

Big Screen Dreams: A New Stage for Opera



San Francisco Opera's 2008 world premiere production of Glass's *Appomattox*. *Appomattox*, directed by Robert Woodruff and designed by Riccardo Hernandez (sets), Gabriel Berry (costumes) and Christopher Akerlind (lighting). Photo by Terrence McCarthy.

By Rebecca Winzenreid

Will anyone really pay \$20 to see an opera in a movie theater?

The question so many people were asking a little more than a year ago seems almost quaint now as operacasts to movie theaters have skyrocketed in number. San Francisco Opera introduced its digital opera programs to movie theaters nationwide in March; La Scala and the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden began offering transmissions to U.S. locations this spring; and the Metropolitan Opera finished off a second season of Live in HD transmissions by expanding its global reach to New Zealand.

The Met continues to add to its list of electronic media projects with the expected launch this fall of an online service, via its own Web site, that will offer the company's audio and video content, by subscription or on-demand. (The Met's multi-pronged initiatives also include a weekly live stream from its Web site, a Sirius satellite radio channel and on-demand streaming via Rhapsody.) But the Live in HD transmissions that launched in December 2006 remain the crown jewels of the Met's new-media efforts. Simulcasts have been attended by a million people in 17 countries, with more locations expected next season. And the high-definition transmissions have acquired something of an event status among opera fans, including those who attend performances at both the Metropolitan Opera House and in movie theaters in order to compare and contrast the viewing experiences.

Julie Borchard-Young, director of worldwide HD distribution, notes that the digital transmissions were always viewed as a 21st-century extension of the Met's traditional radio broadcasts. "There was an insurance card there," she says. "Millions of people every Saturday have already devoted their time to listen to the Met on the radio. It was a natural step to take with that audience of radio faithful, to say, come to your local movie theater on occasion and not only enjoy the music but see what's going on, participate as an extended member of the Met Opera family."

Field research has taken her to theaters across the country, often incognito, to scout audience reactions. She's discovered a level of communal experience that seems to have surpassed even her own expectations. "There is this energy and connectedness in the movie theaters. I don't often feel that when I go to a typical movie, but this crowd wants to talk about their experience, they want to share insights they have picked up, during intermission. People are congregating by the popcorn stand talking about vocal achievements or costumes." Visual cues to the full Met experience add to the familial aspect; the screen is focused on the house prior to curtain, showing audience members meeting and greeting; cameras follow the conductor into the orchestra pit; and singers are interviewed just moments after they've completed a big scene. Simulcasts also include a direct appeal by hosts, the likes of Susan Graham, Natalie Dessay and Renée Fleming, to experience an opera live in the viewers' own area.

Metropolitan Opera General Manager Peter Gelb has heard lots of comments about how the Met's initiatives affect the field. He says the majority of opera companies see a win-win situation. "In general it's getting opera more in the news, which is critical for local as well as national companies — to have awareness at a high level.

And I think the more entrepreneurial opera companies have been taking advantage of these transmissions to create their own kind of promotional events." He cites as a good example of synergy The Santa Fe Opera's efforts to equip that city's historic Lentic Performing Arts Center with the high-definition projection system needed for Live in HD transmissions. "It's a great opportunity for opera lovers to get their fix from the Met during the off-season of The Santa Fe Opera."

The lack of digitally-equipped movie theaters in urban areas is an odd kink in digital distribution plans, as the San Francisco Opera (SFO) found out in the run-up to its launch last winter. Because digital projection systems tend to be found in newer suburban theater chains, the list of more than 120 theaters offering the performances includes just one location in San Francisco proper, albeit a glorious one — the 1920s-era Castro Theater.

San Francisco Opera cinemacasts are digitally captured from live performances, using up to 10 cameras for varying angles and closeups, which are edited in-house. Digital feeds of the finished programs are then transmitted to movie theaters that have the discretion to schedule screenings. Most theaters in the Bigger Picture distribution network, with which SFO has partnered, offered multiple showings over a three- or four-day run for the first season's offerings: *La rondine*, *Samson and Delilah*, *Don Giovanni* and *Madama Butterfly*.

While the company is cognizant of the event status of a live simulcast, General Director David Gockley says the option of longer runs acquaints theater owners with the concept of presenting an ongoing SFO series. Additionally, he says, "Theater owners in different locations perhaps know that they can attract more of an opera audience at certain times or on certain days."

Audience comments following the first cinemacast, of *La rondine*, on March 8 echoed that sentiment, according to Director of Electronic Media Jessica Koplos. "We've gotten numerous e-mails from people who said, 'I went not really knowing what to expect and I went back for every showing.' They literally went four days in a row." (Attendance figures were still being gathered as of early April.)

Koplos took charge of the newly-minted electronic media position last October. With a background in film and television production, she carries the title of producer for the cinemacasts. However, Koplos describes her role as being more about communications, involving production matters, rehearsal schedules, meetings with marketing, communications and public relations personnel, and discussions with distributions partners. "I just have to be aware of what's happening when, and make sure everyone is comfortable with what's happening on the fifth floor to capture it."

The fifth floor of San Francisco's War Memorial Opera House houses the company's new Koret-Taube Media Suite. The high-definition digital video and audio production facility (named for lead funders, the Koret Foundation, with support from Tad and Diane Taube) is the first permanent installation of its kind in a U.S. opera house. It's equipped with controls for robotic cameras situated in the theater, plus post-production equipment to edit, color correct and adjust audio. The \$3.5 million media suite was installed in the spring of 2007

and was first used to support the Opera Vision system that Gockley had imported from his tenure at the Houston Grand Opera. Opera Vision projects video onto screens in the balcony to give standing room patrons closeups of the action.

Once the media suite was up and running and the company saw the quality of video it was capturing, the next logical step, according to Koplos, was to ask, "Where else can we go with this?" She views the cinemacasts as a foundation on which the company can build its new-media framework, producing content for DVDs, video on-demand and other technologies on the horizon, whether they involve delivery to movie theaters, home entertainment systems or even cell phones. "Any performing arts organization is, day after day, offering content. It just happens to be content that's in the moment. Being able to capture that content, retool it and re-expose it is interesting ground," she says.

SFO has already begun building on its in-house capabilities to produce supplementary content for the cinemacasts. Intermissions have included interviews with the director, singers and, in the case of *Samson and Delilah*, time-lapse video showing the complex dance of manpower and technical adjustments involved in a scenery change. Koplos envisions expanding into such Web-based offerings as build-your-own-edits of operas, allowing dedicated fans to customize performances through their choice of multiple camera angles and film clips. "I don't know how far off that is, but it isn't five years. It's pretty close to being an area where we can be highly creative with our content," she says.

In the meantime, the company's investment in equipment for in-house production allowed revenue from the cinemacasts to be generated from the start. Under a revenue-sharing agreement with the American Guild of Musical Artists, the American Federation of Musicians and the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees — a first for SFO — the company takes a 20 percent distribution and administrative fee, with the remaining split among the unions, conductor and the designers.

"What is going to be the extent of this, how much of this material the market will bear, is yet to be determined," says Gockley. "We wanted to make sure we were getting a footprint, getting our brand out there." In 2006, he took over a company that had mounted artistically successful productions but hadn't been on the airwaves on a regular basis in 25 years or television in nearly a decade. "The world didn't hear much from the San Francisco Opera," Gockley recalls. "We want to be open and available, and that means bringing opera to where people are, whether it be in a park, a public plaza, a ballpark, a community center or a school."

Gockley jumped in with free outdoor simulcasts of *Madama Butterfly* and *Rigoletto* in 2006, and expanded a free simulcast of *Don Giovanni* the next year to include performing arts venues in San Francisco, Berkeley, Santa Rosa and the University of California-Davis. A free Opera at the Ballpark night last September drew 15,000 for a simulcast of *Samson and Delilah* shown on the 103-foot-wide scoreboard of AT&T Park, home of the San Francisco Giants. This June, San Franciscans will have another chance to grab a hot dog and a mad scene with the simulcast of *Lucia di Lammermoor* starring Natalie Dessay. The company also returned to the radio airwaves this past season with new broadcast agreements locally and nationally, through the WFMT network.

Washington National Opera (WNO) has taken a similar approach with free annual HD simulcasts, dating back to a 2005 production of *Porgy and Bess* that was beamed to an estimated 15,000 people on the National Mall in Washington,

Paris Opera uses electric light in <i>Le Prophete</i>	1849
<i>Don Pasquale</i> delivered via telephone lines in Bellinzona, Switzerland	1878
Stereo sound demonstrated for the first time in history from the Paris Opera	1881
Opening of Massenet's <i>Le Mage</i> in Paris transmitted to London via telephone	1891
Sound movies of opera arias demonstrated	1900
Radio broadcast of operas from the Met	1910
>91,000 subscribers to Telefon Hírmondó, an electronic opera delivery service in Budapest	1930
Opera on TV in London	1936
<i>Cinderella</i> opera commissioned for TV by the BBC	1938
<i>Don Giovanni</i> broadcast on TV from the Cambridge Theatre stage	1947
Met <i>Carmen</i> cinemacast live to 31 theaters in 27 cities	1952
NBC broadcasts <i>Carmen</i> in color	1953
Met Opera radio network goes stereo	1973
Digital recording of <i>The Mother of Us All</i> at The Santa Fe Opera	1976
NYCO <i>Barber</i> is first live telecast with subtitles (LFLC)	1976
<i>Lucia</i> plazacast in Basel	1986
Seattle Opera <i>War & Peace</i> – first opera in HDTV	1990
NYCO <i>Butterfly</i> HDTV image-magnification in the opera house	1991
Met channel on Sirius Satellite Radio	2006
Met <i>Butterfly</i> (HD plazacast)	2006
Met <i>Flute</i> (HD global cinemacast)	2006
Met live multi-language subtitling for cinemacasts	2007

1879 First Edison light bulb demonstration

1876 Bell Telephone patent

1887 First radio transmission

1927 First sound movie

1920 First licensed radio station

1934 First demonstration of an all-electronic television system

1954 First coast-to-coast color television broadcast

1981 First stereo television

early 1970's First standard digital audio recordings created by Thomas Stockham

1981 First HDTV demonstration in the United States

Opera on the Small Screen

For more than a century, opera was often on the cutting edge of new technology — electric light, sound movies, color TV. The recent explosion of electronic media opportunities has left many opera companies bewildered. Where to begin?

A tour of OPERA America member sites turns up all kinds of video content — trailers for season productions, discussions with artists and interviews with audience members. But the opera company's home page is not the only source of information for the opera-curious — more than two-thirds of OPERA America member companies have some kind of presence on YouTube. In some cases, companies post videos created for their own Web sites, while in others they create materials specifically for the online video-sharing site. One company sponsored a contest, inviting students to create original videos to accompany a rock-and-roll rendition of Puccini's "Nessun Dorma." Users who search for a specific opera company will find anything from behind-the-scenes documentaries to clips of mainstage performances to education tours. And not all material is posted by the company in question — one aspiring singer taped his chorus audition, complete with an opening exchange: "Is that a bomb?" "No, it's recording device ... that is, unless the auditions don't go well." One young video diarist, inspired by a simulcast of *La bohème*, detailed her obsession with tenor Vittorio Grigolo.

With so much content available, does it even matter if opera companies add theirs to the mix? It matters if they don't, says one of the younger participants in OPERA America's recent meeting of the Electronic Media Forum (EMF): "I may not want to watch opera on my computer, but I want to learn about it before I go see it. If you put something up there, I am going to find it. If I can't find you, it's your loss." According to a recent study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 57 percent of Internet users have watched videos online, and most of them share what they find with others.

Online video is just one of the platforms for electronic media experimentation. At the EMF meeting, members shared their experiences with podcasts, local radio broadcasts, live recordings of new works and more. While big-screen activities represent an exciting step forward in bringing opera to the masses, only a handful of companies can justify such a large-scale undertaking. However, with the growing number of electronic media delivery options, there are opportunities for companies of every size.

— Kelley Rourke

D.C. WNO expanded its range last September with a simulcast of *La bohème* that was seen outdoors at the Washington Monument and offered free of charge at two movie theaters in the D.C. area, plus 38 colleges and universities across the country. WNO also partnered with the Department of Housing and Urban Development to simulcast the opera to seven HUD sites around the country. *La bohème's* story of young, struggling artists in the city seemed a natural choice

Timeline courtesy of Mark Schubin.

for WNO to begin introducing college-level and young urban audiences to opera, according to former Director of Public Relations Bruce Loving. The production, staged by Mariusz Trelinski, was updated to 1980 and included references to such pop culture icons as Elvis and Playboy Bunnies. “It was not your father’s Puccini,” says Loving. He recalls a question-and-answer session after the simulcast in which one of the older audience members remarked that it was the worst thing she’d ever seen. “But the last comment was from a 14-year-old who said she’d never been to an opera before, and she loved it.” Audience members interested in learning more about the company’s productions can download podcasts from the WNO Web site or iTunes.

Big-screen initiatives aren’t limited to large companies; in May 2007, Chicago Opera Theater’s production of *Don Giovanni* played to an audience of 1,500 in Millennium Park, despite temperatures in the 40s — the first outdoor, large screen, live simulcast presentation of an opera in the city’s history.

Stories of packed houses for simulcasts and movie theater transmissions have been wonderful for raising opera’s profile, but they also leave many companies wondering what the digital future might hold. Seattle Opera Executive Director Kelly Tweeddale has been hearing the questions from board members since the Met’s HD simulcasts began: How do we interpret this? What does it mean for us? Being located in the technology hub of the Pacific Northwest added subtle pressure for the Seattle Opera to be in the thick of new-media developments.

But the company decided to take a different tack. “Because we are in such a highly wired, tech-savvy area, we wanted to be strategic about it,” says Tweeddale. “We also have the advantage of having a lot of resources in our own backyard. We wanted to take advantage of some of that knowledge to really take a look at what the trends are, how people are using technology, with the goal of being able to issue some recommendations on what projects we want to invest in.”

Beginning at the first of the year, a technology task force consisting of staff, board members and individuals from the community who’ve worked with companies such as Google, RealNetworks and SecondLife started exploring a wide range of electronic media topics. Their six-month agenda was designed to follow an arc from open-ended discussion of online music distribution to specific economic analysis of potential Seattle Opera projects, with stops along the way to consider analogies between sports and the arts in community building, intellectual property issues, opera demographics and psychographics. Community members with expertise in the various subject areas were brought in to offer perspective.

Some of the most surprising information was about how different audiences engage with technology. A recent Seattle Opera audience survey found that for the first time last year, the Internet outranked traditional media outlets as a source of information among core users. “That’s the 45-plus group,” says Tweeddale. “We tend to think that older people are technophobic and don’t use the Internet. We’ve found that they actually spend more time online, doing discretionary planning, looking for travel ideas, where to go for dinner, that sort of thing. Younger people use it more as a two-way street, to build a community and a dialogue. So there are very different approaches. How do we serve both masters when their expectations are so different?”

While the task force tackled such big-picture issues, the company also partnered with KING FM on the January launch of a channel on the Seattle radio station’s Web site. The dedicated Seattle Opera channel offers on-demand streams that pair a full opera performance with segments on various backstage topics.





It's part of a larger initiative to gather content for KING's possible HD radio use. That high-definition digital radio format allows stations to bundle signals and broadcast more than one channel of content on the same frequency. For example, a public radio station could offer news and music on one channel, with a secondary channel devoted to symphonic music or opera.

Tweeddale notes that Seattle Opera is exploring how to organize the content into user-friendly packets. The Web channel currently offers five-hour streams that must be listened to all in one sitting, without the option to pause and restart along the way. "Maybe someone driving in their car can't spend the time they need to listen, as someone online can. Maybe they want an MP3 they can download to their iPod or want to be able to skip around. Some of those things are limited right now. We haven't quite got the sweet spot yet," says Tweeddale.

Experimentation also revolves around how to best pull together the creative team needed to produce engaging, informative content. Like most opera companies, Seattle has no technology guru on staff. KING FM opera channel content has been created by the education and marketing departments, Tweeddale says. "The education department is great at putting together a 45-minute presentation, but how does that translate to a 10-minute radio segment? It's a learning curve." And one that may very well lead to the addition of dedicated electronic media staff. "I would say that in the future, most opera companies will probably be looking at bringing on someone who has specific knowledge," says Tweeddale.

Seattle's technology task force hopes to capture its findings in a study that can be widely disseminated to organizations that are considering their own digital futures. Tweeddale advises: "Approach it the same way you would any other initiative. Don't be so shy that you don't do anything. Try something at a very low level. Bring in a college intern or someone who can offer services at low cost. Give them a matrix: Here are some things we would like to do. What will have the most impact? Then do that really well. Opera companies tend to be slow, but you won't be left behind. Look at things like online ticketing. We started out slow, but now everyone's got it."

All the talk may be of technology projects, but even at the Met, Gelb says, "It doesn't have to be all about media." He points to the company's collaborations with museums and schools, and the forging of civic connections through events such as a free open house/dress rehearsal. "New media is one quiver in our bow of arrows to reconnect the Met to the public. The point is that every opera company, every theater company, should be thinking about ways to reach out to a larger audience. The key to it, as least as far as I'm concerned, is making these connections without diminishing or undermining the artistic integrity of what we're presenting." ☺

This is the first of two articles looking back on recent innovations in delivering opera to audiences. In this issue, Rebecca Winzenreid speaks to company representatives about what they have initiated, as well as their plans for the future. Next, we'll turn our attention to the audience: OPERA America worked with member companies to survey audiences nationwide and learn more about their reasons for attending the Met HD Broadcasts, as well as their experience of live opera. Shugoll Research will provide a complete analysis of the data, which will be reported in the September issue of *Opera America*.

Photo credits: All black and white photos this page are courtesy of The Metropolitan Opera Archives. The color photos this page are of San Francisco Opera's AT&T Ballpark simulcast of *Samson and Delilah*; photos by Terrance McCarthy and courtesy of San Francisco Opera.