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BRAVO

THE MAGAZINE OF THE OPERA LEAGUE OF LOS ANGELES

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AFTER AN "INTERMISSION" FOR THE AGES,
WE CATCH (BACK) UP WITH HEMMINGS HONOREES
(AGAIN, FOR REAL THIS TIME) DIANE AND PETE GRAY.



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operaleague.org

From the President



Photo by Stephanie Girard

It's Like We Never Left

Happy New Year! I hope that you and yours enjoyed a wonderful holiday season.

The Opera League closed out 2021 with a busy fall that saw the long-anticipated return of live performances at LA Opera.

In September and October we presented two well-attended seminars at the Colburn School, the first an in-depth analysis of *Il Trovatore* and the second an

examination of the historical basis of *Tannhäuser* and various productions thereof throughout the decades.

In November we hosted a members-only intermission reception during *Alcina*. Attendees were delighted when the opera's conductor, Harry Bicket (see our interview with him in the previous issue of BRAVO), dropped by to chat. African Americans for LA Opera (AALAO), a chapter of the Opera League, resumed its fall recital tradition with soprano and LA Opera Young Artist Tiffany Townsend performing a variety of art songs and arias, accompanied by pianist Nicholas Roeher, also from the Young Artist program.

None of this is to say we have left the virtual space. Our virtual gatherings did not lose a beat, each one featuring one of our Community Educators taking us on a fascinating deep dive on an opera-related topic.

All of this means the League had volunteer opportunities aplenty, both to support LA Opera as well as to foster love of opera in the community.

Cast dinners looked a bit different this season, but our dedicated volunteers were still able to help feed close to 200 or more hungry principal singers, chorus members, musicians and LA Opera staff at two rehearsals each for *Il Trovatore* (180 at each dinner), *Tannhäuser* (230 each) and *La Cenerentola* (180 each).

Light walkers did not miss a step after almost two years away, enjoying a literal up-close glimpse into the behind-the-scenes magic as they work with the opera production tech team during the final week of rehearsals, clocking 200 hours for *La Cenerentola* and 150 hours for *Tannhäuser*.

The Shop at the Opera is back in business, with a smile! Managed by a hard-toiling crew that sets up the Shop hours ahead of each performance, these devoted League members mingle with operagoers while brandishing selections of jewelry, attire and accessories. Next time you attend LA Opera in person, why not pop by and say hello?

And that was just the start. As we look ahead to the second half of the 2021-22 season, the Opera League has a bevy of fun and diverse programming in store. The return of our flagship gala, the Peter Hemmings Award Dinner, as well as seminars on *St. Matthew Passion* and *Aida*, a few opera field trips for good measure... Getting excited yet?

If you are interested in the wonderful world of opera—either as a veteran devotee or an intrigued newbie—I sincerely hope you will join us at one or more of these events. If you do, why not sign up to volunteer? You will find few opportunities that will nourish your soul quite like helping foster love of opera in the community while supporting our local resident opera company.

Here's to a fruitful and nourishing 2022.

See you at the opera!

Todd Calvin
PRESIDENT



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A GRAY MATTER RETURNS

CONTINUED FROM COVER

The loss of live opera for a year and a half was challenging for the entire Opera League family. We here at BRAVO asked the honorees at the upcoming Peter Hemmings Award Dinner to speak for all of us about how they felt when the curtain rose, finally, at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion on Saturday, September 18 for the first performance of the season-opening *Il Trovatore*.

"I was ecstatic and elated," says Pete Gray.

Adds Diane Gray: "I have to admit there were some tears."

"It felt as if there was an empty hole," Pete continues. "And then we were coming back together as a family."

"We sorely missed our opera family," Diane says. "Opening night was a revelation and a time for renewal."

Long as it seemed, the pause in LA Opera's live performances wasn't quite as interminable as the "intermission" between the date that Pete and Diane were set to be honored with the Opera League's highest award and the actual awards dinner to be held Sunday, June 5, 2022: 792 days.

For Diane and Pete, the delay will make the honor no less sweet.

The fact that the award is named for the late Peter Hemmings, LA Opera's first General Director (1986–2001), is

particularly meaningful to the Grays.

"He was a visionary who really pushed the company toward becoming what it is today, and we fondly remember him," says Pete.

For Diane, the fact that the award comes from the Opera League makes it especially meaningful as she has held virtually every League leadership and volunteer role including president from 2011-13. "Most people don't understand just how big and how involved the League is in Los Angeles and surrounding communities," she says. "It's a real compliment because I was so involved and committed to the League. Through it all, Pete was my sidekick and partner." 🌟

In our Winter issue two years ago (BRAVO #53), we published a more detailed story about the Grays and their contributions to the League and to opera in Los Angeles ("A Gray Matter"). If you would like to check it out, we have republished it on our website, operaleague.org.



CALIFORNIA CLUB

By BILL KENNEDY

This season's Peter Hemmings Award Dinner, the Opera League's annual flagship fundraising gala, will be held—as it has for the last several years—at the elegant and venerable California Club in downtown Los Angeles, thanks once again to the support of Opera League co-founder and LA Opera board member Carol Henry.

Established in 1887, the California Club is regarded as the oldest private club in Southern California. Since 1930, the club has been housed in a seven-story Italian Renaissance Revival building on Flower Street designed by Robert D. Farquhar. This building was placed on the National

Register of Historic Places in 2010. The club's 2021 Member Guide states: "Our notable membership represents the most diverse trailblazers and influencers in Los Angeles."

The reception rooms and dining room on the building's third floor are marked by high ceilings, wood-paneled walls and antique furniture. The walls are adorned with some of the area's best examples of Western-themed plein-air paintings, giving a New World touch to Old World spaces.

The California Club is rightly proud of its reputation for culinary excellence.

WHERE THE OPERA LEAGUE PLAYS DRESS-UP

Its web page tempts: "Savor legendary masterpieces in an atmosphere of European elegance with The California Club's dining experience. Headed by world-renowned chef Roy Khoo, our kitchen cultivates each menu item with care and inspiration..."

The 2022 Hemmings Award Dinner, honoring Diane and Pete Gray, will be held at 5 PM on Sunday, June 5th. The club offers valet parking in its basement at 538 Flower Street.

This year's Hemmings is an event not to be missed at a location never to be forgotten. 🌟

SOCIAL BUTTERFLY

By BILL GREEN

AN INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE SOLOMON, THE OPERA LEAGUE'S CO-HEAD OF SOCIAL EVENTS



"My goal is to try to learn something new every day," says George Solomon, the Opera League's co-chair of Social Events.

That goal has led George down many different paths and helped him to become famous within the League as a passionate, hard-working volunteer.

George grew up in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. His father was superintendent of schools and his mother was a major influence in bringing music into the home. "They [my parents] exposed us to the performing arts when we were quite young, taking us to local concerts and then later to see Broadway shows." One of his earliest movie music memories, at age six or seven, was when his parents took the family to see an evening showing of *The Sound of Music*. "I recall sitting there, dressed up in our little Glen plaid blazers and clip-on ties, perfectly still, enthralled by the lush orchestrations."

A year or two later, George discovered that the local library offered a huge selection of every genre of music on vinyl. Being ever curious, he sampled everything. "I probably looked ridiculous, being barely able to carry the weighted stack of albums I'd bring home, including Broadway cast albums, opera recordings and Edith Piaf," George recalls. "I also had a major obsession with big band music: Glenn Miller, [Tommy] Dorsey, Artie Shaw, which made everyone scratch their heads and make me believe I was reincarnated." By the time he was 13, George and his older brother were recording the musical scores from the old films that played on local TV networks onto a cassette recorder, and then analyzing the music together.

While the library was helpful for listening to opera, George didn't get to bask in the spectacle of live opera until the 1970s, when

his local PBS station broadcast the first Live from the Met performances. George recalls his house having two television sets: a small black-and-white plus a larger color set. Somehow, somehow, George managed to appropriate the color set to immerse himself in opera on PBS Friday nights. He remembers vividly the thrill of finally being able to merge the music with the imagery, awestruck by the magnitude of each production, the vast expanse of the stage, the larger than-life set designs.

For his higher education, George ventured two hours south of Wilkes-Barre to Philadelphia, where he was accepted into the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and Science, the first pharmacy school in the nation. After graduation, a physician friend of his encouraged George to venture west to Los Angeles. Arriving during the peak of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, George worked in retail pharmacies that specialized in providing medicine to HIV/AIDS patients.

While pursuing his professional career, George's natural insatiable curiosity has drawn him into many passions and pursuits: home construction, floral design, traveling and, more recently, landscape painting. He also served a few years on the board of PAWS/LA (Pets Are Wonderful Support, Los Angeles) and has run marathons and triathlons for charities, including the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society (LLS).

Of course, another group George has volunteered with is the Opera League, thanks to an invitation from Opera League President Todd Calvin, one of the first people George met upon moving to L.A. over 20 years ago and whom George calls "his oldest friend in L.A." Eventually George joined the League's board of directors in the fall of 2020, and last fall was elevated to the executive committee where he co-heads the Social Events team. The timing could not have been better.

During rehearsals for the season-opening *Il Trovatore*, LA Opera's first in-person production since the start of the pandemic, LAO called on the League to help serve boxed dinners to cast and crew. As this

project fell under the Social Events purview, George dove right in. He and his tiny but mighty crew of volunteers set up over 60 tables, complete with red runners, floral centerpieces and hand sanitizer, to feed upwards of 180 ravenous, and socially distanced, people. It was a herculean effort that has already become legendary in the annals of the Opera League.

George has since parlayed the success of that first cast dinner into even more elaborate setups and executions for the *Tannhäuser* and *La Cenerentola* cast dinners, as well as the League's two fall seminars at the Colburn School of Music. He feels that since opera itself tends to be over the top and hyper-dramatic, he owes it to Opera League members to provide some flourish and visual spectacle to our events. Yes, the work can be grueling, but George loves it. He especially loves meeting and engaging with fellow League members and opera lovers.

In typical George fashion, he's not done. Once public health guidelines allow for it, George looks forward to getting involved with our Education team to support League events for students. Based on his own childhood, he fervently believes that early and frequent exposure to the performing arts expands our world view and makes us more optimistic. Of course, as the pandemic drags on, optimism is more needed than ever. ☀



YAPPING WITH A YAP: TIFFANY TOWNSEND, SOPRANO

SPREADING THE GOSPEL By JUDITH HYMAN

Tiffany Townsend arrived in LA Opera's Domingo-Colburn-Stein Young Artist Program (YAP) in the fall of 2019 and immediately started "guest-starring" in Opera League events.

When I first heard her voice, I knew I was in the presence of a powerhouse. Shortly thereafter, I ran into LAO CEO Christopher Koelsch at the Music Center Plaza coffee bar and asked him how, given she was a YAP and therefore still transitioning to a professional career, could Tiffany possibly get any better? We were both awed by her sound's quality and intensity.

Gospel singing is rooted in Tiffany's early beginnings in Jackson, Mississippi. "We were a gospel family," she says. "And we also played folk and R&B. And I loved playing the piano, which I started at age seven, and then I became interested in classical music.

"I received a piano scholarship at Millsaps College," she continues. "As a side job, I worked as a church musician usually practicing gospel music. One day, a voice teacher who had attended Juilliard heard me practicing and urged me to take voice lessons." Having just seen

her first opera, *Carmen*, Tiffany says she was beguiled (that seductive Gypsy has won many hearts!).

Perhaps intuitively sensing she had something unique, and the strength of character to stick to it, Tiffany ultimately got into Juilliard and eventually received her Master of Music degree.

Yet she still didn't feel ready to perform. In spite of financial hardships, Tiffany felt she must go further, that she had still more to learn. She applied to and was accepted into the Curtis Institute, and three years later received her Professional Studies Certificate in Opera.

Around this time, Joshua Winograde, LAO's Senior Director of Artistic

Programs, heard Tiffany audition for LAO's Young Artist Program. His finely tuned ear immediately recognized the grandeur of her voice.

Tiffany's LAO debut was the role of Léontine, "a beautiful young widow who has become disillusioned with love," in the virtual production of *The Anonymous Lover* (*L'Amant Anonyme*) in November 2020. This criminally overlooked 1780 chamber opera is a comic romance by Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges, a pioneering Black composer who was a contemporary of Mozart. Those of you who missed it can still stream it on the website Marquee TV (marquee.tv).

When LAO kicked off the 2021-22 season with *Il Trovatore*, the first in-person production since the start of the pandemic, Tiffany sang the role of Ines, confidante to Leonora. Speaking of Leonora, Tiffany would love to sing that next. The title role in Bellini's *Norma* is also in her sights. "Norma and Leonora are two dream roles that I would love to sing in the near future," Tiffany says. "They seem to be great fits for my voice."

When we sat together for this interview, I asked Tiffany the same question I had asked Christopher Koelsch: how someone so superlative could get any better. Laughing with a musical resonance, she responded, "I have much to learn: how to act and how to move on the stage. There is so much more to performing than just the voice." 🌸



MUSIC ON THE BRAIN

BY JUDITH HYMAN

AN INTERVIEW WITH KRISTI BROWN-MONTESANO, LA OPERA AFFILIATED SCHOLAR



I first met Kristi Brown-Montesano, one of LA Opera’s affiliated scholars, when she taught classes for Opera for Educators, a program designed by LA Opera for teachers and educators. I was one of those educators, trained for eight weeks to inspire community appreciation of opera. Prior to each LAO production, I would join this group to attend lectures to deepen my understanding of the art form. The first time I heard Kristi present an amazing talk on the role of women in opera, I was totally wowed.

As the Chair of Music History at the Colburn Conservatory of Music, Kristi teaches courses across the broad history of music to undergraduate and graduate students, but opera is one of her specialized interests. Her book *Understanding the Women of Mozart’s Operas* has just been re-released in paperback.

Her focus on women was set off years ago after reading a book on Mozart’s operas published by Oxford University Press. The author offered a scathing description of Donna Anna from *Don Giovanni*, concluding that it would be beneficial for her to be “pleasantly raped” by Don Juan. That comment unsettled Kristi and set her off on a lifetime mission of focusing on Donna Anna and all women in opera, much to our benefit.

Recently, Kristi was invited to teach a course for the LAO board of directors by John Nuckols, LAO’s Executive Vice President and Chief Strategic Officer. John had taken one of Kristi’s courses for adults at the Colburn School and admired her knack for conveying a

deeper, yet accessible, understanding of opera, and wanted others to benefit. Soon after, LAO invited her to offer a class on *Tannhäuser* and *Cenerentola* as part of their Scholars Series this past October.

If you have been fortunate enough to attend one of the Opera League’s opera pre-lectures, part of our Overtures program, such as one of last fall’s on *Alcina* or *La Cenerentola*, then it’s possible you have heard Kristi speak, and that you and I exchanged a “Wow!” as she spoke.

In case you have missed any of these talks, check out her podcasts on the LAO website. She always seems ready to stimulate and educate. When I complimented her on her breadth of knowledge and the vigor with which she delivers it, she informed me, “Well, Haydn got started at 50, and he was only 60 when he first went to London.”

That kind of energy has fueled her throughout her life.

Kristi’s Grandma Marcie inspired her early love of ballet musical

theater, such as Stravinsky’s *The Firebird*. Kristi started piano early in life and played the flute in the school band, but her most serious classical lessons were in voice with Stephanie Friedman and Jeffrey Thomas.

By the time she finished her doctorate in musicology at UC Berkley, Kristi had two children, and in time had a third child. Today she has a daughter of 29 and two sons, 27 and 19. Everyone is bilingual, as Kristi’s husband, Bruno, is from Milan. “We met at a dinner party in Berkeley and immediately started debating issues of the day. We are opposites but completely complement each other. We just celebrated our 30th anniversary.”

Since her teaching responsibilities at the Colburn Conservatory have required her to teach subjects from across centuries of Western music history, Kristi has embraced the idea of the scholarly “generalist.” Fascinated by story, person, place and sound, her mission is to make people curious, entertained, enlightened—and to want more. ✨

NOT JUST ANOTHER MANLY VOICE

By BILL KENNEDY

AN INTERVIEW WITH BARITONE NATHAN GUNN ABOUT HIS KEY ROLE IN CREATING LA OPERA OFF GRAND'S *IN OUR DAUGHTER'S EYES*

What is it to be a man in the 21st century?

This was the question that was lurking in Nathan Gunn's thoughts five years ago.

"We know what was expected of a man a hundred years ago," says the celebrated baritone. "But what is now the experience of the American man? What is his modern-day journey to manhood?"

Gunn thought the subject might be explored in a new opera, so he went to Beth Morrison, founder, president and creative director of Beth Morrison Projects.

"Beth doesn't shy away from a challenge," Gunn said, a deadpan understatement.

The end result of that conversation is *In Our Daughter's Eyes*, a one-man show starring Gunn which will have its world premiere April 13 at REDCAT, part of LA Opera's Off Grand series.

It will certainly not be Gunn's first starring role—he has sung on all of opera's great stages—and not even his first premiere—he starred in Jennifer Higdon's *Cold Mountain* in Santa Fe in 2015. It is, however, unique in that the singer was intimately involved in the creative process from the ground up.

Morrison put Gunn in contact with composer Du Yun, winner of the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for *Angel's Bone*, an opera that had been scheduled for REDCAT in the spring of 2020 but which fell victim to the pandemic (although it was livestreamed by LA Opera in May of that year).

The two of them reached out to Michael McQuilken, the New York-based theater and opera director who had directed *Angel's Bone*, to work on a libretto. It was McQuilken who discovered a magazine article he would adapt into a libretto built around Gunn's character approaching fatherhood for the first time.

Gunn says, "Is being a father what my father was to me? What is this relationship? Is it a new relationship?"

There's a turn in the story too touching and painful to be revealed here, but as Gunn puts it: "This is about the phoenix rising from the ashes at a number of levels. There is something about suffering that allows for the greening of the world."

Over the next few years, Gunn, Morrison and McQuilken would get together at various locations to work through the music and the book.

As far as Gunn knows, his role as a singer in the creation of an entirely new opera is unprecedented.

As an example, Gunn noted that writers need words—sometimes a lot of them—to convey an idea. A musician can be more sparing. Said Gunn, "Michael had two paragraphs in the draft libretto that I suggested I could capture in a single phrase of Du Yun's music." Change accepted.

As he puts it, there is one component that is absolutely essential for a collaboration such as this one to work: trust. "We all had to trust that each of us brought special expertise to our roles, what we were good at and what we weren't good at."

This brings some special moments to the creative process. For example, Gunn says Du Yun wrote a voice marker into the score that went far beyond "pianissimo" or "fortissimo." It was a marker he had never seen before: "Scream."

For her part, Beth Morrison says of *In Our Daughter's Eyes*: "Having the opportunity to work with Nathan as a creative artist on the project was illuminating for me as a producer. His understanding of what he needs to communicate a thought or a feeling in the libretto helped us to arrive at the most potentially concise way to tell the story, allowing for space for the music. Watching his curiosity and excitement to work with an experimental composer, as Du Yun is, was thrilling to witness. I'd like to think that we are sharing a different side of Nathan Gunn with the opera world, and a very exciting side indeed." 🌟





STEWARD FOR THE LONG TERM

AN INTERVIEW WITH
KEITH LEONARD,
LA OPERA'S NEW
CHAIRMAN OF
THE BOARD

By TODD CALVIN

In June, LA Opera's Board of Directors elected Keith Leonard as its new Board Chair after Marc Stern stepped aside after 20 years to become Honorary Chair.

Keith has been an active LA Opera board member since 2015, and I recently had the opportunity to sit down and chat with him about his passion for opera and his vision and goals for LAO.

BRAVO: KEITH, YOU FIRST JOINED THE LA OPERA BOARD IN 2015. HOWEVER, PRIOR TO THAT, YOU WERE A DONOR TO THE RING CYCLE [IN 2010] AND OTHER PRODUCTIONS. HAVE YOU ALWAYS BEEN A FAN OF OPERA?
KEITH LEONARD: I've been a fan of opera since high school. Later, I was fortunate enough to study opera at UCLA as part of my undergraduate curriculum. I did a year's worth of courses on the history of opera while pursuing my degree as an engineer. Arts and humanities classes were required in addition to engineering subjects. So I got a chance to do a year of opera study in the School of Music. My senior project was

to design and construct a small version of a set for the beginning of Act 2 of *Fidelio*, the dungeon scene. It was a little diorama with lighting and everything.

My father was a classical music and opera lover. I sang in church choir until my mid-20s. There was always tension in the household because he was a bass and I was a tenor. I grew up in Baldwin Park, east of Los Angeles. A very modest neighborhood. I grew up in a house where classical music was always present, and especially opera. My father introduced it to me and also how to listen, especially to opera. He would lie on the floor in front of our console stereo with a pillow under his head and his eyes closed. When I was really young, I thought he was sleeping there, but he said, "No, you focus on the music, and you will not go to sleep." He taught me that this music was not background, but very foreground, and if you eliminate other distractions, just be perfectly still and close your eyes and you will be sucked into the music.

I never went to an opera with my father. He was always listening to recorded opera, that is what we could do and that is how I learned about opera.

My sisters, who I brought to the season opener, and I consider it such a gift to have been raised in the house that we were because we had this father who was super passionate about classical music and opera.

BRAVO: DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE COMPOSER AND OPERA?

KL: My answers won't be terribly surprising on the composer side. I love Mozart's operas and I love Wagner. I love Verdi, too.

Favorite operas—I could just go down the list, but I love *Fidelio*, of

"I never went to an opera with my father. He was always listening to recorded opera, that is what we could do and that is how I learned about opera.

My sisters, who I brought to the season opener, and I consider it such a gift to have been raised in the house that we were because we had this father who was super passionate about classical music and opera."

course. There is a small opera that I would love to see us do some day, which is Carl Maria von Weber's *Der Freischutz*. I've never seen it staged, but I've listened to it many times. I've seen some stagings on YouTube, but I've never seen it live.

Right now, *The Marriage of Figaro* is up there, because I've been involved with it more recently and seen more productions. My Apple has a counter on it that tracks how many times you have listened to something, and I went to *The Marriage of Figaro* and the version that I have on my phone. It shows that I have listened to it 45 times. So, I really do get sucked in. Often, I listen while in the car. I love listening to an opera while driving.

BRAVO: DID YOU EVER THINK YOU WOULD STEP INTO MARC STERN'S SHOES IN JUST SIX YEARS?

KL [laughing]: Holy cow, no. No, no, no.

BRAVO: WHAT HAVE BEEN YOUR MAIN CHALLENGES AS CHAIR SO FAR?

KL: It's a really significant time commitment, and frankly, it's hard to follow someone like Marc who did such an incredible job. It is like a second job, but a really enjoyable one. No difficulties so far. It's been an incredible pleasure, actually.

BRAVO: WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO BRING TO THE OPERA BOARD?

KL: I was thinking about that on the ride over here—the role of the board and the board chair vis-à-vis the professional staff of the opera company. The word leadership gets thrown around a lot, but I actually think stewardship is the more appropriate term for the chair and the board in general. Stewardship for the long-term growth of the company. I have a responsibility to be a leader within the board, and to help create a culture of making people feel included and welcome at the board. Of course, the leadership of the company is always a board responsibility. Whether you have to make changes or have to fill a gap. We are so blessed to have [CEO] Christopher [Koelsch] and [Executive Vice President and Chief Strategic Officer] John [Nuckols] and [CFO] Kathleen [Ruiz] and [Vice President, Labor Relations and Human Resources] Jill [Boyd], and the talent that Christopher is recruiting is really spectacular.

Check out the rest of our interview with Keith Leonard on the newly revamped operaleague.org. 🌟

IN THE PIT

LUCINDA CHIU, FIRST VIOLIN

ALWAYS LEARNING, WITH STRINGS ATTACHED By DIANE EISENMAN

As part of LA Opera's First Violin team, Lucinda "Lucy" Chiu is both the newest and youngest member of the LA Opera Orchestra.



Arriving in the Los Angeles suburb of Arcadia from Hong Kong with her parents and brother when she was 12, Lucy brought with her a background that included a variety of musical experiences.

First learning violin at age four, Lucy expanded her musical talents by joining a children's choir and beginning piano lessons at age nine. At one point, she even found herself singing onstage with Opera Hong Kong in the children's chorus for *Turandot*. Through all of that, however, she remained focused on the violin, what with its wide range of sounds, from sparkling high voices to deep rich mezzo.

After two years of pre-college training at the Colburn School in L.A., Lucy earned a B.M. at Peabody University in Baltimore, where she became very involved in chamber music. This is where she also learned how to interact with performers and developed her communication skills with fellow musicians. For her master's, Lucy attended Rice University in Houston, learning how to adapt to a much larger group of outstanding performers and musicians. The season before joining the LAO Orchestra, she played with a piano quintet for Holland America Cruise Lines, enriching her world view as she traveled to ports in the Mediterranean and Caribbean.

She only had two months left at Rice when she saw an opening for violinist with LAO. Having never auditioned for an orchestra, Lucy received a lot of good coaching and support from her mentors and colleagues at Rice. Suffice it to say she nailed it.

Comparing the rigors of academic life to those of a professional big city orchestra, Lucy points out that at Peabody and Rice, students are given more time to focus on details and polish the pieces, which are new to many of them, with frequent, shorter rehearsals. "In the professional world, I have to show up to the first rehearsal ready to go," she says. "Furthermore, these rehearsals are much longer, sometimes up to six hours. I'm getting used to it now. But *Tannhäuser* [in the fall of 2021] was a stretch for me, both physically and technically, in all the best ways possible."

“I’m now really enjoying the human interaction of live orchestra performances again... For me to have a live audience and hearing the applause makes the biggest difference.”

During the pandemic, Lucy has found purpose teaching virtual violin lessons. Wanting to extend her teaching experience even further, she landed a position as a special education instructional aide in the Arcadia Unified School District. She says teaching has been quite rewarding for her maturation as a musician, improving her communication skills, emotional intelligence, patience and creativity.

Additional opportunities during the pandemic have included an internship in the development department at Pacific Symphony in Costa Mesa and making YouTube videos for her extended family in Hong Kong. After buying a \$400 viola on eBay, she said the tough part was “learning to read the alto clef.”

Since things have opened up, she has performed as a substitute violinist with the Pacific Symphony and Houston Symphony. She also has fun with fellow musicians at sight reading parties and performing at private events.

Still, nothing compares to playing with a professional orchestra. “I’m now really enjoying the human interaction of live orchestra performances again,” Lucy says. “I relish the conversations and close contact with my colleagues, and it is really satisfying to receive feedback from the audience after the shows. For me to have a live audience and hearing the applause makes the biggest difference.”

To the Opera League she says, “I hope you will continue to support us. We love what we do and we need you more than anything. Without you, there would be no performances. We would have no one to create our music for.” ❄️

CURL UP WITH A QUIZ

Let’s face it. The City of Angels isn’t exactly known for being a winter wonderland. But that doesn’t mean we can’t celebrate the season. After all, forty-six degrees in the morning with dew on your windshield is nothing to sneeze at.

Mark Lyons, LA Opera’s Associate Director of Communications and Publications, provides this kindling of a quiz to ward off brain freeze.

1. Who sings the aria “Must the winter come so soon?” (Insider trivia: singers sometimes refer to it as the “mezzo national anthem.”)

- A. The Old Lady in Leonard Bernstein’s *Candide*
- B. Erika in Samuel Barber’s *Vanessa*
- C. The Mother in Giancarlo Menotti’s *Amahl and the Night Visitors*
- D. Baba the Turk in Igor Stravinsky’s *The Rake’s Progress*

2. What opera begins and ends with the singing of a Christmas carol?

- A. Jules Massenet’s *Werther*
- B. Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky’s *The Queen of Spades*
- C. Giacomo Puccini’s *The Girl of the Golden West*
- D. Kevin Puts’s *Silent Night*

3. “What is like ice yet burns?” asks the title character in Puccini’s *Turandot*. What is the correct answer to her riddle?

- A. Fury
- B. Revenge
- C. Turandot herself
- D. Unrequited love

4. Catalani’s *La Wally* almost never gets performed, but it does feature a famous aria: “Ebben? Neandrò lontana.” (Non-opera fans might even recognize it, since it’s featured prominently in the cult movie *Diva*.) How does the title character meet her tragic wintry fate?

- A. She falls into a frozen lake and drowns.
- B. She kills herself by jumping into an avalanche.
- C. She is thrown from her sleigh on an icy road.
- D. She is stranded on an iceberg.

5. In Act Three of *La Bohème*, which takes place in February, why do Rodolfo and Mimi postpone their breakup?

- A. Mimi needs time to recover her strength before she can move out.
- B. If they separate, they won’t be able to keep warm at night.
- C. It’s just too tough to be alone during the winter.
- D. Since Marcello has temporarily moved out, Rodolfo needs her help with the rent.

6. Mimi in *La Bohème* isn’t the only opera character with cold hands. Who sings “Che gelo è questo mai” (How cold this [hand] is) and in what opera?

- A. Tosca to the dead Cavaradossi in *Tosca*
- B. The Count to the Countess (while disguised as Susanna) in *The Marriage of Figaro*
- C. Lucia to her hallucination of Edgardo in *Lucia di Lammermoor*
- D. Don Giovanni to the Commendatore’s statue in *Don Giovanni*



MY FIRST OPERA: CLAYTON RHODES MORELL

By GARY W. MURPHY

For this edition of "My First Opera," we sat down with one of the Opera League's newest members, Clayton Rhodes Morell.

Clayton is a therapist in Los Angeles who specializes in working with patients struggling with substance use disorders. He has an undergraduate degree in vocal performance from McGill University in Montreal, and a masters in social work from Florida State University.

BRAVO: WELCOME, CLAYTON! I UNDERSTAND THAT YOU BEGAN SINGING AS A CHILD. IS THAT CORRECT?

CLAYTON MORELL: Actually, I started voice lessons shortly after my ninth birthday and eventually went to the music conservatory at McGill University in Montreal where I trained as a baritone. Unfortunately, I stopped singing as an undergraduate but went back to it when I got a job at a church singing as a soloist while I studied for my master's in social work. Now, I still sing a bit and just recently joined the Gay Men's Chorus.

BRAVO: WHAT COMPELLED YOU TO STUDY SINGING AT SUCH A YOUNG AGE?

CM: My family were not big opera lovers, but in the mid-90s my mom brought me to the New York City Opera's production of *The Magic Flute* when I turned nine years old. It was performed in German, and the soprano singing Queen of the Night was only 19 years old. During the intermission I decided that's what I want to do, and when I'm 19, I will be on that stage singing in opera. I dove into classical music and opera and began my musical training. Years later, I found out that my last voice teacher, Sanford Sylvan, was actually in *The Magic Flute* that I saw.

BRAVO: OBVIOUSLY, YOUR FIRST OPERA EXPERIENCE CHANGED YOUR LIFE. WHAT WAS IT ABOUT *THE MAGIC FLUTE* THAT HAD SUCH AN IMPACT ON YOU?

CM: For me, it's always about the singing. I love the art and craft behind great singing in various genres—opera, art song, oratorios. But opera singers are special as it takes thousands of hours of training and practice for a singer to rise to the next level. It's both hard work as well as talent and a passion for the art. But from that first moment attending my first opera, it's always about great singing.

BRAVO: WHEN DID YOU START TO ATTEND THE PRODUCTIONS AT LA OPERA?

CM: Soon after I moved to L.A. from New York in 2019, I saw that LA Opera was presenting *The Magic Flute*, so I brought a friend who had never seen an opera before. It was the Barrie Kosky production, we both were just blown away by it. He showed us what opera is capable of doing—the innovation, great singing, full orchestra, terrific production elements—all coming together to give audiences a transcendent moment. That's what I want to see!

BRAVO: HOW DID YOU BECOME INVOLVED WITH THE OPERA LEAGUE?

CM: I was new to L.A., so I asked my co-worker Scott Seomin if he had any suggestions as to where I could see classical music and opera. He said I should meet his husband, Todd Calvin, who is President of the Opera League. I was looking for suggestions, and the Opera League seemed to be the perfect fit—a good organization that supports LA Opera and connects me to a community of opera lovers in Los Angeles.

BRAVO: OPERA SEEMS TO BE PART OF YOUR LIFE, SO DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE AT THIS POINT?

CM: Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* for sure. It's in English and very accessible in its music and nonrealistic storytelling. Stravinsky's opera is based on William Hogarth's 18th century series of eight paintings which serve as bit of a moral tale. It's not supposed to be a literal understanding of the opera's characters which allows us the freedom to connect with it from our own emotional place. That connectivity is what is really special about opera, and when it clicks, there's nothing like it. Bizet's *Carmen* is also at the top of

the list, as it is both the perfect introduction to opera and satisfying for the advanced opera-goer. It's a favorite because it's filled with hits for all four leads, each with a different voice type. What could be better?

BRAVO: DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE OPERA COMPOSER AS WELL?

CM: In terms of opera, I would bring everyone I know to a Mozart opera. There isn't a bad one in the mix, and as a singer, Mozart is the most fun to sing. Listening to a coloratura soprano perform Fiordiligi's "Come scoglio" from *Così fan tutte* and knock it out of the park is a moment to cherish.

BRAVO: IS THERE ANYTHING IN PARTICULAR THAT YOU ARE LOOKING FORWARD TO THIS SPRING AT LA OPERA?

CM: That would have to be *Aida*. I was so blown away by *Il Trovatore* at the beginning of the season, which proved to me that we do Verdi really well. *Aida* is the perfect big blockbuster which we need after missing a year. Being back in the theatre and reconnecting with the Opera League and LA Opera is so important right now. Seeing *Il Trovatore* was such a special experience—the singers, the chorus and orchestra—just got me so excited about the future, which is why I'm so looking forward to *Aida*.

BRAVO: IF YOU COULD GO ANYWHERE TO SEE AN OPERA, WHERE WOULD YOU GO?

CM: Bayreuth. I always loved Wagner and never could sing his music very well, which made me sad. I just love a true Wagnerian voice, particularly the Wagner heldentenor voice which is so hard to do well. It's such a rare voice, which makes it so exciting to see and hear. And in Bayreuth you can really immerse yourself in the legacy of both Wagner and Liszt. I can't wait to go. 🌟

OPERA BYTES

GETTING YOUR OPERA FIX FROM THE COMFORT OF YOUR KEYBOARD

By DIANE EISENMAN



LA OPERA ON NOW

Head to laopera.org/onnow to access the following programs.

Digital Shorts

Today's hottest composers and visual artists have teamed up for nine new musical videos to date, incorporating dance, animation, rediscovered silent film footage, etc.

After Hours Recitals

Russell Thomas, LA Opera's Artist in Residence, hosts and curates this series of themed recitals (previously offered in person in the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion's Founders Room after mainstage opera performances).

Lift Every Voice

Mezzo-soprano J'Nai Bridges leads a panel discussion on racial disparity in opera.

Signature Recital Series

These limited-run recitals (five to date) showcase world-class artists in intimate online performances filmed in venues across the country and in Europe.

Living Room Recitals

Informal recitals filmed by artists in their homes during lockdown.

From the Vault

The place to enjoy archived broadcasts of your favorite operas.

Mainstage Opera Livestreams

Each opera this season has two performances you can watch live on your home screen. You can purchase digital tickets (or switch your in-person tickets for these digital streams) by logging into your account or calling the LA Opera box office.

James Conlon's Corner

Here you will find Maestro Conlon's lessons and talks on all things opera, including essays, pre-performance talks for every opera he conducts and informal "Coffee with Conlon" Q&A sessions.

LA Opera was the first opera company to launch an ongoing series of original digital programming, originally called *LA Opera At Home*, in response to stay-at-home orders. It proved so successful that the company decided to make it a permanent part of its offerings, changing the name to *On Now* to reflect fresh and innovative interpretations of the art form that can be enjoyed on screens anywhere you happen to be.

Below you will find a comprehensive menu of LA Opera's digital offerings, including *On Now*, as well as a little something from your friendly neighborhood Opera League.

OPERA'S OTHER ONLINE PROGRAMS

Blog

The latest news, profiles and interesting details about LA Opera.

Podcasts

An audio dive into the magic of LA Opera with experts, artists and fans, including in-depth talks by James Conlon and other opera authorities.

Featured Videos

See for yourself how the opera makes magic.

You can also access an extensive collection of the videos that LA Opera has to offer by visiting youtube.com/laopera.

Video Conference Backgrounds

Add some opera drama to your next video conference.

EDUCATIONAL OFFERINGS

HBCU Opera Career Comprehensive

LA Opera's Artist in Residence Russell Thomas personally mentors current students and recent graduates from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) to help foster their careers.

The Cathedral Project

This year's annual community opera production at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, *The Three Women of Jerusalem*, will feature an online component, including a virtual choir of singers from around the globe.

Opera Camp

The annual summer opera camp for kids went digital in both 2020 and 2021.

Connects On Now

Visit youtube.com/laoperaconnects to access a variety of performances and activities for kids and families, fun Opera Happy Hours with Jeremy Frank and uplifting programs for community members who need it most.

VIRTUAL GATHERINGS FROM THE OPERA LEAGUE

General fun topics of interest presented by trained Community Educators.

Opera League members are notified by email of the current schedule of these live virtual talks. You can find the schedule as well as information about becoming a member of our vital opera-supporting nonprofit at operaleague.org.



SOUNDS GREAT, BUT IS IT OPERA?

A LOOK AT *ST. MATTHEW PASSION*

By GARY W. MURPHY

As the saying goes, if it looks like a duck, swims like a duck and quacks like duck, it's probably a duck. But can you say the same thing about opera?

As stated on the LA Opera website, *Bach's St. Matthew Passion* is considered by many to be the single greatest masterpiece of Western sacred music, a profoundly moving depiction of the final days of the life of Jesus. John Neumeier's production features the Hamburg Ballet along with LA Opera's powerful orchestra under the baton of James Conlon, plus a formidable ensemble of soloists and the LA Opera Chorus.

Sounds great, but is *St. Matthew Passion* opera?

We asked three experts for their thoughts: Maestro Conlon, UCLA Professor Katherine Syer and Opera League member and LA Opera-trained Community Educator Ray Busmann.



JAMES CONLON
LA Opera Richard Seaver Music Director and Conductor of *St. Matthew Passion*

An old joke for musical insiders

tells of a violinist, exhausted after playing Johann Sebastian Bach's greatest sacred work, exclaiming, "Well, it may be Matthew's passion, but it surely isn't mine!" No matter what we know or don't know about *St. Matthew*, Bach's inspired music is not about the evangelist's passion.

Bach's masterwork is inarguably one of the greatest works of classic music, period. No qualifiers are necessary.

Its title is properly translated as *(The) Passion of (our) Lord Jesus Christ, according to the Evangelist Matthew*.

Whatever its title, it has never been called an opera, and even less, a ballet. But that has stopped no one from freely adapting it for the theater. I would argue that, although it was not intended to be an opera, the

distance between sacred oratorio and full-fledged opera is not as great as is commonly assumed.

In Medieval Europe, religious subjects were performed as plays (sometimes with music) at holidays on the village square in front of the principle church or cathedral. It wasn't long before the musical elements were brought inside the church, even as the theatrical elements were left at the door.

But the dramatic content of the musical presentation had all of the elements of future opera: a compelling narrative, solo singers and an omnipresent choir who described, participated in and reacted to that narrative. The upgraded soloists' arias were emotional and expressive, moments of reflection, frozen in time. They were held in place by the connective glue of recitatives. Only the vanity of vocal virtuosity, vocalism for its own sake, was largely absent from the oratorio.

Subsequent prohibitions of biblical and scriptural subjects in the opera house helped to cement the discrete forms of oratorio and

opera, but the essential impulse to vocalize human drama flowered as oratorio in the church, or concert hall, and as opera in the theater.

In the hands of an absolute master such as Bach, a religious oratorio is as dramatically convincing as any opera. So for anyone whose “passion” it might not be, there are thousands of others, potentially all opera fans as well, for whom a “passion” it may become.



KATHERINE SYER
Adjunct Associate Professor, UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music

My understanding of what opera is

and can be is expansive, and includes a range of theatrical presentations featuring the singing voice.

The human body, more than just a vessel for the voice, can enhance our understanding of emotions and experiences woven into works for vocal soloists and chorus not intended, for one reason or another, for theatrical realization. Broadly speaking, the production of traditional kinds of opera has received closer attention to intentional gestures and movement on stage in recent decades. Dance choreography, in particular, has contributed to the myriad ways we can bring stories to fresh life in visually and physically compelling ways.

Looking forward to Neumeier’s Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, I am reminded of an opportunity I had, as a young teenager with no mainstage opera experience, to attend a choreographed

performance of Mozart’s *Requiem*. What a visceral revelation it was to see dramatic reflections on death embodied—literally—onstage. Notions of communal and individual struggle, pain, faith, acceptance and more gained vivid, memorable expression.

Since then, I’ve experienced dozens of powerful performances of vocal works in this vein. When, a few years ago, I introduced my teenaged daughter to Verdi’s *Requiem*, in a production choreographed by Christian Spuck, she was riveted throughout. The text, which might be considered a bit remote nowadays, spoke to her through the music and moving bodies combined. Now a physics major at UCLA, she is deeply moved each time she recalls that shared experience.



RAY BUSMANN
Opera League member and LA Opera-trained Community Educator

Is it opera?
Definitely not!

That’s what Bach himself would have said if you had posed that question to him. For the composer of *St. Matthew Passion*, the secular entertainment presented in an opera house could not have been more different from the essence and purpose of his oratorio. It would have been unthinkable for Bach, the cantor of the St. Thomas Church in Leipzig, Germany, to perform his *Passion* anywhere but in a church, or on any day but Good Friday. It fulfilled a liturgical requirement, and its story was of deepest religious significance to the audience of Bach’s time.

Nevertheless, when *St. Matthew Passion* was first performed in 1727, it was criticized for its “operatic style.” The free verse Bach inserted between the Gospel narrative—in the form of soloists or choruses commenting on the emotional impact of the story—sounded very much like the arias of Baroque Italian opera.

Furthermore, today, almost 300 years after its creation, we have a distinctly different listening experience at a performance of *St. Matthew Passion*. Originally, a small group of about 12 singers and 18 orchestra members performed the entire work in a narrow church, positioned behind and to the sides of the congregation. Nowadays, a cast of hundreds fill the stages of large concert halls to present Bach’s masterpiece as a monumental musical creation.

And yet, *St. Matthew Passion* defies being turned into an entertaining spectacle. It still requires focused attention and invites serious reflection, regardless of the religious affiliation of the listener. At the same time, this oratorio is a perfect match to the work of choreographer John Neumeier, as Bach’s music is always about movement, never about stasis.

In *St. Matthew Passion*, the sacred and the secular, the old and the new, the intimate and the grandiose, coexist in divine harmony.

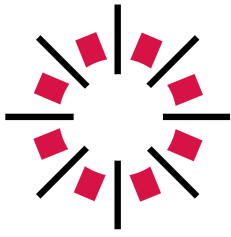
This is indeed opera at its best. 🌟

Want to learn more? Join us for the St. Matthew Passion Seminar with Ray Busmann

**Saturday, March 5, 2022
12-3pm**

**Thayer Hall, Colburn School
RSVP: operaleague.org**

“Whatever its title, it has never been called an opera, and even less, a ballet. But that has stopped no one from freely adapting it for the theater.”



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OPERA LEAGUE CALENDAR OF EVENTS

WINTER 2022

Event details will be broadcast via operaleague.org with supporting eBlasts.

JANUARY

GATHERINGS

Welcome to the Opera

Saturday, January 15 at 1:30pm

LOCATION: Virtual (Zoom)

SPEAKER: Ron Streicher

**Richard Strauss, Oscar Wilde and
Their Salome**

Saturday, January 22 at 1:30pm

LOCATION: Virtual (Zoom)

SPEAKER: Larry Verdugo

SPECIAL EVENT

Day Trip to Opera Santa Barbara: Semele

Sunday, January 16

LOCATION: Lobero Theatre, Santa Barbara

FEBRUARY

GATHERINGS

Opera and Theater in the Wild West

Saturday, February 5 at 1:30pm

LOCATION: Virtual (Zoom)

SPEAKER: Regi Merwin

**Lusters, Lovers and Other Forms
of Love in Opera**

Sunday, February 13 at 1:30pm

LOCATION: Virtual (Zoom)

SPEAKER: Steve Kohn

RECITAL

**African Americans for LA Opera (AALAO)
in a Joint Venture with the Ebell of Los
Angeles Present: Black History Month
Recital with Baritone Ken Simms**

Sunday, February 27 at 12:00pm

LOCATION: Ebell of Los Angeles,
President's Tea Room, 3rd Floor

VOCALIST: Ken Simms, Baritone

SPECIAL EVENTS

LA Opera 2022-23 Season Preview

Sunday, February 6 at 4:00pm

LOCATION: Virtual (laopera.org)

Day Trip to San Diego Opera: *Così fan tutte*
Sunday, February 20

LOCATION: San Diego Civic Theatre, San Diego

MARCH

SEMINAR

St. Matthew Passion

Saturday, March 5 at 12:00pm

LOCATION: Thayer Hall at the Colburn School

SPEAKER: Ray Busmann

MAY

SEMINAR

Aida

Sunday, May 15 at 12:00pm

LOCATION: Dorothy Chandler Pavilion,
5th Floor Salon

SPEAKERS: TBD

SPECIAL EVENT

Patron Premiere Dinner

Sunday, May 1

Where: TBD

JUNE

RECITAL

**African Americans for LA Opera
(AALAO) Presents: Father's Day Recital**

Sunday, June 19

LOCATION: TBD

VOCALIST: TBD

SPECIAL EVENTS

Volunteer Appreciation Event

Friday, June 3

LOCATION: Omni Hotel

**Peter Hemmings Award Dinner
Honoring Diane and Peter Gray**

Sunday, June 5 at 5:00pm

LOCATION: California Club