a 36-string Celtic harp.

Built and tuned by this veteran, my harp has been played at numerous military ceremonies and events across the country. And, always with an eye to promoting AGMA's support and professionalism, I recognize the importance of my membership in this union. Linking other veterans with live music, the harp,

the military, and AGMA, the mix is an eclectic one! But here I am, touching veterans one note at a time. ■



## The Power of Belonging in the Arts

By Wagner Pástor, Chorister



"Che bella cosa..."

Those were the first words I sang at my interview at the United States Embassy in Ecuador—an unexpected audition before an immigration officer. That impromptu performance marked the beginning of a melodic journey: a story of hope, courage,

and the search for belonging in a new land. I didn't realize then that the arts would not only shape my voice but also my understanding of what it truly means to belong. I discovered that belonging has an extraordinary power—it transforms fear into courage, isolation into connection, and uncertainty into inspiration. Belonging is not just about fitting in or being accepted. It's about contributing our voices to a larger harmony—a community that listens, supports, and creates together.

### Discipline: The Foundation of Belonging

In the arts, belonging begins with discipline—the shared rhythm that unites us as musicians, dancers, actors, and creators. My parents, in Carapungo, a small town in northern Quito, Ecuador, taught me that discipline is more than a habit. It is a daily commitment to show up—for

yourself, for your craft, and for those who believe in you.

Every morning at five a.m., my parents woke my siblings and me. We dressed neatly, grabbed a piece of warm bread in one hand and a cup of cocoa in the other, and walked to the bus station. It was often crowded, and sometimes we had to climb in through the windows just to make it to school. They used to say, "Staying in bed doesn't open doors." That morning routine—repeated over and over for twenty years—became my first lesson in belonging.

Discipline gave me purpose. It taught me that no matter how early, how difficult, or how uncertain the path might be, you keep moving forward—because others are counting on you. When I came to the U.S., that same discipline carried me through freezing Idaho mornings and stormy North Carolina rains. My feet were cold and wet, but my heart was on



fire with the joy of learning.

In those moments, I began to understand that discipline is not a solitary act. It's a bridge that connects people who share the same passion. When we show up consistently—to rehearse, to collaborate, to listen—we build trust. That trust becomes belonging. And belonging, in turn, fuels our creativity.

### **Perseverance: The Music of Community**

Leaving home was frightening. I left behind the familiar warmth of family meals, the sound of my mother's voice, and the comfort of my language. But my passion for music, and the dream of growing as an artist, gave me courage.

One cold January morning, I flew from Idaho to North Carolina while running a fever. My friend Nate was driving, and I remember shivering, my throat aching, my eyes watering. He looked over and said, "You're always in such a rush, Wagner. Is it really worth it—traveling sick across the country just to sing?"

My answer was simple: *Yes*. Because singing was never just about me. It was about honoring every sacrifice that brought me here: my parents' early mornings, my grandmothers' hard work, the hopes of a small-town boy who dreamed in music. As an immigrant, I couldn't wait for opportunities to knock. I had to create them, even when I didn't feel strong enough to stand.

When I arrived in North Carolina, weak and exhausted, I stepped onto the stage. The moment I opened my mouth, my breath turned into a melody, a prayer of gratitude, a declaration of perseverance. With every note, I felt the strength of everyone who believed in me. The sickness faded, replaced by a powerful sense of connection to my teachers, my colleagues, and my purpose.

Perseverance, I learned, is not a lonely journey. It is sustained by community. In the arts, we lift each other through every challenge—a missed cue, a lost voice, a rejection letter, or a disappointing audition. Each time we choose to persevere, we remind ourselves that we belong to

something greater than the individual performance. We belong to a collective story of resilience, creation, and hope.

### **Determination: The Spirit That Unites Us**

My grandmothers, Nelly and Bachita, were two of the most determined women I have ever known. One was widowed young; the other left a hotheaded husband to protect her children. They washed clothes by the river and cooked in a jail for young men to feed their families. From them, I learned that determination is love in action.



In their words, "Whatever you choose to do, be the best you can be. Don't give up, and never stop smiling." When I said I wanted to be a musician, they smiled and said, "If that's your dream, then make it beautiful. Share your joy with the world. And remember, music should feed your soul and your family."

Their advice still echoes in my heart. Determination means more than ambition. It means responsibility—to our communities, our colleagues, and our audiences. In an arts organization, determination is what keeps us striving for

excellence while nurturing the people around us. It pushes us to open doors for others, to mentor, to collaborate, and to celebrate every small success as a shared victory.

The arts flourish when determination is collective, when everyone—from the stage manager to the soloist, from the choreographer to the intern—feels invested in the same purpose. That unity, that sense of belonging, turns individual effort into something far more powerful: a community of creativity.

### **Belonging: Our Greatest Work of Art**

Over time, I realized that belonging itself is a masterpiece—a composition built on love, effort, and empathy. In the last few years in the United States, I found not only education but also a second home. I found mentors who believed in me, friends who became family, and Andrea, my life partner, who taught me that love and art are deeply intertwined.

I am grateful to have been a member of AGMA since 2022 through Cincinnati Opera, as I have felt truly supported in my artistic journey. Since joining, I have received numerous audition opportunities and, most recently, a contract with Houston Grand Opera. This sense of belonging within an organization that values and protects artists has strengthened my belief that when we support one another, we all rise together.

Belonging gave me the courage to face my fears of being far from home, of speaking a new language, of starting over again and again. It also gave me joy—and, I confess, a few extra pounds from muffins and ice cream. But those small indulgences were part of the celebration of community. They were the sweetness of knowing I was no longer walking alone.

Belonging, I've learned, is the invisible harmony behind every performance. It is the laughter backstage, the quiet encouragement in a rehearsal, the shared silence before the curtain rises. It is what allows us to take risks, to express vulnerability, to create something authentic and true.

As artists and leaders in arts organizations, our greatest responsibility is to

nurture that sense of belonging—to make sure every voice, every story, every background is heard and valued. Inclusion isn't a slogan; it's a practice. It's how we ensure that the arts remain a place where everyone can see themselves reflected and respected.

Let's make our rehearsal rooms, classrooms, and performance spaces homes where people feel safe to be brave, where creativity flows not from fear of failure, but from the joy of connection. Let's use our art to build bridges across languages, cultures, and identities. Because when people feel they belong, they don't just

participate—they thrive.

**Conclusion:** The Song We Sing Together My journey from the bus stations of Carapungo to the concert venues of New York has taught me that discipline, perseverance, and determination are not just qualities of success; they are the instruments of belonging.

A single voice can move hearts. But when many voices unite, they can move the world.

Let's keep singing—not just to be heard, but to make others feel included in the music. Let's keep learning from each other, encouraging

each other, and creating spaces where art becomes a reflection of our shared humanity.

A single finger can turn on a light switch, but two hands can build a home.

To everyone who creates, collaborates, and belongs: remember that the most beautiful work of art we will ever make is *each other*.

So, let us live with a song in our hearts. With loud and soft melodies, let us sing it with our souls—together—as if it were our last breath. ■

## Policies of the AGMA Board of Governors

Since Fall 2020, the policies of the AGMA Board of Governors have been available on the AGMA website. All AGMA members in good standing can review these policies by accessing the MyAGMA Portal.

Since the last issue of *AGMAzine*, three policies have been approved:

1. 2025 AGMA Nomination and Election Policy: 2025 AGMA Governors Election (January 2025)
2. Filling 2-year and 4-year terms in Uncontested Elections (August 2025)
3. New Policy on Respectful Workplaces (November 2025) ■

## Notice to Employees Subject to Union Security Clauses

This Notice explains how union security clauses work for employees covered by AGMA contracts. In simple terms, these clauses ensure that everyone who benefits from AGMA's collective bargaining and representation helps support that work.

This Notice outlines what AGMA membership means. How dues are used

to support contract enforcement, workplace protections, and advocacy, and what options exist for employees who choose not to become full members. It also explains the rights guaranteed by law and the process for raising questions or objections.

This information is important for all AGMA-covered artists because it helps

you understand how your union functions—from negotiating wages and benefits to protecting safety, fairness, and professional standards across the industry.

Follow the link [here](#) to review the full notice and learn more about your rights, responsibilities, and the collective power of AGMA membership. ■



# Artists Winning in Texas: AGMA Joins YALL to Celebrate Solidarity and Success

*By Griff Braun, AGMA's National Organizing Director*



AGMA's historic campaign in support of the fired dancers of Dallas Black Dance Theatre (DBDT) last year would not have been possible without the help and support of many allies. I'm talking about AGMA Artists across the country, the leaders and rank and file members of our sibling unions, local and state politicians, the Dallas and Texas chapters of the AFL-CIO and the Dallas and Tarrant County Central Labor Councils, local religious and Black community leaders, and the many, many working people from various unions and fields; they all had our backs in Dallas and beyond.

Simply put, solidarity across industries and across communities is what allowed us to achieve justice for those artists. And no ally was more involved and more valuable over the many months of the DBDT campaign than the Young Active Labor Leaders (YALL).

YALL is made up of working people and union members, 40 years old and under, who are passionate about the labor movement and committed to action. From teachers to pipe fitters to airline mechanics, YALL is a diverse collection of motivated young people from across Texas. From my first introduction to the YALL leaders, in that frantic week of preparation for our huge rally outside the DBDT studios in August of last year, it was apparent that these folks were ready to show up and make things happen.

Over the next several months and the many rallies and picket lines we held, YALL was always there, boosting turnout, acting as picket line deputies, storing and bringing our materials (including Scabby the Rat, a first for AGMA!), and helping with vital political connections at the city and state levels.

Earlier this year, when Arash Farasat, a leader of the Dallas Chapter of YALL, reached out and asked if I would be a part of their upcoming state-wide convention in Dallas, I immediately said yes. The initial request was for me and one or two of the

former DBDT dancers to speak for an hour about the DBDT unionizing fight, our campaign, and the ultimate settlement and victory. After some discussion, though, YALL agreed to give us 90 minutes for a broader AGMA panel discussion that we called "Artists Winning in Texas!"

I was thrilled that AGMA artists from four Texas companies were able to join me on the September 6 panel: Christopher Harrison, chorister, AGMA delegate, and negotiating committee member at The Dallas Opera; Rayleigh Vendt, dancer and organizing and negotiating committee member at Texas Ballet Theater; Wes Landry, chorister, AGMA delegate, and negotiating committee member at Houston Grand Opera; and Sierra Noelle Jones and Gillian Clifford, both former DBDT dancers.

Speaking in front of over 100 young labor leaders from across Texas, we were able to introduce them to the work of being an artist in the worlds of opera, dance, and choral performance. At what was a fairly somber event up to that point, due to the current state of the world, our panel was also able to lift spirits a bit by celebrating recent AGMA wins in Texas—from important contract victories at The Dallas Opera and Houston Grand Opera, to the amazing first contract at Texas Ballet Theater and, of course, the very public campaign and victory with the fired dancers of DBDT.

The audience was very responsive and engaged, cheering the achievements of all the AGMA artists on several occasions. At one point, I invited a few of the YALL leaders to give their perspective on the DBDT campaign. They spoke passionately about our campaign as a gift to their organization and to the labor movement in the Dallas/Fort Worth area, because it was an opportunity to unite a variety of communities behind a truly righteous cause. With that in mind, we finished our discussion on a high note and showed what solidarity can look like in Texas by showing the professional video we had made of the first rally we held outside the DBDT studios last August.

Huge thanks to everyone at YALL for hosting our AGMA panel, and to AGMA members Christopher Harrison, Rayleigh Vendt, Wes Landry, Sierra Noelle Jones, and Gillian Clifford for their participation.

Solidarity forever! ■

# A Look into the AGMA Pilot Leave Program: An Interview with the First Participant



*On March 31, 2025, the AGMA Board of Governors approved the Short-Term AGMA Leave Pilot Program as part of AGMA's 2025 and Beyond Strategic Action Plan. This initiative, modeled after long-standing "leave of absence" programs in other unions, will allow AGMA members to temporarily step into staff roles for a fixed term, gaining valuable experience and skills for potential future employment within AGMA or the broader labor movement. Jennifer Wallace, a long-time chorister of the LA Opera and AGMA Governor, served as the first recipient of the program, stepping into the position in July 2025.*

**Eldee Eyimife (EE), AGMA's Communications Coordinator:** Hello Jennifer, I really appreciate you chatting with me today. Congratulations on being the first participant in the AGMA Leave Program. First, kindly walk us through your journey with AGMA.

**Jennifer Wallace (JW):** I joined AGMA in the summer of 1986, coinciding with the first production at Los Angeles Opera. I later joined the Board of Governors around 2002-2003 and the Work Rules and Contracts Committee (WRCC)

about three years later. I really took to that line of work and became chair of the WRCC about six to seven years ago. I stepped down this past summer to participate in this pilot project.

**EE: This is a program that other unions have similarly implemented. Why do you think this pilot program was an important step for AGMA to take, and what would you say to encourage members to learn more about this program?**

**JW:** I was part of the AGMA Board of Governors for several years, serving as Chair of the WRCC, but I've always wanted to help AGMA staff more. However, I was limited in what I could do as a member. When this program was discussed, I immediately saw it as an opportunity to benefit the Union by stepping into a staff-like role. The program gives insight into what happens "behind the curtain. As a member, I've seen the final results of staff work, but rarely witnessed how it's developed. This role has allowed me to have more input and share my unique, lived experience when staff members encounter unfamiliar situations.

**EE: Could you talk about your responsibilities or what a day in your life looks like in this pilot program?**

**JW:** This experience will be different for every member who steps into the role. The main idea behind the program is the flexibility and adaptability to meet the Union's needs and participants' skills while gaining valuable experience. Initially, I was supposed to assist with 2-3 projects, but when I started, one staff member had resigned, and two others were on family leave. So, I was able to step up more, in a way. For example, I was assigned 12-13 signatories, many on hiatus but including ballet companies that were

returning to work. I've not been negotiating but doing things like discussing side letters and waivers with companies when needed. I check contracts, reach out to delegates, run delegate elections, and orient new members. It was never overwhelming, but sometimes it felt like I bit off more than I could chew. But at the same time, I found it all really fascinating and intriguing and jumped in with both feet. For the lack of a better term, I speak "singer" so those contracts are understandable to me, and I feel comfortable navigating that world.

**EE: How do you see this pilot program shaping AGMA's long-term approach to supporting its leaders and members?**

**JW:** This program offers artists the opportunity to gain hands-on experience in union operations. This is a great opportunity for me, as someone nearing the end of my vocal career, to explore other options. It's an excellent alternative to traditional office jobs, retail, or teaching, as it builds on knowledge developed over years as a union member and allows you to contribute to the future of artists.

**EE: The theme of this issue is "AGMA Coast to Coast: A National Push for Change." How does this pilot program align with the nationwide effort to empower members?**

**JW:** This program embodies this year's *AGMAZine* theme perfectly. In this position, I've felt empowered to perform deeper dives into agreements and noticed minor inconsistencies across contracts that we were quickly able to sort out. I've gained a better understanding of how our contracts function, supported staff in negotiations, and identified areas where we can push for stronger protections and fairer terms. What's powerful about this



initiative is that it builds leadership from within. This program represents what “AGMA Coast to Coast” is all about: artists supporting artists, learning from one another, and standing together to make our union stronger nationwide. It’s a way to take an active role in shaping the future of AGMA and the labor movement.

**EE: Thank you so much for your time today, Jennifer. One last question. Can you share a moment when you saw that solidarity firsthand, maybe in a bargaining room, on a picket line, or in a cross-country show of support?**

**JW:** A memory that stuck with me is the solidarity and teamwork that was displayed at the Portland Opera while negotiating an extension agreement. Members experienced difficulties with management, communication, and safety issues. They banded together, prepared written statements, and voiced their concerns to the board. Through multiple meetings and the 35 individual interviews

I conducted, we identified common themes and concerns. These concerns were presented to the general director, resulting in improvements to the extension agreement, including a 3% wage increase, parking reimbursement clarification and recommitment to existing health and safety language. This demonstrated members standing together and voicing their opinions both individually and collectively. What struck me most was how unified everyone in the room was; artists, delegates, and staff working together toward the same goal. Everyone was determined to secure fair treatment and uphold the integrity of our contract, and that collective spirit carried us through some tough conversations.

**Are you interested in participating in the Pilot Leave Program or have questions? Contact your AGMA Staff Representative or a member of the AGMA Board of Governors! ■**



## Stay Connected: How to Find Your AGMA Staff Rep

### How to Find Your AGMA STAFF REPRESENTATIVE

[musicalartists.org/contact-your-agma-staff-representative/](https://musicalartists.org/contact-your-agma-staff-representative/) 

AGMA’s professional staff serves as a direct line of communication and support for AGMA members. To assist members every step of the way, AGMA’s counsel, regional directors, and assistant regional directors are assigned to specific signatory companies to work closely with members, negotiating and enforcing the collective bargaining agreement and protecting members’ rights. And, of course, they are available to answer any questions you may have.

Given recent updates to AGMA’s professional staff, we recommend that members revisit AGMA’s “Contact Your AGMA Staff Representative” webpage to familiarize themselves with their primary point(s) of contact.

[www.musicalartists.org/contact-your-agma-staff-representative/](https://www.musicalartists.org/contact-your-agma-staff-representative/) ■

# National Executive Director, Jeffrey Boyd, Reflects on his First Year in the AGMAverse



*National Executive Director Jeffrey Boyd joined Communications Coordinator Eldad Eyimife in conversation to reflect on his first year at AGMA, a year defined by purposeful visits to AGMA Areas across the country, Bargainfest 2.0, and vision cast toward AGMA's future.*

**Eldad (Eldee) Eyimife (EE): What motivated you to throw your hat in the ring for this role at AGMA?**

**Jeffrey Boyd (JB):** When a good friend mentioned that AGMA was searching for a new National Executive Director, I thought performing arts (which I love) + union (which I love) = an amazing opportunity. But what really motivated me was reading about the struggle at Dallas Black Dance Theatre: a struggle for workers' rights, a struggle led by Black workers, a struggle in the South, a David and Goliath struggle. I thought, wow, this is the union for me—AGMA is a fighting union!

**EE: Congratulations on your first year, Jeffrey! What word or phrase would you use to describe your first year as National Executive Director?**

**JB:** In keeping with the cosmic metaphor

of the AGMAverse, I would choose the word: STELLAR. I mean, our members are *literally* stars. And as I've repeatedly said over the course of the year, I'm regularly starstruck. But in all seriousness, our members, our leaders, and our staff are truly stellar. Bright, eternally committed, illuminating the path forward, a marvel to behold. And I am just so grateful to have been welcomed into the AGMAverse with such open arms.

**EE: Prior to AGMA, you had accrued over 25 years of experience in the labor movement at unions like UNITE HERE. Although you are no doubt well-versed in labor unions, I can only imagine that pivoting to the performing arts industry was quite a shift for you. How was that transitional period for you?**

**JB:** I must confess that the transition is still a work in progress, and I'm grateful for the patience of our members and staff as I continue to deepen my understanding of the AGMAverse in all its complexity. I will say that the core issues are the same: artists need more money, access to affordable health care, retirement, safety and health on the job, and very importantly: inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility in the workplace. What it has taken me longer to wrap my head around is how much AGMA members' daily work life resembles that of a highly-skilled, often low-wage, gig worker. Figuring out how AGMA can be the best union for full-time artists as well as part-time or itinerant freelance artists is one of our great challenges, but I'm excited to dig deeper into it!

**EE: During your first year, you visited AGMA members across most of the country. You went to performances and met with Area Committees and Negotiating Committees. What was**

**your driving force in making sure you traveled to these AGMA regions during your first year?**

**JB:** Whether you're sitting in the studio with the dancers at Sacramento Ballet, trying not to fall while wandering around backstage with the staging staff at the Metropolitan Opera, watching the incredible athleticism of the dancers rehearsing at Ballet Memphis or marveling at the virtuosic singing and dancing of our members at Lyric Opera of Chicago, there is a deeper connection to the art forms, to the struggles, and most importantly to the humans who do this work tirelessly, gracefully and (at least seemingly) effortlessly. The Union lives in the workplace, and that's where our members are, so that's where the union's leadership needs to be. I'm very proud to have spent time in almost all our areas this year, and if I haven't yet met you, I will very soon!

**EE: Your dedication to meeting AGMA members on their home turf perfectly aligns with our theme for this issue, "AGMA Coast to Coast: A National Push for Change." How did being there physically affect your perspective on their situations and challenges?**

**JB:** AGMA's National Headquarters in New York City is a wonderful resource, but AGMA lives in theaters, opera houses, and studios across America. To really know our members, their work, their struggles, and their vision for change, it's critical to be where they are. While Zoom is a helpful tool, it pales in comparison to the warmth felt through conversations during caucuses, the debates over food when the bargaining day is done, the meeting of families and friends during cast parties, the small asides where the fears and hopes are quietly expressed. To be able to change the Union for the better, we have to really know the Union, and



being present with our members is, in my experience, the best way.

**EE: A concept that you discuss frequently is AGMA's 2025 and Beyond Strategic Plan. For our members who are hearing of this for the first time, please describe in a sentence or two what it is and what we hope to accomplish.**

**JB:** The Strategic Plan is essentially a blueprint we can all share that describes our action steps to make AGMA the strongest union it can be. The planks of the plan include Organizing (internal and external), Training and Development (for members and for staff), Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Accessibility (in the workplace and in the union), Future of Arts Funding, Communications (internal and external), Solidarity (our work with other unions in the U.S. and globally), AGMA's 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary (what's our vision for the future?) and of course, Budget and Finance. Each plank has concrete action steps with timelines to ensure accountability with AGMA's Board of Governors.

**EE: Part of this AGMAzine theme is about artists standing together across geographies and disciplines. Can you**

**share a moment when you saw that solidarity firsthand, maybe in a bargaining room, on a picket line, or in a cross-country show of support?**

**JB:** It feels appropriate to circle back to where we started this interview: the former dancers of Dallas Black Dance Theatre. They've written a blueprint for solidarity in action. The dancers stood in militant solidarity with each other. The other AGMA shops in Texas repeatedly demonstrated their support through myriad acts of solidarity. AGMA members from across the country were sending in video messages to support the dancers. The Dallas labor movement and the Dallas City Council regularly showed up to hold the company accountable. The AGMA Board of Governors stood in stalwart solidarity. And AGMA's staff worked with singular focus to ensure the best possible outcome. And we won. First, we made the company pay for their illegal behavior. Second, we insisted that DBDT is and will forever be a union shop, and we are currently negotiating our first collective bargaining agreement. Third, we showed all our employers and our industries that AGMA will fight back against injustice and AGMA will win. I believe this win has been absolutely central to the success of our bargaining across the country, and

it will be one of the great struggles that defines the future of our union.

**EE: Speaking of! From coast to coast, AGMA has been seeing wins across the board during Bargainfest 2.0. In what ways are you hoping to carry this energy into your second year as N.E.D.?**

**JB:** My second year will coincide with AGMA's 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary, which is so exciting! My hope is that we will channel the energy of winning through Bargainfest 2.0 into a bold vision for AGMA's next decade which will include higher wages across our industries, more AGMA signatories from coast to coast, building our work around inclusion, diversity, equity and accessibility, deeper collaboration with our employers around arts funding, and a more secure financial future for the Union. The last few years have propelled AGMA forward, and I think we are well-positioned to continue that trajectory and even accelerate it. ■

# Meet AGMA's New Communications Coordinator: Eldee Eyimife



**Eldad (Eldee) Eyimife**  
*Communications Coordinator*

Eldad (Eldee) Eyimife (she/her) joined AGMA in August 2025 as the Union's first Communications Coordinator. In this role, she supports AGMA's mission by strengthening storytelling, member engagement, and external communications.

Eldee comes to AGMA from Waco, Texas, where she earned two bachelor's degrees in International Studies and Corporate

Communication, as well as a master's degree in Intercultural Communication, from Baylor University. She also served as a Program Manager for two years before transitioning into union communications.

"Effective communication is at the heart of member engagement and public understanding of AGMA's work. Bringing Eldee on as our first Communications Coordinator marks an exciting step forward for the Union," said Alicia Cook, AGMA's Director of Communications. "Her skills and dedication will allow us to expand our communications efforts in ways we had only dreamed of before."

Born in New York and raised in Lagos, Nigeria, Eldee's global perspective fuels her passion for culture and connection. A lifelong appreciator of the arts, she played violin for 10 years in Nigeria before focusing on her academic and professional journey in the United States. Joining AGMA has reunited her with her love of the arts while allowing her to continue pursuing her passion for communication. ■

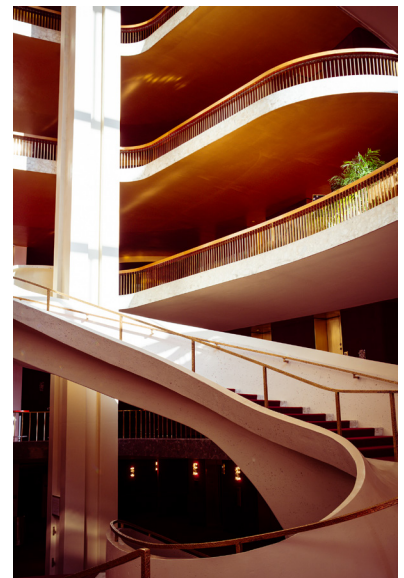
## "Met Mornings"

*Photography Submission by Erin E. Monteleone, Dancer*



These images were captured on my Sony a7riii just before nine in the morning. I teach a fitness class nearby at seven in

the morning, and sometimes I bring my camera to take a few shots before the Met ballet class. ■





# Delegate to Director: Tracy Jones' Journey through the AGMAverse



*Following her appointment as Director of Collective Bargaining in April 2025, Tracy Jones met with AGMA's Communications Coordinator, Eldad (Eldee) Eyimife, to discuss what the creation of this role means for AGMA members. She shares her passion for advocacy developed over the years as an AGMA dancer and delegate.*

**Eldad (Eldee) Eyimife (EE):** Hello, Tracy! Thank you for taking the time for this interview. It is a pleasure getting to sit down with you today. Congratulations on your new role as Director of Collective Bargaining! Why don't we open this conversation with a brief introduction?

**Tracy Jones (TJ):** Thank you, Eldee!

I'm originally from Cork, Ireland, and my ballet training began at age 11 at London's Royal Ballet School. I went on to perform with the Royal Ballet, English National Ballet, and Barcelona Ballet before joining the Colorado Ballet in the States.

I joined AGMA as a member in 2013. During my eight seasons with Colorado Ballet, I not only performed as a Soloist but also served as an Artist delegate,

representing my fellow dancers in contract negotiations and union matters. I also joined the AGMA Board of Governors, where my passion for advocating for artists truly took root. After retiring from the stage in 2020, I officially joined AGMA's Senior Staff as Western Business Representative. After two years in this role, I was promoted to Senior Negotiator, where I assumed the important responsibility of leading several contract negotiations, as well as working on various AGMA initiatives. I'm kind of known for my collaborative spirit and hands-on approach, so I was delighted to accept the new role as Director of Collective Bargaining this year.

In addition to my union work, I stay active in the local arts scene, teaching and mentoring young dancers and serving on the boards of two dance-focused nonprofits in Colorado.

**EE: What a beautiful journey! For our members who may not be aware, could you expand on what your new role entails?**

**TJ:** Absolutely. The role of Director of Collective Bargaining was created to drive strategic growth within the Union, ensure consistency in our approaches, and reinforce AGMA's commitment to achieving strong, lasting contracts and protections for our members.

**EE: As you just shared, your journey with AGMA began as a dancer with the Colorado Ballet, and you've been a part of the Union's professional staff since retiring. That's truly amazing! How did each stage of your path shape the perspective you bring to this new role?**

**TJ:** During my first season with Colorado Ballet, a delegate position opened up. I had some previous experience as

a member of Equity in the UK, having danced with the English National Ballet. I have always been drawn to work that involves advocacy and supporting others, so stepping into that role felt like a natural fit. It gave me the opportunity to build strong lines of communication between the dancers and management, helping to resolve workplace issues and create a healthier environment for everyone.

While I was with Colorado Ballet, I had the opportunity to negotiate three collective bargaining agreements. With each cycle, I found that I was always so excited to help prepare for negotiations while internally organizing our members to make sure everyone was on the same page. The process of drafting contract language and coming up with solutions to the problems both sides brought to the table was, and still is, a part of the work that I am really drawn to. My experience working alongside AGMA staff also



opened my eyes to the possibility of pursuing this work full-time after my dancing career. To prepare for that transition, I completed a Certificate in Labor Studies from Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations in 2018 to deepen my knowledge of the labor movement and strengthen the skills I could bring to future advocacy work.

After a knee injury and several surgeries in 2018, I realized that my transition out of performing would likely come sooner than I had anticipated. Around that time, I connected with AGMA leadership to discuss the possibility of joining the staff. Coincidentally, they were in the process of creating a new Business Representative position. I began consulting with AGMA in 2019, and by 2020, I officially joined the team full-time as a new Business Representative. It was an incredible opportunity, not only to help shape a new role, but also to learn firsthand how to be effective as a staff leader within the union.

Given the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, we had to negotiate terms with all of our signatories as they navigated the crisis. I felt like I was thrown into the deep end, but that experience was a fast track to developing the skillset I needed to become a strong and effective negotiator. I have also always been motivated by the collaborative aspect of this work and how we, as staff, can combine our efforts to create a streamlined approach that truly benefits our members.

**EE: Looking back, what lessons from your time as a dancer delegate still guide the way you approach negotiations and leadership now?**

**TJ:** I think that the biggest thing that I still carry to this day is the importance of listening first. People need to feel heard and represented before meaningful progress can occur. I also try to assume good intentions and see things from every angle before giving any type of response. That can help me build empathy and frame solutions in a way that resonates with both sides.

**EE: This is a brand-new role for**



**AGMA. Why was creating a Director of Collective Bargaining important at this point in time?**

**TJ:** Creating a Director of Collective Bargaining is important now because of the moment we are in as a union. Across the country, we have been witnessing unprecedented organizing and an increase in interest and commitment from our members. Having this role in place is imperative in helping to shape where we go next. My hope is that this role will ensure that we can coordinate across bargaining tables, align priorities, and share lessons from one negotiation to the next.

**EE: It sounds like this new position reflects AGMA's growth and the expanding scope of its work. How do you envision your role in helping members feel more connected to the union's national movement for change, no matter where they are in the country?**

**TJ:** Right now, our members are more engaged than ever, and it is important to me that their efforts feel connected to something bigger. Part of that is creating more consistency in our approach to collective bargaining across signatories, so

that no matter where negotiations happen, members know they're benefiting from a united strategy.

**EE: To that point, AGMA is seeing a wave of organizing and contract victories across the country. We're calling it "Bargainfest 2.0." From your perspective, what common threads or lessons stand out from these negotiations, regardless of where they happen?**

**TJ:** Our members' priorities tend to be pretty consistent across our signatories. Of course, keeping up with inflation and cost-of-living increases remains a core issue, but what really has stood out as driving the success of recent negotiations is the willingness of members to come together around their priorities and push collectively for change. That unity, when displayed to management, has had a positive impact on many signatories and has significantly increased solidarity within the bargaining units.

**EE: The theme of this issue is "AGMA Coast to Coast: A National Push for Change." How does your work fit into that nationwide push for stronger contracts and member power?**



**TJ:** My work fits directly into AGMA's nationwide push by helping coordinate and strengthen collective bargaining approaches across the country. By fostering communication between different shops, we can help to make sure that wins at one signatory inform and empower negotiations elsewhere, building member power on a national scale.

**EE:** Thank you so much for your time today, Tracy. One last question. Part of this AGMAzine theme is about artists standing together across geographies and disciplines. Can you share a moment when you saw that solidarity firsthand, maybe in a bargaining room,

**on a picket line, or in a cross-country show of support?**

**TJ:** I had the privilege of witnessing this during my time working on the San Francisco Ballet (SFB) negotiations at the end of 2024. This negotiation happened right on the heels of the San Francisco Symphony Chorus strike, where many SFB members joined the Symphony singers on the picket line. During the negotiation process, the dancers and stage managers of SFB worked incredibly hard internally, organizing and taking collective actions to make sure their voices were heard and taken seriously. Our members were watching and standing in solidarity with our fight there, and the Artists of SFB

knew that ultimately, they were not just advocating for themselves, but they were also helping to continue lifting industry standards across the country. Their efforts paid off, resulting in one of the strongest contract outcomes we have seen with that company. It was a clear example of how solidarity can lead to meaningful change! ■

## IN MEMORIAM

Roberta Alexander, *Soloist*

Luigi Alva, *Soloist*

Aaron C. Ball, *Soloist*

Ralph Bassett, *Soloist*

Jean-Pierre Bonnefoux, *Dancer*

Carolyn Brown, *Dancer*

Stuart Burrows, *Soloist*

Vladimir Chistiakov, *Chorister*

David Clatworthy, *Soloist*

John Conklin, *Designer and Dramaturg\**

Gilda Cruz-Romo, *Soloist*

Timothy E. Filliman, *Chorister*

Loretta Di Franco, *Soloist*

Marquis Floyd, *Dancer*

Alan Good, *Dancer*

Franz Grundheber, *Soloist*

Eric Haines, *Chorister*

Ole Hass, *Chorister*

Linda Hodes, *Dancer*

Christian Holder, *Dancer*

Ian Paul Judge, *Director*

Doris Jung Popper, *Soloist*

Denise Kelly, *Chorister*

Frank Kerin, *Chorister*

Gary Lakes, *Soloist*

Matthew Lau, *Soloist*

Linda Lavin, *Soloist*

George Lee, *Dancer*

LeRoy Lehr, *Soloist*

Seth Malkin, *Chorister*

Carla Maxwell, *Dancer*

Donald McIntyre, *Soloist*

Mary Minott Burgess, *Soloist*

Sandra Neels, *Dancer*

Elizabeth (Liz) Norman, *Chorister*

David Rendall, *Soloist*

Tony Roberts, *Soloist*

Marshall A. Rutter, *Founder of the Los Angeles Master Chorale\**

Otto Schenk, *Director*

Peter Seiffert, *Soloist*

Kirsten Simone, *Dancer*

Kathryn Stewart, *Chorister*

Peter Strummer, *Soloist*

Lynne Taylor-Corbett, *Dancer and Choreographer*

Michael Thomas Geiger, *Chorister*

Beatrice Uria-Monzon, *Soloist*

Benita Valente, *Soloist*

Dennis Whitehead Darling, *Director*

Robert Wilson, *Director*

*\*Indicates a distinguished individual in a related profession*

# The Myth of “Labor Reform”: Why Unions Are the Future of Opera

By Eric Ferring, AGMA’s Assistant Regional Director



I became an AGMA member in 2015, when I was a Gerdine Young Artist at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis. At the time, I thought of joining a union as a formality—signing my first professional contract, taking my first step into the career I had dreamed of since I was a child. What I didn’t realize then was how profoundly that choice would shape not only my work as an artist but my sense of solidarity, responsibility, and power within and for this industry.

I became more involved in my union as a delegate for young artists and soon after joined the Midwest Area Committee. Later, I was elected to the AGMA Board of Governors as the Chicago/Midwest Soloist Representative, a position I held for four years before becoming our union’s first-ever Soloists Vice President. Today, I serve on AGMA’s professional staff. That arc, from singer on stage to fierce union advocate at the bargaining table, has revealed the unshakable truth that when artists and institutions genuinely collaborate, when creativity guides not only what happens in rehearsal but also how we solve problems, anything is possible.

We have proof. At the Metropolitan

Opera, a cross-union joint lobbying effort helped secure \$5 million in critical state funding, strengthening one of the world’s great cultural institutions. At the San Francisco Symphony, the chorus took the bold step of striking—and the result was a transformative gift that endowed the chorus for generations to come. These victories remind us that solidarity is not merely defensive; it is generative. It creates possibilities that would never have emerged in isolation.

That is why I bristle at both recent and past calls for “labor reform” in opera. The phrase sounds modern and pragmatic, but in truth, it is nothing more than an anti-union refrain—an attempt to recast austerity as innovation. It suggests that the path forward lies in cutting the very people who make *opera* what it is.

## What “Labor Reform” Really Means

“Labor reform” is labor regression. When critics call for labor reform, they are almost always talking about union contracts, which means cutting artist pay, reducing benefits, and demanding more “flexibility.” They are essentially calling workers “too expensive.”

This lazy framing reduces complex structural issues to an easy scapegoat. Opera faces real challenges like ticket pricing, shrinking audiences, rising administrative and production costs, outdated business models, and declining federal, state, and city support. These challenges require thoughtful, creative solutions. But they are harder to fix than targeting the most visible expense—the people on stage and behind the curtain.

## When You Weaken the Artists, the Art Suffers

Labor reform is not a path to sustainability but is a slow erosion of the very

foundation of workplaces. Diminished compensation drives away talent, dampens morale, and narrows the pipeline of future artists. Young singers, dancers, actors, and production staff look at an industry where “reform” means instability and sacrifice, and many simply (and understandably) walk away.

Unions exist to prevent this erosion. Unions like AGMA ensure that artists can make a living, that working conditions are safe, that the art form is accessible to people from all backgrounds—not only those who can afford to subsidize their own careers. When unions are strong, industries like the performing arts are not weaker. They are richer, more diverse, more sustainable.

As a member, I sat in negotiations where solidarity preserved healthcare and retirement benefits that made entire careers possible. As staff, I’ve watched members stand together to improve rehearsal conditions and hiring practices to protect artistic integrity. Every time, the outcome is not only fairer for artists, but healthier for the institution itself.

## What Actual Reform Looks Like

If we want the performing arts to thrive from coast to coast, real reform must look beyond the “quick fix” of cutting labor:

- If tough choices are necessary, artists must be part of the conversation. True partnership demands transparency and collaboration, not unilateral cuts.
- Open the books. Let everyone understand where money is coming from and where it is going. Too often, artists are asked to sacrifice without ever seeing the real cost drivers.
- Opera companies must embrace new ways of reaching audiences.



This could mean streaming, educational partnerships, digital content, and creative collaborations. Other industries already understand this.

- Opera is a public good, worthy of public investment. The most successful reforms in recent years have come from joint advocacy and imaginative fundraising, not from cutting salaries.
- The strongest institutions are those that value their artists not as expenses but as their most essential assets and thought partners. Too often, the narrative casts artists as liabilities to be managed rather than partners in growth. But from my view—across roles as performer, union leader, executive director of an arts non-profit, and union staff member—artists remain the most untapped resource in our field.

### Give Us a Seat at the Table

Let's be honest, Artists are the reason donors give. Whether it is the \$10 supporter who loves the annual chorus outreach concert or the million-dollar donor who underwrites a new production or young artist program, their generosity flows toward the art itself and the people who bring it to life. Nobody gives because of a development officer alone (no offense). They give because of the electrifying soprano who made them weep, the stage manager who ensured a flawless performance, the chorus whose sound lifted (and perhaps shook!) the hall.

That is why bringing artists closer to those who support our work is essential. When artists are empowered to advocate publicly, to connect directly with audiences and patrons, to speak with authenticity about the value (and struggles!) of their craft, the results can be transformative. These encounters remind supporters that they are not funding an abstraction called “the opera;” they are investing in human beings.

Expanding the circle of supporters will be key to our joint future. But it will only be possible if we stop treating artists as a budget line item to be trimmed and start recognizing them as



the very heart of fundraising, advocacy, and public engagement. The real “reform” our field needs is not to cut down artists, but to elevate us: to trust us, empower us, and bring us forward as the leaders we already are.

### A National Push for Change

The theme of this issue, AGMA Coast to Coast: A National Push for Change, is not abstract. What happens at the Metropolitan Opera does not stay in New York. What happens at the San Francisco Opera does not stay in San Francisco. It echoes outward.

Union activism matters in moments of crisis, of course, but also in daily, often quiet acts of solidarity. From New York to Chicago, from San Francisco and LA to Santa Fe and Houston, our collective voice ensures that opera remains not just viable, but vital.

### Unionism as Imagination

My experience has taught me that unionism is less about shielding what exists and more about imagining what could be. The same creative energy that animates a performance can animate negotiations, organizing drives, and lobbying campaigns. We do not have to shrink from difficulty. We can rise to it, together.

So, when I hear calls for “labor reform” that clearly translate to “artist sacrifice,” I think back to my first contract in 2015. I remember the thrill of standing on stage, but also the security of knowing I was not standing there alone.

If we want opera to survive and flourish, the answer is not to weaken unions. The answer is for institutions to view unions as partners. We are, after all, in this together. ■



# AGMA Resources



## The AGMA Relief Fund

AGMA members can apply for emergency assistance from the AGMA Relief Fund.



## The Entertainment Community Fund

As an AGMA member, you are able to access the [Entertainment Community Fund's](#) broad spectrum of **programs, workshops, and other online resources**. The Fund has built offerings spanning from personalized health insurance counseling and other social services to career counseling, employment training, and job development. Their calendar of webinars covers topics such as mental health, mindfulness, finance, and career management, with specific gatherings for members of the LGBTQIA+, BIPOC, and AAPI communities. All of their offerings support the unique, essential needs of all who work in entertainment and the performing arts.



## Union Plus

[Union Plus](#) offers Hardship Help, discounts on a number of things, such as car rental and hotels, education opportunities (they have their own scholarship!), and more. We encourage you to sign up for email alerts from Union Plus in order to receive Union Plus newsletters.



## AGMA Health and Retirement Funds Portal

The AGMA Funds Office can be reached via phone or email. Please refer to the [AGMA Retirement and Health Fund](#) website.

## Respectful Workplaces, Anti-Discrimination, and Anti-Harassment Resources

If you have personally experienced or witnessed harassment or discrimination of any kind, please know you are not alone. You can alert AGMA by reporting claims to [reporting@musicalartists.org](mailto:reporting@musicalartists.org). These reports are kept in strict confidence. After your report is received, you will be contacted regarding resources for support and the next steps to take. If your case involves criminal allegations, please call 911 immediately and report it to law enforcement. [Visit here](#) for more information.



# Some of AGMA's Most Helpful Webpages

## Contact Your AGMA Staff Rep

[www.musicalartists.org/contact-your-agma-staff-representative/](http://www.musicalartists.org/contact-your-agma-staff-representative/)

As your direct line to your union, members of AGMA's professional staff are here to assist you every step of the way. A staff representative has been assigned to each AGMA signatory company and works with the members to negotiate and enforce their collective bargaining agreement and protect members' rights. For general information or questions, you can also reach out to [membership@musicalartists.org](mailto:membership@musicalartists.org).

## Auditions and Job Postings Webpage – Updated regularly

[www.musicalartists.org/auditions/](http://www.musicalartists.org/auditions/)

We remain committed to sharing auditions and relevant job postings with our members on our website.

The audition and job listings webpage was completely redesigned in May 2021. We continue to remind all AGMA signatory companies to send us any upcoming postings to help make sure that thousands of AGMA Artists are aware of job listings and auditions in a timely manner.

## I.D.E.A. Job Posting Resource Page – Published February 2023 and revised as needed

[www.musicalartists.org/idea-job-posting-resource-page/](http://www.musicalartists.org/idea-job-posting-resource-page/)

Accessibility and inclusion should be top of mind for job posters throughout every step of the hiring process. In an effort to share hiring opportunities in a broader range of outlets to increase the number of applicants often underrepresented in AGMA-represented positions and roles, AGMA has recently published this Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility (I.D.E.A.) Job Posting Resource Page.

While AGMA Signatory Companies should not limit their hiring opportunity postings to the outlets listed here, they are strongly encouraged to familiarize themselves with the resources on this list and use them to expand their reach when circulating their audition listings and job postings!

The page is public and can be found under the FOR MEMBERS tab on AGMA's website.

## New and Prospective Member Resource Page

[www.musicalartists.org/new-member-information/](http://www.musicalartists.org/new-member-information/)

This resource page will jumpstart the AGMA experience for first-time members or those thinking of joining. The important information compiled here will also come in handy for current and even longtime members.

The New and Prospective Member Resource Page is a one-stop shop that houses information on how a union works, what it means to be an AGMA member, how to apply for membership, how dues help create collective power, who the elected

leadership and staff are, a complete orientation video, and more. This page now replaces paper packets and will be updated whenever needed.

We recommend that all members bookmark the New and Prospective Member Resource Page in their browsers for easy reference at all times. If you know anyone who is curious about AGMA and wants to learn more about the union, please share the page with them, too!

## ORGANIZE! Webpage

[www.musicalartists.org/organize/](http://www.musicalartists.org/organize/)

Our "ORGANIZE!" webpage is designed to help Artists learn more about joining AGMA and organizing their workplaces. The nationwide wave of union organizing continues as dancers, singers, and staging staff across the country vote overwhelmingly in favor of unionizing with AGMA. What an exhilarating time it has been for the Union! It is becoming more and more apparent to performing artists that standing together and speaking with one voice is the best way to ensure safe, equitable, and viable careers in their industries. You can find our "ORGANIZE!" webpage right on the main menu of our website.

## AGMA Caucus Webpage

[www.musicalartists.org/agma-caucus/](http://www.musicalartists.org/agma-caucus/)

AGMA's strength comes from the power of our members. Across the country, AGMA Artists are organizing within their communities to amplify voices, spotlight shared experiences, and fight for lasting change. Our official AGMA Caucuses are spaces of solidarity, strategy, and action—created by members, for members.

## SwAGMA

[www.shop.worxprinting.coop/collections/agma](http://www.shop.worxprinting.coop/collections/agma)

Now, you can show your support for the union with official AGMA merch available in the new SwAGMA store. From hats and mugs to hoodies to tote bags, there's something for every member and friend of the union. Plus, \$5 from every purchase goes directly to the AGMA Relief Fund, helping AGMA artists in need. All items are printed by Worx Printing Cooperative, a union print shop committed to supporting workers. Wear your union pride and help make a difference today!



AGMA  
RELIEF FUND

2025 Holiday Drive

## A Message From Sandra Oh, *Honorary Chair*

This fall, I had the tremendous opportunity to step onto a sister stage at the Metropolitan Opera, performing alongside AGMA members—artists whose medium is different from mine, yet whose devotion to their craft feels so very familiar. My experience working for the first time with singers, dancers, actors, stage managers, directors, and choreographers opened a new window into the performing arts industry. And what I saw left me in awe.

Every person involved, whether onstage or behind the scenes, works at an extraordinary level of expertise, all in service of something bigger than themselves. I found myself endlessly fascinated by the scale, the precision, and the number of people it takes to bring a production to life.

Every rehearsal and performance felt like entering a temple—a holy space where voice, music, and dance become a direct download of the soul into the audience. I didn't want it to end. But all things do.

**Being the Honorary Chair of this year's AGMA Relief Fund Holiday Drive is my way of staying connected, of continuing to express my gratitude, and of supporting the artists who moved me so profoundly.**

Sometimes we can forget that the people who make these sacred spaces possible are *mortal*. They roll up their sleeves. They work to the bone. Their schedules are grueling; their commitment is total. And when the unimaginable happens, like a canceled contract, an unexpected illness or injury, a personal tragedy, or a financial emergency, they deserve a safety net.

**This holiday season, I'm asking you to join me in supporting the AGMA Relief Fund.**

For decades, this fund has offered crucial, confidential emergency assistance to AGMA Artists in need. In these increasingly uncertain times for the arts, this lifeline matters more than ever. AGMA Artists across the country rely on the AGMA Relief Fund when life takes an unexpected turn.

**Whether you contribute through a tax-deductible donation or simply help us spread the word, your support makes a very real difference.**

There is a reason these art forms have survived for centuries. They speak to the deepest parts of who we are. And the artists who carry them forward need us—need *you*—now. If not us, then who? Please give today, and help sustain the temple.

**Learn more and donate at: [agmarelief.org](https://agmarelief.org).**

**Sandra Oh**

*Honorary Chair, AGMA Relief Fund Holiday Drive*



Photo Credit:  
Karen Almond / Met Opera



