

COMMENTARY

Maybe Boston's Not An Opera Town Yet, But There's A Lot To Sing About

October 13, 2017

By [Keith Powers](#) 

Boston's opera landscape has been static for decades. We have an Opera House with (almost) no opera, a major troupe that can't get a nice word from the press and smaller companies that make a splash for a couple of seasons then disappear.

The Boston Lyric Opera takes its critical lumps with almost every show. The blockbuster repertory the BLO presents can be too watered down, the innovative repertory too obtuse. (This writer has been a voice in the chorus of complaints, admittedly.)

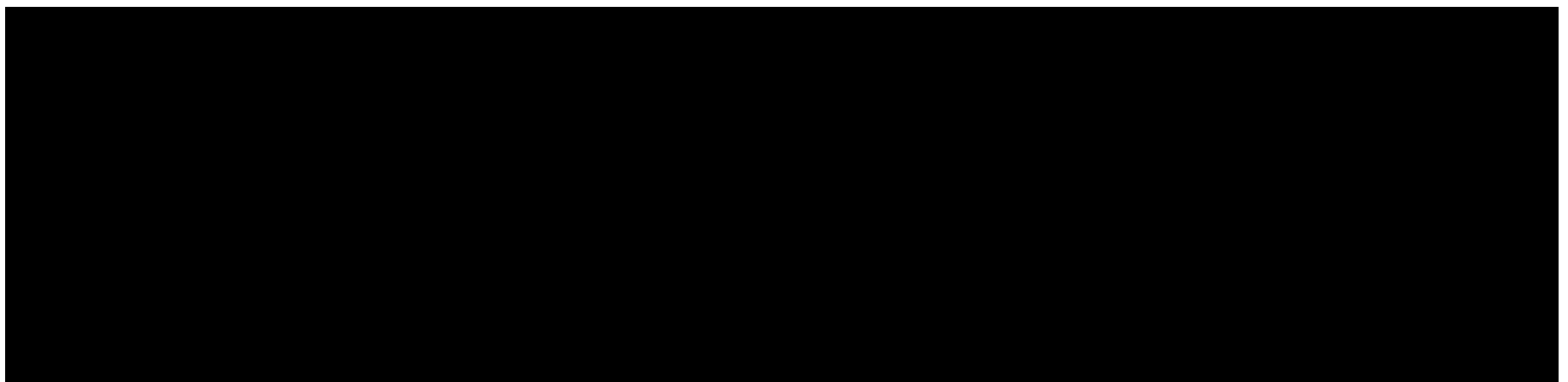
But let's take a step back. Bucking conventional wisdom, maybe the opera landscape isn't that bad after all. If you look closer at the scene, there's a lot of promise. For starters, operatic presentations — ranging from main stage productions to aria recitals — are frequent in Boston.

The Boston Lyric Opera is not Metropolitan Opera, but at its best is on par with similar troupes, in similar sized cities. And with Odyssey Opera staking an ambitious claim to the neglected repertory, a host of audience friendly presentations, along with some challenging premieres — feeding a solid opera audience — there's a lot going on.

What's Coming Up

The next few weeks provide a good snapshot. The BLO opens its season on Friday, Oct. 13, with "[Tosca](#)," at the Cutler Majestic Theatre. If this were typical of the rest of the BLO season, then it would be a yawn. But coupled with a world premiere in November, and two potentially solid stagings in the spring, "Tosca" could be a great way to start the season.

Here's Elena Stikhina, who is Floria Tosca in the BLO's production, singing the role from the trailer to Opernfestival Gut Immling in 2015:

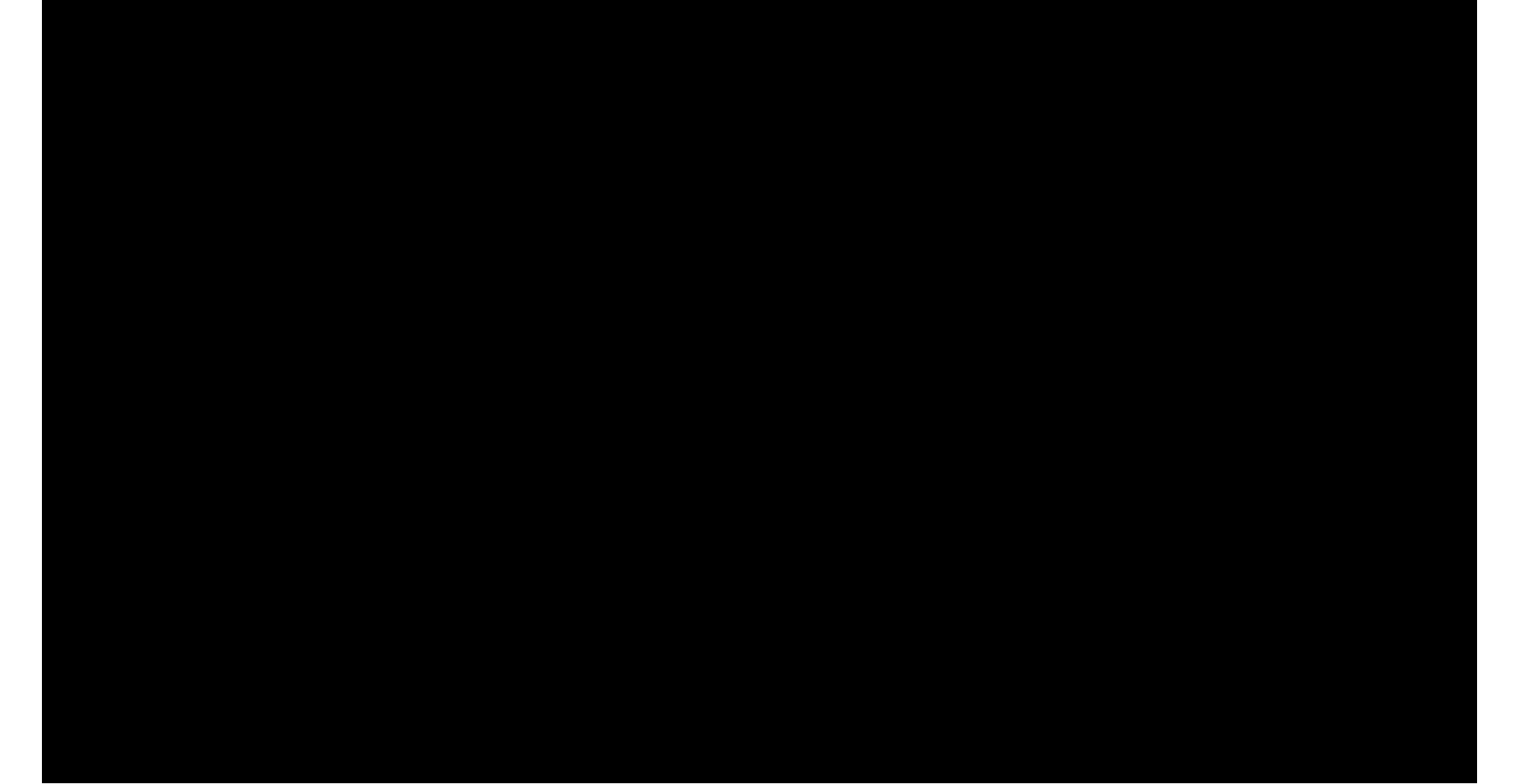


The company should hit its stride later this year. "[The Nefarious, Immoral but Highly Profitable Enterprise of Mr. Burke and Mr. Hare](#)" — a world premiere — has a short November run at the Cyclorama. With Kurt Weill's noir "[The Threepenny Opera](#)" at the Huntington Avenue Theatre, and Bernstein's "[Trouble in Tahiti](#)" (unfortunately, at a venue still to be announced), both next spring, the company should capitalize on its strengths — insightful productions, with good singers, of works that don't need a massive budget to stage.

Odyssey Opera has already begun its season, which includes a five-pack of operas, each telling the Joan of Arc story. This month: Donizetti's "[L'Assedio di Calais](#)," following last month's performance of Tchaikovsky's "The Maid of Orléans." The survey culminates with operas by [Norman dello Joio](#), [Honegger](#) and [Verdi](#) — the quintessential audience adventure: five shows, five eras, five composers, one story line.

Symphony Hall has become a more frequent spot for opera, with the Boston Symphony Orchestra renewing its commitment under music director Andris Nelsons. This month: Berlioz's "[Damnation de Faust](#)," under the baton of French specialist Charles Dutoit. (Nelsons conducts Act II of Wagner's "[Tristan und Isolde](#)" in April.)

Here's Dutoit, conducting "Damnation" in Japan with the NHK Orchestra:



Guerilla Opera continues its world premiere series in November, with “[Chrononhotonthologos](#),” by Andy Vores. Each of the conservatories mounts an opera production: Boston Conservatory tackles Jake Heggie’s challenging “[Dead Man Walking](#)” in November; NEC’s fall [Opera Showcase](#) is already sold out; and in the finger-food department, Longy School of Music hosts a set of [10-minute operas](#) in November — three evenings of music created jointly by the Boston Opera Collaborative and the Boston New Music Initiative.

That’s plenty of choices in just a couple weeks. And we’re not done.

The period instrument scene fuels some of the best opera in town. The Boston Early Music Festival wows the world every two years with a massive summer production ([this year](#) it was Campra’s “La Carnaval de Venise”).

Here’s a taste of what “La Carnaval de Venise” was like — showing why the early music productions are so compelling:



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This fall BEMF semi-stages Handel’s “[Almira](#),” over Thanksgiving weekend. Wait until April, and Boston Baroque will stretch the notion of period instrumentation with Beethoven’s “[Fidelio](#).” Both these groups have made award-winning recordings of early operas, and are legitimately just as popular internationally as they are in Boston.

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If you just want a singer parked next to a piano, belting out arias, you can find that too. The Celebrity Series leads the way, with concerts from mezzo [Jamie Barton](#) and soprano [Julia Bullock](#). The conservatories have recitals almost weekly. [Dawn Upshaw](#) comes to Rockport Music in April, in what will surely be a memorable performance.

What Could Be

It adds up to an impressive slate of presentations. If you can get away to New York a few weekends a year — or if the Met simulcasts are enough for your opera jones — it makes for a near-constant opera fix.

Still, we want more. There is a growing opera-savvy audience — the simulcasts have had a lot to do with that — along with a number of meet-up groups, who bring that audience together in informal settings that offer culture and friendship. Just what would infuse more life into the Boston opera scene is a matter of active discussion.

First on the list would be a home for the BLO. Seemingly, the [company will get shut out](#) of any new venues that come out of the Seaport district negotiations — venues that are destined to have fewer than 800 seats, far less than the 1,800-seat house the BLO really needs.

So for the second year in a row, the BLO will move from stage to stage — guessing at possible audience enthusiasm for different productions, working around the schedules of different presenters, and other artistic tenants.

The company, strengthened in many ways by general and artistic director Esther Nelson, has put together a promising, multi-faceted season. But moving around town won't help — especially with the non-musical aspects of opera-going, like dining, parking and familiarity. The BLO will undoubtedly survive this peripatetic period, but the company should be building up, not just surviving.



Banners for the Boston Lyric Opera's 40th anniversary hang outside the Boston Opera House in 2016. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

And the BLO still mounts only four productions a year — not nearly enough to cultivate a robust subscription roster. Perhaps a merger with another troupe would allow them to perform each month. That, and a new home, and maybe we could brag without reservation.

A festival might help — something to generate buzz. The BLO did its 40 Days of Opera to [celebrate its own 40th anniversary](#) last year, but that came across as a marketing contrivance. Something on the model of [Philadelphia's O17 Festival](#) — produced last month by Opera Philadelphia, that city's equivalent of the BLO — might appeal. It featured extended runs of five operas, on various stages, offering a blast of operatic immersion.

Does Boston have it? Not yet, but we do have a lot of it. And there is a perception that the audience is greater than the opportunities — definitely a good thing for Boston, and for opera.

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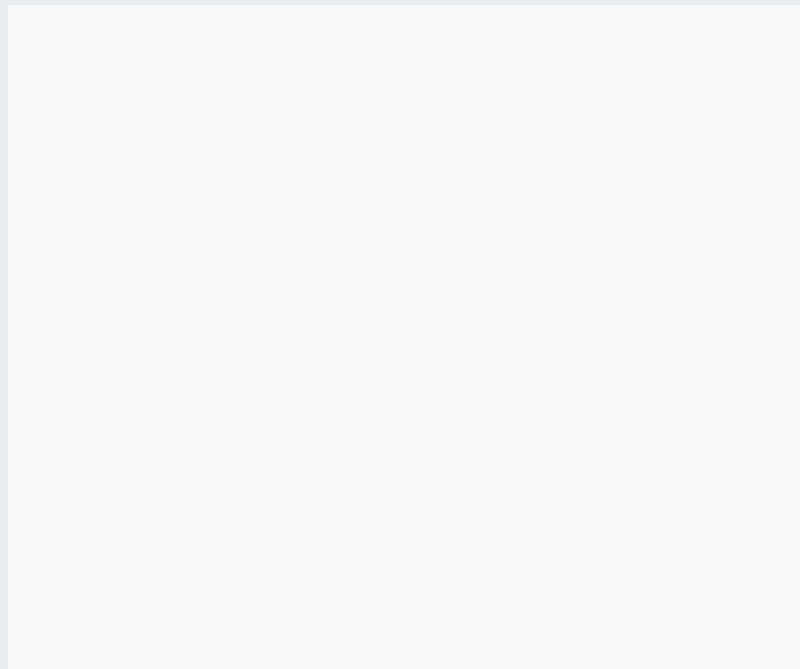
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