

CENTER STAGE

THE METROPOLITAN OPERA

SOURCES: Storytelling is one of humanity's fundamental needs. And through the operatic art, stories old and new are lent heightened drama and vitality, brought to life through the immediacy of body and voice

A TALE OF TWO OPERAS

REPLENISHING A RICH REPERTOIRE



Peter Gelb, general manager of the Metropolitan Opera.

In the summer, after the end of the Metropolitan Opera's last season, the general manager, Peter Gelb, was in Europe seeing opera. "During the Met season, I can't travel much," he says, "because my job involves overseeing all aspects of the operation, from artistic to business and fund-raising, marketing — everything. I actually have a clause in my contract that says I have to be available on a 24/7 basis, so I'm like a doctor on call."

The break between seasons, however, allows him to see performances in the great houses of Europe and meet with the Met's partner organizations. "Much of what we put on our stage is initiated in New York, but some of it is a result of collaborations with European companies," he says. "We have a number of them in various stages of gestation, whether productions that will premiere in Europe or that already have, or are planned for the future. So this is my chance to meet the directors and designers, and hear singers, and plot out the future of the Met artistically."

New productions making their debut at the Met in 2017-18 illustrate how the house brings together the international teams of the best that the opera world has to offer, and also how it develops its season with respect to the paired objectives of representing the art form's historical repertoire and expanding it with new work. When the new season was announced in February, Gelb said: "We're replenishing our core repertoire with new productions of 'Così fan tutte,' 'Norma,' and 'Tosca,' while stretching our horizons with 'The Exterminating Angel' and 'Cendrillon.' It's a season of repertory favorites and stimulating rarities, with something for neophytes and aficionados alike."

Elaborating on the choices involved in planning and conception, particularly with regard to new productions of "Tosca," by David McVicar, and "Così fan tutte," by Phelim McDermott, Gelb said: "As far as storytelling is

essence of the very dramatic story that it contains. It's not a happy piece by any means. It's a very dark and sinister story about evil and good, and courage and art."

The setting reflected that and was "very grim looking." The audience missed the opulence of Zeffirelli's version, he says: "So what I've learned is that it's possible to be more modern, and theatrical and dramatic, but still give the beauty that the audience wants, so that they can be seduced into what the director has to say."

McVicar's production, designed by John MacFarlane, does just that. It has the beauty of the Roman settings, says Gelb, "but they're much more dramatic. It's set on a steep rake, so the audience has the sense that they're almost inside the set, because it's looming up to them, being on this steep angle. So, hopefully, we'll all have our cake and eat it, too, because it will look beautiful, but it will have the dramatic energy that the Zeffirelli production lacked. We'll see."

"Così fan tutte" takes another approach, setting the story in the New York beachside amusement park Coney Island of the 1950s. McDermott chose it, though, to serve the needs of telling the story. Gelb explains: "The greatest single challenge for a director of 'Così' is to create an atmosphere of sufficient fantasy to make the big switch in the opera plausible — when the two male lovers go off to war and return with a test of loyalty of their girlfriends, changing identities and swapping roles with each other. The audience has to somehow buy this. I think in more realistic productions of 'Così' that I've seen it's very hard to accept that, because you wonder, why don't the girls know? Why don't the soprano and the mezzo-soprano immediately recognize that their wayward boyfriends are not who they're supposed to be? So I think the director's challenge — working with the designer — is to create a hallucinatory world where things are not what they may seem to be and set up the idea that there can be unusual swaps of personalities. By setting the action in this sideshow at Coney Island in the '50s, I think that Phelim McDermott, the director, has successfully accomplished this changing of normal perception."

These types of choices — whether to reflect historical precedence or offer a fresh vision in terms of location and time period — are particularly felt in the staging of the great lyrical repertory. "What makes opera different from theater, in general, is that the bulk of the operatic canon relies upon new productions of core repertory pieces," says Gelb. "It doesn't mean we don't do new things — we do — but most of it is new productions of old pieces that have been produced previously hundreds, if not thousands, of times. It's sort of the same challenge that a Shakespeare company has. We're reproducing work that has been seen many, many times before, which makes it much more creatively challenging for a director. In the same way that directing a new production of 'Hamlet' is very challenging for a director, directing a new production of 'Tosca' or 'Così' is challenging."

What counts, he says, is the commitment to the work itself, and to communicating that to the audience. "If an audience can't understand what they're seeing, if a piece is so deconstructed and turned upside down that it doesn't bear any resemblance to what the story is, and you have to read some accompanying essay and an extensive statement from the director to understand what it is they're trying to say — that, to me, doesn't belong on the stage, on any stage. To be true to the story and still be creatively brilliant: that is the challenge that great directors meet."

When the time came to renew the show, says Gelb, "I chose Bondy because he was one of the great narrative storytellers and had an illustrious career directing theater and opera, including running France's most prestigious theater, the Opéra, at the time of his death. He wanted to represent 'Tosca' in terms of the

concerned, in terms of new productions, 'Così' and 'Tosca' represent an interesting illustration of our approach."

McVicar's "Tosca" replaces a Luc Bondy production that ran from 2009-15, which in turn replaced a long-running 1985 to 2006 — production by Franco Zeffirelli. McDermott's "Così fan tutte" is a production with the English National Opera that premiered there in 2014; the previous Met production was by Lesley Koenig and ran from 1996 to 2014.

"The Franco Zeffirelli production was absolutely spectacular in its physical beauty," notes Gelb. "What Zeffirelli did in this production that was very highly regarded, particularly by the older members of our audience, was that he created in vivid detail the settings of ancient Rome that were actually indicated in the libretto. But it was so spectacular, that, in a way, it dwarfed the dramatic action. It became almost a Disneyesque picture postcard, to the point where you didn't need to fly to Rome to see Rome, you could see it on the stage of the Met."

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A scene from Act I of Zeffirelli's "Tosca," which ran from 1985 to 2006. MARYL SOHL/METROPOLITAN OPERA

NEW STORIES EMERGE

A LABORATORY FOR COMPOSERS AND WRITERS

As Peter Gelb, the house's general manager puts it, "part of the Metropolitan Opera's mission is to expand the repertoire with new work." That includes programming contemporary operas like Thomas Adès's "The Exterminating Angel" in the season about to open or Kaija Saariaho's "L'Amour de loin" last season, and also developing new work. To accomplish this part of the mission, in 2006 the Met, in a partnership with the Lincoln Center Theater, began a program to commission new operas by composers and playwrights.

"It's a kind of a laboratory for composers, usually younger composers, to develop new work," says Gelb. "We commission not only a composer, but also a librettist. What the program promises is to provide them with the financial resources to write the work and for us to produce an initial workshop after the piece is written. At that point, we decide whether to support it in further development into a main-stage piece that could play either at Lincoln Center Theater or at the Met — or it could be a chamber-sized opera that could play at Lincoln Center Theater."

The composer/librettist pairs are often determined by the Met. This was the case for the first new opera from the program to be staged, "Two Boys," with music by Nico Muhly and a libretto by Craig Lucas, which opened at the Met in the fall of 2013. It premiered at the English National Opera in 2011. Muhly's new opera, "Marnie," premieres at the ENO in November. "We introduced Nico to his librettist, Craig Lucas," says Gelb, "and also brought in Bartlett Sher early on in the creative process to give directorial advice in

helping to shape the story. We want to help composers and librettists create new work that has a chance of really playing on the stage of the Met or other opera companies, and to help by making sure they're aware of the narrative dramatic challenges. That's why we bring in a director, or have a composer work with an experienced librettist."

Among the current composers and playwrights in the program are Matthew Aucoin, an assistant conductor at the Met and "one of the most exciting young American composers," according to Gelb, and Sarah Ruhl, "a top American playwright. She wrote a play from the perspective of Eurycleia, in the Orpheus story. She's now adapting that play into a libretto that Matt is going to be writing music for. We introduced the two of them to each other."

Other operas in development in the program include "Intimate Apparel," by the composer Ricky Ian Gordon ("27" and "A Coffin in Egypt") and the Pulitzer Prize-winner Lynn Nottage, with a libretto adapted from her play about an African-American seamstress in turn-of-the-century New York; "Grounded," about a female F16 fighter pilot reassigned to drone duty, with music by the Tony award-winner Jeanine Tesori and George Brant, adapting his play; a third opera by the composer David T. Little and the librettist Royce Vavrek, whose previous works together include "Dog Days" and "JFK"; and a new opera about Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater house by the composer Joshua Schmidt, whose musical "Midwestern Gothic" premiered in March at the Signature Theatre in Arlington, Virginia.

SONYA YONCHEVA

A BREAKOUT SEASON FOR A 'FEARLESS' PERFORMER

Sonya Yoncheva returns to the Metropolitan Opera in the 2017-18 season to star in three operas, in two new title roles for her. "Tosca" and "Luisa Miller," and as Mimì in "La Bohème." In addition to her role debuts at the Met in the season, she will take on Elisabeth de Valois in "Don Carlos," at the Paris Opera in October, alongside Jonas Kaufmann in the title role. She will also bring her popular Mimì to Paris, in December.

"It's been less than three years since she made a big impression on the Met stage by making her debut as Mimì at very short notice at the end of 2014, followed immediately by her triumph as Violetta in "La Traviata" in January 2015. Last season she added new operas to her repertory: Desdemona in "Otello" at the Met and "Norma" at the Royal Opera, another role she accepted in an 11th-hour cast change. This summer, she sang her first major role at La Scala — in her obviously highly in-demand Mimì, and she returns to Milan for another role debut, as Imogene in "Il Pirata," next summer.

"It will be probably one of the most challenging seasons I've had," says Yoncheva. "It will be a test for me — how far I can go."

"This is going to be somewhat of a breakout season at the Met for Yoncheva," says Peter Gelb, "since she will be the first artist since I've been general manager to sing in three starring roles in one season. So her profile at the Met and around the world is going to go up."

"She's one of the great rising stars, and there's a reason for it, because she has an extraordinarily beautiful and expressive voice, she's a stunning figure onstage, she has great dramatic chops and she's a dream to work with for directors. She's very willing

and interested in exploring interpretations, and she's learning repertoire as she goes along, so she's very fresh and new, not jaded by repeating too many roles.

"She's ambitious about taking on a wide range of repertoire, and so far that has worked to her advantage. No one thought she could pull off stepping into 'Norma' at the last minute at the Royal Opera last year, and yet she triumphed."

Though Yoncheva's successes in London, Paris and Milan are impressive, the Met poses a particular challenge, according to Gelb. "Usually, singers sing roles in other companies before they tackle the giant stage of the Met," he says. "The Met is harder than other opera houses because it's bigger — it's physically more of a challenge because of the size, and the singers aren't amplified. The Met, with 3,800 seats, is the biggest of the great opera houses by far, and there are some singers who have great careers in Europe who can never make it at the Met, just because their voices lack the vocal firepower. Sonya not only has that, but so far she also has a fearless approach."



Sonya Yoncheva will sing the title role in "Luisa Miller."

KEN HOWARD/METROPOLITAN OPERA

Yoncheva as Mimì in "La Bohème."

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THE COMING SEASON

PERENNIAL FAVORITES AND RARELY SEEN GEMS

The Metropolitan Opera presents modern contemporary operas and U.S. and world premieres of new ones, and even commissions new works to further the art form's development, but it is a repertory company. "That's what the Met is all about," says Peter Gelb, the general manager.

Among the pieces in the Met repertory are favorites that are mainstays, like Franco Zeffirelli's production of Puccini's "La Bohème," which has had hundreds of performances since its premiere in 1981. The opera itself has been performed at the Met more than 1,200 times since 1900. Angel Blue, Anita Hartig and Sonya Yoncheva. Piotr Beczala is Luisa's lover, Rodolfo, and the cast also includes the Russian bass Alexander Vinogradov, who is making his debut at the opera house.

"Luisa Miller" is a historic production that has some great Verdi music in it, and it has an extraordinary cast," says Gelb. "It's a piece that James Levine — in his new role as music director emeritus — has embraced over the years and really wanted to do again. With the cast we have, including Domingo and Yoncheva, we feel it's worth doing. My focus has been making sure everything we put on the stage, whether it's a revival or a new production, has the best possible cast — the Met has always been famous, long before I got there, for the quality of the singers on the stage. I've tried to reinvigorate that approach."

Rossini's "Semiramide" is not very often performed anywhere. The Met production by John Copley ran from 1990 to 1993 and hasn't been seen there since. Set in ancient Babylon, the opera features Angela Meade in the title role of the queen, and Maurizio Benini conducts. It runs Feb. 19 to March 17.

There are also two recent productions being revived at the Met for the first time, both conducted by Yannick Nézet-Séguin, the Met's "music director designate," who will officially take the title of music director in 2020. François Girard's staging of Wagner's "Parsifal" (Feb. 5-27), which was his directorial debut at the Met in 2013, stars Klaus Florian Vogt, and Patrice Chéreau's version of Strauss's "Elektra" (March 1-23), from 2016, features Christine Goerke.

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The Metropolitan Opera



WHEN YOUR TRADITIONS SET THE STANDARD, YOU'VE MADE HISTORY.

This watch is a witness to one of the world's greatest opera houses, the home to nearly 30 groundbreaking productions each year. Worn by those who always push art to new heights. It doesn't just tell time. It tells history.



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LIVE OPERA IN MOVIE THEATERS

Opera lovers who may not make it to New York in the next year can still see many of the Metropolitan Opera's productions live — in high-definition broadcasts to movie theaters around the world. Ten operas are programmed for the Met's Live in HD 2017-18 season.

Peter Gelb, who started the program in 2006 when he became the Met's general manager, explains how the operas are chosen for the program: "We know many in our audience go to see all the Met titles in movie theaters, so we want to give them a good range of repertory, both popular titles and more unusual, more obscure ones. It reflects what we're trying to do with the Met repertoire as well. We'll include very popular titles like 'Tosca' or the season opener, a new production of 'Norma,' which we're excited about, and more eclectic pieces, like 'The Exterminating Angel,' because we think the HD programming has a role in introducing opera to audiences not only in our opera house but in movie theaters, who may have never seen an opera, or a title, before."

Gelb speaks with pride and enthusiasm about the program, which has more than 2,000 participating movie theaters in 73 countries. More than 23 million tickets have been sold since its beginnings. "Even though some of our competitors, the other top opera houses, have followed in our footsteps in presenting operas in movie theaters," he says, "it's an indisputable fact that the Met's distribution is far larger than anybody else's, because we were first and we've maintained this leadership position. Live in HD reaches hundreds of thousands of people around the world."

Pathé Live, part of the Gaumont Pathé movie-theater chain, has been showing the series since 2007, and now broadcasts to about 160 theaters in

France, as well as to another 15 in Switzerland, six in Lebanon and two in Morocco — a combined capacity of 21,000 seats.

According to Raphaël Lemée, International sales manager for Pathé Live, theater owners say the program helps them create an "edge over the competition" in marketing. Though most theaters in the program are in larger markets, he says, "even smaller cities sometimes have a very vivid and eager community when it comes to the arts, especially opera, because there may be no local stage. You want to reach out to people who are not able to come to you, and often it's there where it works the best."

Another Met broadcasting initiative that is not as well known is Metropolitan Opera on Demand, says Gelb, "which is probably the single greatest operatic-content source in the world, available in one streaming service."

For \$14.99 a month or \$149.99 a year, subscribers get access to audio and video of 600 full-length Met performances on mobile phones, tablets or smart televisions.

He explains: "It contains all of the HD shows — we've produced 109 of them; all of the pre-HD TV shows, going back to the '70s, like Teresa Stratas in 'La Bohème'; about a hundred or so television programs that were produced for public television; and hundreds and hundreds of radio broadcasts that go back to the '30s. We're constantly upgrading it with new content."

This year, for example, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Met's move to Lincoln Center, it released a 22-CD box set, "The Inaugural Season: A Century of Extraordinary Met Performances from 1966-67." All of the audio recordings from the collection are now available on Met Opera on Demand.

- Upcoming Live in HD broadcasts
- "NORMA" BY VINCENZO BELLINI: directed by David McVicar and starring Sondra Radvanovsky in the title role. Oct. 7.
 - "DIE ZAUBERFLÖTE" BY WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART: James Levine conducts Julie Taymor's production. Oct. 14.
 - "THE EXTERMINATING ANGEL" BY THOMAS ADÈS: conducted by the composer of this work, which premiered at the Salzburg Festival in 2016. Nov. 18.
 - "TOSCA" BY GIACOMO PUCCINI: with Sonya Yoncheva, Bryn Terfel and Vittorio Grigolo. Jan. 27.
 - "L'ELISIR D'AMORE" BY GAETANO DONIZETTI: with Pretty Yende in a role debut with Matthew Polenzani in a production by Bartlett Sher. Feb. 10.
 - "LA BOHÈME" BY PUCCINI: with Sonya Yoncheva in Franco Zeffirelli's classic production. Feb. 24.
 - "SEMIRAMIDE" BY GIOACCHINO ROSSINI: Maurizio Benini conducts in the first production of the opera at the Met in nearly 25 years. March 10.
 - "COSÌ FAN TUTTE" BY MOZART: A new production set at Coney Island by Phelim McDermott. March 31.
 - "LUISA MILLER" BY GIUSEPPE VERDI: A favorite of James Levine, the Met's music director emeritus, with Plácido Domingo and Sonya Yoncheva. April 14.
 - "CENDRILLON" BY JULES MASSENET: The first production of this Cinderella story at the Met, with Joyce DiDonato in the title role. April 28.
- This special advertising supplement is produced by T Brand Studio International. The news and editorial staff of The New York Times has no role in its preparation. Text by Perry Leopold.