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2021
POLICY
REPORT



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SINGTANK 2021 POLICY REPORT

This report summarizes the results of SINGTANK's 2021 Summit (and research conducted thereafter by SINGTANK), which gathered an Advisory Cabinet of 20 opera singers from a diversity of backgrounds and stages of career for 2 days of private discussion of issues pertinent to our profession. The specific issues discussed (which were also drawn from ideas submitted by non-attending Members) included: Young Artist Programs; Audition Best Practices; Singer Representation in Opera Leadership; Company Culture; Bullying/ Harassment; Performance Fees. This Report presents three cross-topic, overarching themes that emerged from discussion of these diverse issues, and solutions proposed by the Cabinet.

INTRODUCTION

We are reaching a crisis point in our art form. Too many professional singers are not making a sustainable living, and are enduring unacceptable workplace conditions and exploitative practices that have become normalized. The good news is that many small (and some larger) fixes to opera houses' policies can result in immediate improvements to singers' experience and livelihoods. The impact of implementing even some of these changes will be a more positive & productive company culture, higher career retention rates, and a field which better identifies, fosters and sustains the highest levels of performing artists of all backgrounds.

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1. The Specter of "Difficult": How the Culture of Fear Permeates the Workplace (and Better Ways Forward)

SUMMARY

Opera is a high-pressure, high-stakes art form. For singers, it is also a calling that is deeply interwoven with a sense of selfhood. Too often, **singers' dependence on the vagaries of industry structures to be allowed to practice their career, craft and calling leads to a work environment permeated by a sense of Fear**: not a fear of performing, but fear of being fired (or the equivalent: not being re-hired) for the smallest perceived infraction: an assertion of opinion, lodging a harassment complaint, standing up for a bullied colleague, expressing vocal fatigue, or otherwise being tarred as "difficult".

Beyond AGMA's legal protections already in place (which only address egregious discrimination), **SINGTANK is calling for a shift in company culture**. We propose that some **simple fixes to opera houses' policies can foster an intentional culture of respect and security**, resulting in immediate improvements to singers' experience, livelihood, and even their performance onstage.

CONTEXT

At SINGTANK's 2021 Summit, this Topic emerged as one **of the most pervasive issues in opera culture**, as experienced by singers themselves. It is also a largely taboo topic that is rarely voiced publicly by singers, since to call it out inherently exposes one to the threat one seeks to address. As researcher Michael Smallwood stated in his 2020 study¹ of singers' career trajectories, "in this world, you do not want to show vulnerability or weakness".

With no job security in a "job" that is bound to one's very sense of selfhood, even consistently-employed **singers live in a state of near-desperation to never "rock the boat"**. What SINGTANK describes as the Myth of the Singing Robot (see Topic #2, pp. 5-7) informs a cultural expectation that the singer never complain or have a strong opinion, follows orders, isn't burdened with health or vocal issues, financial straits, pregnancy, child- or eldercare, or other human realities.

This dynamic emerges naturally from the organizational complexity of opera: i.e., singers are often regarded as replaceable elements slotted into a production late in the process, almost an inconvenience to the smooth operation of a well-oiled and complex machine, **instead of being regarded as the true, core value and product of the company**.

Exacerbating this dynamic is the fact that—absent a "Fest"-type permanent ensemble system in America—singers are not salaried employees of a company, and **lack the basic contractual protections and resources** most



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employees in corporate America would expectⁱⁱ. The singer correctly perceives that to make anyone in power even slightly uncomfortable entails the very real risk of being fired, or the freelancers' equivalent: not being re-hired.

As one singer-researcher put it, "We are told not to speak truth to power, for fear of retaliation".ⁱⁱⁱ A director, conductor or administrator may fire a singer for any arbitrary reason ("shrill high notes") at any time, and is legally protected in doing so, as they may cite a subjective artistic standard or opinion as their cause.

Female, gender-nonconforming, and BIPOC singers may feel especially vulnerable in this regard, as many have been culturally conditioned to be actively unthreatening to authority. This means that fewer of these singers may feel free to assert their agency in the workplace.^{iv} This, in turn, leads to lower career retention rates as well as fewer pathways to administrative leadership within the industry.

Professional soloist singing careers in opera have grown distressingly short: although data has proven difficult to gather on this point, multiple recent studies^{vvi} have determined that the great majority of singers experience severe career difficulties in their 30s, with retirement from the career experienced as "unexpected and involuntary" by most.^{vii}

While the reasons for premature retirement may be primarily financial (cited by 64% of singers in one study; a critical issue addressed in this Report on pp. 6-7), a shockingly large percentage of singers also reported general stress (60%) as one of the *primary reasons* for withdrawing from singing.^{viii}

Opera companies can address these systemic problems firstly by listening to singer-advocates such as SINGTANK when we state that these problems are real, corrosive and pervasive. Secondly, organizations can consider taking any or all of the steps below to review and improve upon their policies and structures, **fostering better workplace cultures that foster mutual loyalty, respect and sustainability.**



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What steps can an opera company take to address and ameliorate the Culture of Fear?

SOLUTIONS

- review general salaried employee policies vs. artist contracts: are singers being offered the same **basic protections** as full-time staff?
 - build **more protective language** into contracts that sets a higher, more objective bar for terminating a contract, and that
 - outlines a more respectful process by which these decisions would be made and communicated to/with the singer
- have **loyalty clauses** in contracts that guarantee "right of refusal" to roles in the following Season(s)
- establish regular, **scheduled meetings for soloists with HR**, that are safe, required and anonymous (Wolf Trap model) or **anonymous tip lines** to report abuses (Seattle Opera)
- provide more access & transparency by allowing singers to **attend admin. & Board meetings**, or having "deputized" individual singer-representatives attend
- consider multi-year "**Fest**"-type **Ensemble or Troupe structures** (see: Victory Hall Opera, The Industry, AMOC) that encourage investment in longer-term careers and build mutual loyalty and trust
- have intentional, **singer-forward principles** and codes of conduct that can guide company culture (see Appendix A, p. 10)



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2. Singing Robots or Adult Human Professionals? Simple Steps to Building a More Singer-Friendly Culture

CONTEXT

Opera is a glamorous art form, and the great singers transform onstage into almost superhuman beings, objects of idolization. But underneath the wigs and makeup, **opera singers have the same lived realities as anyone else**: paying their bills, trying to find childcare or health insurance, deciding what to make for dinner. We do not live on inspiration alone, and, on top of the everyday tasks of life, the art that we perform requires constant discipline, training, investment, and maintenance of perfect health.

The myth of the singer imagines that we are born with a magical, effortless gift. All we have to do is throw on a gown, open our throats, and a miracle happens, in our easy life of fame & fortune.

Upholding this myth in the workplace is exhausting for singers. The "tradition" for so long insisted that singers never discuss: having other income streams (teaching, opera chorus, temp work); having children, being pregnant; suffering from any form of physical, vocal or mental ailment; struggling with finances. Bringing up any of these subjects marked one as either a failure—casting doubt on the quality of one's work—or an inconvenient burden to the system, a tarnishing of the Myth.

The Singing Robot Myth results in uninformed and exploitative demands placed on singers in such areas as over-scheduling, discouragement of vocal marking in rehearsal, unpaid/underpaid labor, unprofessional accommodation, and exploitative audition practices. It does not acknowledge **the full reality of the embodied instrument**.

The next generation of singers is coming into their own and is publicly voicing their disappointment and outrage at this culture, demanding better of those in power. **The time has come for opera companies to embrace this cultural shift, and to start to consider, and support, the Whole Singer.**

SINGTANK has broken down into **4 areas** the ways that companies can lead this change:

- **COMPANY CULTURE**
- **FINANCES**
- **LIFE RESOURCES**
- **AUDITION PRACTICES**



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What steps can an opera company take to dismantle The Myth of the Singing Robot and to treat their singing artists more respectfully?

SOLUTIONS

1. COMPANY CULTURE

Real change starts with a shift in thinking. SINGTANK recommends that companies develop **intentional policies that explicitly center singers as the core product and value** of their company.

- include **intentional singer-forward language** in Bylaws, Operating Principles, Contracts, and/or Codes of Conduct (see Appendix A, p. 11)

2. FINANCES

SINGTANK is not a Union and is not citing specific wage figures for recommended fees paid to singers. However, we urge that companies demonstrate a **prioritization of the value of their singing artists** by:

- **increasing the percentage of production budgets** directed towards singer fees
- establishing **fair flat fee minimums** for all singers that reflect their professional expertise, time commitment, and local cost-of-living
- paying **rehearsal fees/per diems** so that singers are not 100% dependent on the performance fee for compensation (Portland Opera model: option of 25% of fee paid up-front)
- treating all singers, including Young Artists, as highly-skilled, contracted professionals, who are **not asked to perform unpaid labor** such as singing at donor benefits or leading educational outreach for free

3. LIFE RESOURCES

Singers spend much of their life on the road. Being provided with private, convenient and professionally suitable accommodation during their gig is only the beginning; the following are a few ways companies can take better care of their artists by acknowledging their whole, lived realities while under their employ.

- survey singers about their general practical needs prior to the gig, and/or past experiences in this area while working for your company
- consider providing, as needed and as feasible:
 - childcare, housing for partners/ caregivers
 - rehearsal releases for limited remote work hours (such as teaching)
 - professional co-working space
 - local mental health resources
 - offer of supplemental therapy co-pays to singers who are performing roles that demand exceptional psychological duress



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4. AUDITION PRACTICES

Many common audition practices today are not grounded in the reality of vocal technique (i.e., the necessity of warming up the voice just before singing) **or of singers' finances**. One rigorous case study found singers having to expend *hundreds or even thousands of dollars per audition* (in application fees, pianists, equipment, studio space, travel, etc.), *paying for a job interview* in a career that requires dozens of job interviews a year.^{ix} Young Artists and recent grads are especially vulnerable, as **the majority of Young Artist Programs do not even pay a living wage**.^x This is neither fair or sustainable, and leads to the rapid exclusion of artists at all levels of the career who cannot rely on external funding sources such as partners or parents.

One recent study found that a third of *professionally established* singers end up "retiring" from singing in their 30s, with the most common career length being just **7 years** (= mode; average length 11 years: also not long)^{xi}. **The great majority of these retiring singers (64%) cite financial reasons as the primary cause**.^{xii} The important thing to note about that statistic is that this study was not surveying "failed" singers who couldn't cut it, but rather those who had in fact achieved early career success and had been earning the majority of their income as solo professional opera singers for at least 5 years.

SINGTANK recommends companies adopt the following **AUDITION BEST PRACTICES** to ensure more equity and more respectful and successful auditions for singers and companies alike:

- **MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS:**
 - no application fee
 - free, private warmup room for 10-15 minutes prior to audition
 - competent pianist provided for free on request

- **FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS:**
 - have a singer present on all audition panels (see Topic #3, pp.8-9)
 - when invited to house to audition, company covers or subsidizes travel & accommodation



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3. The Room Where It Happens: Giving Singers a Place at (and Behind) the Table

CONTEXT

Opera singers are woefully underrepresented in leadership positions in their own art form. Positions of power and influence—executive administrators, Board members, management, casting directors, competition adjudicators—broadly lack meaningful representation by singers. A SINGTANK survey of American opera house leadership in 2022 reveals that **only 7.5% of executive roles are filled by professional singers.**^{xiii} A self-reinforcing culture persists that **vastly undervalues singers' expertise**, excluding them from authority and underutilizing the knowledge, creativity and commitment they offer.

While singer representation in admin. has recently increased in the American field, [from 3.6% in a 2018 study]^{xiv} decision-maker positions remain dominated by businesspeople, directors, composers, conductors, agents, producers: everyone except the chief practitioners of opera itself.

Additionally, singers as a body are more diverse than opera leadership at large. The Asian Opera Alliance's recent survey cites **34.9%** of singing roles in the 2022-3 Season as cast with BIPOC singers, while **just 7.1%** of executive admin. positions at opera houses are held by POC.^{xv} As companies strive to build more equitable cultures, inviting more singers to the leadership table has proven to be a simple step towards increasing DEI: of the current Black executive leaders in opera, 60% were [former] singers; taking all POC into account, 53% were singers.^{xvii}

As OPERA America's Field-Wide Demographic Report 2021 revealed, only 15% of opera Board positions are filled by BIPOC members.^{xviii} Here is another area of opportunity for companies to increase diversity in their leadership—as well as creativity and knowledge of the industry—by taking the simple step of inviting more singers to the Board table.

SINGTANK recommends an **intentional increase of singer representation at all levels of the art form, catalyzing the industry with increased diversity, artistic vision, and artist-forward culture.**

SINGTANK is calling for institutions of all kinds—companies, competitions, Vocal Arts programs at conservatories, artist agencies—to examine levels of singer representation within their ranks, **to draft minimum percentages of singer representation into their structures** as targets, and to empower these singers with actual decision-making influence and authority.



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What steps can an opera company, voice competition or other organization take to increase singer representation?

SOLUTIONS

- conduct a **survey** of Board and Staff to determine current singer representation
- draft **minimum requirements or targets** into Bylaws or other company policies, such as a 10% minimum singer representation on the Board of Directors (Victory Hall Opera has a 30% minimum singer representation on the Board)
- create company policy that requires at least one singer to be present on audition/casting panels, and a majority of singers on competition panels
- if creating a singer "Advisory Board", give it teeth by empowering members to:
 - be regularly consulted for candid analysis & feedback
 - attend meetings of Admin. and Board of Directors
 - have a collective vote on the Board of Directors
 - be privy to/ participate actively in casting & repertoire discussions, budgetary and/or other strategic planning



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APPENDIX A

Singer-Forward Language Templates

As outlined in this Report, SINGTANK proposes that opera companies take the simple step of including **intentional singer-forward language** in their corporate documents, such as in Bylaws, Operating Principles, Employment Contracts, and/or Codes of Conduct. Including such language will aid organizations in focusing their policy and guiding their actions, helping to foster a better, more respectful workplace that supports and sustains artists.

The Templates below are **examples** that draw from Victory Hall Opera's [VHO] corporate documents. VHO has found these Principles to be invaluable in guiding a wide range of organizational activities. **They are not intended to be legalistic regulations, but rather address a company's value systems, culture, communication, tone, and priorities.**

(Operating Principles adapted from VHO's Bylaws:)

1. Opera = Singers

- a. [Opera company] recognizes that singers represent the core value, product and identity of operatic art form, and are its chief practitioners.
- b. [Opera company] recognizes that the audience's primary experience of opera is of the singer, and so it will prioritize the impact of the singer's performance over and above other production elements.
- c. [Opera company] will prioritize the fair remuneration of its singing artists over and above other production and administrative expenses.

2. Professional Respect Clause

- a. In all areas of communicating and interfacing with artists, [Opera company] shall assume an attitude of respect for their professional and artistic status, integrity, ability and achievement. Any language or practices, even those standard to the opera industry, deemed damaging to this attitude of respect, shall be discouraged and avoided by [Opera company] .



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REFERENCES AND NOTES

- ⁱ Smallwood, Michael. "*Fremd bin ich eingezogen, fremd zieh' ich wieder aus*: The common but not shared crises of opera singers", PhD thesis, Dept. of Music, New Bulgarian University [not yet published]. *Smallwood surveyed 224 professional opera singers internationally for this 2020 study, as well as numerous previous studies in the field, and shared his data with SINGTANK.*
- ⁱⁱ see examples of exploitative contractual language in singers' contracts in the article "[Ethical Challenges in the Classical Music Business](#)", by Zach Finkelstein on the *Middle Class Artist* blog and presented at NATS, June 29, 2020.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Finkelstein, Zach, as quoted in above article.
- ^{iv} Dobnik, Verena. "[Black Male Singers Feel Like 'Invisible Men' of Opera](#)". *L.A. Times*, Jan. 26, 1997.
- ^v Gembris, Heiner and Langner, Daina, "What are singers doing after graduation?", *Vox Humana*, June 2008, p.19-30.
- ^{vi} Smallwood, p. 12.
- ^{vii} Connell, Kathleen, Baker, Sarah & Brown, Andrew. "The Rise and Fall of Professional Singers". In: *Geographies of Creativity*, edited by A.DeDios and L.Kong. 2020. Singapore: Elgar Press. p. 2
- ^{viii} Smallwood, p. 12.
- ^{ix} Finkelstein, Zach. "[Emerging Opera Singers Now Pay for Online Auditions. Are Companies Watching Them?](#)", posted on *Middle Class Artist*, Nov. 12, 2020.
- ^x Finkelstein, Zach., in the section "Barriers for Young Artists: the Living Wage Crisis", of the "Ethical Challenges..." article cited above.
- ^{xi} Smallwood, p. 12.
- ^{xii} Smallwood, p. 12.
- ^{xiii} SINGTANK (author Patterson, Brenda), "[Opera Leadership 2022](#)" study of all OPERA America Professional Company Members, 2022. *Study investigated the professional background, gender and race of all Executive Administrative leaders, such as those with the title Artistic Director, General Manager, Music Director, CEO, or similar. SINGTANK defined a "professional singer" in this study as having had several years of solo operatic performing experience. (Singers whose bios stated only that they had studied voice, participated in YAPs, or performed concert work were counted as "Amateur Singers".)*
- ^{xiv} Patterson, Brenda for Victory Hall Opera, "Executive Leadership in American Opera" study of all OPERA America Professional Company Members, 2018. *Study investigated the professional background, gender and race of all Executive Administrative leaders, such as those with the title Artistic Director, General Manager, Music Director, CEO, or similar.* .[unpublished; full data results available on request from SINGTANK]
- ^{xv} Asian Opera Alliance study, "[Summer 22 and 22/23 Season Opera Casting Diversity](#)."
- ^{xvi} SINGTANK 2022 study cited above.
- ^{xvii} SINGTANK 2022 study cited above.
- ^{xviii} OPERA America, "[2021 Field-Wide Opera Demographic Report](#)", published online.