

Anthony Freud, *Préface de l'édition anglaise*

Aujourd'hui encore directeur général du Houston Grand Opera, ancien directeur du Welsh National Opera de Cardiff, Anthony Freud a été choisi en 2011 pour prendre la direction du Lyric Opera de Chicago. De nationalité britannique, l'auteur est Président du conseil d'administration d'Opera America et ancien président d'Opera Europa

“Opera is a mystery. This cumbersome, expensive relic of the past, so absurd in its conventional demand that people should sing when offering each other a whisky or lamenting that they have dropped their key, refuses to fade away. Instead, it acquires new converts every year; and converts is what it demands, for like a religion, it changes the lives of those it wins over, transforming them into acolytes and partisans who will queue all night in a blizzard to buy tickets, or cross continents for a performance – who think, talk, read and dream about the art that is their avocation.

“Opera has this potency because it is itself mysterious....It is the song of our irrationality, of the instinctual savagery which our jobs and routines and our non-singing voices belie, of the music our bodies make. It is an art devoted to love and death (and especially to the cryptic alliance between them); to the definition and the interchangeability of the sexes; to madness and devilment....

“The characters of opera obey neither moral nor social law.....These people sing what they feel, rather than tamely speaking (like the rest of us) what they think they ought to say. Love and hate tend to reduce us to speechlessness – to embarrassed stammering or expletives.... Words are always failing us when we need them the most. To remain articulate in states of extreme emotional intensity almost convicts you of insincerity. Love poetry often apologizes for its linguistic fluency, afraid it will seem specious. But when words give up, music takes over”.

From: Peter Conrad: *A Song of Love and Death* (1987)

Peter Conrad encapsulates what, I suspect, many of us feel about opera; particularly those of us for whom opera has been both a life-long passion, and a means of earning a living. In spite of its wondrous, logic-defying lunacy (or perhaps because of it), opera continues, four hundred years after its birth, to be a worldwide phenomenon, enjoying great popularity throughout Europe, the Americas, Australia and in parts of Asia.

The fact that it is possible to experience live performances of opera, inevitably of varying quality, in so many of the world's towns and cities, should be a cause for both amazement and celebration. Amazement, because the mechanics of producing and performing opera are so complicated. Any opera performance is the result of immense dedication and hard work by a large number of people with diverse skills. It also requires significant financial resources. Celebration, because, at its best, opera offers revelatory, life-enhancing experiences, without which the world in general, and society in particular, would be much the poorer.

In my opinion, an opera company (as opposed to an entirely ad-hoc group of people coming together for a single event), has, time and time again, proved to be the most effective vehicle for delivering consistent and high performance quality. What is a company? There is no simple answer. Certainly, for an opera-producing organization to be a company, it has to aspire to an ongoing life, to a developing and maturing artistic evolution, and to elements of consistency in artistic, technical and administrative personnel from one production to the next, and from one season to the next.

That being said, the range of opera companies throughout the world encompasses diversity and variety that defy straightforward categorization. There is an infinite number of variables – for example, of scale, of resources, of nature of ensembles, of season and performance structures - quite apart from the immense diversity of cultural, social, political, and economic environments within which opera companies operate.

I would argue that without a significant infrastructure of cultural organizations, it is impossible for a city to claim the status of being major. An opera company must be an indispensable part of this infrastructure.

If confronted with the task of creating from scratch the ideal city, what would its opera company look like? What would it seek to achieve? Whom would it seek to serve? How would it be structured and staffed? How would its seasons be constructed? Luckily, the concept of inventing a generic opera company serving a generic city is unlikely to be more than an academic exercise.

While none of us is likely to be given this challenge in reality, is it possible to learn lessons by comparing companies around the world and the ways in which they seek to serve their cities? Are there examples of best practice, artistic, financial or organizational trends, repeating instances of success (and failure) that transcend the diversity of companies and their environments?

This book provides us with the means to examine and answer some of these questions. As a result of years of extensive and meticulous research, compilation of statistical information and comparative analysis, Philippe Agid and Jean Claude Tarondeau have created a unique book: one that examines in a methodical, disciplined and factual way, the similarities and differences between a wide range of opera companies around Europe and North America. Between them, Agid and Tarondeau encompass the skills of both an experienced, senior opera administrator and those of a distinguished academic statistician.

In some ways, my own life and career has resonances of the variety of situations that this book seeks to analyse. I was born in the UK, of Hungarian parents, and am currently living and working in the USA. Since March 2006, I have been General Director and CEO of Houston Grand Opera, one of the most important and distinguished of American opera companies. From 1994 to 2005, I served as General Director of Welsh National Opera, an equally distinguished British opera company.

Having moved from Europe to America, I have become acutely aware of similarities and differences between the continents in the business of producing opera. We are, for example, united by our passion for our art-form, our determination to provide a cultural service to our cities and our striving to achieve artistic excellence (though it must be said that there are as many definitions of artistic excellence as there are opera companies or even audience members). Examples of marked differences include our funding systems, our organizational structures and the respective involvement of public authorities in the provision of culture.

I continue to be struck by how little serious understanding there is on each side of the Atlantic of the other. There is a perception in the United States that a funding system based on public subsidy results in a utopian world in which blissful general directors await their next big subsidy cheque while dreaming languidly of high art. Europeans think that the US system, based largely on private funding, results in artistic decisions being driven by the whims of capricious, wealthy donors, who, having more money than sense, care only about their own prestige.

From my personal experience, I can assure you that neither perception comes close to the truth. Of course, there are always extreme examples of extraordinary incidents. But the reality is much more complex and subtle. It deserves detailed and thorough analysis. Both systems have worked extremely well for many companies over many decades. Both systems have generated countless examples of immensely distinguished work. Neither system is perfect. Naturally, each system has resulted in infrastructures and companies that reflect its specific strengths and weaknesses.

This book provides the foundation for a deeper shared understanding.

If I was asked to identify the most significant difference in the life of a general director in the UK and America, I would say that it is the amount of time I now have to spend worrying about cash flow: however inadequate the level of public subsidy, a predictable, periodic subsidy cheque is a buffer and a safety net against alarming and unpredictable economic volatility. Without this luxury, given the high overhead cost of many opera companies, and without sufficient vigilance, financial disaster could quickly overtake a company.

I am privileged to be chairman of the board of Opera America, having previously served in the same capacity at Opera Europa. These two sibling organizations represent the opera profession on each continent. The two have much in common. They both lead and serve our business by facilitating collaboration between companies, examining and recommending best practice in many specialist areas, and in raising public, political and media awareness of our art-form, its value and importance. Both organizations have carried out valuable research, enabling comparisons between companies and better understanding of opportunities and threats.

However, the biggest difference between the two lies in the contrasting nature of their respective memberships. The professional company membership of Opera America has great diversity of scale: though there are a small number of extremely large companies (indeed, all the large opera companies in the US are in our membership), the majority is not full-time, full-scale organizations, but much smaller, seasonal operations. In spite of regional differences, all share a common social, economic and political environment and funding system.

In contrast, the majority of Opera Europa's members are full-time companies (albeit of varying sizes), with enormously diverse histories, in some cases spanning centuries, reflecting the histories of the cities and countries in which they are based. Wide-ranging political, economic and social contrasts in the histories of European countries have impacted directly and fundamentally on those countries' opera companies and their operations.

In recent years, multifaceted globalization has made the world a smaller place in so many ways. Historic differences between companies and countries have become blurred. Now, more than ever, opera companies must learn from colleague organizations from around the world, if they are to stand the best chances of fulfilling potential and overcoming challenges.

There has never been a more important time for Opera America and Opera Europa to serve our business by working to develop mutual understanding and collaboration.

Similarly, there has never been a more relevant time for this book to be published. The Agid/Tarangeau study fills a gaping hole in available information. I urge all my colleagues in opera companies around the world, and, indeed, all those interested in professional opera production, to read and digest its contents.

We are living through uniquely challenging times. The world around us is changing at bewildering speed. We need all the resources at our disposal to understand, analyse and respond to the opportunities and challenges swirling around us; our ability to respond swiftly and accurately has become ever more critical. We cannot afford to exist in hermetically sealed bubbles. We must work together, as a worldwide community of opera companies, sharing experiences both positive and negative, learning from one another, and ensuring, as we move through the twenty-first century, that opera becomes more relevant and indispensable than ever.

Opera and opera companies can thrive. But we must be on our mettle.

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