

THE 40 SEASONS OF  
**BOSTON  
LYRIC  
OPERA:**

A HISTORY

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**BOSTONLYRICOPERA**  
**40THANNIVERSARY**

As Boston Lyric Opera celebrates its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary season, the Company finds itself enjoying a level of artistic and popular success unprecedented in its history. A look back at that history will prove informative for the charting of a course to world class status in the future.

Originating as an amalgamation of several small companies, BLO has evolved like a growing organism, following a spiraling trajectory ever upward, ever gathering strength, incorporating along the way many separate strands of ideals, goals, and ambitions, frequently revisiting its past intentions but always on a higher plain. It has proven adaptable to changing times, redefining itself several times over, but never losing sight of the original Boston focus that was its essential *raison d'être*. In the process it has become the longest enduring opera company in Boston history and the only one to have successfully made the transition from embodying the dream of a single individual to its current status as a civic institution, a board-driven, professionally managed opera company, a gift to the city from its supporters.

But this status has been attained with great effort from many individuals and cannot be maintained without continual striving by all who love opera and BLO and who would see them both endure. In this regard the history of professional opera in Boston can be viewed as a cautionary tale, and one that has defined BLO's past and bears upon its present and, to some extent, its future. Considering the context in which BLO arose and has developed is therefore an essential part of understanding the history of BLO.

Although the operatic art form has always enjoyed popularity in Boston, forming an institution around it has never before been fully successful. Multiple factors have contributed to the failure of the various attempts to establish permanent opera companies in Boston, but the lack of sufficiently broad-based financial backing has consistently proven to be the most significant one.

The first resident professional company of note, Eben Jordan Jr.'s acclaimed Boston Opera Company, went bankrupt in 1915 after only six seasons of production, when Jordan determined he could no longer afford to carry the Company without the backing of additional major donors. For the next few decades there was relatively little professional opera produced in Boston, with most of what did occur being presented by touring companies, as there were no locally based companies of significance nor ones that endured for very long.

In the post-World War II years Boris Goldovsky, director of the opera department of the New England Conservatory, and founding director of the opera department of Tanglewood Music Center in the Berkshires, founded the New England Opera Theater, a professional company that performed in Boston and then took its productions on tour nationally. Goldovsky is widely considered to have been a pivotal figure in the history of opera in America and a significant innovator in all aspects of opera production. One of the first to perform all works in English and to train singers as naturalistic actors, he presented the American premieres of a number of important works and also explored the field of stage technology, for example, experimenting with the acoustical properties of various set-building materials. Even though he and his company were highly admired by both critics and the opera-going public, the collapse of his financial backing forced him to cease performing in Boston in the 1960s, although the touring company endured until the 1980s. Some of his supporters had become concerned that his touring activities conflicted with the Boston component of his

work, although the reality was probably more complicated than that. This situation illustrates how seriously many local backers of opera regarded the importance of building and sustaining a resident Boston company.

In the meantime Goldovsky's most prominent protégée, Sarah Caldwell, organized her own company, which she originally called The Boston Opera Group, debuting in 1958, but in 1965 renamed The Opera Company of Boston (OCB). It flourished from the 1960s through the 1980s. Nationally acclaimed for its artistic successes but never well managed, in 1990 it, too, fell victim to financial forces and also to its failure to grow beyond its dependence upon Caldwell's will and strength of personality.

Sarah Caldwell's vision for her company, like Boris Goldovsky's for his, had been one of artistic excellence and the establishment of a resident professional company that would challenge both its audience and its artists. Various different concepts spurred the founding of other Boston opera-producing groups that arose in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Many of them surfaced on an informal basis, gathering personnel and resources to produce a single opera with no real thought toward building an enduring institution. Most of these efforts embodied the personal concept of a sole individual. Several of the groups met with enough initial success that they sought to continue producing operas and applied for tax-exempt status as non-profit organizations in order to raise funds to support further activity and growth. Among these companies were New England Regional Opera, Associate Artists Opera, and New England Chamber Opera Group, the ultimate merger of which three laid the foundation for today's Boston Lyric Opera. Although each of these three groups had a specific and unique reason for producing opera, each viewed itself as offering an alternative to what Caldwell was presenting, and they were strikingly similar in their insistence on featuring Boston-based artists. In fact in some instances their founders appear to have felt affronted by Caldwell's use of "New York singers," expressing a sense of almost personal betrayal by her in this, and decrying the lack of a truly "Boston company."<sup>1</sup>

New England Regional Opera (NERO) had been founded in 1966 by Dr. Richard Marshall, then the head of the opera department at Boston Conservatory. His intent was to establish a touring repertory company that would produce chamber operas throughout New England for both adults and children. He attempted to affiliate with the Boston Conservatory and to perform as company-in-residence in its theater, but he met with administrative opposition and was unable to achieve this goal.

In 1970 during a performance hiatus of NERO, Ernest Triplett established Associate Artists Opera (AAO). A recent New England Conservatory graduate, he had sung in NERO performances and had taken small parts with Sarah Caldwell's Opera Company of Boston. Eager for more challenging performance opportunities for himself and for other local young professional singers, he programmed relatively new music as well as neglected older operas, some of which were larger in scale than chamber works. This was also a self-described repertory company, but one that aimed to become a bigger player on the scene, an AGMA<sup>2</sup>-affiliated company early on, and one whose identity was tied closely to its founder, much as New England Opera Theater was synonymous with Boris Goldovsky and Opera Company of Boston with Sarah Caldwell.

Again, in 1972, at a time when these two older ensemble companies appeared to be faltering, Rafael de Acha and his wife Kimberly Daniel founded New England Chamber Opera Group (NECOG) to fill the possible void. Both singers in the New England Conservatory Masters program, they were soon joined in their venture by Philip Morehead, also NEC educated, as conductor and music director. They intended to function as a small ensemble repertory group with a focus on presenting young New England singers who were preparing for bigger careers, and they were especially interested in producing, and ultimately commissioning, works by local composers.

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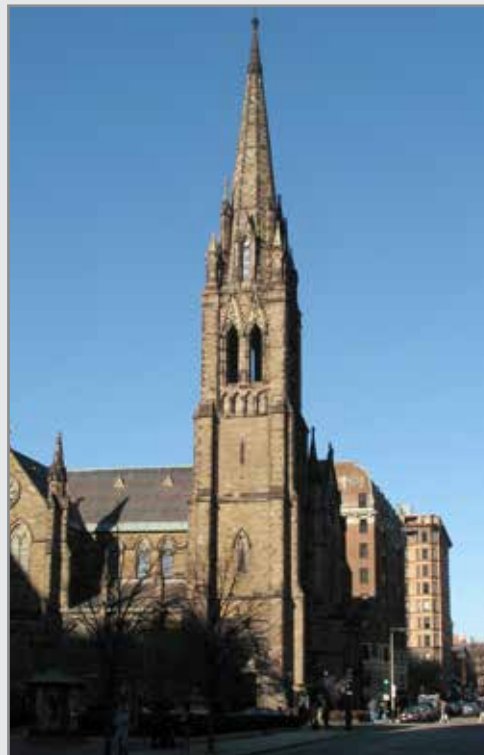
1 "A new opera company," by Harry Neville, *The Boston Herald*, February 7, 1971, p. 158

2 American Guild of Musical Artists, a labor organization representing opera, chorus, and dance artists

Each of the three companies achieved some of their goals and met with some degree of artistic success. Significant works were introduced: NERO's East Coast premiere of Floyd's *Of Mice and Men*;<sup>3</sup> AAO's American premiere of Graun's *Montezuma*;<sup>4</sup> NECOG's world premiere of Earls's *Death of King Phillip*.<sup>5</sup> Singers who went on to have important operatic careers acquired stage experience in their productions, among them David Arnold, Robert Honeysucker, James Maddalena, D'Anna Fortunato, Susan Larson, David Evitts. Most importantly, because of their efforts to complement Caldwell's output, the Boston opera scene grew broader and much richer than perhaps it had ever been before, as audiences became more sophisticated in their knowledge of and taste for opera, more diverse in their demographics. But ultimately all three companies were forced to face greater challenges than they could overcome.

In 1976 as Marshall prepared to leave NERO and Boston for the General Directorship of the Charlotte Opera, and as NECOG and AAO wrestled with growing debt, representatives of each company met to negotiate a consolidation of the three by means of which they hoped to continue both providing Boston audiences with an alternative to Caldwell and offering Boston singers opportunities to perform, indeed a Boston-centric endeavor. At the urging of Frederic Cohen, Chairman of the Board of NERO, they pooled their stores of costumes and sets, their mailing lists and their talents, to create a new entity operating under the charter of AAO.<sup>6</sup> They chose the name "Boston Lyric Opera" for several reasons: they thought "Boston" should be the primary focus of the company and therefore of its name; the new name should be unlike the names of the antecedent companies, signaling a fresh start; and the inclusion of "Lyric" would call to mind other successful American opera companies (e.g. Chicago).<sup>7</sup> AAO's Ernest Triplett became Artistic Director, AAO's James Curran Managing Director, NECOG's Philip Morehead Music Director. The Board of Directors, guided by NERO's Frederic Cohen and AAO's Randolph Fuller and Stephen Ruggiero, wrote by-laws by which to govern and turned their sights toward raising funds.

The opening chapter of BLO's history began somewhat inconspicuously, as the newly formed company initially fared no better than had the original smaller companies in battling the forces which even now plague those who would produce opera in Boston. Obstacles in addition to issues of funding included the dearth of suitable performance spaces and the difficulty in controlling costs when contracting with unionized



The newly formed Boston Lyric Opera held its first performance at the Church of the Covenant on December 26, 1976 – *Amahl and the Night Visitors*.

3 *Of Mice and Men*, music by Carlisle Floyd, libretto by Floyd after the Steinbeck novel, performed February 10, 1973, at Loeb Drama Center at Harvard University, three years after its world premiere by the Seattle Opera in 1970

4 *Montezuma*, music by Carl Heinrich Graun, libretto by Frederick the Great, King of Prussia, in 1755; American premiere by AAO, February 14, 1973, at Boston's Cyclorama

5 *Death of King Phillip*, music by Paul Earls, text taken by Earls from a play by Romulus Linney, performed March 26, 1976, at All Saints Church, Brookline, as part of a double bill with *Chocorua*, music by Robert Selig, libretto by Richard Moore, that had premiered at Tanglewood a few months earlier

6 Dated July 2, 1970

7 Although there are references in Boston newspapers of 1897-1898 to a short-lived Boston Lyric Opera Company of that era, none of the founders of the modern company with whom I communicated cited the older company as a source of the name.

personnel. The young BLO played out in late 1976 and early 1977 the programs that had previously been organized and scheduled by its antecedent companies<sup>8</sup> and then appeared to stall.

Organic growth often follows a pattern of periods of consolidation and stabilization alternating with periods of active risk-taking and more visible change. This model describes the evolution of BLO from its earliest days onward. Having made a bold and complex move toward building a future by joining forces, the leaders of the new company still faced impediments to growth. Board members and artistic and administrative personnel from each of the parent companies had collaborated to form the new entity and had divided up the tasks of running and financing it among themselves. However in addition to their still-differing perspectives on the project, funding and artistic challenges remained. Unable to immediately steer through these difficulties BLO mounted no additional mainstage productions from mid-1977 through 1979<sup>9</sup>, a period of consolidation, offering only a gala fund-raising concert commemorating the career of Jenny Lind in March of 1978.<sup>10</sup>

Again this break in activity appeared to signal a possible disbanding of the Company, and yet another small performance group arose during the interim. Hub Opera, under the direction of New England Conservatory graduate Charles Ellis, declared its intent to feature works performed by locally trained singers at affordable ticket prices, but it produced only one work, Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in October of 1979<sup>11</sup>. By the following June it had ceased operations and joined forces with BLO, just as the latter burst forth with renewed strength.

Once more during a period of inactivity the specter of demise had loomed over a professional Boston opera company, this time the young BLO, but vigorous fund-raising led by Board President Randolph Fuller and a change in management had staved off failure. Feeling he lacked the necessary Board support to fully implement his plans, Ernest Triplett resigned his position, and in December of 1979 BLO engaged John Balme as General Director of the Company. A period of notable growth had begun.

Balme was a Britton who had moved to the United States in 1971 to further his music studies. He came to Boston in 1975 as an assistant conductor to Sarah Caldwell, then worked at the University of Texas and San Diego Opera before returning to Boston when offered the BLO position. He saw his mission as one of re-energizing the Company by putting it back on stage as soon as possible and shining a spotlight on it. Perhaps influenced by Caldwell he developed a somewhat flamboyant leadership style, displaying a willingness to take chances and to draw attention to his work by doing the unexpected. Thus his first production in Boston, mounted less than three months after his appointment, was the extremely rarely performed early Verdi work, *Un Giorno di Regno*<sup>12</sup>. He followed in short order with several other novelties – a Festival of opera films at Suffolk University

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- 8 *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, music and libretto by Giancarlo Menotti, prepared by AAO, performed December 26, 1976, at the Church of the Covenant; *A Grimm Duo (The Dog and the Sparrow, The Brentown Musicians)*, music by Paul Earls, libretti by Earls after fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm, prepared by NECOG, performed December 31, 1976, at Goddard Chapel, Old South Church; *Zaide*, music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, libretto by Johan Andreas Schachtner, English version by Nicholas Deutsch, prepared by NECOG, performed February 18 and 19, 1977, at Longwood Theater, Massachusetts College of Art; *The Story of the Wise Woman and the King*, music by Carl Orff, libretto by Orff after a Grimm fairy tale, English version by Gerhard Lenssen, prepared by AAO, performed May 21, 1977, at the Berklee Performance Center of Berklee College of Music
- 9 In May of 1977 the Company had announced that its season of 1977-1978 would consist of three works: Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors*; Smetana's *The Two Widows*; and Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts*. See "Die Kluge' confounds Lyric Opera," by Richard Dyer, *The Boston Globe*, May 25, 1977, p. 19.
- 10 Boston Lyric Opera program notes for "A Jenny Lind Gala – Boston Lyric Opera Presents Elizabeth Parcells as Jenny Lind," March 4, 1978, at Jordan Hall, Boston, and March 11, 1978, at Mechanics Hall, Worcester
- 11 *Don Giovanni*, music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte, performed October, 1979, at Suffolk University Theater
- 12 *Un Giorno di Regno*, music by Giuseppe Verdi, libretto by Felice Romani, English adaptation by Don Wilder and David Witherspoon, performed March 13 and 16, 1980, as *King for a Day* at Roberts Auditorium, Brookline High School; production borrowed from the National Opera Company of Raleigh, NC

in June and July, two outdoor performances on City Hall Plaza in July,<sup>13</sup> and a special performance of *Fiorella*<sup>14</sup> at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in October of the same year, 1980. However the way further forward for a relatively new company with unstable finances was not obvious nor unobstructed.

Sarah Caldwell's domination of Boston's opera scene during the '70s and '80s cannot be overstated. Her work had gained national notice and she had begun to forge international cultural connections with the Philippines, with Soviet Russia, and with Israel. But major financial backing for the arts in Boston was almost all completely tied to the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Museum of Fine Arts, so even she, hailed by many as a genius in her field, was forced to wage a constant struggle to survive and flourish.

Other opera supporters whose funds BLO, or Caldwell's OCB, might have attracted were affiliated instead with the Boston Opera Association<sup>15</sup>, through which organization they directed their money and efforts toward supporting the Metropolitan Opera on tour in its annual week-long visits to Boston. When the Met discontinued its tours in 1986 the Association lobbied to engage major Met stars for concert performances in Boston and tried to bring in touring performances by the New York City Opera, but it failed to raise sufficient funds for the latter. It then turned its support toward sponsorship of the performance of opera by the Boston Symphony Orchestra. This group of socially prominent individuals appears to have been the sole extant proponent of a position completely at odds with the one held by almost all other Boston opera lovers, who believed in the importance of a high quality resident Boston opera company.

Another organization, the Boston Concert Opera, enriched the music scene from 1975 through 1989 under the direction of David Stockton, a conductor from Texas who had previously worked for Sarah Caldwell. At first performing in New England Life Hall (as the Festival Orchestra of Boston), then moving to Jordan Hall in 1978 (initially as the Concert Opera Orchestra), and finally graduating to Symphony Hall in 1984, the Company attracted substantial audiences and financial support with its unstaged presentations of unusual repertoire and interesting artists. However, despite its apparently sound fiscal management, the state of its finances was always precarious, and after a few artistic miscalculations, in March of 1989 it succumbed to an insurmountable debt.

More competition for support arose from yet another small company, the Boston Academy of Music (BAM), which grew steadily from its simple beginnings in 1980. Richard Conrad, its founder, artistic director, and principal singer, piloted it through a number of incarnations until it had found a niche of its own. After providing several seasons of summer orchestral concerts and choral performances at community events such as Christmas tree-lighting ceremonies, BAM began to attract attention for its Gilbert and Sullivan operettas and concert-style opera "marathons" focused on the music of beloved 19<sup>th</sup> century composers. Always operating on a minimal budget but with an almost cult-like appeal for its audience, BAM moved up the scale to fully staged performances of unusual repertoire featuring Boston singers at the Emerson Majestic Theater in 1999. By 2002 BAM had begun collaborating with the Boston Modern Orchestra Project to produce Opera Unlimited, a biennial festival of new works. With an ever-enlarging share of both audience and financial backing, it emerged in its next incarnation late in 2002 as Opera Boston, this time without Conrad at the helm. But like almost every other opera company in Boston's history it failed to broaden its base of financial support to the point where it could withstand major cash flow difficulties, and in 2011 it ceased performing.

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13 *The Impresario*, Music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, libretto by Gottlieb Stephanie the Younger, English version by Richard Gibson, performed July 17, 1980; and *Trouble in Tahiti*, music and libretto by Leonard Bernstein, performed July 23, 1980

14 *Fiorella*, music by Amherst Webber, libretto by Victorien Sardou and Pierre-Barthélemy Gheusi, orchestration by John Balme, translated by Richard Gibson, performed October 17, 1980, in commemoration of the April 23, 1906, performance given by Mrs. Gardner in the music room of Fenway Court, now the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

15 Boston Opera Association, 1935-2002, legal guarantors of the Metropolitan Opera's Boston performances on tour



The above-named organizations all left a lasting mark on the Boston opera scene, expanding audience interest in the art form and broadening knowledge of it among locals. In addition to competing with those groups for financial support from an extremely limited pool of resources, BLO found itself vying against a plethora of other small companies not unlike itself, all focused on presenting local singers and advertising themselves as the “not-Sarah” company,<sup>16</sup> and all dependent on the capricious good will of the fragmented opera community in order to continue to function. Boston had clearly developed a large appetite for opera but little inclination to support any of it adequately.

Despite all the unfavorable circumstances and the competition for audience and funding the young BLO continued to attract attention. The Company’s community profile was certainly raised by its participation with the Brookline Symphony<sup>17</sup> in a performance of *Aida*<sup>18</sup> at the Edward A. Hatch Memorial Shell on the Charles River Esplanade. Complete with an elephant tethered near the stage,<sup>19</sup> the event reportedly attracted 10,000 audience members on a Sunday afternoon in August of 1981.<sup>20</sup> Press reviews of the Company’s performances were never wholly positive but opera lovers continued to turn out to see them, perhaps mindful of BLO’s mission to present promising young area singers and appreciative of John Balme’s musical gifts as a conductor. Nevertheless the Company was still financially dependent upon the generosity of a very few individuals, a narrow base of support.

During Balme’s tenure with BLO, the Company took a major step forward when it became company-in-residence at Northeastern University in September of 1981. This affiliation with the Division of Fine Arts offered BLO office space and the technical resources of Northeastern’s Alumni Auditorium and its staff, as well as the stability gained by performing regularly in a familiar venue. At the time of the merger that had resulted in the creation of BLO, the Company had expected to take up residence at the National Theater,<sup>21</sup> but a prolonged period of closure of that facility in anticipation of renovation had left BLO without a performance venue. So like all of Boston’s other fledgling opera companies BLO had then been forced to negotiate for performance spaces for each of its productions separately, and as a result it had resorted to playing in the auditoriums of other area colleges and high schools as well as churches. All of these spaces represented temporary solutions to the problems arising from limited funding and the lack of suitable affordable alternatives, given the high costs associated with Boston theaters staffed by unionized labor. Alumni Auditorium was a temporary solution too, but its pluses, including the acoustics of the space, outweighed its minuses, and the collaboration proved positive all around. During BLO’s first seasons in residence there reviewers found its musical standards improving and the physical appearance of its productions more professional.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps successfully addressing the issue of performance venue, even on a temporary and imperfect plane, was a factor that set BLO apart from the other small companies with which it still competed for the support necessary for its survival and for further growth.

16 Other companies performing during BLO’s early years included Cambridge Opera Workshop, The New Opera, Boston City Opera, Longwood Opera, and Bel Canto Opera. The last two still exist, with only Longwood Opera continuing to perform regularly. Longwood Opera was co-founded by John Balme and Scott Brumit in 1986, a year during which Balme was not active with BLO, with a mission quite like those of early BLO and of its antecedent companies. Additional small opera companies dedicated to presenting local artists have arisen in the intervening years.

17 Brookline Symphony, a community orchestra of which Balme was also Director at the time

18 *Aida*, music by Giuseppe Verdi, libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni, performed August 2, 1981

19 See paid advertisement for the performance, *The Boston Globe*, August 2, 1981, p. A18.

20 “*Aida*’ gets lost on the Esplanade,” by Richard Buell, *The Boston Globe*, August 4, 1981, p.19

21 The National Theatre was a 2,000 seat multipurpose auditorium, built in 1911, closed in 1978, demolished in 1997. It was located at 535 Tremont Street near the corner of Berkeley Street in the South End, next door to the Boston Cyclorama, at the site now occupied by the Boston Center for the Arts. Associate Artists Opera had performed there prior to the merger that created BLO.

22 “Review/Music: Mozart opera ends up in good company,” by Richard Dyer, *The Boston Globe*, September 28, 1981, p.1

All of these gains were nearly rendered meaningless when the Company, greatly overextending itself financially and artistically, chose to produce Wagner's *Ring* cycle<sup>23</sup> in its new home. The first cycle was a concert-style offering on four successive Sundays in July and August of 1982,<sup>24</sup> presented under the auspices of the Wagner International Institution of New York in conjunction with the newly formed New England Wagner Society. Derided in some circles for being structured on a significantly smaller scale than what Wagner had originally intended, especially regarding the size of its orchestra, the series was nonetheless well attended, and operations stayed within the \$80,000 budget. Based on that success a decision was made to present a fully staged version of the cycle the following summer, first in Boston at Northeastern, then in New York at the Beacon Theater.<sup>25</sup> Conceived as a set of modest sized touring productions with the potential to be presented in other cities after the New York performances, it might have become known as "the Boston *Ring*." This would have given new meaning to the idea of BLO as a "Boston company," a term that had previously always meant "a company of Boston based or trained singers performing in Boston." The *Ring* had required the importation of singers for the principal roles, which clearly cut against the grain of the usual definition, and which had drawn criticism from some in the community.

Together Balme and BLO were both applauded and vilified for having dared to produce four of the most difficult of all operatic works on a very limited budget, in a facility comparable to a high school auditorium, with virtually unknown singers and greatly scaled back orchestral forces. Ultimately they were shown to have drastically underestimated the costs of the productions and overestimated the likely revenue, especially regarding the New York series. Having budgeted for \$439,000, a break-even figure, the Company found itself about \$150,000 short of its revenue goal.<sup>26</sup> The resulting deficit brought BLO to the threshold of extinction once more.

A substantial portion of the debt was money owed to the orchestra members, and they refused to play for BLO until they were paid. In particular they refused to play for Balme, forcing changes in leadership at BLO. Anne Ewers was named General Director of the company in October of 1984, the previously announced 1983-1984 season<sup>27</sup> having been postponed and then cancelled.

Ewers had worked with Balme as an assistant stage director in San Diego and had joined BLO in May of 1982 as General Manager of the company. She had held this position concurrently with that of resident stage director before taking over the General Directorship after Balme's post-*Ring* resignation. No one was truly sanguine about her chances of making a difference in the circumstances of the Company, given the seemingly intractable size of the debt problem, and BLO was widely expected to shut down completely within six months. But despite her lack of previous administrative experience she succeeded admirably in turning things around.

Her immediate challenge was to convince the musicians' union that they had placed themselves and BLO in a catch-22 situation: the orchestra refused to play for BLO because its members were owed money, but BLO could only raise money to pay off the debt if it was performing before the public. Instituting tight fiscal policies, Ewers demanded of the Board of Directors that they fully underwrite the costs of her first planned production, thereby enabling her to promise all resulting ticket revenue to the orchestra as a payment on the debt owed them.<sup>28</sup> Union officials and the Board accepted these conditions for allowing the Company to

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23 Four operas, *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, *Götterdämmerung*, music and libretti by Richard Wagner

24 July 11, 18, 25, and August 1, 1982, at Alumni Auditorium, Northeastern University

25 July 25, 26, 28, and 30, 1983, at Alumni Auditorium, Northeastern University, Boston, and August 8, 9, 11, and 13, 1983, at the Beacon Theater, New York

26 "Marquee: Boston Lyric Opera cancels '83-84 Season," by Margo Miller, *The Boston Globe*, December 18, 1983, p. 1

27 The proposed works were *Daughter of the Regiment*, *Death in Venice*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, and *Otello*, according to an advertisement placed by BLO in the *Theatrebill* of the Metropolitan Opera on Tour for June, 1983.

28 "Opera head explores new arias," by Ellen Pfeifer, *The Boston Herald*, January 10, 1985, p. 34

return to the stage, and in January of 1985 BLO mounted an interesting pairing, a Mozart/Salieri<sup>29</sup> double bill, and began the long climb back to solvency.

Ewers was able to regularize the financial workings of the Company which resulted in its stabilization. In published interviews<sup>30</sup> she cited the Board of Directors under the leadership of President Randolph Fuller and Chairman Ann Monks Barry for its generosity. The level of financial support given by the Board at this time was characterized by OPERA America (the national service organization for opera) as the most generous of any in the country on a percentage-of-budget basis.<sup>31</sup>

Ewers's administrative abilities and fund raising skills impressed others in the community as well. Perhaps as a vote of confidence in the new fiscal management of the Company, the Boston Arts Lottery Council recognized BLO with a grant for the first time during the 1985-1986 season. The Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities offered a Merit Aid grant for the 1986-1987 season, again its first such award to the Company, and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) followed suit in the 1987-1988 season. The recipients of this last award were categorized as arts groups of unusual promise, and the grant allowed the Company to engage in long term planning for the first time in its history.

In another act of recognition of its potential during this period, BLO also received two OPERA America "Opera for the Eighties and Beyond" grants in support of commissioning new works. The first one resulted in *Countdown*, which was premiered by BLO in 1987, the first entirely computer-assisted opera ever produced;<sup>32</sup> the product of the second grant did not, however, come to fruition at BLO.<sup>33</sup>

Balme was completely unemployable as a musician in Boston as long as the union held him responsible for its members' being owed money. In early 1985 he moved to New York to become artistic director of the newly formed American Opera Theater, an organization created for the purpose of identifying and developing promising talent. He arranged for a series of operatic concert performances at the Tremont Temple's Converse Hall by a Boston offshoot of the organization that he called the Opera-of-the-Month Club.<sup>34</sup> Dedicating the ticket revenues to debt repayment, he contributed significantly to the deficit reduction process and was allowed to return to Boston to conduct BLO's 1986-1987 season, taking the position of principal guest conductor. By such means and through the continuing generosity of a few individuals, BLO completely retired its debt before the beginning of the 1987-1988 season and in fact managed to amass a small endowment.

BLO had essentially survived the debt crisis intact but did not immediately enter into its next period of demonstrable artistic growth. With strict budget constraints in place, the scale of what could be performed was very limited, and BLO and Ewers returned to the practice of casting locals, suggesting that the use of non-Boston based singers for the *Ring* cycle had been a temporary deviation from the mission of showcasing regional singers. However, critics often found the particular casting choices at odds with standards of excellence, indicating perhaps that uncertain funds narrowed the range of available singers. Similarly the

29 *The Impresario*, music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, libretto by Gottlieb Stephanie the Younger, English adaptation by Giovanni Cardelli, paired with *First the Music, then the Words*, music by Antonio Salieri, libretto by Giovanni Battista Casti, performed January 11, 13, at Northeastern University Alumni Auditorium; this was the era of popularity of Peter Shaffer's play, *Amadeus*, and Milos Forman's film adaptation of it, in which Mozart and Salieri were portrayed as bitter rivals.

30 "Boston Lyric Opera triumphs over debt," by Jeff McLaughlin, *The Boston Globe*, October 16, 1987, p. 101

31 Ibid

32 *Countdown*, music by Christopher Yavelow, libretto by Laura Harrington, performance February 12, 1987, at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

33 *The Wife of Martin Guerre*, music by Roger Ames, libretto by Laura Harrington; workshop performance for BLO, February 18, 1988, at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum; first complete performance in January, 1993, at the Hartford Stage, Hartford, CT

34 "Opera series proceeds to reduce 'Ring' deficit," by Margo Miller, *The Boston Globe*, May 12, 1985, p. A4

Company was constrained to programming brief two-opera seasons of two performances per work from the 1986-87 season forward. Ewers did manage to expand and broaden community outreach programming by such means as participation in Boston's annual First Night Celebration,<sup>35</sup> collaboration on productions with the Boston Theater of the Deaf,<sup>36</sup> and the creation of special events series like the citywide John McCormack Week,<sup>37</sup> so that the Company would remain as visible in the community as possible. She introduced a "themed season" for 1988-1989 with programming<sup>38</sup> dedicated to exploring the events of the French Revolution in anticipation of the upcoming 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its beginning, and she sought and gained for it the endorsement of the French Consul General in Boston and named him Honorary Chairman of the season. On the whole, BLO did not garner much praise for artistic achievement during this period but it did stay in the black and in the news. Looking forward with optimism it scheduled two larger scale works, *Tosca*<sup>39</sup> and *La Traviata*,<sup>40</sup> and a concert performance of *The Flying Dutchman*<sup>41</sup> for the 1989-1990 season.

Although strong artistic growth did not characterize the late 1980s for BLO, this period was nevertheless more than merely an era of consolidation and stabilization. As a result of Ewers's vision of a larger role for BLO in the community, BLO would undergo dramatic changes before the plans for the 1989-1990 season could be implemented. Utilizing the NEA Advancement Award of the 1987-1988 season, the Board, under the leadership of Ann Monks Barry, had begun working with an arts consultant, Richard Gaddes, to shape future growth. Following Gaddes's recommendation it moved to establish the position of General Director as a full-time job at a salary level calculated to attract top candidates. Although the Board invited Ewers to apply for the position she declined the offer, citing her love of stage direction and her desire to continue with that aspect of her career. By February of 1989 the search had begun for her successor. Balme then left the Company in order to focus all of his attention on the General Directorship of the Lake George, NY Opera Festival, a position he had held concurrently with that of BLO Artistic Director in preceding years. The concert-style *Dutchman*<sup>42</sup> performances of January, 1990, concluded his career in Boston.

The other major step forward that resulted from the grant-supported strategic planning was a change of performance venue, beginning with the 1989-1990 season. BLO would move from Northeastern University's Alumni Auditorium to the Majestic Theater, a 1903 Beaux Arts style 850-seat proscenium house in downtown Boston. The terms of the lease required the owner, Emerson College, to improve and enlarge the orchestra pit in order to accommodate the orchestra BLO would employ for its performances. The college was already

35 *Hansel and Gretel*, music by Engelbert Humperdinck, libretto by Adelheid Wette, performed December 31, 1985, at Lorimer Hall of the Tremont Temple; *Alice in Wonderland*, music by Robert Chauls, libretto by Chauls after the story by Lewis Carroll, performed December 31, 1986 at the Tremont Temple; *Little Red Riding Hood*, music by Seymour Barab, libretto by Barab after the fairy tale, performed December 31, 1987, at the Tremont Temple

36 The 1986 *Alice* was "shadowed," with signing actors performing beside the singers; also shadowed were *The Barber of Seville*, music by Gioacchino Rossini, libretto by Cesare Sterbini after the Pierre Beaumarchais play, English translation by Ruth and Thomas Martin, performed March, 11, 1986, at Northeastern University Alumni Auditorium; *The Turn of the Screw*, music by Benjamin Britten, libretto by Myfanwy Piper after the Henry James novella, performed March, 1987, at Northeastern University Alumni Auditorium.

37 John McCormack Week was celebrated from March 4-10, 1985, by proclamation of Mayor Raymond L. Flynn. BLO presented a concert of McCormack favorites performed by Robert White on March 8, 1985, at Converse Hall of Tremont Temple, and there were showings that week of the two known McCormack films and citywide displays of related memorabilia.

38 *The Portrait of Manon*, music by Jules Massenet, libretto by Georges Boyer, English translation by Colin Graham on a double bill with *Thérèse*, music by Massenet, libretto by Jules Claretie, English text by Claude Aveling, performed September 30, 1988, at Northeastern University's Alumni Auditorium; *Dialogues des Carmélites*, music by Francis Poulenc, libretto by Georges Bernanos, performed January 13 and 15, 1989, at Northeastern University's Alumni Auditorium

39 *Tosca*, music by Giacomo Puccini, libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica, after a play by Victorien Sardou, performed November 15 and 17, 1989, at the Majestic Theatre

40 *La Traviata*, music by Giuseppe Verdi, libretto by Francesco Maria Piave, after the Alexandre Dumas fils play *La dame aux camélias*, performed March 30 and April 1, 1990, at the Majestic Theatre

41 *The Flying Dutchman*, music and libretto by Richard Wagner, performed January 12 and 14, 1990, at the Majestic Theatre

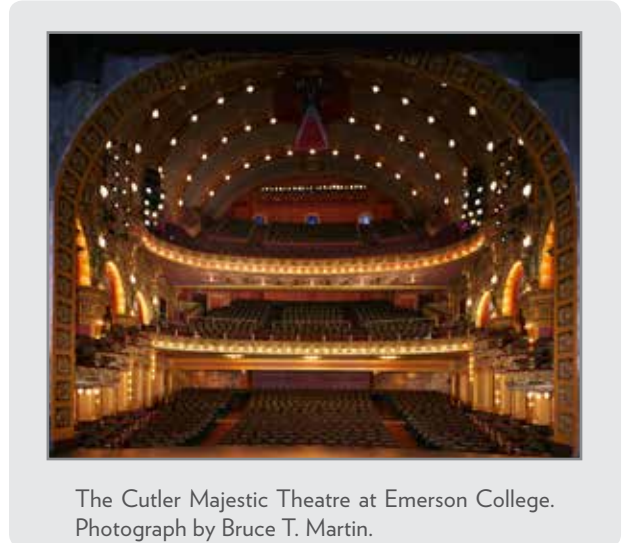
42 Ibid

committed to restoration and modernization of the theater in accordance with its status as a Boston Historic Landmark building. Given that the handsome theater had originally been designed specifically for opera and spoken dramatic performances, this move was seen by the community as a positive sign of growth by BLO.

In June of 1989 BLO hired Justin Moss to be the next General Director of the Company, signing him to a three-year contract. He had previously worked in administrative positions at musical and medical libraries in California and then at Virginia Opera and Baltimore Opera, where he had been Director of Development and then General Manager. They also engaged Richard Gaddes as Artistic Advisor with a one-year contract. Gaddes had had extensive experience with arts management and administration both in his native Great Britain and in the United States. In particular he had served Santa Fe Opera as Artistic Administrator, introducing important new talent there, and had then co-founded Opera Theatre of Saint Louis and served as its General Director from 1976 to 1987. He was President of Grand Center of St. Louis, a performing arts umbrella organization, and was concurrently serving as a consultant to Santa Fe Opera's Apprentice Program for Artists, when he agreed to advise BLO on artistic matters.

Clearly the BLO Board believed that continued artistic growth would require parallel growth of administrative infrastructure. By appointing its first full time General Director and hiring an experienced Artistic Advisor it was creating a more highly professionalized leadership team than ever before. The Board took the process another step forward when, at the urging of Gaddes, it hired Stephen Lord as Music Director, in September of 1990. A Massachusetts native, Lord had had extensive conducting, consulting, and teaching experience with a variety of American regional opera companies and was head of the Opera Program at the St. Louis Conservatory and Music Director-designate of Opera Theatre of St. Louis. BLO had decisively left behind the "Jack-of-all-trades" model of administration that often characterizes fledgling arts organizations. No longer would one individual be responsible for multiple aspects of company function, as Ernest Triplett had been when he had prepared for singing roles, answered the phone, and raised funds in the early days of AAO, nor as Richard Marshall had been when he had rehearsed the orchestra, built sets, and directed the staging of operas for NERO, nor even as Anne Ewers had when she had served as both part-time General Director and resident stage director at BLO, often unpaid for one or more of these activities. BLO was further establishing itself as a permanent and stable professional component of the Boston arts scene.

In published interviews, the newly-hired Moss<sup>43</sup> described his vision for BLO as one of presenting a repertory mix suited to the scale of the Emerson Majestic Theater, specifically including American works, and introducing important young American singers. Gaddes emphasized his interest in young talent and his passion for building regional opera.<sup>44</sup> Lord, too, stated a commitment to the development of young singers, although he noted the importance of including in productions experienced singers from whom their younger colleagues could learn.<sup>45</sup>



The Cutler Majestic Theatre at Emerson College.  
Photograph by Bruce T. Martin.

43 "Justin Moss to run Lyric Opera," by Richard Dyer, *The Boston Globe*, June 24, 1989, p. 9

44 Ibid

45 "Reinventing the Lyric Opera," by Richard Dyer, *The Boston Globe*, September 9, 1990, p. B8

From the beginning their formula proved very effective both fiscally and artistically despite the adverse economics of the times. As Moss took over the General Directorship BLO began to regularly sell out its performances at the Emerson Majestic Theater, and he was able to sustain this and other measurable forms of growth throughout his three-year tenure. While maintaining balanced books, the Company increased its annual budget from \$200,000 to over \$1,000,000; added an additional performance to the run of each of the season's three operas; and expanded its subscription base from about 250 to over 1,400. The number of professional full-time staff rose to five, all this within three years of the naming of Moss as the Company's first full time General Director.

Taking over at the start of the 1989-1990 season, which had been planned by the previous artistic team, Moss made substantial changes to the final opera of the season by engaging a new stage director and conductor and by professionalizing the work of the chorus. Critics praised the production for meeting higher standards of artistic excellence than almost all of the Company's previous work.<sup>46</sup> Artistic standards continued to rise, with critics recognizing much improvement in the orchestra and chorus and more theatrically compelling stage direction. Some of this was achieved by engaging as stage directors people from outside the world of opera, such as choreographer Bill T. Jones, who directed the Company's 1992 production of Weill's *Lost in the Stars*.<sup>47</sup> Important emerging talent was showcased, Deborah Voigt most notably, and highly accomplished Boston-based singers such as Robert Honeysucker and Mary Ann McCormick were featured. In March of 1992 BLO premiered Michael Kaye's new critical edition of Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann*,<sup>48</sup> an event that drew international attention and signaled BLO's rising status among regional opera companies.

Through Gaddes and Lord, BLO established a working partnership with Opera Theatre of St. Louis, perhaps a natural outcome of Lord's holding the position of Musical Director with both companies and of Gaddes's continued involvement in the St. Louis arts community. The first opera planned as well as staged by the Moss team, *Daughter of the Regiment*,<sup>49</sup> was a reworking of a production originally presented in St. Louis, retaining the original sets and costumes but recasting most of the vocal roles. The practice of borrowing and renting productions created by other successful regional companies became an important planning model for BLO during this period. Striving for the highest levels of regional opera excellence seemed a most suitable goal for BLO, as Sarah Caldwell and her Opera Company of Boston still occupied the position of preeminence on the Boston opera scene. As long as there was any chance that the seriously ailing finances of her company might undergo recovery there was little likelihood of BLO or any other Boston company rising to greater prominence.

But just prior to Moss's tenure with BLO, Boston's opera landscape had begun to undergo dramatic changes. Within the short span of Moss's three-year contract<sup>50</sup> Boston would see the final demise of Caldwell's Opera Company of Boston, the creation and subsequent dissolution of a brand new major league opera company, and finally the arrival of new Board leadership and new administrative governance at BLO.

The seeds of change had been sown during the mid-1980s when Boston's funding and civic communities began to squarely address the impossibility of the Opera Company of Boston ever overcoming its debt, ultimately believed to have been in the range of \$7,000,000. Further, Caldwell's illness and hospitalization

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46 "Four's a crowd: where does the city's operatic future lie?" by Richard Dyer, *The Boston Globe*, April 15, 1990, p. A1

47 *Lost in the Stars*, music by Kurt Weill, book and lyrics by Maxwell Anderson, based on Alan Paton's novel *Cry, The Beloved Country*, performed January 17, 19, 20, 21, 1992, at Emerson Majestic Theatre

48 *The Tales of Hoffmann*, music by Jacques Offenbach, libretto by Jules Barbier, after the play by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, performing version of the Critical Edition by Michael Kaye, performed March 13, 15, 17, 1992, at Emerson Majestic Theatre

49 *The Daughter of the Regiment*, music by Gaetano Donizetti, libretto by Jules-Henri Vernoy de Saint-George and Jean-François Bayard, English version by Ruth and Thomas Martin revised by Michael Albano and Stephen Lord, performed September 15, 16, 1990, at the Emerson Majestic Theatre

50 1989-1992

in 1985 had forced her Board to cancel the entire season scheduled for that year, an act that demonstrated vividly to all the extent to which Caldwell was the Opera Company of Boston. The revelation distanced and embittered many former supporters who had imagined they were building an enduring Boston arts institution around her. Potential solutions to the Company's problems were subsequently advocated for by various members of the local media: the Company should declare bankruptcy followed by reorganization; the Massachusetts Convention Center Authority should take over the Opera House<sup>51</sup> and after paying off the debt owed on it, rent it back to Caldwell; the City of Boston should create a Midtown Cultural District with a thoroughly renovated and privately owned Opera House as its linchpin. Recognizing the need to change its mode of operation if it were to stave off all such manner of takeover, the OCB tried to reorganize from within. In July of 1987 Robert Canon was hired as CEO of the Company, a title that replaced the former unpaid position of president and incorporated the duties of the general manager.

Canon had had extensive experience as an arts administrator, having founded and directed the division of local programming of the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, and prior to that having served as Director of the Galveston Arts Center and then as Executive Director of the San Antonio Arts Council. He was well regarded by both the business and the arts communities. Significantly, in his position with the NEA Canon had worked with Bruce Rossley, Boston's Commissioner of Cultural Affairs. Speaking for city government, Rossley expressed confidence in Canon's ability to restructure the Opera Company and to work with the city to insure its continued viability.<sup>52</sup> However neither Canon nor city leaders were ultimately able to envision a restructuring plan that would allow Sarah Caldwell to maintain anywhere near the level of control over the Company she had always commanded, and the Company quickly became rife with dissent over how to proceed. Canon was accused of having secretly plotted with anti-Caldwell forces to shut down the Company and replace it with a totally new entity, one that had but a limited role for Caldwell. Her supporters on the Company's Board had Canon suspended from his position in March of 1989 after the details of the planning were prematurely made known to the public. When the Midtown Cultural District Task Force reacted strongly in the negative to his dismissal, he was quickly reinstated. In May of 1989 Canon conclusively resigned from the Opera Company of Boston, taking with him a number of the Company's Board members who shared his desire to form a brand new company completely independent of Caldwell's organization.<sup>53</sup> Burdened by insurmountable accumulated debt and by the need for sizeable and extensive repairs to the infrastructure of the Opera House, the Opera Company of Boston ceased operations in June of 1990. In January of 1991 the Opera House was boarded up and left to decay even further.<sup>54</sup>

At the heart of all the plans to reorganize or replace the Opera Company of Boston was the goal of creating a board-governed professionally managed organization, one that was fiscally responsible yet artistically exciting. An additional feature was the desire to focus once again on the richness of the Boston music community, the very same goals toward which Boston Lyric Opera had been orienting itself. But there did not appear to be a groundswell of interest in having Canon's group join forces with BLO, perhaps because most of the plans proffered would have involved the hiring of Craig Smith, a highly respected local conductor, and Peter Sellars, a daring and dynamic young stage director fresh from Harvard, in the chief artistic leadership roles of the new company. There existed in BLO's funding community strong opposition to Sellars's directorial interpretations,<sup>55</sup> making the Smith/Sellars team an unlikely choice for the Company.

51 The 2,900 seat B.F. Keith Memorial Theatre, built in an elaborate combination of French and Italian style, opened in 1928 as a vaudeville palace on the Keith circuit and then served as a movie theater. Purchased in 1965 by Sack Theatres and renamed the Savoy, it continued to show films until Caldwell bought it in 1978 and renamed it The Opera House.

52 "Opera Company fills top slots," by Margo Miller, *The Boston Globe*, August 5, 1987, p. 68

53 "A struggle backstage for Opera Company," by Richard Dyer and Jeff McLaughlin, *The Boston Globe*, March 25, 1989, p. 1

54 The building was eventually purchased by Clear Channel in 2002, thoroughly renovated with historical accuracy, and reopened in 2006. The Boston Ballet and touring Broadway shows have taken to its stage since then.

55 "The lights dim for Boston opera," by Richard Dyer, *The Boston Globe*, May 12, 1991, p. B1

During the mid-1980s the Smith/Sellars duo had teamed up to create several controversial operatic productions featuring local singers that drew international attention. In particular their settings of the three Mozart/DaPonte<sup>56</sup> operas in modern day urban environments had caused a sensation. Staged by Sellars, these works had originally been produced in collaboration with Boston's Emmanuel Music,<sup>57</sup> where Smith was the artistic director, and they had subsequently been performed and recorded in several European venues and televised nationally at home on public television. Many Bostonians bemoaned the fact that only one of them had ever been performed in the Boston area and grimaced at the farcical irony of a scenario in which a company featuring Boston-based singers in productions created in Boston was not actually performing those works in Boston.

By July of 1989 Canon's new company, soon to be named the Boston Opera Theater (BOT), had rented an office, recruited Board members, and begun raising capital. Long-range planning indeed called for Smith and Sellars to be hired for the artistic leadership positions, but their own productions were to be only one component of the programming.<sup>58</sup> With Canon serving in the lead administrative role and Kenneth Freed, a Boston real estate developer, chairing the Board, the new company reached out to other opera-producing institutions in the city, declaring their eagerness to collaborate. But standing on the threshold of its move to the Emerson Majestic Theater and with its own new artistic leadership team of Moss and Gaddes about to take the helm, BLO formed no connection with the Boston Opera Theater at this time, preferring to independently chart its own organizational course.

Thus Moss's term with BLO was characterized by substantial growth of both an artistic and an institutional nature, but it played out against a background of turmoil, uncertainties, realignments, and changing expectations in the city. Newspaper headlines shouted "Opera Wars!"<sup>59</sup> and characterized the post-Caldwell situation as a confrontation from which either BOT or BLO would emerge as the premier opera company of the city. Some critics openly advocated for the success of one over the other.

Most in the funding community had never believed it possible for BLO to strive for a level of achievement higher than regional excellence, the goal of the Company as identified by Moss, and some critics did not think BLO's work consistently reached the highest standards against which regional opera companies might be measured. They noted that the quality of the work of some of BLO's "imported" singers could have been matched or exceeded by local singers. In this way they accused BLO of having betrayed the spirit of its original *raison d'être* but still not consistently achieving a high level of artistic excellence in its productions. Perhaps deeming BLO unworthy of support in such a skirmish, many people were heartened to learn that Boston Opera Theater was aspiring to a much higher level than regional opera. In a sense its creators and their supporters and fans imagined it would fill the void left in international circles by the demise of Caldwell's OCB. They expected Smith and Sellars to bring their internationally honed skills and locally trained singers back home to Boston, to BOT. Both BLO and BOT were being called upon to define themselves as "Boston" companies and to set and meet appropriate goals at a time when simply claiming to be the "not Sarah" company no longer had meaning.

But the climate of economic downturn of the early 1990s was not an auspicious one for undertaking the creation of an entirely new major cultural institution such as its backers expected Boston Opera Theater to become, a factor that impacted the Board's ability to raise funds. Despite the meticulously careful planning of its founders, the depth of knowledge of the arts and of business they brought to their task, and their vow

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56 *Così Fan Tutte, Le Nozze di Figaro, Don Giovanni*

57 Emmanuel Music is an ensemble of musicians and singers founded by Craig Smith in 1970 and led by him until his death in 2007, an organization affiliated with Boston's Emmanuel Church. Originally focused on baroque music, it has expanded its repertoire into the contemporary era.

58 "Canon quietly sets stage for opera," by Richard Dyer, *The Boston Globe*, July 14, 1989, p. 67

59 "The Opera Wars: a truce," by Richard Dyer, *The Boston Globe*, October 20, 1991, p. A1



never to undercapitalize their work or to operate with a deficit, the company was forced to cease production after its first and only offering.

That work, a January, 1991, presentation of the Smith/Sellers vision of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*,<sup>60</sup> had been a complete success in every measurable way. All five of the performances were sold out, with audience totals near 10,000, and the number of turned-away ticket seekers suggests that several additional performances could have been sold out as well. It attracted numerous out-of-town attendees and critics from a broad range of journalistic organizations. Set in New York's Trump Tower in modern dress and sung in English, it was not unconditionally beloved by opera-goers but it was widely admired. However it proved considerably more expensive to mount than the BOT administration had projected, and the company found itself with a sizeable debt at the end of the run. The lack of a suitable performance space looms as a major factor in the unanticipated cost overrun. Perhaps the BOT administration had expected that the Opera House would have been purchased from Sarah Caldwell by a governmental agency, thoroughly renovated, and made available to them by the time they were ready to mount their first work, but none of that happened. The Company instead performed in Boston's Colonial Theatre,<sup>61</sup> a fully unionized and therefore costly venue, a circumstance that may have delivered at least one of the fatal blows to the operation of BOT.

The unexpected crash of this reach-for-the-stars effort had a profound effect on the Boston opera community. The accumulating legacy of failed attempts to create an important permanent and enduring Boston-centric opera company heavily reinforced the already wide-spread beliefs that such a dream could never be realized, that Boston is not an "opera town" and would never fully support and sustain high level resident professional opera. If, according to this line of thought, despite its vigorous efforts to avoid the financial pitfalls that had brought down its immediate predecessor, BOT had nevertheless been ensnared by the very same ones, then a similar fate must surely await anyone else who would dare try. Further, for some in the funding community this financially unsuccessful venture reinforced the belief that opera companies by nature cannot be managed in a fiscally responsible way and therefore constitute a poor investment for would-be donors. It should come as no surprise that BLO, mindful of recent events and of its own early debt struggles, would set its sights on incremental growth over the long term toward the goal of becoming the best regional opera company in the country, recommitted to casting local talent wherever feasible, and with the most carefully managed resources and debt-free financial structure possible, avoiding undue risk in order to endure.

Many in the opera community continued to dismiss out-of-hand the possibility that BLO could ever become a significant successor to the Opera Company of Boston, and the Company faced criticism for what was termed an excessively conservative outlook and a lack of vision. But BLO stood its course. In order to ensure its long-term stability the Company would balance its commitment to incremental artistic growth with the continued professionalization of its staff and Board of Directors. Just before the 1990-1991 season, Horace Irvine II, commonly known as Hod, ascended to the position of Chairman of the Board, the first in a series of BLO Board leaders who had achieved prior success in the world of business and finance.<sup>62</sup> He believed that BLO could fill the void in Boston's operatic life that Sarah Caldwell had left in the wake of her financial failure, and he was prepared to work hard to make it happen.

His first major task would be to initiate and facilitate many months of ongoing meetings, the ultimate result of which would be the merger of the Boards of BLO and BOT. His second major task would be to oversee the search for the next General Director of BLO.

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60 *The Marriage of Figaro*, performed January 23, 25, 27, 31, February 2, 1991, at the Colonial Theatre

61 The Colonial Theatre is a handsome 1,700 seat Beaux Arts-style theater built in 1900 for staged drama.

62 His immediate successors as Board Chair were J.P. Barger and Sherif A. Nada. Barger was instrumental in forging a connection with the technology community and bringing some of its members to the BLO Board. Nada was effective in broadening business connections for the Company.

BOT, after suspending operations following the run of *The Marriage of Figaro*, still had hopes of returning to the stage. The Board had announced a planned collaboration with the Handel and Haydn Society<sup>63</sup> for a production of Mozart's *La Clemenza di Tito* the following season, and they held in storage the sets and costumes for the remaining Smith/Sellars pair of Mozart/DaPonte operas, but the futility of these aspirations became apparent as they labored to reduce the *Figaro* production debt. In September of 1991 seeking to ensure the future of professional opera in Boston and after great deliberation, the Boards of BLO and BOT agreed to merge.<sup>64</sup>

This was a complex and multifaceted process, one that would require more than another six months' worth of discussions in order to be brought to completion. BOT's debt would have to be retired before there could be any additional movement forward, so the initial announcement was that of the two Boards' intention to consolidate their efforts toward a common goal. As articulated by BOT's Kenneth Freed the common principle animating both organizations was the emphasis each placed on presenting theatrically valid productions in a relatively small house. Only their approaches to meeting that goal had differed, he stated, and he characterized it as a hare vs. tortoise situation,<sup>65</sup> with BLO clearly the tortoise. After an interim breakdown in talks fueled by differences of artistic agendas and personalities, the final resolution was announced in April of 1992. There was to be a joining of the "creative energies" of the two Boards but no true legal merger of the two organizations, no transfer of assets or liabilities.

In February of 1992 amidst all the talk of "opera wars" and the anticipated "truce," General Director Justin Moss announced that he intended to leave BLO at the fast-approaching end of his contract, although he declared his willingness to continue working with the Company until his successor had been chosen and installed. Assisted by BLO Board Vice-Chair Ted Dintersmith, Hod Irvine determined that the search committee formed under Board Clerk Michael Lytton to choose a successor to Moss should be supplemented by an ad hoc advisory panel that would include several BOT Board members and other representatives from the broader Boston music community.<sup>66</sup> Some BOT Board members had remained reluctant to commit to the new merger agreement, but apparently this act of outreach won their favor, and the consolidation of the Boards was enacted. Many in the opera community perceived the gesture as the beginning of an important new chapter in BLO's history and in the story of opera in Boston.

During the period of the Board merger negotiations Irvine had been advised by an arts consultant who had impressed him. The search committee, after screening multiple candidates for the position of General Manager and interviewing six of them in depth, recommended the arts consultant for the job. She was Janice Mancini Del Sesto, and she would hold a leadership post as the head of BLO for the next 16 years.

Del Sesto brought to BLO a unique set of credentials. A graduate of New England Conservatory with a degree in voice and music education she had trained and briefly toured with Boris Goldovsky. After completing a master's degree in education she had taught voice and mentored students. Her work with non-profits and arts organizations had included positions as the first director of development and communications of the New England Foundation for the Arts<sup>67</sup> and as the head of development and communications at

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63 The Handel and Haydn Society is a period instrument orchestra and chorus, founded in 1815, that presents Baroque and Classical music in historically informed style.

64 "Opera troupes agree to merge," by Richard Dyer, *The Boston Globe*, September 13, 1991, p. 47

65 Ibid

66 Participants included Lawrence Perera, President of the Boston Opera Association; Eric Mourlot, Kenneth Freed, and Lawrence Smith from the Board of Directors of Boston Opera Theater; Phyllis Curtain, dean of the School of Fine Arts at Boston University; John Moriarty, head of the opera department of New England Conservatory; Walter Palmer from the Board of Directors of New England Conservatory; and Bruce Rossley from the City of Boston's Commission of Cultural Affairs.

67 The New England Foundation for the Arts is a regional organization founded in 1976 with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts for the purpose of strengthening the infrastructure of the arts.

the Computer Museum.<sup>68</sup> She was presiding over her own arts development consulting firm when she first became connected with BLO. In addition to her many qualifications for the position she was a Rhode Islander, a New England native who had a thorough first-hand knowledge of the operatic ups and downs of Boston's recent musical past. She was as prepared as anyone could be for the situation she stepped into, just before the beginning of the 1992-1993 season.

Despite Hod Irvine's efforts to create harmony, Del Sesto faced a still-fragmented opera-going public as well as what continued to be a multi-voiced Board of Directors. Within the community there were enduring factions that believed it unwise to count Sarah Caldwell out and that indeed thought she might be engaged by BLO as a stage director; another group continued to support the idea of the Smith/Sellers team for BLO's artistic leadership positions; yet another resisted as strongly as ever the belief that BLO could rise to a status higher than that of a modest municipal undertaking. Within the Board the fault lines fell roughly along the divide between the old guard and the new guard, the former consisting largely of traditionally hands-on founding members who sought to continue their direct involvement with artistic decisions, and the latter encompassing newly recruited former BOT and OCB supporters and a significant influx of members from the business community recruited by Irvine, who focused on actively seeking to broaden support for the Company within the funding community. The personality differences and competing artistic agendas that had made the BLO/BOT Board negotiations so complex re-emerged in this context. BLO was suffering from institutional growing pains and reinventing itself once again. Del Sesto's initial accomplishments in her new role would take place largely behind the scenes as she worked to build some consensus about mission and company identity.<sup>69</sup>

During Del Sesto's term of company leadership beginning as General Manager in 1992 then continuing as General Director from 1995 to 2008, BLO would successfully weather all these and other storms as they arose and would grow in every measurable way. Her tenure would see the increase of BLO's annual operating expenses from 1.2 million to over 6 million dollars, the move to a much larger theater, the implementation of a widely praised business model, and the accomplishment of many BLO and industry firsts. The Company would evolve more fully as a board driven organization and would recommit to its roots as a "Boston" institution. Its major artistic successes would feature new stars and present emerging artists in addition to well-established singers, important stage directors and talented conductors. Its performances would be enjoyed by enthusiastic attendees of annually increasing numbers and by a large New England-wide radio broadcast audience.

Taking charge at the beginning of the 1992-1993 season Del Sesto elected to continue some of the successful practices of the Moss era, such as borrowing and renting productions from the Opera Theater of St. Louis and collaborating with them on programming and casting.<sup>70</sup> She and Board Chair Hod Irvine and J.P. Barger after him reiterated their promise to aim for the highest artistic levels of regional opera. But the time had come to make strides in new directions.

BLO sought to clarify its mission and more clearly delineate its identity before its public. Would sustained close interaction with St. Louis not raise the risk of making BLO appear to be a mere reflection of the other company? After all, both organizations had been focused on presenting new talent in the same catalog of

68 The Computer Museum was founded in 1982 and opened on Museum Wharf in 1984, then merged with the Boston Museum of Science in 1999.

69 Preceding the 1993-1994 season BLO created a new category of support, the Board of Overseers, as a complement to its Board of Directors, providing a means of drawing in individuals who were considering a larger commitment to the Company. The Company also issued a revised mission statement, one that included the goal of ensuring the continuation of professionally produced opera in Boston, an insertion important to many of the former BOT Board members who were now part of BLO.

70 However BLO did not adopt the Opera Theater of St. Louis practice of performing all works in English and has presented many, although not all, works in their original language.

works that falls within the reach of regional companies, and their productions often had the same “look.” How might BLO distinguish its image and its goals from those of the other company? Del Sesto described in published interviews<sup>71</sup> the important role that aggressive fund-raising would need to play in the future in order to enable the Company to draw new resources and expand the community of funders committed to it. The results, she rightly foresaw, would be the increased ability of BLO to take a lead role in collaborating with other opera companies<sup>72</sup> and to build networks with other institutions within the city of Boston. These two points along with a new casting focus would be key in formulating a brighter, more sharply defined image for BLO.

Going forward, then, the practice of borrowing and renting productions was retained but with several modifications: the works of companies in addition to St. Louis were utilized; BLO took an active role in co-producing increasing numbers of works with other companies; and some of BLO’s original productions were sought for rental by others, providing a new source of income. Some of the collaborations were international in scope,<sup>73</sup> a new wrinkle for this regional company, hinting at the possibility of future growth beyond the range of regional opera. This fulfilled the first promise of Del Sesto’s expanded fund raising efforts aimed at creating a new image for the Company.

The focus on community engagement that had been championed by Anne Ewers was notably strengthened and deepened by Del Sesto, again as she had promised, this time underlining but also expanding the definition of what it means to be a “Boston” company. With Del Sesto’s guidance BLO forged a major community partnership with WGBH public radio. Beginning with its *Carmen*,<sup>74</sup> aired in February, 1994, BLO’s performances were broadcast throughout New England to large and very appreciative audiences. Other community partnerships brought free operatic performances to great numbers of people, including a series of programs entitled Opera Night at the Boston Public Library and outdoor concerts presented with the Boston Pops Orchestra on the Esplanade and the city of Boston’s Waterfront Performing Arts organization in Christopher Columbus Park in the North End. Under this model being a “Boston” company included disseminating opera more broadly within the community than ever before.

Del Sesto’s BLO created themed seasons, selecting an element common to all the works programmed for a given season and devising a title to highlight that motif. The most noteworthy of these were the 1999-2000 “Egyptian Season”<sup>75</sup> and the 2004-2005 season, “Flights of Fancy.”<sup>76</sup> Each one featured an elaborate network of citywide partnerships with other institutions such as the Museum of Fine Arts, the Museum of Science, the Boston Ballet, the Wang Center for the Performing Arts, and the French Library/Alliance Française, all promoting an expanded

71 “Del Sesto new managing director for Lyric Opera,” by Richard Dyer, *The Boston Globe*, July 17, 1992, p. 37

72 Del Sesto described the value of co-productions to regional opera companies thus: “They allow us to share both artistic ideas and costs of developing new and exciting productions for our audiences....., productions that no single company could afford to produce on its own,” from the General Director’s notes, *Playbill* for Boston Lyric Opera’s production of *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, libretto by Gottlieb Stephanie the Younger after the play by Christoph Friedrich Bretzner, set by John André, performed November 6, 8, 10, 12, 15, 17, 19, 2002, at the Shubert Theatre.

73 e. g., *Die Zauberflöte*, , music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, libretto by Emanuel Schikaneder, performed March 29, 31, April 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 2000, at the Shubert Theatre, production rental from the Royal Danish Opera

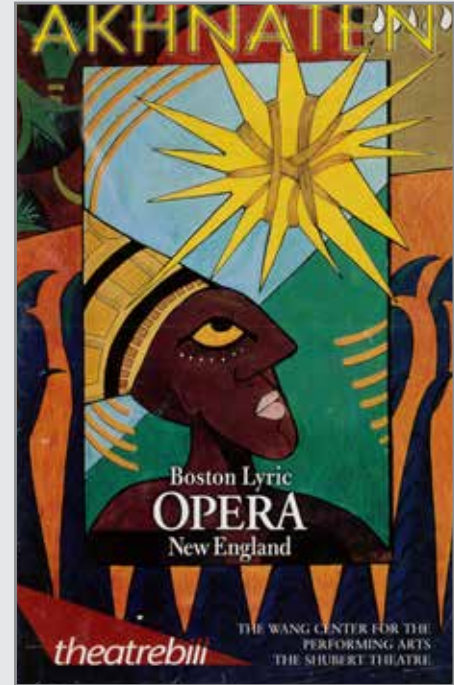
74 *Carmen*, music by Georges Bizet, libretto by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy after the novel by Prosper Mérimée, Critical Edition by Fritz Oeser, performed January 12, 14, 16, 18, 21, 23, 1994, at the Emerson Majestic Theatre

75 *Aïda*, music by Giuseppe Verdi, libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni, performed November 10, 12, 14, 16, 19, 21, 1999, at the Shubert Theatre; *Akhnaten*, music by Philip Glass, libretto by Glass in association with Shalom Goldman, Robert Israel, Richard Ridell, and Jerome Robbins, performed January 26, 28, 30 February 1, 4, 6, 2000, at the Shubert Theatre; *Die Zauberflöte*, see note 67.

76 *L’italiana in Algeri*, music by Gioacchino Rossini, libretto by Angelo Anelli originally for Luigi Mosca, performed November 3, 5, 7, 9, 12, 14, 16, 2004, at the Shubert Theatre; *The Little Prince*, music by Rachel Portman, libretto by Nicholas Wright, performed February 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 2005, at the Shubert Theatre; *Eugene Onegin*, music by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, libretto by Tchaikovsky and Konstantin Shilovsky after the poem by Aleksandr Pushkin, performed March 30, April 1, 3, 5, 8, 10, 12, 2005, at the Shubert Theatre; *Flight*, music by Jonathan Dove, libretto by April De Angelis, performed April 27, 29, May 1, 3, 6, 8, 10, 2005, at the Shubert Theatre

experience of the given topic. The participants developed ticket packages and travel agencies promoted themed tours, to the considerable economic benefit of the city.<sup>77</sup> The centerpiece of the “Egyptian Season,” *Akhnaten*,<sup>78</sup> and the corresponding exhibit presented by the Museum of Fine Arts entitled *Pharaohs of the Sun*, then moved in tandem to the city of Chicago, to Chicago Opera Theater and the Art Institute of Chicago, respectively. Such an intra-city collaboration combined with the inter-city connections was historically unique in its scope<sup>79</sup>, as was the attempt to create such an enriched context in which to view opera. Despite the fact that the City of Boston offered very little financial support to the effort, the success of the collaboration spurred the Mayor of the City of Boston, Thomas M. Menino, to convene with the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce at the University of Massachusetts/Boston Campus to discuss the topic of building an arts industry and developing cultural tourism in Boston.<sup>80</sup>

Del Sesto’s expanded fund raising efforts and her concepts of networking and collaboration eventually intersected and led to quite a different kind of partnership within the community. Beginning with the 1997-1998 season, the name of a given sponsor began to appear in the printed program directly beneath the name of the artist whose performance their contribution supported. The practice demonstrated to the public at large how important donors are to the production of opera, and for some artists and sponsors the linking of their names in this fashion led to an enduring personal bond. Having been among the earliest companies to adopt this practice, BLO has quite successfully continued it into the present era, and the practice has since been emulated by other companies.



The program cover for *Akhnaten* by Philip Glass, part of the “Egyptian Season,” 1999-2000.

Besides extending and expanding the collaborations with other regional companies, as begun by Justin Moss, and networking within the community, as initiated by Anne Ewers, the Del Sesto-led BLO followed up and built upon other programming trends established by Moss and his team. As previously noted, the Moss-era 1992 premiere of the new Michael Kaye critical edition of *The Tales of Hoffmann* had been a very significant achievement for BLO,<sup>81</sup> and Kaye’s onsite work with the Company attracted international attention. This interest in alternate versions of familiar works continued under Del Sesto with such productions as the 1994 American premiere of the Neapolitan version of *I Puritani*;<sup>82</sup> in 2001 the original five-act French version of *Don Carlo*;<sup>83</sup> and in 2005 the French version of *Lucia di Lammermoor*,<sup>84</sup> last presented in the United States over a century before. Moss had successfully programmed some less familiar and seldom seen works by well-known composers, such as Rossini’s *La Cenerentola*

77 Chairman’s message, *Playbill* for Boston Lyric Opera’s production of *Aida*; see note 75.

78 *Akhnaten*, see note 75.

79 BLO received the OPERA America Success Award for unprecedented collaboration, according to the Boston Lyric Opera 2008-2009 Fact Sheet.

80 “Boston’s arts groups are starting to learn,” by Maureen Dezell, *The Boston Globe*, July 29, 2006, p. L6

81 See note 48 for Kaye critical edition of *The Tales of Hoffmann*.

82 *I Puritani*, music by Vincenzo Bellini, libretto by Carlo Pepoli, in the Critical Revision by Alberto Zedda and Federico Agostinelli with additional revisions by Philip Gossett and Claudio Toscani, performed September 29, October 1, 3, 5, 8, 10, 1993, at the Emerson Majestic Theatre

83 *Don Carlos*, music by Giuseppe Verdi, libretto by Joseph Méry and Camille du Locle after the dramatic poem by Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller, performed October 3, 5, 7, 9, 12, 14, 16, 2001, at the Shubert Theatre

84 *Lucie de Lammermoor*, music by Gaetano Donizetti, libretto by Alphonse Royer and Gustave Vaëz, after the novel by Sir Walter Scott, performed November 4, 6, 9, 11, 13, 15, 2005, at the Shubert Theatre

in 1991.<sup>85</sup> A similar approach worked well for Del Sesto with works such as Berlioz's *Beatrice and Benedict* in 1993,<sup>86</sup> Handel's *Xerxes* in 1996,<sup>87</sup> Mozart's *The Shepherd King* in 1997,<sup>88</sup> and Strauss's *Salome* in 2001.<sup>89</sup>

By the mid-1990s it had become clear that BLO was the primary opera company in Boston, and many in the community began to acknowledge and value the fact that it was being professionally governed and effectively managed. As the economy of the times brightened, BLO saw a surge of growth in ticket and subscription sales and in the number of donors and the size of their gifts. Regularly selling out the house, BLO responded to the demand for tickets by increasing the number of performances of each opera, and for the 1998-1999 season it made a major move – out of the Emerson Majestic Theatre and into the Shubert Theatre.<sup>90</sup>

The move to the Shubert opened up many opportunities for BLO, with the new venue's seating capacity of 1,550, nearly doubling the Majestic's 850, and its orchestra pit accommodating 67 musicians greatly improving upon the 39 places at the Majestic.<sup>91</sup> Now larger scaled operas could be presented; co-productions with a wider range of partners became possible; and of course much larger audiences could be served. Given the greater availability of the Shubert over the Majestic, Del Sesto predicted that the Company would be able to add an additional opera to each season within a few years and possibly another in the years to follow, allowing for more diverse programming.<sup>92</sup>

The year 1998 was a banner growth year for BLO in other ways as well. The Company named Leon Major as its Artistic Director, the first person to hold that title since the departure of John Balme in 1989. The Toronto-born Major, who had directed BLO's successful *L'Elisir d'Amore* in 1997,<sup>93</sup> was a well-respected opera and theater director then serving as Director of a new opera program at the University of Maryland, and he brought teaching skills as well as directorial experience with him to Boston. The theatrical and technical aspects of BLO productions were to be his responsibility in complement to Stephen Lord's ongoing work as Music Director,<sup>94</sup> an arrangement that contributed greatly to the Company's artistic development over the next five years.

In another move, BLO made a very large and significant commitment to opera education during the same year when it acquired Opera New England (ONE). Begun in 1973 as the touring arm of Sarah Caldwell's Opera Company of Boston,<sup>95</sup> it had become an entity separate from the financially failing OCB in 1988 and then

85 *La Cenerentola* music by Gioacchino Rossini, libretto by Jacopo Ferretti, based on a fairy tale by Charles Perrault, performed October 4, 6, 8, 1991, at the Emerson Majestic Theatre

86 *Beatrice and Benedict*, music by Hector Berlioz, libretto by Berlioz after the play of William Shakespeare *Much Ado About Nothing*, lyrics translated by Geoffrey Dunn, performed January 13, 15, 17, 19, 1993, at the Emerson Majestic Theatre

87 *Xerxes*, music by George Frideric Handel, libretto by Niccolò Minato and Silvio Stampiglia, translation and adaptation by Stephen Wadsworth, additional lyrics by Carol Borah Palco, performed March 6, 8, 10, 12, 15, 17, 1996, at the Emerson Majestic Theatre; conducted by Craig Smith of Emmanuel Music and former Music Director of the short-lived Boston Opera Theater

88 *Il Re Pastore*, music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, libretto by Pietro Metastasio, English translation by Nancy Evans and Eric Crozier, performed January 15, 17, 19, 21, 24, 26, 1997, at the Emerson Majestic Theatre

89 *Salome*, music by Richard Strauss, libretto by Strauss based on the play by Oscar Wilde, performed January 24, 25, 28, 30, February 2, 4, 2001, at the Shubert Theatre

90 The Shubert Theatre opened in 1910 as a venue for stage shows and opera. It was placed on the list of the National Register of Historic Places in 1980. Closed for renovations for several years, it reopened in 1996.

91 "Lyric gets new home, renewed commitment," by Richard Dyer, *The Boston Globe*, February 19, 1998, p. C5

92 Ibid

93 *L'Elisir d'Amore*, music by Gaetano Donizetti, libretto by Felice Romani, performed April 2, 4, 6, 8, 11, 13, 1997, at the Emerson Majestic Theatre

94 "Lyric gets new home, renewed commitment," by Richard Dyer, op cit.

95 Previously Sarah Caldwell had created a touring company called the American National Opera Company, (see "Hub May Not See Operas of New National Troupe", by Elliot Norton, the *Boston Record American*, April 12, 1967, p.49), which only lasted a season or two. Its route was to cover cities which had earlier been served by the National Company of the Metropolitan Opera, an entity featuring young singers, disbanded after a brief run because of financial considerations. The productions to be presented by Caldwell were to be created and rehearsed in Boston but were not intended to be performed there, a strange presaging of the circumstances which had factored into the formation of the short-lived Canon/Smith/Sellers Boston Opera Theater.

had reoriented itself toward presenting opera exclusively to children in 1989.<sup>96</sup> It had operated independently for many years, until its founder and artistic director, Linda Cabot Black, determined that it could be more efficiently managed as a BLO affiliate. In February of 1998 BLO announced its legal acquisition of ONE, assets and liabilities included, thence to become the Company's Education and Community Programs Division.<sup>97</sup>

With the new millennium approaching and anticipating sustained growth, BLO began to refocus its casting strategies, even as it continued to develop new and expanded collaborations. As do many regional companies it had been seeking out young talent worthy of showcasing, hoping to discover future stars and to attract audiences with the exciting possibility of being present at the making of operatic history; and it had actively sought to engage and support artists of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds with the intention of reflecting the diversity of the city, another facet of its identification with Boston. In support of its casting strategies the Company had already initiated a series of "Corporate Night at the Opera" events during the 1996-1997 season to raise funds for the development of emerging artists. Without neglecting this aspect of its casting strategy BLO began to seek out new stars, artists who were already complete in their vocal technique and acting skills and who were prepared to move to the next level of their careers. Del Sesto spoke of the importance of seeing an accomplished artist develop a new role and present it for the first time.<sup>98</sup> And indeed many of the artists thus featured by BLO were mere steps away from major recognition and career activity at a level well above regional opera. BLO kept track of some of these new stars and presented progress reports to its audiences, such as those in its Playbills of the 2001-2002 season.<sup>99</sup>

By now the sights of the Company were clearly set on a much higher level of scale, no longer on regional opera status but national status. In 2001 Chairman of the Board of Directors, Sherif Nada, suggested a comparison with important U.S. companies when he observed that even with the increased seating capacity of the Shubert Theatre over the Majestic, BLO's performance venue was still only 1/3 to 1/2 the size of those of companies such as San Francisco, Miami, New York City Opera, Chicago, Houston, and Washington.<sup>100</sup> Further, observing its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary that year, BLO was nevertheless decades younger than those other companies. However BLO was growing in a way that could make it competitive with these companies, he noted, having moved in the preceding decade from 64<sup>th</sup> out of 95 U.S. companies, as measured by budget size, to 15<sup>th</sup> out of 115.<sup>101</sup> As Del Sesto had predicted, the Company added a fourth opera to its subscription series for the 2000-2001 season, a sure indicator of the kind of growth Nada had described.

BLO celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary by closing the season with a gift to the city of Boston, two free outdoor performances of *Carmen*<sup>102</sup> on Boston Common in September of 2002. On a weekend of perfectly clear skies and mild temperatures, crowds in lawn chairs and on blankets on the grass, more than 140,000 people in all, enjoyed the multimedia production as it unfolded live onstage and was simultaneously projected onto giant screens flanking the stage, supplemented by an elaborate sound system. Over the course of the summer BLO had distributed free study guides in multiple languages within the community, and an array of cultural

96 "Nurturing the next generation of opera lovers: Simple flourishes draw attention," by Matthew Guerrieri, *The Boston Globe*, April 13, 2008, p. N6

97 "Lyric gets new home, renewed commitment," by Richard Dyer, op cit.

98 General Director's message, p. 3, Boston Lyric Opera program notes for *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, music by Gioacchino Rossini, libretto by Cesare Sterbini, after the Pierre Beaumarchais play, Critical Edition by Alfredo Zedda, performed January 11, 13, 15, 17, 20, 22, 1995, at the Emerson Majestic Theatre

99 Those named included David Daniels, Mary Dunleavy, Paul Groves, Nathan Gunn, Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, Earle Patriarco, Patricia Racette, Lisa Saffer, Robert Spano, Deborah Voigt, and Stephen West, p. 36 of Boston Lyric Opera *Playbill* for *La Bohème*, music by Giacomo Puccini, libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica, based on Henri Murger's *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, performed May 1, 3, 5, 7, 10, 12, 14, 17, 2002, at the Shubert Theatre. There would be many other such new stars in the seasons to come.

100 Chairman's message, p. 8 in *Playbill* for *Don Carlos* (see note 83)

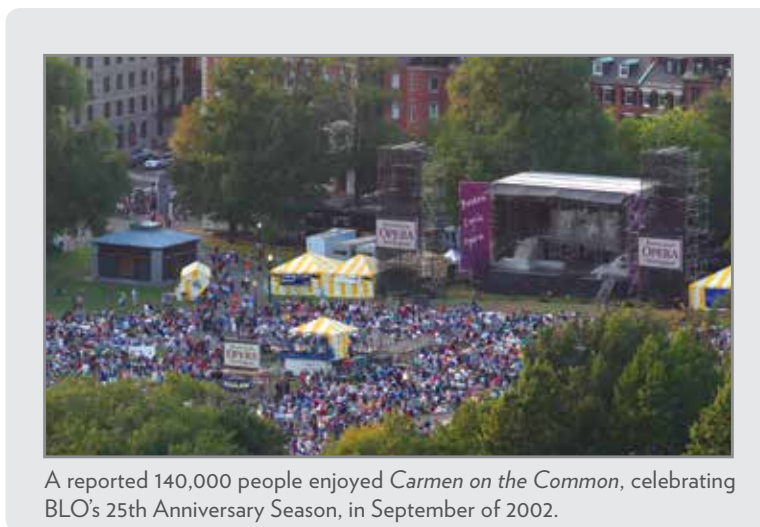
101 Ibid

102 *Carmen*, music by Georges Bizet, libretto by Ludovic Halévy after the novella by Prosper Mérimée, sung in English in a two-and-a-half hour abridged version, featuring a racially diverse cast with local connections, performed September 20, 21, 2002

organizations had partnered with BLO to provide neighborhood-based educational previews for all ages.<sup>103</sup> *Carmen on the Common*, as the event was dubbed, was widely praised and recognized for excellence, garnering acknowledgments and awards from the Boston City Council, the Arts and Business Council of Greater Boston, and OPERA America.<sup>104</sup>

During the 1990s BLO had undergone rapid expansion, trying to provide enough tickets to its performances to satisfy the ever-growing demand for them, working to raise funds to expand its operation as well as to extend its seasons. For the 2000-2001 season a fourth production and two non-subscription performances of each opera had been added, and the following season saw the addition of a seventh series. The Company had expected at the time to continue adding performances incrementally over the next five years,<sup>105</sup> but the rapid and steady growth of the '90s could not be sustained indefinitely. Multiple changes in both local and national life intruded, and the first decade of the new century would prove quite unlike the last decade of the previous century.

To begin with, the events of September 11, 2001, had profound and far-reaching effects on all aspects of American life. Boston, although not the epicenter of the tragedy, experienced an especially strong jolt from it by virtue of being closely tied to New York by geographic proximity, and through having been the point of origin of two of the doomed flights, as well as the home of a substantial number of the victims and their relatives. People became fearful of going into the center of the city, of using public transportation, and of gathering in large numbers.



A reported 140,000 people enjoyed *Carmen on the Common*, celebrating BLO's 25th Anniversary Season, in September of 2002.

The destruction of the Twin Towers by terrorists would prove to be a watershed moment for arts activity in the United States. Ticket sales were negatively affected and attendance at performances declined as even long-time subscribers chose to avoid the risk they now perceived in what had formerly been normal activity. BLO took the pulse of its audience and countered the national mood of melancholy and dread by programming feel-good works that avoided tragic subjects for its 2002-2003 season.<sup>106</sup>

As audience behavior began to change in the new century, owing to this tragic event and to other factors, BLO had to adapt to meet the challenges thus posed to its operation. Del Sesto was forced to suspend one notable programming trend that had been begun by Justin Moss, her action a source of great disappointment

<sup>103</sup> Cultural partners for this event included the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the Boston Public Library, the Children's Museum, the Huntington Theatre Company, the Wang Center's Suskind Young at Arts program, WGBH public radio, Young Audiences of Massachusetts.

<sup>104</sup> Boston Lyric Opera Fact sheet, 2008-2009

<sup>105</sup> Boston Lyric Opera document, Overview, January 4, 2001

<sup>106</sup> *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (see note 98), performed October 2, 4, 6, 8, 11, 13, 15, 2002, at the Shubert Theatre; *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, see note 72; *La Rondine*, music by Giacomo Puccini, libretto by Giuseppe Adami, based on a German libretto by Alfred Maria Willner and Heinz Reichert, performed March 26, 28, 30, April 1, 4, 6, 8, 2003, at the Shubert Theatre; *Die Fledermaus*, music Johann Strauss, Jr., libretto by Carl Haffner and Richard Genée, based on Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy's vaudeville "Le Reveillon," performed April 30, May 2, 4, 6, 9, 11, 13, 2003, at the Shubert Theatre



to some BLO followers. Each season Moss and his team had programmed a work by an American composer among their offerings.<sup>107</sup> Initially Del Sesto had followed suit and had affirmed the Company's commitment to exploring the work of contemporary composers. Operas such as *Candide*,<sup>108</sup> *The Ballad of Baby Doe*,<sup>109</sup> *Akhnaten*,<sup>110</sup> *Resurrection*,<sup>111</sup> *The Little Prince*,<sup>112</sup> and *Flight*<sup>113</sup> were part of this vein of programming. However despite critical approbation of many of the productions, only *Akhnaten* proved a box office smash, and the others, excepting *Baby Doe*, were publicly greeted with weak ticket sales and poor attendance by subscribers. No performing arts organization can afford to ignore for long the preferences of its paying audiences. A new model for choosing repertoire would have to be sought and another means of creating interest and sustaining growth would have to be employed.

In the General Director's message in the Playbill for the 2003-2004 season-opening *Rigoletto*,<sup>114</sup> Del Sesto cited the enormous progress and growth of the Company over its 27-year-history and emphasized the fact that, unlike many other arts organizations throughout the country, BLO had ended the previous season with balanced books. However under difficult nationwide economic circumstances it had been necessary to cut the budget in order to do so, and there would have to be other cost-saving measures taken to preserve the balanced status. The 2003-2004 season, the "Italian Season,"<sup>115</sup> as it was thematically designated, was, of necessity, limited to three operas, down from the four that had been offered in each of the three preceding seasons; and as there existed very little room for risk-taking, Del Sesto and the Board further responded to the situation with greater focus on beloved masterworks – guaranteed box office successes – and even more extensive outreach programming.<sup>116</sup> Failure to respond to economic circumstances in such a way would have exposed the Company to substantial risk, they felt, and to the very real possibility of unsustainability. The use of the "Italian Season" as an attempt to win back BLO's old audiences with "comfort opera" succeeded in a somewhat limited way, but it also demonstrated graphically the negative financial aspects of the situation. And the programming strategy of the two seasons immediately following the World Trade Center horrors also left BLO open to a revival by its critics of its past reputation for stodginess.

BLO's recalibration, decried by critics as a shift toward more conservative programming, was not a reflection of Del Sesto's taste nor that of Board leadership but rather a bow to the fiscal realities of running an opera

107 *Regina*, music and text by Marc Blitzstein, based on *The Little Foxes* by Lillian Hellman, performed March 22, 24, 1991, at the Emerson Majestic Theatre; *Lost in the Stars* (see note 47); *Wuthering Heights*, music by Carlisle Floyd, libretto by Floyd based on the novel by Emily Brontë, performed March 10, 12, 14, 16, 1993, at the Emerson Majestic Theatre

108 *Candide*, music by Leonard Bernstein, book by Hugh Wheeler after the novel by Voltaire, lyrics by Richard Wilbur, with additional lyrics by John LaTouche, Dorothy Parker, Lillian Hellman, Leonard Bernstein, and Stephen Sondheim, orchestrations by Leonard Bernstein and Hershy Kay, additional orchestrations by John Mauceri, performed March 8, 10, 12, 14, 17, 19, 1995, at the Emerson Majestic Theatre

109 *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, music by Douglas Moore, libretto by John LaTouche, performed January 14, 16, 18, 20, 23, 15, 1998, at the Emerson Majestic Theatre

110 *Akhnaten*, see note 75.

111 *Resurrection*, music by Tod Machover, libretto by Laura Harrington, after the novel of Leo Tolstoy, performed November 7, 9, 11, 13, 16, 18, 20, 2001, at the Shubert Theatre; chosen for the season's repertory as a dynamic new work with which to celebrate the Company's 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

112 *The Little Prince*, see note 76.

113 *Flight*, see note 76.

114 *Rigoletto*, music by Giuseppe Verdi, libretto by Francesco Maria Piave, after the play *Le roi s'amuse* by Victor Hugo, performed November 5, 7, 9, 11, 14, 16, 18, 2003, at the Shubert Theatre

115 *Rigoletto*, *ibid*; *Tosca*, music by Giacomo Puccini, libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica, after the play of Victorien Sardou, performed March 31, April 2, 4, 6, 9, 11, 13, 2004, at the Shubert Theatre; *Così Fan Tutte*, music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte, performed April 28, 30, May 2, 4, 7, 9, 11, 2004, at the Shubert Theatre

116 By 2004 BLO offered the interpretive services of a describer for blind patrons, online courses, Opera Insights (lecture and dinner at BU Mugar Library), Opera Preview at the Tremont Hotel before each performance, Opera Overtures (dinner and lecture) as fund-raising activity, and free study guides.

company in difficult times, and more specifically, an opera company still laboring in financial shadows cast by its predecessors<sup>117</sup> and by its own not-so-distant past. No successful appeal-for-funds case could be made to prospective donors or foundations by a company with poor ticket sales or by one lacking financial accountability.

Concurrent with this budgetary scaling back and repertoire refocusing, and compounding BLO's ongoing difficulty in establishing an entirely positive name for itself in the community, was the ousting of Richard Conrad from his artistic leadership role at the Boston Academy of Music and that organization's subsequent vigorous rebranding of itself in 2002 as Opera Boston. Dedicated to presenting new music and rarely seen older works, the Company attracted a growing number of followers who sought out such esoteric programming and the occasional famous-name artists engaged for some of its productions.

Voices thought permanently silenced by BLO's decade of dramatic organizational and artistic growth called out again with words of doubt, the same apparently lingering doubt regarding BLO's chances for long term success that had shadowed the Company early in the 1990s. The question of choosing between "The Hare" and "The Tortoise" approaches to attaining an ever higher level of excellence arose again, and BLO was once more pejoratively branded as "The Tortoise."

Opera Boston received much positive press attention that included descriptions such as "the scrappy underdog" of the Boston opera scene, and was cheered on by some in the community as "The Hare" in the age-old racing analogy. Some of Opera Boston's supporters behaved as if motivated by the belief that Boston might not be able to support an opera company that was both fiscally stable and artistically vibrant, and that if just one of those standards were to be met, it should be the latter. "Opera here and now, the future be damned," the philosophy that was ultimately seen to have been behind Sarah Caldwell's approach to her career, flourished anew. The press never seemed to express concern for the fiscal health of Opera Boston nor for its potential for longevity, but the Company failed to broaden its funding base much beyond the contributions of a relatively small number of major donors and was forced to cease operations in 2011 when it encountered a large cash flow problem, although the Company did not declare bankruptcy and thereby left open the door to possible future activity. Indeed, in 2013 a reorganization led to the creation of a new entity, Odyssey Opera, focused as had been its predecessor on new works and underperformed works of earlier masters.

BLO remained committed to meeting both standards of excellence, that is, building an enduring company and performing with a high degree of artistic vitality, but its struggle to change Boston's negative preconceptions of the city's own operatic life and that of its largest opera company paralleled its struggle to remain stable and to resume the momentum of its late-20<sup>th</sup> century growth.

Although the press continued to chide BLO in the first few years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century for not taking more artistic risks, much significant growth occurred behind the scenes during this period of supposed stasis. Del Sesto had long since moved the Company into the technology age by computerizing record keeping and ticket sales. Now she would lead the Company toward greater modernization in another way, by completing a strategic plan that would help align the thinking of Board members, staff, and patrons toward a common set of priorities and objectives for the future.<sup>118</sup> This would be accomplished by implementing the Balanced

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117 In a phone conversation of September 20, 2013, Del Sesto described how in the early days of her leadership BLO was still required by the musicians' union to post a bond for the payment of their members' salaries before every performance, harking back to the days when there was reason to be wary of BLO's ability to pay. Perhaps more disturbing was the profound distrust harbored by much of the business community of any opera company's ultimate ability to remain solvent, coupled with their failure to distinguish one organization from another. For many years after Sarah Caldwell ceased production, the state Attorney General's office called BLO on a regular basis with complaints from people who were owed money by the Opera Company of Boston and who did not understand that BLO was not connected to it in any way nor liable for the debts in any measure.

118 Boston Lyric Opera document, Overview, January 4, 2001

Scorecard, a strategic management system developed by Harvard Business School professors Robert and Ellen Kaplan and adapted by Ellen, a member of BLO's Board of Overseers, to the specific circumstances of non-profit organizations.<sup>119</sup> BLO became the first performing arts organization to use it and then became the subject of a Harvard Business School best practice case study citing its positive results using the system's proposed multiple performance measures of success.

Of course, organizational growth as well as artistic growth must be supported by the development of fund-raising tools. To this end in the same year, 2001, BLO produced a program for planned giving that it named the Goldovsky Society, after the great American impresario, Boris Goldovsky. In doing so it chose to associate itself with the extraordinary record of achievement that his name evokes, and further, this choice suggests the importance of the continuity of resident professional opera in Boston, a cause to which Goldovsky had certainly been devoted.

But regardless of these efforts and quite apart from them, audience-building became a challenge for performing arts organizations in general and for BLO in particular in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite the huge success of such public outreach ventures as *Carmen on the Common* and enthusiasm for BLO's Opera New England performances for school children and for families, the purchase of both subscription series and single tickets by traditional opera-goers was declining, and attracting new paying audiences, especially younger people, was becoming increasingly more difficult. Broad changes in societal behavior were emerging as trends that made opera attendance an unlikely choice for many in the community. It soon became clear that the road ahead for BLO and for arts organizations everywhere would differ greatly, and most likely permanently, from the path many of them had been following in the recent past.

Among these broad changes were a shift in national educational priorities and the growth of multiple new technologies. Primary among the former was a much-trumpeted drive for overhauling public education entitled No Child Left Behind. As the movement gained national momentum, the key to achieving its ends was held by policy makers to be the implementation of a tightly structured curriculum focused entirely on basic skills. Assessment of skills would be ongoing and rigorous, and there was little, if any, role for arts education in such a plan. Funding formerly dedicated to arts instruction was shifted into other curriculum areas, and teachers were required by administrators to spend all of their class time exclusively presenting core material, student mastery of which would be gauged with standardized tests. Even in instances where non-profits and arts organizations offered free programs and activities to schools, they were often declined either as being educationally irrelevant or as draining time away from basic skill practice and especially from test preparation. As a result, a generation of children has arisen with limited knowledge of the existence of any art forms beyond the most obvious aspects of mass culture and with no means of exploring them. In such a hierarchy of values opera becomes easily ignored. As attendance at its events geared toward school groups and families declined over the decade, and as the funding community redirected grants toward programs for children that emphasized their active participation in arts experiences, BLO found it financially unfeasible to continue its existing educational programs and ceased performing under the ONE name in 2011.<sup>120</sup>

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119 Ibid

120 As grant funding for opera education for children shifted from a performance model to a hands-on model, BLO had to change its delivery as well. It now presents professional development training for classroom teachers and teaching artists using a curriculum developed for that purpose by OPERA America: *Music! Words! Opera!*. The teachers in turn educate their students about opera and work with them to produce their own original class opera. In BLO's Create Your Own Opera Partnership Program, teachers and students are supported throughout the academic year in the implementation of the *Music! Words! Opera!* curriculum through continued professional development and a teaching artist residency to meet the unique needs of their school. In addition, BLO has developed a partnership with the Wheelock [College] Family Theater to create school vacation week participatory programs for children in elementary through high school. In a further educational offering, high school and college students and their teachers are invited to attend the Final Dress Rehearsal of each opera at no cost. The teachers use study guides generated by BLO staff to prepare the students for the experience, and the students are encouraged to submit to BLO an artistic response of their reaction to the performance. The Dress Rehearsal opportunity is the continuation of an initiative begun by the Del Sesto administration.

The other changes in wide swaths of societal behavior that impinged on arts consumption all stemmed from the rapid growth and development of communications technology. Previously undreamed-of electronic devices changed both the way people experience culture and their expectations of it, in part by spawning multiple new entertainment genres, many of which can be enjoyed privately with a personal electronic device. As diversionary and leisure activity became increasingly predicated upon electronic rather than face-to-face connection, the chances of young people becoming exposed to or interested in attending live opera were further reduced. And more, the rise of instant communication has led to the pursuit of a spontaneous and fluid social life for most young people, the unscripted quality of which means making fewer advance commitments to activities or events. For the performing arts this translates into much smaller numbers of subscribers even when single ticket sales remain steady, often creating a cash flow problem.

An additional technological development in the entertainment domain that may have contributed to lower attendance at BLO performances is the growing popularity of high definition telecasts live from the Metropolitan Opera in New York to select movie theaters across the nation, although this seems to have affected mostly middle-aged and elder patrons, people who were familiar with opera and who had purchased performance tickets in the past. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many of these opera-goers are apparently willing to trade the thrills of a live performance for the convenience of driving to a suburban movie theater with easy access to free parking and relatively low ticket prices.<sup>121</sup>

As the transmission of news and information has become increasingly a function of high-tech devices, the parallel decline of printed news media has further eroded the visibility of the performing arts in the community. The resulting drastic decline in the readership of daily newspapers and of print magazines has left only a small fraction of the amount of space once devoted to reviews and discussions of opera now available for that purpose, and of course a much smaller group of potential audience members reading about opera activity. While there is extensive reviewing of opera and theater available online, much of it is provided by non-professional commentators who lack extensive knowledge of their subject and who are thus unable to educate their readership, an activity that had formerly been undertaken by journalists who reviewed theatrical and operatic performances.

Changes in the recorded music industry have also contributed to the marginalization of opera in national cultural life. Because recorded music is now most often delivered to consumers by means that do not generate as much revenue for producers as once had been the case, the availability of recorded opera has been greatly reduced. A narrow range of operatic works are recorded by a limited set of singers, with producers unwilling to take large risks on uncertainties, a situation that had been developing even before the blossoming of the technology era. This has been an increasingly forceful factor in shaping audience tastes. As Del Sesto pointed out in 1998<sup>122</sup> the paucity of recordings of 20<sup>th</sup> century operas renders these works unfamiliar to most opera goers and therefore of limited or no interest to the less adventurous. Addressing the subject again in 2002<sup>123</sup> she noted that audiences before the 20<sup>th</sup> century experienced all music as new music the first time they heard it live, but in modern times people have come to expect some degree of prior familiarity with works before they see them onstage. There exists, then, the catch-22 situation of opera audiences increasingly wanting to hear familiar music, while the opportunities

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121 The success of the cinema experience does not seem to have created an increased demand for live local opera, in contrast to an earlier combination of opera and cinema in Boston. Beginning in 2006 before the widespread availability of the Met telecasts in theaters, BLO had partnered with the Coolidge Corner Theater in Brookline to present a series of films of great operas. The program was entitled "Divas in the Dark" initially and then "Europe's Grand Operas" when the content of the programming changed to telecasts recorded at European opera houses. BLO staff were present at the screenings to promote the sale of subscriptions and tickets to upcoming BLO productions, and the program usually included a live singer who performed excerpts from one of BLO's seasonal offerings. In that context, the film viewing appeared to serve as a complement to live opera and perhaps as a stimulus to seek it out rather than as a substitute for it as now seems to be the case with the Met telecasts.

122 General Director's message, p. 3, Boston Lyric Opera's program notes for *The Ballad of Baby Doe*; see note 109.

123 General Director's message, p. 12, in *Playbill* for Boston Lyric Opera's production of *Resurrection*; see note 111.

for building such a familiarity are diminishing, creating an ever-shrinking list of operas that are familiar and thus desirable to audience members with conservative tastes. Opera companies walk a programming tightrope trying to please polarized audiences, those who only want to hear well known works, those who primarily want to hear unfamiliar works, and the few who populate all the spaces between these two extremes.

The first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw tremendous fluctuations in the economic health of the United States that, again, impacted all aspects of life throughout the country and certainly the arts. But one factor quite specific to Boston has weighed heavily on all the not-for-profit organizations of the community since then. During that decade several very large corporations moved their world headquarters out of the city to other locales or were subsumed into companies that were headquartered elsewhere. The funds that such businesses contribute directly to non-profit organizations in the city with which they are most closely identified were then redirected to their new centers of commerce, and the transfer of executives out of the city drew away those individuals' personal philanthropy as well. Others of the companies that remained headquartered in Boston shifted the emphasis of their community contributions away from the arts and toward poverty relief.

A very specific manifestation of what such an overall loss of corporate strength would mean to Boston was the failure of BLO's attempt to follow up its *Carmen on the Common* success with two free outdoor performances of *Aïda*. Planned for September of 2006 and with a projected budget of \$1.4 million, the performances were never given due to the lack of sufficient corporate sponsorship. The Company could secure only \$1 million of the necessary funds, with the largest corporate gift received a mere \$10,000 against an anticipated lead sponsorship from the \$250,000 to \$300,000 range.<sup>124</sup> This was most likely the greatest disappointment of the Del Sesto era at BLO.

Among all of the obvious implications for the arts of the national and local depressed economic climate there lies one significant outcome that might not be apparent at first glance. Public television and radio were sorely impacted and suffered extensive budget cuts, as the relevance to the community of these traditional media was being challenged by the same new communications technologies that encroached directly upon the live performing arts. When broadcasting costs rose and funding levels fell, WGBH, the local public radio station, determined it could no longer afford to present all of BLO's performances to its audience. Where thousands of people all over New England had been listening on the radio to locally produced opera on a regularly scheduled basis, stimulated to attend in person and perhaps to make donations, in 2008 BLO lost that consistent and effective presence, an important audience-building tool. Sporadic special programs highlighting BLO productions continue to be broadcast but are not a regular feature of the station's programming and therefore no longer a reliable means of audience-building.

Midway through the first decade of the new century as all the cultural institutions of Boston struggled with an ever-evolving model of audience engagement and with a diminished community-wide structure of support, BLO also confronted a number of major changes in leadership, management, and staff, to the extent that by 2010 there would be an entirely new team in place.

The first change occurred in May of 2003 as the severity of the post-September 11 economic downturn began to acutely impact the arts. When BLO responded to the circumstances by paring back its budget and reducing the number of operas for the 2003-2004 season, Leon Major opted to leave his position as Artistic

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124 "Donor Shortage Halts Plan for Free 'Aïda,'" by Geoff Edgers, *The Boston Globe*, December 20, 2005, p. A1

Director. Although he would later direct additional productions for the Company<sup>125</sup> he felt he would not have enough professional activity in Boston to keep him there on a formally committed basis.<sup>126</sup> This position would then remain vacant until 2008.

No further changes appeared to be forthcoming in the foreseeable future as Music Director Stephen Lord renewed his contract for four more years in July of 2004, although the fact that he was scheduled to conduct only one of the Company's productions for the 2004-2005 season constituted a deviation from the pattern established in previous seasons, when he had conducted nearly all of the BLO's offerings, and perhaps suggested a diminished role for him with the Company. In July of 2006 he made known his decision to leave at the end of that contract period, in 2008, ensuring, he suggested, sufficient lead time for the Company to identify a replacement.<sup>127</sup>

BLO immediately planned a search for a new Music Director, but that project was quickly tabled as subordinate to another charge that arose soon after, the search to fill an even higher-level position, that of General Director.

Late in 2007 Janice Mancini Del Sesto announced that she would not renew her contract when it expired in the fall of 2008.<sup>128</sup> After 16 years of devoting herself to stimulating and steering the growth and success of the Company, she had decided that she would like to pursue new and different challenges in the remaining years of her professional career. The Board of Directors opted to postpone the selection of a new Music Director until after the next General Director was in place, allowing for that individual's participation in the selection process. And in keeping with the prevailing tone of change and renewal of this period at BLO, the duty of selecting Del Sesto's successor would fall to a Board of Directors that itself had recently undergone both structural and leadership changes.

Prior to the 2006-2007 season the Company had been governed by a President and a Chairman of the Board of Directors. In 2006 in an attempt to align the Company with contemporary best practice, a restructuring at the top eliminated the largely honorary position of President and left the governance of the Company in the hands of the Chairman, the individual who would now be tasked with guiding the Company through the greatest transition it had ever undergone.

Del Sesto had been by far the longest-serving General Director in Company history and had overseen the evolution of BLO from a moderately respectable regional company to one that had begun to merit national attention. Much of BLO's constituency had come on board during her tenure and was unfamiliar with the history of the Company in its earlier years. Remembering the past before her administration might seem as challenging for some as imagining the future without her. How dramatic might this next change prove? Would all the accumulating changes finally tally up as evolution or revolution? What sort of vision would the next General Director bring to Boston Lyric Opera? What sort of institution would BLO be after the new leadership team was in place?

And as if there hadn't been enough change already, the Chairman of the newly empowered Board of Directors was himself newly arrived in his position. Coming from the world of international finance and communications technology, Steven P. Akin had succeeded Alicia Cooney Quigley in that key role in 2006.

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125 Major's BLO productions since leaving the Artistic Directorship have been *L'Italiana in Algeri* in November of 2004, see note 76; *The Inspector*, music by John Musto, libretto by Mark Campbell, performed April 20, 22, 25, 27, 29, 2012, at the Shubert Theatre; and *The Magic Flute*, music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, libretto by Emanuel Schikaneder, World Premiere of new English adaptation by Kelley Rourke, Leon Major, and John Conklin, performed October 4, 6, 9, 11, 13, 2013, at the Shubert Theatre.

126 "Boston Lyric Opera Artistic Director seeks lesser role," by Richard Dyer, *The Boston Globe*, May 28, 2003, p.C3

127 "Boston Lyric conductor to leave in 2008," by Richard Dyer, *The Boston Globe*, July 1, 2006, p. C3

128 "General Director to leave Boston Lyric Opera," by Geoff Edgers, *The Boston Globe*, November 21, 2007, p. B5

He appointed long-time Board member David Scudder and former Board Chair Hod Irvine to lead the search committee in conjunction with a professional search firm.<sup>129</sup>

After a rigorous selection process of eight months' duration, Esther Nelson was named General & Artistic Director of Boston Lyric Opera, the first person in Company history to hold both titles. Nelson's wide range of experiences in the world of opera made her a highly qualified choice for the position, experiences which included notably her six years as General Director and CEO of Glimmerglass Opera, where she dramatically raised the profile of the Company, resulting in increased ticket sales revenue and other income, deeper outreach programming, and a growing international reputation for artistic excellence. Before that she had been the General Director and CEO of the Nevada Opera Association, the Director of the Virginia Opera Association, the General Director of Triangle Opera Theater (NC), and the Director of Public Relations, Marketing and Development for the New Orleans Opera Association, where she was also artistic administrator. She had been working as a management consultant to arts organizations in the United States and in Europe prior to joining BLO.<sup>130</sup>

Esther Nelson publicly articulated her vision for BLO very soon after coming to Boston. In an interview with *The Boston Globe's* Jeremy Eichler<sup>131</sup> she outlined her general goals, although she described herself as still in the fact-finding mode characteristic of one newly arrived on the scene. She spoke of adding a fourth annual production, of branching out into activities such as concerts and cross-discipline seminars that would be thematically related to a given season's offerings, and of commissioning new works, this latter requiring the input of a yet-to-be-named Music Director. Aware of the spatial inadequacies of the Shubert Theatre and the limitations thus imposed on the range of possible repertoire and production styles, she acknowledged the need to consider the eventual possibilities of both a new performance venue and a capital campaign of some sort.



Esther Nelson, appointed in 2008 to the position of General & Artistic Director of BLO.

Her very first direct message to the audience as General & Artistic Director of the Company<sup>132</sup> explored the same themes but also made a strong statement of her intent to maintain continuity with the Del Sesto administration, citing the importance of financial stability, the development of young artists and new audiences, and ever-expanding community engagement, characteristics that had come to underlie the very identity of the Company.

In the Chairman of the Board's message from the same issue of *Playbill*,<sup>133</sup> Steve Akin, too, spoke of building upon BLO's existing strengths and its uniqueness and of following Nelson's vision of positioning BLO as one of the city's signature cultural institutions. By sounding the same notes in their messages they jointly made it clear that there would be no radical break with past, and that BLO would remain strongly committed to achieving ever-higher standards of artistic excellence and to all that had made it a truly "Boston company."

129 Boston Lyric Opera press release, August 5, 2008

130 Information contained in a letter from Chairman of the Board Steven Akin to BLO patrons and subscribers dated September 7, 2008

131 "Setting the stage new director Esther Nelson shares her plans for Boston Lyric Opera," *The Boston Globe*, November 9, 2008, p. N2

132 General & Artistic Director's Message, p. 8, *Playbill* for *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, music by Jacques Offenbach, libretto by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, freely based on the integral edition of the opera by Michael Kaye and Jean-Christophe Keck, performed November 7, 9, 12, 14, 16, 18, 2008, at the Shubert Theatre

133 *Ibid*, p. 6

But if the mission and the publicly perceived aspects of the Company were to remain constant, the structure of the administrative staff would not. While retaining the title of Artistic Director, Nelson moved to support herself in that role by engaging John Conklin as Artistic Advisor and by creating an administrative position completely new for the Company, that of Director of Artistic Operations, and hiring Nicholas Russell to fill it. This restructuring would become a key to achieving the sort of growth and development envisioned by Esther Nelson and the Board.

John Conklin is an internationally recognized stage set and costume designer with extensive experience in the worlds of opera, theater, and ballet, closely identified with the New York City Opera. In 2011 he would be honored by the National Endowment for the Arts for his lifetime contribution to the world of opera, the first design professional so acclaimed. He had worked with Nelson at Glimmerglass Opera as Associate Artistic Director and had retired in 2008 after 18 years in that position, intending only to continue with his teaching career at New York University's Tisch School for the Arts. Nelson predicted he would become bored with such a limited range of professional activity and she proved correct.<sup>134</sup> Since 2009 he has collaborated extensively with BLO as both designer and dramaturg, his work for the Company encompassing its numerous community engagement events as well as its staged productions.

By hiring Nicholas Russell as Director of Artistic Operations, Nelson was again reuniting with a former colleague from Glimmerglass Opera, assigning to him oversight for the auditioning, logistics, and coordinating of singers and musicians.<sup>135</sup> He had held a similar position at Glimmerglass and had served in other arts administrative and teaching capacities in both Europe and the United States, and was much sought-after as an adjudicator of vocal competitions. He and John Conklin would play major roles in planning for and designing future productions as well as implementing plans on a day-to-day basis for BLO. After they joined the artistic leadership of the Company only the vital position of Music Director remained to be filled.

At the end of the 2009-2010 season, the first one completely planned and implemented by Nelson and her team, David Angus was named BLO's new Music Director. He had conducted that season's final production, Mozart's *Idomeneo*,<sup>136</sup> to great acclaim by all, including the orchestra and singers who had performed with him. Originally from the United Kingdom, he had extensive conducting experience in European opera houses and concert halls as well as in a number of American venues. At the time of his hiring he also held the position of Music Director at Glimmerglass Opera, although his work there had not coincided with Esther Nelson's tenure. BLO was now in the hands of the richest and deepest artistic leadership team in its history, and taking into account the series of distinguished stage directors and additional dramaturgs it has engaged for its productions, a team characterized by an unusual degree and range of artistic collaboration. By all appearances BLO seemed poised to move into a new period of notable artistic and institutional growth.

Even before completing her artistic leadership team with the hiring of David Angus as Music Director, Nelson had put her stamp on BLO and on the finale of the season she had "inherited" from the Del Sesto era (2008-2009), a production of *Don Giovanni*.<sup>137</sup> By presenting the original 1787 Prague edition of the score instead of the expected Vienna version, which is more familiar to most contemporary audiences,<sup>138</sup> she signaled her interest in thoughtful exploration and innovation, in making what is old seem new again, as one means of engaging a wide range of potential ticket purchasers, employing a strategy that had been proven

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134 "A man of drama, by design," by Anthony Savvides, *The Boston Globe*, November 3, 2011, p. G31

135 Boston Lyric Opera press release, November 14, 2008

136 *Idomeneo*, music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, libretto by Giovanni Battista Varesco after Antoine Danchet's *Idoménée*, performed April 23, 25, 28, 30, May 2, 4, 2010, at the Shubert Theatre

137 *Don Giovanni*, music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte based on a Giovanni Bertati book, performed April 24, 26, 29, May 1, 3, 5, 2009, at the Shubert Theatre

138 Joint message from the Chair and General & Artistic Director, from the Playbill, p.6, for *Don Giovanni*, see note 137.



effective in Boston by her predecessors.

The Nelson administration had also immediately begun expanding the outreach of BLO through enhanced community engagement, as promised. Entering into an extended partnership with the Museum of Fine Arts beginning with the 2009-2010 season, the Company offered the first set of its Signature Series events at the Museum, programs featuring musical performances in a context that embraces the dramatic and visual arts as well, each followed by a reception with a meet-the-artists component. In August of 2009 BLO joined with the Boston Landmarks Orchestra<sup>139</sup> for a free concert at the Edward A. Hatch Memorial Shell on the Charles River Esplanade, drawing 10,000 attendees, an event that was repeated annually through 2014, at which the Company showcased music and performers scheduled for the upcoming season. In an additional overture to the entire community BLO organized its first-ever Open House at the Shubert Theatre<sup>140</sup> the same year, another free event geared toward families and visitors of all ages, one that has been repeated periodically since then. The Company's commitment to its ongoing partnership with the Boston Public Library has remained firm, with the continuation of the free Opera Night at the Library series begun during the Del Sesto term. Since then there have been additional outreach partnerships pertaining to specific operas, such as those with Zoo New England and the Boston Children's Museum in anticipation of a production of *The Magic Flute* with a Mayan setting,<sup>141</sup> and numerous others that have functioned on a more occasional basis, for instance, with the Handel and Haydn Society, the French Cultural Center, the Dante Alighieri Society, the Boston Center for Adult Education, the Boston Athenaeum, and Brandeis University.

Again moving to add a new component to BLO's work and in keeping with her original statements about her vision for the Company, Nelson quickly sought to revitalize the Company's approach to engaging and developing new talent. Picking up a theme as old as BLO itself and building on another foundation laid in the Del Sesto era, Nelson formalized and deepened the Company's commitment to Emerging Artists.

Just as each of its three "parent" companies had been founded at least in part to provide performance opportunities for Boston-based singers, so had BLO been committed from the beginning to showcasing Boston's wealth of musical talent. But as regional opera companies grow and evolve many find themselves confronting an often-contradictory situation: how to balance a commitment to local artists with the desire to cast the best available singer for each role. As it strove for higher levels of artistic excellence, BLO had had to face such choices and it had been held accountable by the press any time it had been perceived as neglecting either one or the other of these two sometimes-competing goals.

For many companies the answer to such a dilemma lies in the creation of a young artists program of one sort or another. As early as 1998 Del Sesto referred to the Company's long range plan to add a professional development component,<sup>142</sup> and, as noted previously, had begun dedicating a stream of revenue raised at special events to support the casting of young artists.<sup>143</sup> Then in 2001 BLO announced its first Stephen Shrestinian Award for Excellence, a prize established in memory of a young chorister who had passed away suddenly, to be awarded annually to a member of the Company's ensemble. The stated purpose of this award was to help

139 The Boston Landmarks Orchestra, comprised of professional musicians, was founded in 2001 by Charles Ansbacher and performs free concerts, primarily in the summer, in various public spaces in Boston. This was not BLO's first collaboration with the Landmarks Orchestra, but it was a markedly fresh approach of staging a collaborative performance, rather than presenting a concert.

140 BLO's first-ever Open House was held at the Shubert Theatre on Saturday, November 7, 2009.

141 *The Magic Flute*, see note 125.

142 Message from the General Director in *Playbill* for Boston Lyric Opera's production of *Werther*, music by Jules Massenet, libretto by Édouard Blau, Paul Milliet, and Georges Hartmann, based on Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, performed March 4, 6, 8, 10, 13, 15, 1998, at the Emerson Majestic Theatre

143 See p. 23 for "Corporate Night at the Opera," p. 24 for *Carmen on the Common*. The Company's annual gala events have been another source of support for the program.

defray the costs of training for a promising young artist and thus at least symbolically addressed the topic of the development of new talent. But this was at best an incomplete solution to the problem, and a much hoped-for apprenticeship program to be crafted in conjunction with local schools that offered graduate programs in vocal studies never quite materialized, leaving the Company without a reliable means of ensuring the availability of local talent who would truly be prepared for professional employment at the requisite artistic level.

Nelson's approach to the problem was designed to work in a holistic way, and took the BLO Emerging Artist initiative a step further toward meeting both earlier-stated goals – advancing the development of the individual and simultaneously creating for BLO a pool of suitable locally-based talent from which to cast both principal and *comprimario* roles. Once selected for participation, an Emerging Artist would be offered extensive personal coaching, career advice and support, introduction to artists' management, the opportunity to learn one or more new roles as understudy to a principal artist, and one or more engagements in a BLO production. Moreover, the local availability of these Emerging Artists would ensure that all of BLO's community engagement programs and special events would feature performances that would exemplify the Company's high artistic standards, and in the process would actually create more paid performance opportunities for Boston artists. Beginning with the 2010-2011 season and continuing through the 2015-2016 season, the proceeds of the Company's annual gala event were formally directed toward the support of this initiative.<sup>144</sup>

The Nelson team has wholeheartedly embraced the significance of Boston's operatic history and of BLO's place in it in ways even beyond the redesigned Emerging Artists model and the wide range of community engagement opportunities it has developed. For instance the very first gala event designed by the team, that of the 2009-2010 season, was dubbed the Century Gala, and it celebrated Boston's very first professional opera company of note, Eben Jordan Jr.'s short-lived 1909 Boston Opera Company.<sup>145</sup> In the program notes for the evening, Nelson cited Jordan's own words about Boston from a letter he had written: "The musical spirit of the town has long been firm, persuasive, and powerful, often creating what it demanded and could find nowhere else."<sup>146</sup> She made the sentiment her own by adding "I...believe that with your help, perseverance, and inspiration Boston is – and will be – a city for opera for generations to come."<sup>147</sup>

A more recent expression of regard for the Boston identity of the Company was the 2013-2014 season-opening *Magic Flute*<sup>148</sup> and its accompanying gala event. Every member of the creative team and of the cast, every artist associated with the Opening Night gala, had a clear Boston connection, either through residency, education, or prior employment, and many were tied by more than one of these criteria, a fact that was celebrated by the Company.

Esther Nelson had developed a thorough understanding of BLO's history, its past accomplishments, its potential for future growth, and a detailed blueprint for taking it there. But just as she began implementing her plans for the Company, BLO found itself revisiting some of the same issues that had plagued the Company earlier in the decade.

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144 The number of Emerging Artists engaged for each season has varied according to the availability of roles, which is in turn determined by the repertory scheduled for that season. Beginning with the 2011-2012 season the group has included designated Artists in Residence, Emerging Artists each of whom is cast in roles for all of that season's operas. The artists, although mostly singers, have also included pianists who play for rehearsals and accompany singers at outreach events. The 2013-2014 season Emerging Artists roster included an assistant stage director; the 2015-2016 season roster both an assistant conductor and a stage director; and the 2016-17 season roster includes a pianist, two assistant stage directors, and a stage manager.

145 For the 1909 Boston Opera Company, see page 1.

146 From a letter written by Jordan to *New England Magazine* in October, 1909, when he was President of the Boston Opera Company, quoted by Nelson in the program notes of Boston Lyric Opera's The Century Gala event of November 14, 2009

147 Ibid

148 *The Magic Flute*, see note 125.

In the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century BLO had faced new challenges, some specific to the local community and some of a broader nature, and had worked hard to maintain its stability and to ensure its viability. But by 2009 the very grave financial and economic challenges that had emerged in the aftermath of the September 11 tragedy had worsened to the point of promoting an almost Depression-era mentality across the country. In such a climate of profound uncertainty, all arts, entertainment, and hospitality organizations suffered forceful financial blows, BLO certainly among them.

Once again the budget would need to be trimmed to reflect the results of declining subscription sales and a philanthropic community on edge. Nelson declared that the situation demanded that she and her team think outside the box and find ways to do more with less,<sup>149</sup> as there could be no compromise in artistic quality. Deft utilization of programming and fund-raising strategies and general belt-tightening would be employed instead. For instance, a decision was made to limit the run of each opera to five performances beginning with the 2011-2012 season,<sup>150</sup> a choice which yielded significant savings on theater rental costs while not noticeably affecting ticket revenue and certainly not diminishing artistic quality. The meeting of some of BLO's artistic goals also dovetailed well with some of the financial rethinking. The Company found it could, in many instances, generate completely new productions for less than the cost of renting and transporting productions from elsewhere. Another positive outcome of creating completely original stagings is the generation of work opportunities for local companies that build sets and costumes, one of the ways in which Company income is returned to the community.<sup>151</sup> Contributing their talents to the creation of a new production inspires excitement among performing artists and design teams alike, and presents the audience with a work characterized by artistic freshness. The Company determined too that the costs of shipping productions from Europe are often less than the costs of trucking them from other locations in North America, giving focus to the wide range of available possibilities. Of course co-producing and co-commissioning operas can also be very cost-effective, and Nelson's BLO has worked with several partners to that end.<sup>152</sup>

In the work of her inaugural season Nelson definitively set the tone of the artistic goals of her administration, harkening back to the very first public remarks she had made in Boston about building on the strong underpinnings she had inherited from the Del Sesto era, as well as moving to add new dimensions. The repertoire selection of that first season showed the balance of composers, languages, and historical eras so important to attracting various audience segments, the contrast of the familiar with the less well known, programming strategies very much in line with established BLO practice. The casting of artists, too, ranged from familiar names to the new and exciting, from experienced performers to young talent, again in line with community expectations, and quite significantly, always with an eye to the ensemble quality of each cast.

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149 "Scaring up an alternative venue: Park Plaza Castle is the setting for 'Turn of the Screw,'" by Harlow Robinson, *The Boston Globe*, January 31, 2010, p. N2

150 During the Balme and Ewers administrations, two performances per opera had been the norm (1980-1989); under Moss (at the Emerson Majestic, 1990-1992), there had been two to four performances of each work; in the Emerson Majestic years of the Del Sesto era (1993-1997) there were six of each; moving to the Shubert Del Sesto presented six each through 2001, then added a seventh from then through 2005. Six performances were given of each work from 2006 under Del Sesto and then Nelson, until the reduction to five performances for the 2011-2012 season.

151 The scene shop associated with the American Repertory Theater (A.R.T.) at Harvard University in Cambridge and Costume Works in Somerville are two professional shops that work to specification on BLO's all-new productions.

152 For example, *Clemency*, music by James MacMillan, libretto by Michael Symmons Roberts, North American premiere performed February 6, 7, 9, 10, 2011, at Artists for Humanity Epicenter, was co-commissioned with the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden; Scottish Opera; and Britten Sinfonia; *Rigoletto* (see note 114), performed March 14, 16, 19, 21, 23, 2014, at the Shubert Theatre, was co-produced with Atlanta Opera and Opera Omaha.

The initial offering of the new administration, the 2009-2010 season-opening all new production of *Carmen*,<sup>153</sup> was a scaled-back version of the work in keeping with the limitations of the performance venue, reintroducing the spoken dialogue Bizet and his librettists had created and omitting the frequently employed sung recitatives inserted by composer Ernest Guiraud after the composer's death. Conflicts between love, faith, duty, and class, themes relevant to every era, were explored throughout,<sup>154</sup> offering a fresh look at an old favorite, a historically tried-and-true strategy for the Company.

Continuing another well-established programming practice, that of presenting excellent work developed by other companies, BLO mounted the North American premiere of Welsh National Opera's *Ariadne auf Naxos*,<sup>155</sup> an operatic exploration of the clash between high and low art. The original creative team came to town to install the production, but the singers were freshly cast for the Boston performances and included many "new stars," as Del Sesto had pronounced young singers who were entering a new, higher profile stage of their careers,<sup>156</sup> one of the defining Company characteristics to be continued and expanded under Nelson.

Closing out the season with Mozart's *Idomeneo*,<sup>157</sup> a Company premiere, Nelson's BLO again followed an effective programming trend established by previous administrations, that of presenting the less familiar works of much beloved composers with the expectation of attracting audience members who want something different as well as those who would find the general "sound" of Mozart's music familiar. And artistic choices allowed for another sort of culture clash to be examined with this work, this time the tension between the Enlightenment ideals of the era of the opera's composition and the ancient ideals of the Greek myth from which its story derives. These contrasting value systems constituted the theme to be explored in the production, especially as they each regard the worth of individual human life.<sup>158</sup>

The production of *Idomeneo* also demonstrated a significant cost-cutting strategy, one that would be utilized frequently by the Nelson team – the creative repurposing and recycling of scenic and costume elements. The sets were the work of John Conklin and the costumes of Constance Hoffman, all originally designed and executed for the Glimmerglass Opera production of *Orphée et Eurydice* of 2007, and very successfully redeployed in this opera with which *Orphée* shares a historic and cultural setting.

But between the *Carmen* and *Ariadne* productions, Nelson launched a brand new enterprise, an extraordinary undertaking for an organization working through financially troubled times, the reinstatement of a fourth annual production. However this offering was not an additional mainstage production but rather a highly innovative adjunct to the regular season's subscription series, an attempt to present opera "in new and immersive ways,"<sup>159</sup>

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153 *Carmen*, music by Georges Bizet, libretto by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, performed November 6, 8, 11, 13, 15, 17, 2009, at the Shubert Theatre

154<sup>154</sup> Joint message from the Chair and General & Artistic Director, p. 8, of *Playbill* for Boston Lyric Opera's 2009 production of *Carmen*; see note 153.

155 *Ariadne auf Naxos*, music by Richard Strauss, libretto by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, performed March 12, 14, 17, 19, 21, 23, 2010, at the Shubert Theatre

156 Among these singers were Brandon Jovanovich, Edyta Kulczak, and Rachele Gilmore, who sang for the Metropolitan Opera, and Marjorie Owens of the Semperoper in Dresden. This category of singers is separate from that of Emerging Artists, who are generally in an earlier stage of career building.

157 *Idomeneo*, see note 136.

158 Joint message from the Chair and General & Artistic Director, p. 6 of *Playbill* for Boston Lyric Opera's production of *Idomeneo*, see note 136.

159 Message from the General & Artistic Director in *Playbill* for Boston Lyric Opera's production of *Clemency* (see note 152), presented with *Hagar's Lament*, music by Franz Schubert, poem by Clemens August Schücking, orchestration by David Angus, new English translation by Angus and Bernd Ulken as prologue.

to be called the Opera Annex.<sup>160</sup> The Annex, conceived as a chamber piece staged in a non-traditional venue, a “found space” reconfigured to accommodate and enhance the production, has become a much-anticipated annual event after the initial offering, the February 2010 performances of *The Turn of the Screw*.<sup>161</sup> *The Turn of the Screw* was performed within an edifice called The Castle at Park Plaza, originally built as an armory and opened in 1897, its inauguration contemporaneous almost to the year with the debut of the original Henry James story on which the opera is based. Its neo-gothic interior reflected the mood of the opera so fully that no actual scenery was necessary, only a few carefully-chosen props and lighting schemes. Neither the musical nor dramatic structure of the work as presented differed measurably from what is traditionally seen, but the characteristics of the venue and directorial choices regarding the use of it were most unusual,<sup>162</sup> an expansion of the range of what is possible in Boston, an operatically “venue-challenged” city. The first full season of the Nelson era indeed found BLO “thinking outside the box” and “doing more with less.”



Joyce Castle in BLO's inaugural Opera Annex presentation, *The Turn of the Screw*; projected above from L-R are Rebecca Nash, Kathryn Skemp, Aidan Gent, and Vale Rideout. Photo by Jeffrey Dunn.

In each opera of the first season Nelson's team exhibited the attribute which would become the artistic hallmark of BLO's approach to producing opera: its enduring dedication to maintaining the opera stage as a home for a living, evolving art form, not merely a repository for museum pieces. Every opera performed has been subjected to a thorough preliminary review of all aspects of the work and its performance history, leading to a unique interpretation built upon on a modern psychological probing of the characters and their lives. Even – or especially – works very well known to the opera-going public are afforded careful consideration and meticulous, deliberate artistic configuration. Directorial and other artistic choices furnish the story with a message resonant for modern audiences without automatically resetting the events of the opera in the current era. As Nelson has pointed out, definitive interpretations of operatic and theatrical works

<sup>160</sup> The concept of the Opera Annex and other new productions created by BLO have attracted special dedicated funding from the very start, beginning with a \$1 million challenge grant from an anonymous family foundation and a \$20,000 challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in the first year of the Nelson administration.

<sup>161</sup> *The Turn of the Screw*, music by Benjamin Britten, libretto by Myfanwy Piper after the story by Henry James, performed February 1, 3, 5, 6, 2010, at the Castle at Park Plaza

<sup>162</sup> In addition to the action seen live on stage, other often-contradictory action was streamed live from the roughly textured substructure of the building and projected above the stage, restoring some of the sense of ambiguity of the original story.

do not exist, nor should they, for each new production represents a new telling of the composer's story, a search conducted in a specific time and place for a means of connecting the audience with the universal and timeless elements and emotions contained within the work.<sup>163</sup> This focus, apparent from the very beginning, has added considerable depth to the Company's work.

As BLO has continued to evolve from its origins as a small municipal endeavor, through its long run as an ever-improving regional company, and now as it reaches a significant level of national recognition, Esther Nelson's leadership has proven visionary, in ways even beyond the founding of the Opera Annex, and over and above the powerful, probing interpretation her team affords each work. She and her team have put forth a vigorous effort to frame musical works in fundamentally new ways, as the Company has sought maximum engagement with the shaping of individual operas and with the molding of the future of the operatic art form. A considerable number of the productions offered by the Nelson team have been operas either musically or dramatically reconfigured to a greater or lesser extent, highly original interpretations.<sup>164</sup> Five works have involved direct collaboration with living composers, two of whom were commissioned or co-commissioned to write for BLO;<sup>165</sup> and additionally the Company has commissioned a scaled-down chamber version of an already existing larger work,<sup>166</sup> and a translation of yet another opera.<sup>167</sup> Of course this group is complemented by the less frequently performed versions of well-known operas that the Company has offered,<sup>168</sup> which often represent the composer's own attempt at reconfiguration, and which can deepen an audience's understanding of the work of the composer.

163 General & Artistic Director's Welcome, *Kátya Kabanová*, music by Leoš Janáček, libretto by Vincenc Červinka, based on the play *The Storm* by A.N. Ostrovsky, performed March 13, 15, 18, 20, 22, 2015, at the Shubert Theatre

164 Reconfigured versions of works produced by BLO under Esther Nelson include *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, music by Benjamin Britten, libretto adapted from Shakespeare by Britten and Peter Pears, performed April 29, May 1, 4, 6, 8, 10, 2011, at the Shubert Theatre, in "a smaller string group arrangement of the original 1960 Aldeburgh production," prepared by David Angus, see notes from the General & Artistic Director, p. 6 of *Playbill* for the Boston Lyric Opera's production; *Carmen* (see note 153); *Macbeth*, music by Giuseppe Verdi, libretto by Francesco Maria Piave and Andrea Maffei after William Shakespeare's drama, performed November 4, 6, 9, 11, 13, 2011, at the Shubert Theatre, in a version in which the score was "recrafted" to exclude music and repeats originally designed to cover scene changes but which slows down the momentum and is unnecessary in "a swift modern production," see Music Director's Notes, p. 18 of *Playbill* for the Boston Lyric Opera production; *The Magic Flute* (see note 125); *I Puritani*, music by Vincenzo Bellini, libretto by Carlo Pepoli, performed May 2, 4, 7, 9, 11, 2014, at the Shubert Theatre, in a version with a dramatically altered ending; a more recent (new) production of *Don Giovanni*, music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte, performed May 1, 3, 6, 8, 10, 2015, at the Shubert Theatre, in a version that eliminated the epilogue; and *The Merry Widow*, music by Franz Lehár, book by Lillian Groag after the original by Viktor Léon and Leo Stein, with English Lyrics by John Wells, performed April 29, May 1, 4, 6, 8, 2016, at the Shubert Theatre, in which the new book made a statement about Europe on the eve of World War I, an entirely non-traditional setting and approach to the work; also the Opera Annex productions of *The After-Image*, music by Richard Beaudoin, libretto by the composer after Rainer Maria Rilke, Friedrich Rückert, and William Henry Fox Talbot, performed as prologue to and commentary on *The Emperor of Atlantis, or Death Quits*, music by Viktor Ullmann, play in one act by Petr Kien, edited from the sources and adapted for the stage by Henning Brauel, performed February 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 2011, at Boston Center for the Arts; *Clemency* (see note 152) presented with *Hagar's Lament* (see note 159) as prologue; and *Lizzie Borden*, a chamber version in seven scenes, music by Jack Beeson, libretto by Kenward Elmslie, orchestration by Todd Bashore, dramaturgy by John Conklin, presented November 20, 22, 23, 24, 2013, at The Castle at Park Plaza.

165 *The After-Image* (see note 164) as prologue to and commentary upon *The Emperor of Atlantis, or Death Quits* (see note 164) was commissioned by BLO; *Clemency* (see note 152) was co-commissioned by BLO; *The Lighthouse*, music and libretto by Peter Maxwell Davies, performed February 8, 9, 11, 12, 2012, at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, involved extensive consultation with the composer; *The Inspector* (see note 125) brought John Musto to town for participation in community engagement programs as well as work with the creative team; and Philip Glass consulted with the creative team for the production of *In the Penal Colony*, music by Glass, libretto by Rudolph Wurlitzer, based on the story by Franz Kafka, performed November 11, 12, 14, 15, 2015, at the Cyclorama at the Boston Center for the Arts.

166 *Lizzie Borden*, see note 164.

167 *Le Vin Herbé*, music by Frank Martin, based on the novel *Tristan et Iseut* by Joseph Bédier, performed in English translation by Hugh Macdonald as *The Love Potion*, November 19, 20, 22, 23, 2014, at Temple Ohabei Shalom

168 *Don Giovanni*, see note 137; *The Flying Dutchman*, music and libretto by Richard Wagner, U.S. premiere of the 1841 critical edition by Isolde Vetter, performed April 26, 28, May 1, 3, 5, 2013, at the Shubert Theatre.

Two especially important examples of innovative attempts to dynamically shape the impact of a work on its audiences were the 2011 Annex production of *The Emperor of Atlantis, or Death Quits*,<sup>169</sup> presented with the newly commissioned *The After-Image*<sup>170</sup> as prologue, and the 2013 Annex pairing of Schubert's *Hagar's Lament*<sup>171</sup> with *Clemency*,<sup>172</sup> a BLO co-commission.

*The Emperor*, created by Ullmann and Kien in 1943-1944 while they were interned in the Nazi concentration camp at Terezín, makes an important statement about the moral and ethical responsibility of the individual<sup>173</sup> with relevance for modern audiences that was greatly enhanced in performance by the work being joined with the Beaudoin *After-Image*. Designed as both prologue to and reflection upon the Ullmann/Kien work, *The After-Image* provides a modern day lens for viewing the past from the point of view of the daughter of a participant in World War II, now deceased,<sup>174</sup> effective as both framing and interpretive device.

In presenting the North American premiere of MacMillan's *Clemency*, a major co-commissioning by BLO, the Company created its own staging and preceded the MacMillan piece with Schubert's *Hagar's Lament* as prelude. Joining with MacMillan and librettist Symmons Roberts, BLO's David Angus discovered musical as well as thematic links between the two and worked to build additional musical bridges.<sup>175</sup> BLO then released a CD of this musical pairing, the first commercially produced recording in Company history.<sup>176</sup> Like the juxtaposing of *The After-Image* with *The Emperor of Atlantis*, the pairing of *Hagar's Lament* with *Clemency* succeeded in finding resonance between the work of a living composer and that of one whose death had occurred many decades ago. By such means BLO has demonstrated its commitment to presenting opera as a living art form.

Despite audience behavior suggestive of an age of resistance to the less familiar, Nelson has sought as well to spark Boston audiences' appreciation for a broad range of opera. To date during her term twelve works have marked their BLO debut<sup>177</sup> and seven other works have reappeared in new productions after an absence of between ten and 20 years from BLO stages,<sup>178</sup> all these operas having been scrutinized with the fresh set of eyes her team characteristically focuses on each work it presents and prepared with the usual

169 *The Emperor of Atlantis, or Death Quits*, see note 164.

170 *The After-Image*, see note 164.

171 *Hagar's Lament*, see note 159.

172 *Clemency*, see note 152.

173 Message from the General & Artistic Director from the *Playbill*, p. 7, for the Boston Lyric Opera production of *The Emperor of Atlantis, or Death Quits*, and its prologue, *The After-Image*, see note 164.

174 Program notes from the *Playbill*, p. 18, for the Boston Lyric Opera production of *The Emperor of Atlantis, or Death Quits* and its prologue, *The After-Image*, see note 164.

175 Message from the General & Artistic Director from the *Playbill* for Boston Lyric Opera's production of *Clemency* and its prologue, *Hagar's Lament*, p.10, see note 152 and note 159. In the same message Nelson notes the unique community partnership established in the course of producing this edition of the Opera Annex. Youth artists of Artists for Humanity, whose Epicenter building became the performance venue, participated in the creative process with BLO professional staff, resulting in valuable learning opportunities for young people who are considering careers in the arts.

176 MacMillan, James. *Clemency*. Michelle Trainor (*Hagar*), Christine Abraham (*Sarah*), Neal Ferreira, Samuel Levine, David McFerrin (*Three Travellers*), David Kravitz (*Abraham*), Boston Lyric Opera Orchestra, cond. David Angus. BIS BIS-2129 (one CD), released November 19, 2014.

177 Works debuted at BLO under Esther Nelson are *Idomeneo* (see note 136); *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (see note 164); *The Emperor of Atlantis, or Death Quits* (see note 164); Verdi's *Macbeth* (see note 164); *The Lighthouse* (see note 165); *The Inspector* (see note 125); *Clemency* (see note 152); *Lizzie Borden* (see note 164); *The Love Potion* (see note 167); *Kátya Kabanová*, (see note 163); *In the Penal Colony* (see note 165); and *The Merry Widow* (see note 164).

178 Operas recently returned to BLO's stage are *The Turn of the Screw* (see note 161); *Ariadne auf Naxos* (see note 155); *Agrippina*, music by George Frideric Handel, libretto by Vincenzo Grimani, performed March 11, 13, 16, 18, 20, 22, 2011, at the Shubert Theatre; *The Flying Dutchman* (see note 167) [previous BLO presentation not staged]; *The Magic Flute* (see note 124); *I Puritani* (see note 168); and *Werther*, music by Jules Massenet, libretto by Édouard Blau, Paul Milliet, and Georges Hartmann, based on *The Sorrows of Young Werther* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, performed March 11, 13, 16, 18, 20, 2016, at the Shubert Theatre.

attention to detail. A striking example of the potential result of such diligence is a discovery that occurred during preparation for Massenet's *Werther*,<sup>179</sup> BLO's penultimate offering of the 2015-2016 season. Music Director David Angus had determined that the composer's autograph version of the orchestral score had been made available online for public use. In studying it, he discovered three vocal lines for Werther and Charlotte near the end of the piece, at the emotional climax of the opera, that don't appear in the published orchestral score, nor in any known printed version of the vocal score. Musicologists and Massenet scholars were consulted – no one could find an instance of these lines ever having been sung onstage before. With the collaboration of the artists the decision was made to include them in BLO's performances. If this wasn't a historical first – although it very well seems to have been – at the very least Boston audiences were treated to a rare and deeply moving vocal moment and an insight into what must have been the composer's earliest thoughts on his characters' relationship.

While continuing to meet all the perennial challenges that producers of opera in Boston must face – balancing the range of repertory offered each season, building new audiences, maintaining a unique Boston identity, becoming an increasingly essential part of the city's artistic life, broadening and deepening its funding community, all while performing in an inadequate mainstage venue – BLO has made the local<sup>180</sup> and the national arts communities<sup>181</sup> take notice of the quality of its artistry. And given the grave financial uncertainty of the national economy during her first few years at the helm, it is most remarkable that Esther Nelson has been able to move the Company steadily forward. But by building on the firm foundation she had inherited from the Del Sesto era and never losing sight of what had already made BLO distinctive and successful, she has guided the Company to ever rising levels of artistic accomplishment. Additionally and quite significantly, she has been effectively stewarding the evolution and growth of the institution itself that is BLO.

In both recognition and furtherance of these efforts, the Calderwood Charitable Foundation presented BLO with a gift of \$5 million in April of 2015, the largest single institutional gift the Company had ever received.<sup>182</sup> Her position now endowed, Esther Nelson had become Boston Lyric Opera's Stanford Calderwood General & Artistic Director.

Gradually during Nelson's term BLO had been turning a new face toward the public, seeking greater engagement and dialogue, refining its image and its brand in ways that are both symbolic and functional. First came a new streamlined logo in the 2010-2011 season, a bold and vigorous form. The same season saw the creation of the Orfeo Society, a fresh way of recognizing major donors, offering them privileges over and above those granted to subscribers, including opportunities to socialize with artists, staff, and each other. There followed in 2013-2014 a shift away from a reliance on *Playbill* to the publication and distribution of the Company's own performance programs, wherein all the information, articles, and images would pertain directly to the opera, unlike the *Playbill* format, where the contents had to be shared with numerous other performing arts groups and commercial backers. Also in 2013-2014 BLO began scheduling its annual fundraising galas to coincide with the season's Opening Night, allowing the Company to showcase its work to gala attendees through the performance that immediately followed the dinner portion of the evening.

179 *Werther*, see note 178.

180 See, for example, among many other reviews, praise for BLO's casting, conducting, directing, choral work, visuals, in "Darkening 'Dream': Boston Lyric Opera presents Britten's take on Shakespeare," by Jeremy Eichler, *The Boston Globe*, April 30, 2011, p. B12; "Boston Lyric Opera's 'Dutchman' brings Wagner back to Boston," by Jeremy Eichler, *The Boston Globe*, April 29, 2013, p. G3; "Lyric Opera offers energetic and traditional 'Rigoletto,'" by Jeremy Eichler, *The Boston Globe*, March 16, 2014, p. B12.

181 See similar praise in, for example, "Boston Lyric Opera: Agrippina," posted by Susan on March 20, 2011, viewed on [www.operabetty.com](http://www.operabetty.com); "Oppressor's Tale, Written in Oppression," by Allan Kozinn, published in *The New York Times*, February 2, 2011, viewed on [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com); Review: "The Inspector," by Kalen Ratzlaff, *Opera News*, August 2012, vol. 77, no. 2, viewed on [www.operanews.com](http://www.operanews.com); "Boston Lyric Opera finds new ways to break hearts in 'Madama Butterfly,'" by Susan Blood, November 6, 2012, viewed on [bachtrack.com](http://bachtrack.com).

182 "Boston Lyric Opera receives \$5 million grant," by David Weininger, *The Boston Globe*, April 29, 2015, p. B12



With the 2015-2016 season came the creation of a new bi-annual magazine called *Coda*, designed to be mailed to subscribers and other friends of the Company prior to performances. Coupled with the new-style programs it offered opera-goers an unprecedented range and depth of information designed to enhance and inform their experience of the Company's work.

The most notable change in BLO's updated interface with the public, however, would be the implementation of a completely redesigned website, proffered midseason in 2015-2016, one greatly more responsive to users of all types of electronic devices, more visually attractive, and offering superior connectedness to the Company. The inauguration of the new website would correspond perfectly with, and ultimately support, the most strikingly momentous change the Company would make since its 1998 move to the Shubert Theatre – the non-renewal of its contract with the Shubert and its parent company, Citi Performing Arts Center.

For an extended period before the contract expired, BLO and Citi had been trying to negotiate a new arrangement, one that would be of greatest possible benefit to both parties, although artistically the relationship had not been an ideal fit for a number of years. BLO productions had long since outgrown the performance-related spaces of the Shubert Theatre – stage, backstage, wing space, orchestra pit. Audience complaints about comfort and amenities had grown more frequent and more numerous as well, but there existed little or no possibility of improvement in those regards. Thus financial and business aspects of the contract remained the only areas in which change could occur, and there were a number of provisions in the contract that did not work to BLO's advantage. For instance, associated costs greatly limited the amount of time a work could actually be rehearsed in the theater, forcing the Company to lease rehearsal space elsewhere. And perhaps most significantly, the contract as written did not allow BLO to manage and control its own single ticket sales, a situation that severely impacted its ability to maximize marketing efforts and contact with potential future subscribers. When more advantageous conditions in the contract could not be negotiated, BLO made a bold move – it opted not to renew.<sup>183</sup>

When the termination of the relationship with the Shubert Theatre was announced, BLO acknowledged that while there were possibilities under consideration, there was no new accommodation waiting on the immediate horizon.<sup>184</sup> Nevertheless Company leadership was certain that the time was right for a change of such magnitude. Where some saw risk, BLO saw opportunity. That which frightened others in the community excited Esther Nelson and her Board of Directors. With the exercise of installing seven Opera Annex productions in non-traditional performance spaces had come the knowledge and confidence that now underlay the Company's ability to stride forth unflinchingly, prepared for a nomadic existence if necessary, all in the name of artistic and institutional growth.

One reason for such an optimistic outlook was the heightened and intensified relationship between the arts community and city government that had begun with the mayoral election of 2013. During the administration of Thomas Menino<sup>185</sup> there had been much positive growth within the arts community that had merited his support and approval,<sup>186</sup> but critics complained about the lack of long range planning and his project-specific approach to the arts.<sup>187</sup> From the inception in 2014 of his administration, and even during his campaign for office, Mayor Martin J. Walsh, Menino's successor, had stressed his belief in the importance of the arts to the life of the city and in the need for support and advocacy from City Hall.<sup>188</sup> Signaling his commitment to the arts community,

<sup>183</sup> "BLO to part ways with Citi Shubert," by Jeremy Eichler, *The Boston Globe*, October 10, 2015, p. A12

<sup>184</sup> General & Artistic Director's Welcome in program notes for BLO's production of *In the Penal Colony*, see note 165.

<sup>185</sup> Thomas M. Menino was mayor of Boston from 1993 through 2013.

<sup>186</sup> See note 80 for BLO connection.

<sup>187</sup> "Walsh hits right chords with Cultural leaders: Details awaited for arts agenda," by Geoff Edgers in *The Boston Globe*, December 5, 2013, p. A1

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid*

Walsh had appointed Joyce Linehan, an arts public relations consultant who had served as his spokeswoman during the mayoral campaign, to his transition team; and after taking office he named her Chief of Policy.<sup>189</sup> In a further demonstration of his intent, he created a Cabinet-level position entitled Chief of Arts and Culture. Under Menino the office of the Arts, Tourism, and Special Events had been a broad umbrella grouping, but now the arts community would have special advocacy and a much stronger voice in city government.<sup>190</sup> In September of 2014 Walsh appointed Julie Burros, who since 2000 had been Chicago's director of cultural planning, to the position, with a mandate to create a cultural master plan for the city and eventually a financial plan to support it.<sup>191</sup>

However, BLO's announcement in October of 2015 that its 2016-2017 season's performances would be presented in an as-yet unidentified venue coincided with the public disclosure of other major performing arts venue issues within the city. Emerson College, owner of the historic Colonial Theatre,<sup>192</sup> was considering converting the building into a student dining area. Boston University announced its plan to sell its Boston University Theatre<sup>193</sup> to a private developer, potentially leaving the Huntington Theatre Company homeless. And in a twist, Citigroup Inc. terminated its sponsorship of the Citi Performing Arts Center, which of course included the Shubert Theatre.<sup>194</sup>

Shortly after this shifting of the landscape of performance venues<sup>195</sup> was revealed, The Boston Foundation<sup>195</sup> released a just-completed study it had commissioned on the topic of arts funding in Boston. In it, TDC, a consulting and research firm, reported the results of its comparison of Boston's non-profit sector to those of ten other metropolitan areas. In essence it determined that while Boston's arts scene was vibrant and thriving, there had been a relatively weak level of institutional financial support, and that the three largest cultural organizations – the Museum of Fine Arts, the Boston Symphony, and WGBH public television station – accounted for “more than 40 percent of all dollars spent in the cultural sector.”<sup>196</sup> Relating these statements to the fortunes of BLO and other mid-sized cultural groups, the report suggested that heavy reliance on earned income, such as ticket sales, can make companies risk-averse, strategically programming only known best sellers.<sup>197</sup> Calling to mind past criticisms of BLO's repertoire and planning choices as stodgy and unadventurous, but contrasting with the Company's current sound, creative, and vibrant status, this conclusion of the report underscores how deftly and successfully BLO has been steered by its leaders, entering its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary season in the best fiscal and artistic shape of its history.

At this crossroads moment in the Boston arts community's direction and in BLO's very own course, the Company also underwent a major internal change in leadership as Steven Akin, who had held the position of Board Chair for ten years, stepped down in accordance with his plans to retire and relocate out of state.

To honor the extraordinary leadership and generous support that Steve Akin and his wife, Jane, also a long-time member of the Board of Directors, had provided to BLO over many years, the Company proclaimed a tribute to them at its Opening Night gala of the 2015-2016 season. Henceforth BLO's roster of emerging artists would be known as Jane and Steven Akin Emerging Artists.<sup>198</sup>

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189 “Mayor fills his first full day,” by Andrew Ryan and Wesley Lowery, in *The Boston Globe*, p. A1

190 “Cultural leader in Chicago to be Boston arts, chief; Burros to draw blueprint, vows a welcoming climate,” by Joel Brown, *The Boston Globe*, September, 24, 2014, p.A1

191 Ibid

192 Colonial Theatre, see note 61.

193 Boston University Theatre is an 890 seat facility on Huntington Avenue near Symphony Hall. The theater and two adjacent buildings that accommodate scenery shops and storage have been owned by the University for 62 years.

194 “BLO to part ways with Citi Shubert,” by Jeremy Eichler, op. cit.

195 The Boston Foundation is a 100 year old community philanthropic organization.

196 “Boston arts scene gets little institutional funding,” by Malcolm Gay, *The Boston Globe*, January 20, 2016, p. A1

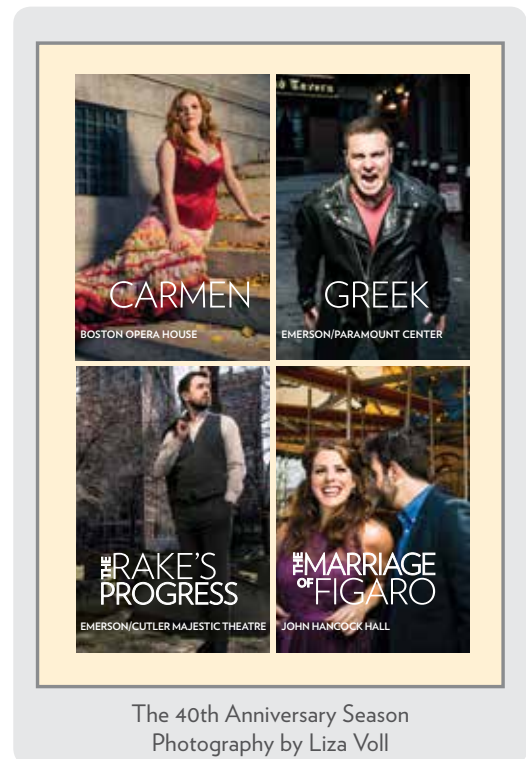
197 Ibid

198 Program notes, BLO production of *La Bohème*, music by Giacomo Puccini, libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, October 2, 4, 7, 9, 11, 2015, at the Shubert Theatre

On October 21, 2015, BLO announced that Michael Puzo had been elected the next Chairman of the Company's Board of Directors, succeeding Akin, who had held the position since 2006. Puzo, a trust and estate attorney with "a deep history of supporting Boston-area organizations, particularly music and opera,"<sup>199</sup> had been a member of the Board since 2010. He vowed to continue the upward artistic and institutional growth curve that had characterized the Akin years,<sup>200</sup> and made it known that he was proud of the Company's resolve to move beyond the Shubert Theatre.<sup>201</sup>

As the 2015-2016 season progressed with no 2016-2017 venue information being made public, much speculation and some anxiety arose in the arts community. Identifying a future home for BLO and determining the fate of performance venues such as the Colonial Theatre and the Boston University Theatre were related issues in the minds of many, part of the pervasive problem that affected numerous performing arts organizations of all sizes. Finally, in March of 2016, BLO made the much-anticipated announcement, and a stunning one it was – the next season's four operas would each be performed in a different venue.<sup>202</sup>

What's more, the opening work of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary season would be performed in the Opera House,<sup>203</sup> once the domain of Sarah Caldwell, now home almost exclusively to the Boston Ballet and Broadway Across America, an organization that presents touring Broadway shows. There had been no opera performances there in over 25 years, since Sarah Caldwell's last locally produced opera had closed. Although the Opera House had seemed a logical venue choice for BLO for a number of years, there had never been available dates that could work with the Company's schedule. But seizing the opportunity that now presented itself, BLO has chosen to open the season with *Carmen*,<sup>204</sup> in an American version of a Spanish staging, a co-production with the San Francisco Opera. In addition to the historical significance of bringing opera back to the Opera House after a prolonged absence, this marks the first time BLO has partnered with a company of the stature of the San Francisco Opera, a company whose productions' grandeur of scale would be too large for the Shubert Theatre. Thus BLO's 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Season will open with an unmistakable reference to Esther Nelson's vision and hopes for the future of opera in Boston.



The season's other repertoire choices and corresponding venues are no less inspired. Again matching opera and performance space for scale, the Company will offer two brand new productions in the spring,

199 Boston Lyric Opera media release, October 21, 2015

200 Ibid

201 Chairman's Welcome, program notes for BLO's production of *In the Penal Colony*, see note 165.

202 "New BLO season will put opera back in the Opera House," by Jeremy Eichler, *The Boston Globe*, March 24, 2016, p. B12

203 The Opera House, see note 51.

204 *Carmen*, music by Georges Bizet, libretto by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy; production by Calixto Bieito, revival director Joan Anton Rechi

*The Rake's Progress*<sup>205</sup> at the Emerson/Cutler Majestic Theatre<sup>206</sup> and *The Marriage of Figaro*<sup>207</sup> in John Hancock Hall at the Back Bay Events Center.<sup>208</sup> The 2016-2017 Opera Annex will feature the first major US production of Mark-Anthony Turnage's *Greek*,<sup>209</sup> to be performed in November at the Emerson/Paramount Center.<sup>210</sup>

In a strangely poetic way BLO will be shaping its future and that of the operatic art form in Boston by revisiting the settings of some of the most successful operatic productions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sarah Caldwell's Opera Company of Boston at the Opera House, the Peter Sellars/Craig Smith-led Boston Opera Theater's production of *The Marriage of Figaro* at the Colonial Theatre, BLO's own numerous productions at the Emerson/Cutler Majestic Theatre from 1989 to 1998, even its family performances at John Hancock Hall – BLO is embracing and celebrating the past as it creates the future.

Pursuing artistic and institutional growth while maintaining continuity with its historical ideals is perhaps the greatest source of the strength that the Company has demonstrated repeatedly in the face of adversity. It has adapted continuously to changing times, but has never lost sight of its original goals. This approach has certainly characterized the Nelson era. With a clear vision of what she hoped to accomplish from the outset of her administration – presenting thoughtful interpretations of works from all eras and exploring their relevance to the present by engaging highly accomplished and exciting artists to bring them to life – the Company has consistently reached and grown under her direction. Along the way Nelson has picked up multiple strands of community connection to weave into an ever-stronger Boston identity for the Company. BLO is attaining the desired status of iconic civic institution worthy of widespread community support through its stellar performances and community engagement offerings, through its longevity, now unrivaled by that of any other opera company in Boston history, and through the professionalism of its Board and management, which exists to a degree unprecedented in Boston opera circles.

BLO continually strives to answer all the critical voices it has always heard calling out in its direction, voices demanding that it be innovative without risking financial stability, that it remain true to its Boston roots without compromising excellence, that it prove Boston to be an “opera city.” In 1992 as the entire opera scene in Boston, and BLO with it, underwent massive change by means of institutional reorganization, a critic sermonized on the theme that any Boston opera company that would dare to view itself as a worthy successor to Sarah Caldwell's Opera Company of Boston or to compare itself to the short-lived paragon of excellence he found in the Boston Opera Theater would have to “present work that [is] both distinctively Bostonian and world-class.”<sup>211</sup> In 2016 it can be said that Boston Lyric Opera has arrived at that point and perhaps has proved, as Aesop opined in his telling of the fable of the Hare and the Tortoise, that slow and steady wins the race.

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205 *The Rake's Progress*, music by Igor Stravinsky, libretto by W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman, last performed by BLO in the 1986-1987 season

206 Emerson/Cutler Majestic Theatre, BLO's home from 1989 to 1998; see page 12.

207 *The Marriage of Figaro*, music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte, last performed by BLO in the 2006-2007 season

208 John Hancock Hall is an 800-1,100 seat auditorium (depending on configuration of stage and orchestra pit) within a 1947 Art Deco style skyscraper. When Opera New England served as BLO's outreach and education division, it performed one hour versions of popular operas for families and school groups there; see page 26.

209 *Greek*, music by Mark-Anthony Turnage, based on Steven Berkoff's stage play of the same title, libretto adapted by Mark-Anthony Turnage and Jonathan Moore

210 The Paramount Center originally opened in 1923 as a movie theatre. It fell into decline, then was purchased by Emerson College and reopened in 2008 as a 550 seat theater within a complex of performance and teaching spaces.

211 “Lyric's welcome move toward peace on the opera front,” by Richard Dyer, *The Boston Globe*, February 9, 1992, p. B34



## JANE PISCIOTTOLI PAPA

A dedicated, lifelong supporter of the greater Boston arts and music community, Jane Pisciotoli Papa was born in Boston, raised in Weymouth, and now resides in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She earned her BS in Education at Bridgewater State College and her MS in Child Study at the Eliot-Pearson School of Tufts University, and subsequently served as an educator in the Quincy Public Schools district for 36 years, teaching Kindergarten; she has been retired for 11 years. Ms. Papa has been a BLO subscriber since 1990, a Volunteer since 2005, a member of the Board of Overseers since 2012 and also serves on BLO's Community Engagement Committee.

An opera lover since 1970, Ms. Papa met her future husband, Cosmo Papa, volunteering for Sarah Caldwell's Opera Company of Boston.

In September of 2016, BLO appointed her as the first Honorary Historian of the Company.

