

American Modern Opera Company Won't Ever Be A Typical Opera Company

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By [Keith Powers](#) 



"I see us like water. We take whatever shape we get poured into."

Managing director Jennifer Chen's isn't describing any typical opera company. But the newly formed [American Modern Opera Company](#), AMOC, won't ever be a

typical opera company.

No home. No subscribers. No overhead. Just artists.

Artists looking for a way to capture their own voice, and do it authentically, with adequate preparation, and — perhaps most importantly — in collaboration, with a fluid notion of art forms and their intersection.

“We want to redefine opera company,” says co-artistic director Matthew Aucoin, a Medfield native. “We’re a company — in the sense of having company over for dinner. We make opera, but we want to pay attention to all the senses. When a piece involves dancers, singers and instrumentalists, they all have an impact on each other.”

The public will have its first chance to see and hear AMOC during a December residency ("[Run AMOC!](#)") at Cambridge’s American Repertory Theater, with three performances mixed in with teaching obligations, rehearsal time and workshops.



Matthew Aucoin and Zack Winokur are co-artistic directors of AMOC. (Courtesy AMOC)

Composer Aucoin and dancer/choreographer Zack Winokur will serve as AMOC’s

artistic directors. The dozen-and-a-half other members of AMOC include some of the top young performers, across multiple disciplines, working today.

Dancers like Julia Eichten, Bobbi Jene Smith and Or Schraiber. Singers like countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo, tenor Paul Appleby, bass-baritone Davóne Tines and soprano Julia Bullock. Instrumentalists like violinists Miranda Cuckson and Keir GoGwilt, percussionist Jonny Allen, cellist Jay Campbell and pianist Conor Hanick.

The group workshopped ideas last summer at a llama farm. “It’s a hundred or so acres in Vermont,” Aucoin says. “Not a farm anymore, but a bunch of barns ready to become rehearsal spaces. I don’t think we would want to spend our summers any other way. That’s our incubator, but otherwise we’ll be nomadic — like a traveling rock band.”

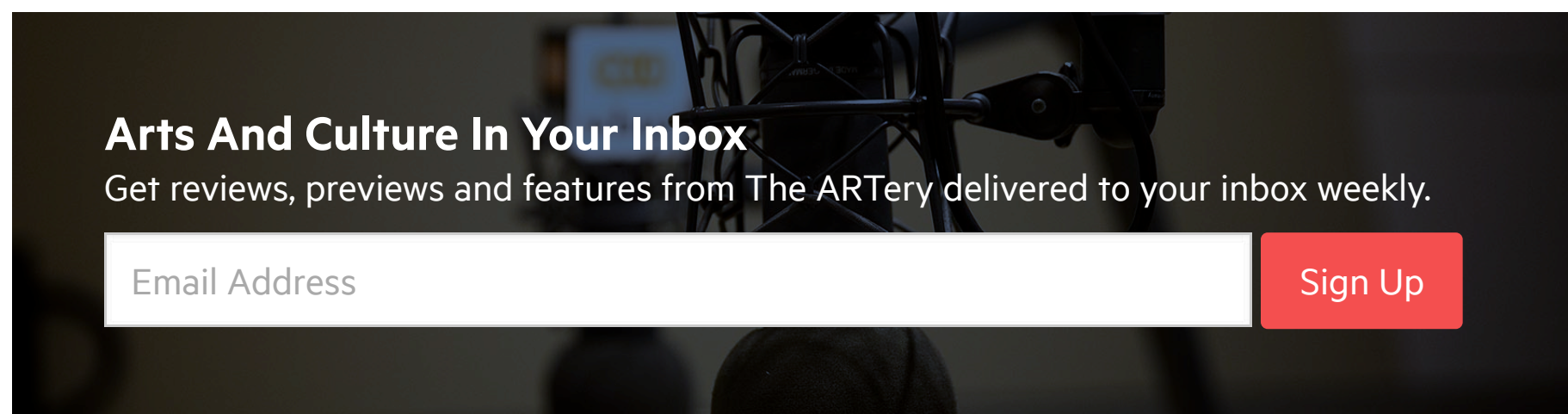
The A.R.T. residency will be highlighted by three performances: “A Study on Effort,” an evening-length dancer/violinist duet with Smith and GoGwilt, at the Dance Complex; “Cage Match” — “a series of duos treated like a boxing match,” Aucoin says, at Oberon; and “Were You There,” a theatrical song cycle at the Loeb Drama Center, featuring Tines, in a multimedia meditation of the lives of black men and women lost in police killings.

“‘A Study on Effort’ is the epitome of what AMOC can be,” Aucoin says. “Last year we were working on a piece of mine, ‘The Orphic Moment,’ with Keir on violin. Zack had the idea the the Eurydice figure in the piece should be portrayed as two-headed — violin and dancer, so the dancer could express things the violinist couldn’t.”

“Zack wanted to introduce Bobbi Jene to Keir, and have them work together. I told him that Keir would never go for it, with someone hanging off his instrument, messing with his movements. Zack just said, ‘Let’s get them in the room together.’”

“It turned out to be mesmerizing. She was touching him, touching the instrument. They became a creature together, and they made their own piece out of that.”

Here’s a look at “A Study on Effort” in progress:



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Another residency at Harvard (in February) and then at New York City’s Park Avenue Armory (in March) gives AMOC a chance for its ideas to coalesce. Performances in New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art next season, and a collaboration in 2020 with San Francisco’s Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra — a commission for Aucoin, staged by Winokur — have also been planned.

“The essence of AMOC is either new work, composed by me or for the company,” Aucoin says, “or a pre-existing work, reimagined by Zack in collaboration with the members. Everybody brings ideas to the table.

“We know that eventually we want to put everyone in AMOC onstage together, in

an evening-long theater piece,” he says. “We know that the characters will not just be singers, or dancers, or instrumentalists, but they will be physically moving and speaking together. Stage action, lighting, even the music I write — it will all be integrated.”

Here’s an idea of what he’s is talking about: Winokur, dancing with pianist Rosey Chan (not an AMOC member), at the Royal Opera House in London.

All the members of AMOC have burgeoning careers, and balancing those careers and AMOC will take some effort. “Our plan is to slowly but surely grow the proportion of everyone’s time that is AMOC focused,” Aucoin says. “It will never be everything that everyone does, but all of us have expressed interest in making it grow. I’m fortunate that I have lots of composition projects, and when people approach me, I’m steering them toward AMOC. That’s what happened with the Philharmonia Baroque.”

Frustration with the foreshortened rehearsal time that orchestras face in

learning new works, and the lack of real collaboration between instrumentalists and other performing artists played a part in AMOC's formation.

“I've gotten tired of the anonymity, and the insanely compressed time scale, of orchestral performances,” Aucoin says. “And in opera too — we come together for four or five weeks to rehearse, but it's a coagulation of people who have never met, and who did not choose to work together.

“It's like a little island. It's absurd if you're a living composer. Everyone is learning your language from scratch.

“That was one reason,” he says, for creating this collaboration. “And I've been in an indie rock band before. The camaraderie, the artistic expression — it's incomparable. I know it will impact the music I write.”

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