



**SINGTANK**



# 2023 POLICY REPORT



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## SINGTANK 2023 POLICY REPORT

This report summarizes the results of SINGTANK's 2022 Summit (and subsequent research), which gathered an Advisory Cabinet of 20 opera singers from a diversity of backgrounds and stages of career in December 2022 for private discussion of issues pertinent to our profession. The specific issues discussed (which were also drawn from ideas submitted by non-attending Members) included: 1) the Myth of the Diva; 2) New Works; 3) the role of OPERA America. This Report presents Context for each of these topics with supporting Research, the themes and Issues that emerged from discussion, and Solutions proposed by the Cabinet.

### INTRODUCTION

In 2023, when opera houses and singers alike had hoped for a robust post-pandemic recovery, we instead **find ourselves in what feels like an extended state of crisis**, with multiple storied operatic institutions announcing closures and layoffs. While broader societal issues are at play, **there remain stubborn cultural myths and structures within opera that singers perceive to be playing a role in its decline**. In SINGTANK's 2nd Annual Summit, we discussed some of the most pervasive issues in opera Philosophy, Policy & Practice (as experienced by singers) and ideated solutions for improving the broader culture of opera. From marketing to commissioning new works, SINGTANK's Policy Report outlines specific steps opera stakeholders can make that, by centering the singer as creator, expert and valued professional, will lead to a flourishing opera field of increased equity and authenticity.

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**Each topic contains a Summary, Context, Issues & Solutions.**

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## PHILOSOPHY

### 1. "The Lady in the Red Gown": Unpacking the Diva Myth

#### SUMMARY

Where does opera's traditional aesthetic derive from, whom does it serve, and whom does it harm? SINGTANK examines the roots, expressions, and consequences of legacy opera culture that presents singers as glamorous, cosseted commodities. Long sold as part of opera's appeal, the perpetuation of this Myth can be detrimental to singers and disinviting to new audiences. We propose ways opera companies can increase their authenticity and respect for artists through a conscious rejection of this outdated Myth, while attracting new audiences to an art form that speaks to our time.



#### CONTEXT

If you ask the man on the street what the word "opera" brings to mind, he will most likely answer: bejeweled women in big dresses; men in capes; rich folks drinking champagne, enjoying something that is not really for the rest of us, and is perhaps even slightly sinister. (See: the Hollywood trope of the billionaire bad guy always listening to old opera LPs in his mansion). SINGTANK titles this collection of tropes "The Lady in the Red Gown" in reference to the archetypal image of the "diva", the central figure of operatic imagination and myth.

But **the Diva Myth doesn't just belong to the man on the street — it permeates opera culture from within:** from the soprano having to wear a formal dress to her studio audition, to the gala tent set up for elite donors, to the pervasive treatment of singers as "difficult", unintelligent or entitled.



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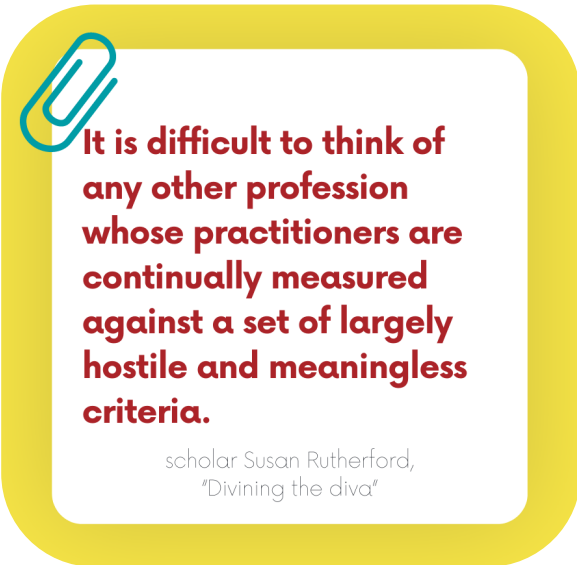
**The aesthetic and values of this Myth** are rooted in opera's long history, and they **belong to the past**. The Lady in the Red Gown exemplifies an antiquated idea of singers, but is not reflective of actual singers; as one British scholar has written,

the ghost of the nineteenth-century 'diva' haunts contemporary singers...with such a disturbing obstinacy that it threatens to obliterate the realities of their actual lived experience....it is difficult to think of any other profession whose practitioners are continually measured against a set of largely hostile and...meaningless criteria.<sup>1</sup>

The simultaneous romanticization and infantilization of singers has its roots in a misogynistic culture handed down from the 18th and 19th centuries, when being a professional female singer was one of extremely few high-status occupations a woman could have in society where she could earn some degree of financial independence and security, and could not be replaced by a man on the job.<sup>2</sup>

Thus developed an entrenched opera system where even a star soprano could be kept in her place through the enforcement of a strictly hierarchical (all-male) culture asserted over her of fear, control, and assumed dependence<sup>3</sup>.

We see the corrosive influence of the Myth at play in our time, even in the case of the greatest artists: for example Joan Sutherland or Kiri Te Kanawa, who were routinely described/dissmissed as mere "discoveries", Pygmalions shaped by the male creators (coaches, conductors, etc.) who imbued them with artistry.<sup>4</sup> Throughout their professional life (even after decades of training and experience), singers are assumed to be dependent on teams of experts (few of them singer-practitioners themselves) to spoon-feed and guide them in a manner that would be considered bizarre for any other mature classical musician.



**It is difficult to think of any other profession whose practitioners are continually measured against a set of largely hostile and meaningless criteria.**

scholar Susan Rutherford,  
"Divining the diva"

Opera culture evolved to restrict and suppress the innate power of these women artists: framing them as illiterate musicians dependent on coaches to learn their music, empty vessels for conductors' expression, or petulant divas. (Many of these stereotypes have also been projected onto male singers, who are feminized/ infantilized by virtue of their occupation). **Singers may have been prized for their talent and beauty** (or the beauty of their

<sup>1</sup> Rutherford, Susan. "Divining the 'diva', or a myth and its legacy: female opera singers and fandom". In L. Zopelli (Ed.) *Schweizer Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft* (Vol. 36, pp. 58, 55), 2016.

<sup>2</sup> for more context on this topic, see Kotnik, Vlado. "The Idea of Prima Donna", pp. 237-287, cited above.

<sup>3</sup> We must recall that until very recently, a lead soprano would in most cases have found herself alone in a cast of mostly male characters, with an all-male orchestra, conductor, creative and production team, musical coaches, and administration. The needle has moved on this somewhat, although SINGTANK's [2022 Opera Leadership Study](#) revealed that 95% of all Music Directors, and 78% of Executive Leaders at American "Category 1 Budget" opera companies, are men.

<sup>4</sup> "She didn't know what to do...couldn't walk across a stage, didn't know how to go beyond making beautiful sounds. I was asked, 'Would you see what you can do with her?'" - director Norman Ayrton. "I could hear what she was capable of, which she did not realize; I convinced her she made better sounds when she wasn't *thinking*...I could play whole arias a 3rd higher and she wouldn't notice the difference." - Richard Bonyngne. "With [Bonyngne's] encouragement, she worked very hard, to please him as much as anything." -quotes from the BBC Documentary film *Joan Sutherland: The Reluctant Prima Donna* (2006).



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instruments), **but rarely have they been regarded as the intellectuals, linguists, and disciplined, advanced musicians that they invariably were and are.**<sup>5,6</sup>

**Not only is the phantom of the Diva therefore actively harmful to singers, but its tired, outmoded aesthetic cannot be said to benefit an art form that struggles to invite and speak to new, younger and more diverse audiences.**<sup>7</sup>

And yet, *The Lady in the Red Gown* has been directly marketed to the public for generations as a primary part of opera's appeal. The singer as a miraculous and shiny *objet* to be desired (or possessed, in the form of private performances offered to high-end donors, for example), a "barihunk", just another luxury product to be consumed by the wealthy. "A love for an artifact rather than an artist," as one scholar describes this objectification.<sup>8</sup>

**The Myth demands that the singer**— like the high-class courtesan with whom she was historically identified —**present as wealthy herself, while living in an often-desperate economic reality.** This is especially true for Young Artists: a 2020 study revealed that about 66% of Budget Category 4 opera companies, and more than 75% of Budget Category 5 companies, pay less than a living wage to their Young Artists.<sup>9</sup> As tenor Jordan Weatherston Pitts stated,

*I only got paid \$125 a week. Some days, we rehearsed 10 hours. They made us sing at an auction gala where over the course of the evening, the opera company raised hundreds of thousands of dollars.*<sup>10</sup>

What Pitts describes is the humiliation and expense of being forced to cos-play as wealthy, performing in formalwear at the gala, for the benefit of the company and its donors alone. The Myth is upheld, but at what cost to the singer? or to the art form?

**95% of all Music Directors, and 78% of Executive Leaders at American "Category 1 Budget" opera companies, are men.**

SINGTANK 2022 Opera Leadership Study

<sup>5</sup> "With the idealizing of the *diva* came the emphasis on charisma and mystique, and a consequent under-emphasis on the technique, intelligence, musicianship, and plain hard work which makes a first-rate singer." Christiansen, Rupert. from *Prima Donna: A History*. London: The Bodley Head, 1984.

<sup>6</sup> "...'*maestro*' implies the mastery of a topic and therefore the acquisition of knowledge and erudition. 'Diva', in contrast, suggests an innate, supernatural quality: the passive recipient of too many gifts bestowed at birth..." This reading expresses a "distrust of female learning" and an "insistence that women conceal their knowledge". (Rutherford, Susan. *Divining the diva*, p. 57.)

<sup>7</sup> "The worst symptom of this image [of the diva] was the neglect of [the singer's] potential autonomy and freedom in opera." from Kotnik, Vlado. "The Idea of Prima Donna: the History of a Very Special Operatic Institution", in *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, p. 279, December 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Hadlock, Heather. "Peering into 'The Queen's Throat'", *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 5/3 (1993), p. 273.

<sup>9</sup> 2020 survey of 55 YAPs by Zach Finkelstein, "[Do Artist Apprenticeships Pay a Living Wage?](#)" published in the *Middle Class Artist Blog*, June 5, 2020. (article by Jack Lindberg and Jordan W. Pitts). Budget Categories as defined by OPERA America (Category 4 = \$250,000 - \$1M annual operating budget; Category 5 = <\$250,000).

<sup>10</sup> quoted in the article above.



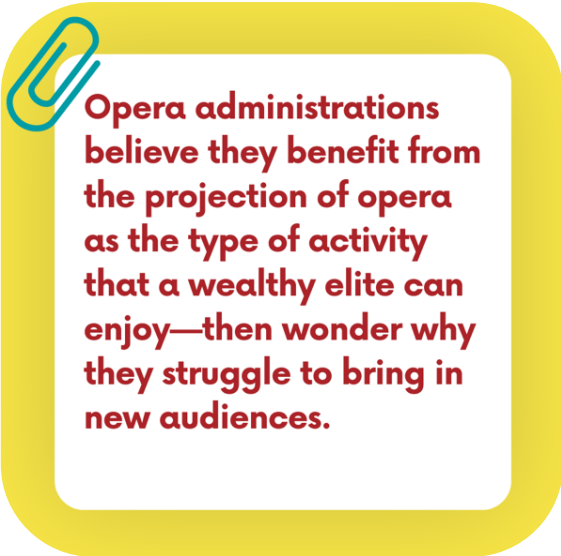
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Opera administrations believe they benefit from the projection of opera as the type of activity that a wealthy elite can enjoy—while then also wondering why they struggle to bring in new audiences. SINGTANK asks: **Whose fantasy is being represented in the "Red Gown" aesthetic, and what does this message say to the broader public?**

Although it may seem to celebrate singers' gifts of charisma and beauty, it "perpetuates a form of discourse masquerading as glorification while deliberately undermining the real achievements and identities of the artist....it is time to acknowledge the singer in more accurate and rational terms."<sup>11</sup>

**Opera is suffering from an authenticity deficit** that harms singers, diminishes the art form and limits its potential audience base. SINGTANK is calling for opera companies to more closely examine the aesthetics and values of their marketing, as well as their internal culture, structure and policies that reinforce this outdated Myth. The solutions listed on the next page offer ways companies can **replace the Myth with intentional policies that honor the full humanity, artistry and dignity of the singer.**



**Opera administrations believe they benefit from the projection of opera as the type of activity that a wealthy elite can enjoy—then wonder why they struggle to bring in new audiences.**

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<sup>11</sup> Rutherford, Susan. *Divining the Diva*, p. 59.



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## What are the problems of the Diva Myth, and what can companies do about it?

### ISSUES

- **Cultural messaging** of opera as elitist and old-fashioned repels new audiences
- **Financial & emotional burden** on singers of upholding the glam aesthetic with limited means; and/or singers presenting as wealthy also justifies lower fees (singer as hobbyist/ independently wealthy)
- **Infantilization of the singer:** archetype of the "diva" means companies are **quick to assume entitlement, immaturity, or selfishness** in a singer's behavior when asking that basic professional needs be met
- **Singers' artistry, intelligence, musicianship not recognized or valued**

### SOLUTIONS

- Companies: Take the risk of **abandoning the old aesthetic** in your marketing to win new audiences: be **authentic**, presenting singers' real, diverse stories, images and lives (for example, don't use models as stand-ins for singers in marketing)
- **Regard all singers in your employ as mature, highly-skilled professionals.** Provide the same contractual workplace/ compensation terms & conditions that you would for a consultant, administrator, or other businessperson
- **Do not ask or require singers to perform** at fundraising galas, to lead outreach activities, social media campaigns, or other time- and energy-intensive activities **without fair compensation**
- **Provide information** to administration, Board Members and donors about the **financial realities of a singing career**
  - For example, share SINGTANK's [Policy Reports](#) with them, or informative articles such as this one recently published in OPERA America, "[The Hidden Costs of an Operatic Career](#)"<sup>12</sup>
- Training programs and conservatories: prepare and train singers with the goal of **independence, not dependence** (on coaches, teachers, conductors, etc.)

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<sup>12</sup> Rinaldi, Ray Mark. "[The Vocal Economy: Hidden Costs of an Operatic Career](#)", published in *OPERA America Magazine*, July 11, 2023.

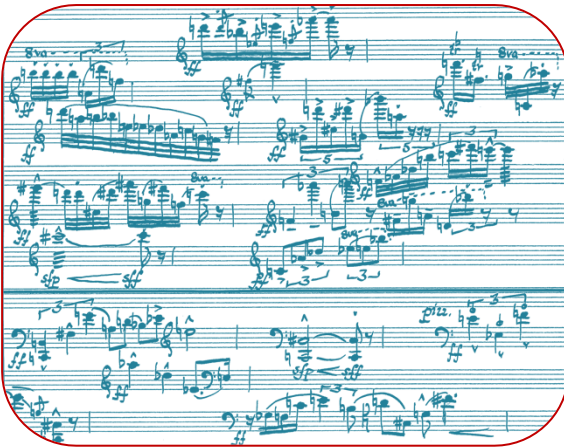


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## PRACTICE

### 2. New Works: Everything But the Voice



#### SUMMARY

SINGTANK examines the culture of classical vocal composition, and proposes ways that composers' education and the commissioning/ workshopping process can evolve to re-center the singer, resulting in new operas that live more successfully in the voice and in audiences, at their Premiere and beyond.

#### CONTEXT

We are living in an exciting moment of opera's evolution, with a renewed interest in the creation and presentation of new works. Composition workshops and commissioning projects abound, with an ever-more diverse creatorship challenging the traditional structures, aesthetic, format and content of the art form.

But there remains an elephant in the room: why are the majority of these new works so unsuccessful? As Anne Midgette candidly wrote in the *Washington Post* in 2015: "Over and over again, we hail as moderately successful works that would have no chance of interesting a non-operatic audience; or give a pass to work that, if we encountered it in a theater or cinema, we'd have no hesitation about panning."<sup>13</sup>

There are many beliefs about why most new operas "fail" (one being that composition was ever thus, and that only time can separate the wheat from the chaff). **But singers perceive one glaring, fundamental flaw in the current**

**Singers perceive one glaring, fundamental flaw in the current culture of vocal composition: the near-total absence of the singer in the process.**

<sup>13</sup> Midgette, Anne. "[Written on Skin and the Problem of New Opera](#)", *Washington Post*, August 13, 2015.





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**culture of vocal composition: the near-total absence of the singer in the process, starting with composers' education at conservatories.**

Institutions developing new works must recognize that for a piece to ultimately "succeed" and to impact audiences, one essential criterion is that it *must* live—healthily and expressively—in the voice and the singer. When knowledge of the singers' craft is absent from the creation process, we risk losing the one defining factor of "opera" that sets it apart from other forms of musical storytelling, and the results are indeed too often (to use Midgette's words) "hard to love".

This is not an argument in favor of a regression to a *bel canto* style of composition. But it is an acknowledgment of the factors that make vocal writing, and opera, unique: primarily, the reality of it being the only purely biological instrument, defined by both the potential and the limitations of the human body.



**A survey of the course catalogues of the Top 15 U.S. Conservatories found only 2 undergraduate composition courses specific to vocal writing.**

The era of composers growing up steeped in acoustic vocal repertoire has passed, and so their familiarity with and fluency in the subject can no longer be assumed. Composers always will—and must—push the limits of the possible, and express the time they live in. But in a void of receiving any solid methodological study of or broad exposure to the 400+ year repertoire of opera and song, too often their choices are made out of ignorance.

Conservatories (traditionally bastions of the primacy of “pure” instrumental composition) have abdicated any real responsibility in teaching vocal composition, touching on the subject only briefly in general composition classes: A SINGTANK survey of the 2023 Course Catalogues of the Top 15 U.S. Conservatories found that there were only 2 undergraduate composition courses offered specific to vocal writing, and of these, only one featured a singer as instructor.<sup>14</sup>

This results in sheer trial-and-error learning later in the composer’s professional life (at which point, the investment and exposure of a Premiere often preclude any productive process of critique and learning). Meanwhile, the singer, who has devoted decades of study to this specialized realm, is left out of any significant advisory or educational role.

The composer misapplies the lessons of instrumental writing again and again, with the same underperforming results: singers who can't be heard (or require amplification); roles that are written in a technically uninformed way, resulting in vocal strain and fatigue; works where all of the interest lies in the sonic world of the orchestra, not in the storytelling onstage.

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<sup>14</sup> The lone course is composer/ singer Susan Botti's "Composing for (and with) the Voice" (Manhattan School of Music). Her syllabus is attached in Appendix A, p. 17, of this report, as an example.



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This results in too many new works with very short shelf-lives, that "fail" with audiences and critics alike, and never recoup the vast investment of time and energy invested in their creation. An OPERA America 20-year survey published in 2015 found that just 11% of new works get a revival.<sup>15</sup>

**The issues of contemporary vocal composition are frustratingly predictable in their universality.**<sup>16</sup> Singers who regularly perform new works can list these pitfalls and rookie errors that crop up again and again off the top of their heads. But in lieu of being invited to contribute this priceless knowledge to the field—their profound, complex understanding of the technical and compositional underpinnings of their own art form—they generally keep it to themselves.

"But we have singers participating in our workshops," the commissioning body will say. The singer hired in this role is unfortunately not employed or empowered to provide useful, methodological feedback or training to composers. Mostly they are bravely trying to prove that they can do anything that is asked of them, and to not appear to be difficult, underprepared or incapable: in short, they are silenced by a valid fear that the flaws of the composition will be solely attributed to their (in-)ability.

What is described above is a **near-total absence of workplace "Psychological Safety" for singers** performing in new opera workshops. This term refers not to feel-good vibes in the workplace, but to a climate in which employees feel empowered to candidly share ideas, concerns and mistakes without fear of retribution or embarrassment, and to have their skills, input and knowledge heard, respected and utilized.

Psychological Safety is especially vital in creative, collaborative work; as Harvard Professor of Leadership Amy C. Edmondson has written,

Achieving performance in knowledge-intensive work relies on integrating the ideas and expertise of multiple people, which requires a willingness to speak candidly in a timely manner.<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, the reality of the freelancing career for singers, and the pervasive Culture of Fear in opera (outlined in [SINGTANK's 2021 Policy Report](#)), mean that unless they are hired in a mentoring capacity, or are explicitly invited to contribute to a fully participatory and methodological process in which their expertise will be heard, respected and incorporated, singers will not feel free to speak candidly or to share their invaluable knowledge.<sup>18</sup>

**In a review of 4 of the top American opera workshops, SINGTANK found that singers represented just 2% of the mentoring faculty (5% if one includes singers**



<sup>15</sup> As cited in Wise, Brian and Lewin, Naomi. "Why Do Contemporary Operas Rarely Get Revivals?" WQXR story published Sep. 2, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> "Composing for the Voice: Suggestions and Guidelines", a simple outline by Robert Paterson, can be found at the Mostly Modern Festival's website. Although written by a composer who is not a singer, his advice is singer-friendly and vocally informed.

<sup>17</sup> Edmondson, Amy C. "4 Steps to Boost Psychological Safety in Your Workplace", *Harvard Business Review*, June 22, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> See SINGTANK's [2021 Policy Report](#) on the topic of the Culture of Fear, pp. 2-4.



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who are also composers).<sup>19</sup> The composer is thus chiefly guided by directors, librettists, composers, and pianists. The absence of singers in the process means that the information that matters the most is missing: How will the piece [healthily] live in the voice? on the stage? in the singer? How can it best reach and impact the audience through the singer's performance?

A few companies have taken steps in the right direction: Opera Philadelphia has occasionally hired a singer who is a Vocal Composition Consultant to work one-on-one with its composers-in-residence; Four Corners Ensemble: *Operation Opera* is a collaborative program co-led by singers, pianists, and composers; American Opera Project has begun enlisting a few independent singers to serve as advisors for selecting works for their "Composers & the Voice" program (although it does not currently list any singer-instructors on its website).

Some conservatory composition programs, as well (at Juilliard, Bard, Rice University, Indiana University, and Mannes, to name a few) have hired singer-educators as Guest Lecturers in recent years to present masterclasses or symposia on the subject. These one-off offerings remain few and far between, but are hopeful signs of progress.

However, there are far more, well-known examples of high-profile, big-budget Premieres in which the singer's voice and presence were deprioritized, this was known to be problematic compositionally, and yet these facts were ignored by the producing bodies. (Until the critical reviews come out that lament, for example, the inaudibility of the singers, who were "cast too light".)<sup>20</sup>

SINGTANK's Advisory Cabinet, which includes many well-known and highly successful New Music singers, frankly discussed at our Summit the systemic issues that we believe actively inhibit better vocal writing, and proposed solutions, below.

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<sup>19</sup> Survey of all 99 composition workshop mentors listed collectively on the websites of: American Opera Project, American Opera Initiative, Pacific Opera Initiative, and American Lyric Theater, July 2023. The total figures across all companies include: 44 composers; 19 librettists; 10 stage directors; 9 conductors; 8 pianists; 3 administrators; 3 dramaturgs; 2 singers\*; 1 publisher. (\*5 singers if including singers who are also identified/ counted as composers).

<sup>20</sup> An example from Zachary Woolfe's 2021 [New York Times review](#) of Aucoin/Ruhl's *Eurydice* at the Metropolitan Opera: "...[the lead soprano's voice was] so slender as to be almost inaudible for much of the opera. (Aucoin's dense scoring doesn't help)....As a result, we never feel sufficiently compelled by her; it's a reminder that the emotional impact of operatic characters emerges from singers' vocal presences." Another example, from the same critic's [review of Blanchard/Cristofer's "Champion"](#) in 2023: "the music often seemed like it lay too low for [the lead bass-baritone] to project strongly through the orchestra, robbing the character of force and intensity."



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## How can singers' knowledge contribute to a more successful era of Vocal Composition?

### ISSUES

- **Lack of any specialized, serious curriculum in Vocal Composition at conservatories:** no familiarity with the repertoire, or training in the needed skill set, leaves many young composers floundering, trying to create from "whole cloth" instead of building on the existing foundation of the art form
- Culture of **natural-born "genius"** inhibits dialogue, learning, collaboration
- **Commissioning contracts** do not have an adequate process outlined (including reasonable timelines) that allows for a series of consultations and revisions
- **Singers have been left out** of the creation process, from conservatory training, to workshopping, to consulting or advising
- **Issues of vocal projection, vocal fatigue**, etc. are not regarded by composers and commissioning bodies as being as important as they are (or the **fault is ascribed to the singers**, not the composition)
- A lack of cultural Psychological Safety means that **singers do not feel safe or empowered** to speak up about problematic writing, even if vocally damaging
- **Result: too many works fail vocally/ dramatically;** the enormous investment is wasted, and audiences/ houses may give up on new works

### SOLUTIONS

Here we outline concrete steps in the right direction that can be taken by a conservatory, opera company or opera workshop. (Note: This outline does not tackle issues of the *content* of new works, only the technical process of their creation.):

#### 1. COMPOSER EDUCATION (Suggestions for CONSERVATORIES/ TRAINING PROGRAMS):

- **Recognize that vocal composition is categorically unique**, and requires a specialized educational curriculum.
- Require composition majors to take at least one course about **writing for the voice and study of vocal repertoire**
  - See: Vocal Comp course syllabus from Manhattan School of Music, Appendix A, p.17
- Have composers sit in on voice lessons and masterclasses, be required to attend more operas and recitals
- Invite **Voice Faculty/ singers** to contribute to developing and/or teaching the Vocal Comp curriculum
- Encourage departments to foster more **collaboration** between singers & composers



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## (SOLUTIONS, continued)

### 2. TRUE COLLABORATION (Suggestions for OPERA WORKSHOPS/ COMMISSIONERS)

- **Recognize that the voice and the singer are central to all vocal music;** compositional choices that enable them to flourish will succeed
- **Recognize singers as authorities and masters of their craft who have knowledge and insights to teach composers**
- **Psychological Safety** should be intentionally created in the rehearsal- or workshop room, where singers and composers alike are explicitly invited to voice gaps in knowledge, ask questions, and propose/discuss alternatives without fear<sup>21</sup>
- **Instigate better collaboration** by having commission contracts for composers **outline the involvement of singers in the creation & revision process** from an early stage, including, for example:
  - scheduled collaboration and feedback sessions with the cast of singers
  - singer-friendly (earlier) timelines for due-dates
  - work with a Vocal Composition Consultant who is a singer
- **Commissioning bodies should hire a qualified independent singer to serve as a Vocal Composition Consultant**<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Other forms of cultural workplace "safety" are of course also advised; one resource to be published in early 2024 is the American Composers' Forum "[Anatomy of a Commission](#)", which aims to provide transparency and guidance for more equitable and productive commissioning collaborations. (Whether it includes singers among its definition of "living creators" remains to be seen.)

<sup>22</sup> Qualifications could include: a singer with an established performing career in New Music; singers who have independently created a vocal comp. curriculum or who have successfully advised in this capacity in the past; singers who are themselves composers or who teach courses on Vocal Repertoire.



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## POLICY

### 3. OPERA America: The System vs. the Singer

#### SUMMARY

OPERA America serves as the principle collective voice and organizational leader of our broader field. But singers have too often felt voiceless among its ranks. SINGTANK suggests ways this influential organization can better serve the artists it represents, becoming a more genuinely diverse and productive platform for real dialogue and the betterment of opera.



#### CONTEXT

Founded in 1970 as a small gathering of opera CEOs, the industry guild OPERA America has grown into an ever-more-influential leader in the field. It has become American opera's most prominent voice in so many areas: lobbying and policy-advising, networking, production resources, grantmaking, data collection, and cultural dialogue. Artist Members were first admitted in 1992; by 2022, Individual Members identifying (non-exclusively) as singers accounted for ca. 8% of total Membership.<sup>23</sup>

As its Mission has evolved from hosting executive lunches to "placing artists at the center", the transition has not been entirely smooth or unconflicted, from the perspective of singers. **In a career that lacks meaningful collective representation, transparency or protections for soloists, singers are hungry to have OPERA America be a platform that can represent their interests.**

Well-meaning attempts by the organization in recent years to better "serve" singer-artists have resulted in mostly one-way exchanges of providing "educational" resources to singers. Although surely some have benefitted from this information, this default stance implies that:

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<sup>23</sup> This is a generous estimate based on OPERA America's [2022 Annual Field Report](#). Since opera company and other org members represent multiple individuals (for example, they state that the 205 Professional Company Members represent 9700 Administrators), the actual % figure can only be estimated.



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- a) singer-members are not mature, knowledgeable professionals already;
- b) *only singers* require lifelong advice, education, and improvement in their vocation (vs. directors, administrators, conductors, etc., who are rarely singled out as requiring edification);
- c) singers' only role and best path is to learn to adapt to the system as it is, however flawed, outdated, prejudicial or otherwise non-functional.

**The onus is always on the singer to make do, while the causal factors within opera administrations go largely unaddressed.**

One example: OPERA America in 2021 hosted a webinar series titled "Career Transitions for Singers", a forum intended to provide guidance for the increasing number of singers giving up their performing careers to enter other lines of work.<sup>24</sup> They chose to frame the discussion of this real (and to singers, profoundly distressing) trend as yet another informational resource for singers, instead of airing the larger and more critical issues of diminishing fee scales, exploitative contracts, etc. that have forced too many singers to abandon their calling prematurely.<sup>25</sup> The onus is always on the singer to make do, while the causal factors within opera company administrations go largely unaddressed.

This **bias towards company-over-artist interests** also expresses itself in OPERA America's research. Every year they conduct lengthy, mandatory surveys of all Professional Company Members' activities and budgets. From this they release their

Annual Field Report, "to provide leaders in the field with a comprehensive overview of the financial positions of our members". But by "members", they mean only companies—not artist-members. Data collected about the percentage of company budgets spent on performing artists and/or singers, for example, is collected but not released in the Report.<sup>26</sup> Data about performance fee scales, or about artist members' financial positions, is not even collected.

## **Can OPERA America evolve to be a genuinely diverse platform for real dialogue, learning, and change between *all* of those who make opera happen?**

Singers—the very body and soul of opera—feel that an organization with "OPERA" in its title should more actively welcome, listen to, and represent them, the chief practitioners of the art form. Some simple ways OPERA America could better demonstrate respect for and engage singing artists are listed in the "Solutions" section below.

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<sup>24</sup> The title of the webinar was subsequently changed to "Career Expansion for Artists".

<sup>25</sup> One sign of positive change is the recent publishing of the article "[The Vocal Economy: Hidden Costs of an Operatic Career](#)", by Ray Mark Rinaldi, in *OPERA America Magazine*, July 11, 2023.

<sup>26</sup> When asked about this data omission directly (during a zoom meeting during the OPERA America "Virtual Road Trip" in 2021), OPERA America President/CEO Marc Scorca stated that legal counsel had advised him that this data could not be released, citing "restraint of trade". SINGTANK followed up with our own legal team (the Williams Mullen Law Firm), who found that this argument did not have legal standing, and "sounded more like corporate self-interest".



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In feeling a void of representation, singers are clamoring to be heard, and in their frustration, some have (successfully) resorted to public shaming of the organization to get results.<sup>27</sup> Lashing out online, calling out opera orgs for their mistreatment and hypocrisy is the unfortunate but inevitable result of singers' collective disempowerment and exclusion. Singers have productive ideas, insights, and unlimited creativity that they desperately wish to offer their field, but feel excluded from the rooms of influence that would allow them to contribute.

**OPERA America has the power of no other organizational body to influence the field and to be a force for opera's necessary evolution.** In pursuing its stated mission of "moving opera forward", **it has a duty to address singers' concerns, to invite them to play a larger role** in shaping and participating in industry conversations. To achieve this, it must re-consider its past fundamental position as a one-way conduit of advice directed from organization to singer only, and should foster more dialogue and learning in both directions.

There are some positive signs that a shift in this direction has begun: OPERA America announced in March 2023 that it will release a "national anti-harassment and respectful workplace initiative" titled "OPERA Respects" in Fall 2023, in conjunction with AGMA and FMCS. They are also currently organizing industry discussions of Travel & Accommodation standards for artists, which include a few singer contributors.

As the org continues to evolve to be more inclusive of singers—who are longing to be heard—it can win their trust and support. Artist membership and engagement will increase, principles of DEI will be better honored, and most importantly, OPERA America can play a role in spearheading real dialogue and change, revitalizing the field with the brilliance, passion and commitment of its singers.<sup>28</sup>

**OPERA America must re-consider its fundamental position as a one-way conduit of advice from organization to singer only, and should foster more dialogue & learning in both directions.**

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<sup>27</sup> One notable recent incident was the [leaked listserv conversation](#) by OPERA America PCM "professional development" administrators in July 2022, cattily disparaging Young Artists as being "narcissistic", "entitled", and (the old favorite!) "difficult". This leak enflamed the singer community, which responded with outrage. After first defending the conversation as having been "private", OPERA America, under enormous public pressure, eventually apologized and then hosted a series of Q&As (as well as an anonymous feedback survey) on the topic of YAP conditions.

<sup>28</sup> Singers as a body are far more diverse than opera administration. See [SINGTANK's 2021 Policy Report](#), p. 8.





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## What steps can OPERA America take to be more inclusive of singers?

### ISSUES

- Focus on large companies, admin, boards/ trustees over artists: **singers and singers' issues not centered**
- Sense of being a **one-way conduit** of info from administration to singers only: telling and not asking its singer Membership what it needs
- No effective system of **input or communication** for Artist Members
- Sense of being **reactive** (responsive to online outrage only), **not proactive**
- Conference **fees too high** for most singers to attend

### SOLUTIONS

- **Be a voice for singers!** (not just *at* singers).
- Invite **more open communication** between the Artist Rep and Artist Members<sup>29</sup>
- **Collect and distribute data** on company budgets and practices as relate to singers, for example:
  - performance fee scales
  - % of company or production budgets spent on singer fees
  - YAP compensation
  - number of roles assigned to YAPs vs. professionals
  - ages of singers hired
- **Place open calls for topic submissions** for the Conference
  - for a model of more participatory Conference planning, see [Grantmakers in the Arts](#)
- Have more **affordable Conference fees** for singers
- **Invite more individuals who are "just singers" to speak on Conference panels** (+ provide an honorarium/ comp Conference & hotel fees)
- **Use the Conference for real progress & dialogue:** host **more cross-disciplinary dialogue** at the Conference with diverse panels, especially on controversial or difficult topics
- **Be an amplifier of Best Practices that affect singers:** create recommended policies, resources, trainings and templates for orgs<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> OPERA America currently has one staff member with the job title of "Artist Development Manager"; it is not clear if this individual is expected to be the primary communication point for Artist Members.

<sup>30</sup> As noted in the Context section above, OPERA America has begun to take positive steps in this area, a development since SINGTANK held its last Summit in 2022.



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## Appendix A: example Vocal Comp. Syllabus

The info below is drawn from the Syllabus for Composer/ Singer Susan Botti's course at Manhattan School of Music, "**Composing for (and with) the Voice**":

### Course Description:

Vocal composition explored by combining practical techniques with historical perspectives, including music from a variety of cultures and genres. The relationship and interaction of composer to singer will be examined citing specific examples (from Handel to Berio) and leading to the actualization of student works with student singers. Composition of short vocal studies will lead to a final vocal composition presented in a class recital. All class members will be called upon to participate in performing student compositions. Singers/performers from outside the class will also be included in performances. The class will have a hands-on workshop aspect along with analysis and writing. Writing projects will be given in-class readings. Each student will also prepare a presentation for the class. A final composition will be prepared for an informal concert at the end of the semester.

### Required Texts:

Specific reading and listening assignments will be given using the course's CANVAS website. The scores used will be vocal works in a variety of settings and with diverse accompaniments

### Recommended Texts (not required to purchase):

- Paul Alan Barker and Maria Huesca. Composing for voice : exploring voice, language and music, Routledge, 2018
- Eric Salzman and Thomas Desi. The new music theater : seeing the voice, hearing the body Oxford, 2008
- John Potter, ed. Cambridge companion to singing, Cambridge University Press, 2000
- Elaine Gould. Behind Bars: The Definitive Guide to Music Notation, Faber, 2011.

### Course Objectives:

Creating vocal music compositions (for solo voice with and without accompaniment)

Composers will be working with singers to explore collaborative aspects

Introducing underrepresented creators - composers and performers - of contemporary and historical vocal works

### Student Learning Outcomes:

Students will be able to translate creative ideas into notation and then into performance

By de-mystifying the technique of singing and the notation of vocal composition, composers will be able to approach vocal composition in an informed and confident way

Existing vocal works will be more accessible and comprehensible with knowledge and experience gained in the class. Students will give a presentation of a vocal work incorporating this information.

Recognize the diversity of the musical practice of creating music for the voice

### Course Requirements & Assessments:

A series of short assignments/exercises 1 presentation of a vocal work

1 concert review of a live performance 2 (or more) original vocal compositions



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## References and Resources

American Composers' Forum et al, "[Anatomy of a Commission: Digital Resource](#) providing guidance on the commissioning process, from American Composers Forum, National Sawdust, and American Composers' Orchestra. (to be released early 2024).

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Midgette, Anne. "[Written on Skin and the Problem of New Opera](#)", *Washington Post*, August 13, 2015.

OPERA America [2022 Annual Field Report](#). (online link)

Paterson, Robert. "[Composing for the Voice: Suggestions and Guidelines](#)", Modern Festival's website.

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Wise, Brian and Lewin, Naomi. "[Why Do Contemporary Operas Rarely Get Revivals?](#)", WQXR story published Sep. 2, 2015.

Woolfe, Zachary. "[Review: 'Champion', at the Met Opera, Spars with History](#)", published in *The New York Times*, April 11, 2023.

Woolfe, Zachary. "[Review: The Met's Eurydice Tries to Raise the Dead](#)", published in *The New York Times*, Nov. 4, 2021.