



opera.ca

the voice of opera in Canada / la voix de l'opéra au Canada

Charting our Civic Impact



Strategic Plan
2016-2019

CONTEXT

Opera.ca is the collective voice of opera in Canada, offering membership and affiliation to producing opera companies, teaching institutions, businesses and individuals. Coast to coast, there are currently fifteen professional opera company members in operation. There is an opera company serving almost every major city in Canada from coast to coast, and in some cities, several.

Since beginning as a full-fledged NASO in 2001, Opera.ca has represented the sector, guided by a set of strategic priorities that established the association's service commitment and role in the environment. This start-up period was also marked by an infusion of 2.5 million dollars into the sector for the development of new works through the Canadian Opera Creation Fund. In 2012, a new strategic plan, *Relevance and Resilience* was adopted with a strategic thrust of developing our collaborative capacity and strengthening our networks.

Building on and emerging from the work of *Relevance & Resilience*, we began the consultative process with the sector for a new plan in February 2015 in Victoria, followed by in-person meetings in Washington, DC and Banff. Participants in the process included a diverse mix of staff, board, and artistic leadership and artists, providing thoughtful insights and ideas, the findings of which helped to shape this new strategic plan.

The development of *Charting our Civic Impact* was overseen by a strategy committee consisting of board members, regular members, and the professional leadership of Opera.ca. It is deliberately brief to be reflective of our limited resources as well as the rapidly changing environment.

The close and reciprocal relationship between Opera.ca and OPERA America means similar strategic priorities are reflected in each others' plans, as issues affecting the field in Canada are not significantly distinct from that of North America, or the world.

THE CHANGING ENVIRONMENT FOR OPERA IN CANADA

The arts exist for public good, a social contract that makes us a part of the charitable sector. However, there are many drivers of change in Canada that are dramatically affecting the relationship between the arts and the public we serve.

As Canada's demography becomes more diverse, opera companies must become more reflective of this growing diversity both onstage and off. As technology advances in leaps and bounds, Opera, once the original multi-media experience, has not well integrated technology into the dissemination, engagement and creation of the art form. A quick search on the internet for Canadian opera reveals a telling lack of visibility for Canadian opera content, as internet and mobile internet access continues to grow. User expectations of free online content make increasing Canadian opera content online a formidable challenge.

Developing and growing audiences is challenging for opera companies in a highly competitive field that includes a multitude of entertainment options including other live art forms, sports and increasingly, staying home to watch Netflix. With decreasing leisure dollars, Canadians are more careful than ever about where they spend their discretionary income.

Opera, traditionally a Eurocentric art form, is under increased pressure to justify, quantify, and measure our public value and impact that we make to communities and the wider public, and we must also understand deeply the motivations that bring our audiences to us, and to be able to deliver on that. What matters to Canadians will matter to government.

Regardless of the outcome of the October 2015 federal election, balancing the federal budget will be the priority of any elected party. Support for the Canada Council for the Arts which provides crucial operating funding to the sector, has been flat lined for nearly a decade as labour costs and inflation rise. Advocacy efforts for increased funding to the arts can succeed only when the arts are seen as necessity, not a 'nicety' by Canadians.

All of this points to increasing our civic impact.

Contributed, Earned and Public Revenues

There is no denying these are challenging times for many sectors, not just opera in Canada.

A decade or more of rising costs due to inflation, combined with relatively flat-lined public funding means opera companies must rely more on contributed and earned revenues.

Companies have reported shifts in audience buying behaviours which include eschewing subscriptions in favour of last minute buying and single ticket sales. Companies have responded by managing earned revenues with dynamic pricing and house scaling, but many report that ticket prices have become just too high or that there is no more elasticity in the pricing structure. As a result, earned revenues have become very unpredictable, and audience attendance is following a declining trend.

Opera companies have excelled at raising levels of individual donations through major gifts, planned giving and endowments. Many of these donors however, are over the age of 50, and with the looming transfer of intergenerational wealth, the younger generation may not demonstrate the same level of philanthropic support for the arts as their parents.

On the balance sheet, most companies are not well-capitalized. Increased focus on earned revenue tends to make companies risk averse, they can't afford to not make goal on box office. They can't afford a 'moderate' success.

Other Realities

Canada is well-known for its high-quality training and development of opera artists but there is an imbalance between the number of highly-trained and talented artists emerging from Canadian training institutions and the ability of the sector to absorb and create opportunities for them. With limited performing opportunities, many young artists create their own opera companies, contributing to the growing trend of start-up and indie opera companies. These new companies are transforming the sector and infusing it with fresh energy and new ideas.

The Met HD Broadcasts, in play for nearly ten years now, continue to keep companies grappling with its effects, both beneficial and disruptive.

Audience demand for fresh, exciting productions has increased, augmented by raised expectations from Met broadcasts. The expense of developing a new production is out of reach for many markets and there is extremely limited availability of quality rentals in sets & costumes. This is somewhat being counter-balanced with increased co-production activity, but not every production will have a partner.

THEMES

Two key themes emerged from our consultations:

1. Influence (our relationship to the public), and
2. Service (our relationship to the sector).

This is reflective of Opera.ca's dual-facing role of representing the sector to the public while providing services and support to members that strengthens the sector.

Growing Influence

Greater understanding of the art form can be achieved by deep listening to our communities and what they value, and by connecting the work we do to civic priorities that contribute to betterment of society.

We have an opportunity to positively affect public opinion about the art form of opera. This opportunity ranges from addressing and correcting misconceptions and barriers to discovery, as well as activating our fandom to share their love of opera.

Strengthening Service

Opera.ca has an important role to play in helping opera companies strengthen their civic impact through communities of practice and sharing of best practices.

VISION

As a result of Opera.ca's work, the art form and business of opera has become the most relevant and artistically and financially vibrant cultural field in Canada.

MISSION

Opera.ca is the national association for opera in Canada offering membership to opera companies, businesses, teaching institutions and individuals. With a strategic focus on professional opera companies, it seeks to create and sustain the conditions that will make the art form an integral part of Canadian life.

CORE SERVICE COMMITMENT

Opera.ca is committed to:

- ▶ Continuously improving its services as a communications hub from Opera.ca to members, the public and stakeholders, and between members;
- ▶ Acting as a convening body for the sector to come together
- ▶ Advocating at the federal level for and on behalf of the opera sector.
- ▶ Delivering an evolving program of member services to the sector that responds the changes in the field;
- ▶ Working collaboratively with other arts service organizations to maximize impact.

GOAL

Lay the groundwork for increasing opera's civic impact and create an environment where increased funding is viable

STRATEGY # 1(2016-2017)

Develop a sector-wide framework to measure and evaluate opera's civic impact.

ACTIONS

1. A) Establish a Civic Engagement Committee
B) Establish theory of change or logic model
2. Develop an understanding of public value as it relates to opera currently through research.
3. Establish key qualitative benchmarks for measuring value, engagement and awareness of opera.
4. Partner with Opera America's Civic Engagement Community

STRATEGY #2 (2017-2019)

Disseminate best practices throughout the sector using the established framework for civic impact

ACTIONS

1. Develop a plan for Collective action that responds to the outcomes/learning from the study
2. Share benchmarks widely with sector to use locally in civic engagement building activities
3. Send a call for case studies of best practice in civic engagement
4. Establish a Civic Engagement Community of Practice
5. Re-develop website to highlight and promote positive stories of opera's civic engagement activities
6. Implement, Evaluate, Measure, Share.