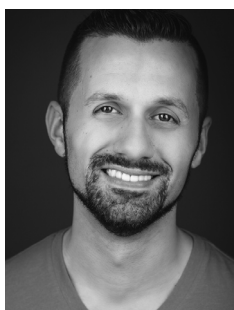


The Changing Face of Opera in America: Musical Theatre on the American Operatic Stage

Justin John Moniz



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FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE PERFORMANCE OF OPERA in America through the turn of the twenty-first century, American opera companies have continued to support programming models heavily reliant upon traditional Western European opera. The presentation of musical theatre by major opera companies in the United States has been challenging to accept for staunch opera enthusiasts, many of whom have struggled to see it as any more than a means to increase ticket revenue.¹ Over the past decade and a half, however, American opera companies have begun to include musical theatre within their subscription series in an attempt to attract both opera and musical theatre enthusiasts and to diversify audiences.

The opera industry's struggle to maintain self-sustaining business models has been an ongoing challenge, particularly since the turn of the twenty-first century.² The Metropolitan Opera, for example, reportedly sold only 69 percent of the house during the 2011–2012 season.³ The same is true for many opera companies of varying budget levels across the United States. As a result, several organizations have since been searching for different ways to attract audience members—many by programming musical theatre. While companies like New York City Opera and Houston Grand Opera pioneered the inclusion of musical theatre within their seasons, Lyric Opera of Chicago's 2012 presentation of *Show Boat* was arguably the industry's turning point, as the production immediately sparked remounts among some of the nation's most respected houses, including Washington National Opera and San Francisco Opera.⁴

Audience size and box office revenue have increased for companies of varying budget levels, including Lyric Opera of Chicago,⁵ Houston Grand Opera, Charlottesville Opera, Tri-Cities Opera, and Utah Festival Opera and Musical Theatre. Houston Grand Opera's 2013 production of *Show Boat* generated significant revenue for the company, as the piece sold 91 percent of the house's capacity. Among *Show Boat* ticket holders, 2.6 percent returned to subscribe to a future season. Nearly 63 percent of the audiences for *Show Boat* had never attended an event at Houston Grand Opera.⁶ Lyric Opera of Chicago reported similar results, as more than half of the audience for the company's recent production of *The Sound of Music* had never been to the Lyric Theater.⁷ As a result, the company is aiming to continue its musical

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theatre initiative. Similar programming initiatives have proven successful for opera companies nationwide and are expected to continue.

PROGRAMMING MUSICAL THEATRE

In recent years musical theatre has been programmed at a number of American opera houses, including Utah Festival Opera and Musical Theatre, Charlottesville Opera, Tri-Cities Opera, the Glimmerglass Festival, Houston Grand Opera, and Portland Opera. Companies of all budget levels have ventured into musical theatre repertoire, many with great success and with programming benefits that include increased box office revenue and audience development.

Located in Logan, Utah, the Utah Festival Opera and Musical Theatre was founded in 1993, following a \$6.5 million restoration of the historic Ellen Eccles Theatre.⁸ The company's inaugural season included *Naughty Marietta*, *La bohème*, and a double bill of *Trial by Jury* and *The Impresario*. Since the early nineties, Utah Festival Opera and Musical Theatre has seen an increase in the frequency of musical theatre programming. As a result of the summer festival's growing success, particularly with the production of musical theatre, the company recently led an initiative to restore the historic 350-seat Utah Theatre, which converted a dilapidated movie house into a state of the art facility dedicated to creativity and excellence in the performing arts. The renovation aims to help the company increase its musical theatre offerings, as well as expand its supplementary programs.

Founding General Director of Utah Festival Opera and Musical Theatre Michael Ballam, long an enthusiast of musical theatre, documents an increase in the frequency of programming the genre. "When Utah Festival Opera was founded in 1993, we did one musical, one opera, and one operetta. Then we moved to four shows and produced two operas and two musicals. Eventually [as in the case of the 2017 season], we started doing more musicals and less opera."⁹ For Utah Festival Opera and Musical Theatre, there are a number of major financial benefits when programming musical theatre. "Often opera companies add musicals into the mix for the economic boon they bring to the company. There is no question that *My Fair Lady* financially enables us to offer *Manon Lescaut*."¹⁰

Charlottesville Opera was founded in 1978 by a group of local musicians and arts enthusiasts. In 1987, the company was named the Ash Lawn-Highland Opera Festival, under the direction of General Director Judy Walker. At that time the organization mounted full length opera and musical theatre productions. In 2002, the Ash Lawn Opera Festival was established with the mission of "performing opera and musical theatre, developing young artists and administrators for professional careers in opera, and providing education programs in opera."¹¹ In an interview, Artistic Director Emerita Michelle Krisel shared the expectation Charlottesville audiences have for musical theatre. "Charlottesville Opera has been doing this for 40 years. The demographics are that we sell twice as many tickets to the musical as we do the opera, so the bargain I made with myself is, if I produce musicals that are really only operas in disguise, and if I produce them as if they are opera [using opera singers without amplification], then I see it as being part of an opera company."¹² This has only been Krisel's personal philosophy since arriving, but she confirms that Charlottesville Opera has been operating on this model for 40 years.

Founded in Binghamton, New York in 1949, Tri-Cities Opera began under the direction of Payton Hibbitt and Carmen Savona. The company currently mounts three full scale operas per season during the fall, winter, and spring months, in addition to a number of supplementary programs. Tri-Cities Opera is nationally recognized for its Resident Artist Training program, which provides young artists a unique balance of instruction and performing experience in both opera and musical theatre. The company's musical theatre offerings have included *Sweeney Todd*, *The Student Prince*, and *Kismet*, among others.¹³

Upon her arrival at Tri-Cities Opera in 2014, General Director Susan Shiplett Ashbaker knew she wanted to escape the confines of the traditional programming model that had been seen in Binghamton for much of the company's history. "The company that I had inherited had the tradition of using only the top eighteen to twenty pieces in the repertoire that were the most popular, in rotation, over the course of six years. I wanted to really shift that paradigm and bring a wider variety of repertoire to Tri-Cities Opera," says Ashbaker.¹⁴ Her incorporation of a musical by Stephen Sondheim fulfilled her

mission of offering a greater variety of repertoire to the local community. Ashbaker adds, “I chose *Sweeney Todd*, because I felt that a) it was a really good piece with a recognizable title—both from Broadway, the opera house, and from the movie—and b) it had legitimate singing.”¹⁵

Houston Grand Opera was founded in 1955 by Walter Herbert, Elva Lobit, Edward Bing, and Charles Cockrell. The company’s inaugural season included *Madama Butterfly* and *Salome*. Under the artistic leadership of Patrick Summers, Houston Grand Opera now presents six to eight productions per season and has an annual operating budget of approximately \$27 million. Performances are held at the Wortham Theater Center, a venue with two performance spaces: the Alice and George Brown Theater and the Roy and Lillie Cullen Theater. The venue’s combined occupancy exceeds 3,300.¹⁶

One of America’s largest opera houses, Houston Grand Opera was one of the first opera houses to perform musicals, according to Artistic Director Patrick Summers. “Houston was the first place [American opera company] to program musicals. The old New York City Opera had no need for them to perform musicals because the compositional activity within Broadway itself was so vibrant and there was so little operatic composition.”¹⁷ Summers believes these worlds have reversed themselves in an unusual way over recent years. He adds, “The most vibrant compositional activity is in the opera house, and the hardest place to get a new work put on is on Broadway. It has been completely reversed in sixty years, and that is an interesting corollary as to why an opera company would perform a musical at all, because I think the genres have melded over time to such an extent that it makes a certain amount of sense.”¹⁸

Patrick Summers’s vision for Houston Grand Opera revolves around the company’s commitment to the performance of American works within all genres. He states, “We are an American opera company and our commitment and vision to this art form is focused on American music and American composers. Part of that important legacy is the classic works of the American Musical Theatre.”¹⁹ As the frequency of musical theatre performances increases in the opera industry, Summers is not surprised. “I think these worlds have been melding for a long time,” he adds.²⁰ Summers believes musical theatre has a welcome home on the operatic stage, emphasizing the contents of the canon. “I do include

them [musicals] because the greatest of those pieces is great indeed . . . It’s exactly the reason I include *La traviata* or *Tristan und Isolde*. The secondary reason is that they are a very important part of American cultural heritage.”²¹

Summers believes the golden age of musical theatre was the high point for the genre’s outpouring of substantial repertoire. “In the creative climax of the American Musical Theatre—40s, 50s, and 60s, with a few works from the 70s (most by Stephen Sondheim)—the creative forces in the American Musical Theatre, the compositional forces, were extraordinarily active, and at a time when American operatic and symphonic composition was very limited and very small,” states Summers.²² He believes there has since been an increase in the creation of significant operatic works, whereas the musical theatre compositions have not been as substantial. He adds, “Since the mid-1980s, we have seen much more compositional activity in the opera house, while that creative risk-taking from a purely compositional standpoint has all but disappeared in musicals, so the two worlds have reversed themselves and are melding.”²³

Founded in Cooperstown, New York, in the summer of 1975, The Glimmerglass Festival (formerly Glimmerglass Opera) opened its doors with a production of *La bohème* at Cooperstown High School. The company has since grown to earn international recognition and is regarded as one of the country’s premiere summer opera festivals. Francesca Zambello was appointed as the company’s Artistic and General Director in September 2010, and under her leadership the organization in 2011 became The Glimmerglass Festival. The company continues its tradition of producing four fully staged productions each season, including three operas and a musical.

Zambello is an enthusiastic proponent of the inclusion of musical theatre. “I feel that musicals are, in a way, our own form of opera. It’s our own musical language that evolved from a synthesis of European opera, operetta, and American music of the early twentieth century: jazz, gospel, spirituals, songs—and, it seemed to me, that I was, in a way, honoring an operatic tradition by producing classic American musicals.”²⁴

Founded in 1964, Portland Opera began as the Portland Opera Association under the leadership of conductor Henry Holt. The company’s first season featured

two performances of *Die Fledermaus*, presented at the Madison High School auditorium. Since the company's inception, it has grown to twenty-three performances of four productions each year. A unique element of Portland Opera is a partnership with Broadway Across America, assisting in the production of a number of touring Broadway musicals that visit the city each season.²⁵

Utah's Michael Ballam recognizes that a large majority of American opera companies offer primarily European repertoire. "Opera in the sense of Verdi, Wagner, Mozart, and Puccini is an adopted art form in America. Our equivalent is the American Musical Theatre. Some of the repertoire, including *West Side Story*, *The Student Prince*, and *Carousel*, are best suited with operatic resources—voices and orchestra."²⁶ Ballam is a prominent advocate for the genre and is serious about the company's level of investment when producing a musical. "We invest the same degree of respect for musicals as we do operas and our audience very much appreciates and supports it," he adds.²⁷

EFFECTS ON THE CASTING PROCESS

The inclusion of musical theatre within the programming of American opera companies is changing the way organizations audition their singers. For major opera companies, several skills need to be displayed during an artist's audition before moving forward with the casting process. "I feel it necessary to have an artist demonstrate a wider range of singing and acting skills. Storytelling is the principal objective with musicals, and *should be* with opera," says Michael Ballam.²⁸ Each year, Utah Festival Opera and Musical Theatre auditions 1,200 singers in cities across the nation in search of the finest singers, actors, and dancers. Because so much of what Ballam produces involves spoken text, he feels a line reading is an essential part of the audition process. "At this point, even if I am only considering an artist for an operatic role, I still ask to hear them read, and sing a 'show tune.' It enables me to witness the communication skills of the artist," adds Ballam. During his 2013 season auditions, he and his team were in search of a dramatic soprano for the role of Senta in *Der fliegende Holländer* by Richard Wagner. "I wanted to hear her do musical theatre and read lines, even though she would not be doing so when it came to *The Flying Dutchman*. I really wanted to see

how she could communicate meaning and story, because I knew our audience had come to expect that."²⁹ In short, audiences are beginning to expect more entertaining and alluring stage work and storytelling. "Opera is no longer a park and bark art form," exclaims Ballam. "Regional companies can't do that because audiences will quit coming."³⁰

Susan Ashbaker understands the great demands the opera industry is placing on singers with the melding of genres. For Tri-Cities Opera, audition requirements have always included a piece in English, which has opened the door for the inclusion of a musical theatre selection. "When I programmed *Sweeney Todd*, people came in with *Sweeney Todd*. I do ask people to bring in something in English and lots of time they bring in musical theatre," says Ashbaker.³¹ She is an advocate for opera companies committed to producing musical theatre, adding, "I think globally, our industry has started to accept that more and more."³²

Patrick Summers's casting process at Houston Grand Opera has not seen a great change with the inclusion of musical theatre within his programming model. "I don't differentiate this repertoire from opera. I don't police the borders of the genres the way many people do," says Summers.³³ For many years, the Houston Grand Opera Studio has required the inclusion of a monologue with a singer's audition package. Summers continues to support this model, which was in place well before his time with the company. He adds, "When I'm looking at a singer who is interesting and I think, 'Wow, they would be a wonderful Mimi,' I'm also very likely to think, 'Wow, they'd be a wonderful Mrs. Anna in *The King and I*.'"³⁴ Similarly to Patrick Summers, Francesca Zambello does not believe the inclusion of musical theatre has had any effect on her audition process at The Glimmerglass Festival. "You always cast what you need. With the young artists, we hire a mix of people who can hopefully do everything," states Zambello.³⁵

LOOKING FORWARD

Due to the increase in musical theatre programming, the casting process for many companies has become more involved. Organizations such those companies identified above have begun to require musical theatre selections, monologues, and in some instances, mandate

singers to attend a dance call. Emphasis has been placed on movement and physicality. Singers are required to communicate not only through song but dialogue.

Young artist and professional singer training programs have been expanding repertoire for young singers, including genres such as musical theatre and operetta. Training programs at Utah Festival Opera and Musical Theatre, Charlottesville Opera, and Tri-Cities Opera offer both opera and musical theatre in order to provide singers with practical opportunities for careers in today's market. A large portion of the curriculum focuses on dance, movement, stage combat, and storytelling. All three programs offer singers the opportunity to study, coach, and perform in musical theatre each season. As greater demands are placed on young artists to become more versatile and flexible, it is important to continue the discussion as to how to best define our training models and curricula across young artist programs and academia alike.

Ashbaker argues that the industry will ultimately adopt a model that is inclusive of both opera and musical theatre in one canon of repertoire. "To me, American Musical Theatre in 200 years is going to be part of the opera and music theatre canon. Operettas in Germany were very different than operas in Germany, but now we in the United States consider that opera," exclaims Ashbaker.³⁶ It certainly begs the question as to what opera will really look like in 2050, 2100, or even 2150. She adds, "I think in a couple hundred years, especially some of the musical theatre pieces that are so vocal, will find their way into what we know as the opera canon."³⁷

Musical theatre's infiltration of the operatic repertory has rapidly spread through recent years as companies like Lyric Opera of Chicago commit to producing all of the works of Rodgers and Hammerstein. There is no denying that musical theatre is finding a welcome place on the American operatic stage. As reported by industry professionals, measureable effects on fiscal aspects, casting, and young artist training have signaled that the increased frequency of musical theatre is changing the face of opera in America.

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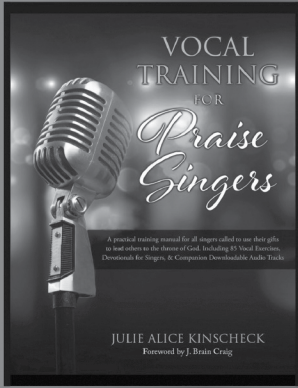
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Dr. Justin John Moniz currently serves as Associate Director of Vocal Pedagogy and Music Assistant Professor of Vocal Performance at New York University's (NYU) Steinhardt School, where he teaches courses in pedagogic theory and practice, applied voice, and supervises the graduate voice pedagogy program. During his first year on faculty, Moniz was awarded Steinhardt's prestigious Faculty Development and Diversity Innovation Grant for his project, *Paving New Paths: Understanding Trans Identities On-Stage & Off*. Prior to joining the NYU community, he served as Chair of Vocal Studies at Millikin University and Visiting Instructor at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music.

Moniz has been recognized as one of the preeminent voice teachers of classical, commercial, and music theater voice in the United States. His current and former students have performed on Broadway, off-Broadway, on national and international tours, in regional theaters and opera houses, on national television (including *The Voice*: Season 15), and in bands touring throughout the United States. In great demand for his presentations and master classes on classical, commercial, and music theater voice, he has presented at both national and regional conferences for the National Opera Association (NOA), National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS), Southeastern Theatre Conference (SETC), and at institutions including The Boston Conservatory at Berklee, New England Conservatory, Oklahoma City University, University of Miami, Boston University, Baldwin Wallace Conservatory, Auburn University, Duke University, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Universidad La Salle Laguna. Dr. Moniz was recently honored as the 2020 Featured Educator for the Boston Sings (BOSS) Festival.

A three-time winner of the American Prize in Vocal Performance, Moniz has sung over 90 roles to date, having recently appeared with Opera Grand Rapids, Utah Festival Opera & Musical Theatre, Sarasota Opera, Florida Grand Opera, The Columbus Philharmonic, Opera Company of Middlebury, Opera New Jersey, DreamCatcher Theatre/Adrienne Arsht Center, Orchestra Miami, Gulfshore Opera, Palm Beach Dramaworks, the Orchestra of Northern New York, and Chicago Symphony Center. His unique style and versatility have afforded him an active career in opera, concert, and music theater.

Moniz also serves as Executive Director of Hawaii Performing Arts Festival (HPAF), a training and performance program on The Big Island of Hawai'i. Moniz's diverse and innovative programming—which focuses on using art as a vehicle for social impact—has earned HPAF global recognition, the festival emerging as an international cultural destination in recent years. Throughout his administrative tenure, Moniz has earned the organization over a half million dollars in public and private grant funding, increased the annual operating budget by nearly 40%, and yielded the highest student enrollment in the festival's 17-year history. He also serves as Hawaii Governor and Chair of the Inclusivity, Diversity, Equity, and Access (I.D.E.A) Initiative for the National Opera Association. Moniz is a proud member of the American Guild of Musical Artists and the Actors' Equity Association.



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