



ON SITE
OPERA

PRESS KIT 2016

ERIC EINHORN

General & Artistic Director

GEOFFREY MCDONALD

Music Director

JESSICA KIGER

Executive Director/Producer



@ONSITEOPERA

www.osopera.org

P.O. Box 231480 | New York, NY 10023
347-394-3050 | info@osopera.org | www.osopera.org

QUOTES

Gregg Kallor's *The Tell-Tale Heart*

- "The starkly simple production by Sarah Meyers, which placed Pojanowski in the merciless glare of a single spotlight, proved one of the most effective stagings I've seen from the always-inventive On Site Opera" –*The Observer*
- "Part of the draw of The Crypt Sessions is its unique venue. Performances happen in the Crypt Chapel...an inspired setting for *The Tell-Tale Heart*—the vaulted, cloistered qualities well suited for a meditation on entombment." –*Parterre Box*

Dominick Argento's *Miss Havisham's Wedding Night* & Hector Berlioz's *La Mort de Cléopâtre*

- "I would not have wanted to hear either opera anywhere else....Without that separation from the audience, Partridge and Gaissert leveraged the closeness, relying on the transparency of their characters' damaged psyches, indulging in murmured pianissimos and quick turns that might get lost in a bigger house. The result was both lavish and intimate." –*NY Magazine*
- "There was the gobsmacking experience of having the performers right there at one's elbow, inches away – Cleopatra's gown wafting against your shoulder as she passed, Miss Havisham's old lace perfuming the air as her doleful countenance met yours in a transfixing intimacy. And, above all, there was the sound!" *La Scena Musicale*

Marcos Portugal's *The Marriage of Figaro*

- "So Much More Than *Sleep No More*. On Site Opera's immersive version of *Marriage of Figaro* is on point. This lively young cast was so irresistible that you wouldn't ever want them to stop singing." –*The Observer*
- "On Site Opera presents the ultimate in intimate productions by performing works in spaces that fit the setting of the story. This delightful staging of Portugal's "Figaro" takes place at 632 on Hudson, a beautifully renovated townhouse in the West Village." –*The New York Times*
- Eric Einhorn's whirlwind staging included plenty of fine detail suitable for viewing at arm's length, and Geoffrey McDonald kept the music not only precise but also breezy. –*The Observer*
- On Site Opera offers the delightful fly-on-the-wall experience of observing—practically participating in—lesser-known operas in intimate domestic settings. –*Opera News*

Giovanni Paisiello's *The Barber of Seville*

- "The enterprising On Site Opera company presented a delightful production of this clever, sure-paced and musically inventive earlier opera...This visionary company could be on to something big." –*The New York Times*
- "On Site Opera has a special niche in the New York opera scene as the pioneer of doing works in specific settings such as the Bronx Zoo, the Cotton Club or Madame Tussaud's wax museum. Its next production will be Giovanni Paisiello's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (1782) which was very popular until Rossini's version came along." –WQXR's *Operavore*
- "It (On Site Opera) succeeds brilliantly in making opera-going an intimate experience, where the singers are a few feet away from the audience and drawing us into the story in a way that a night at the Met or any other grand opera house can hardly ever do." –*Broadway World*
- "A recent production at On Site Opera in New York achieved the seemingly impossible. The performance I attended was so fresh, original and immediate that, within minutes, it banished any thought of Rossini from my mind. Overall I enjoyed this evening as much as any live opera I've attended in the last decade." –*Opera Today*

- "Smaller companies like On Site Opera are experimenting with performance in non-traditional spaces, generally at something closer to the scale at which these many works were historically meant to be heard. Perhaps they have found a viable route back to the future." – *Opera Today*
- "As On Site Opera's captivating performance demonstrated, Paisiello's opera holds up very well, thank you, and so does the musical style of his day. One can spot moments that are at least as good as-or even better than-comparable places in Rossini's opera." – *Opera Magazine*
- "On Site Opera's latest operatic adventure is a hit! ...Director and On Site Opera Founder, Eric Einhorn continues to display a genius for transforming sites into living, breathing immersive theatrical environments." – *Schleppy Nabucco's*

Rameau's *Pygmalion*

- "The production was fun and inventive...the young cast brimmed with acting talent." – *The New York Times*
- "Einhorn explored a deeper lever, where obsessing about art is a copout for dealing with difficult human relationships...a dramatic intimacy that was beautifully detailed and effective." – *Opera News*
- "On Site Opera's production of Rameau's *Pygmalion* was a complete delight. The brainstorm of artistic director Eric Einhorn, his choice of Madame Tussauds for its setting was nothing short of genius...The singers were charmers, everyone of them, and Jordan Isadore's choreography was enchanting." – *Gay City News*
- "I think the idea of immersive opera is great and a new way to open opera to different audiences, and as On Site Opera founder, Eric Einhorn, noted, it's also a way to bring venues such as Madame Tussauds to New Yorkers who normally do not seek out the tourist attractions in their own city. There were several small children in the audience and this short one act opera may have been appealing to them as the action moved around the room, "statues" came to life, Cupid raced around with a bow and arrow...On Site Opera's creative approach, energy and enthusiasm towards new opera experiences is just what the art form needs to stay relevant and catch the eye of younger audiences. I look forward to future performances of this promising young opera company." – *Schleppy Nabucco's*
- "Rameau's *Pygmalion* will be staged in June by On Site Opera, one of New York's most original and enterprising companies. Once they choose an opera, they then select the ideal place to perform it. I very much enjoyed their Blue Monday by George Gershwin at the Cotton Club in Harlem." – *WQXR's Operavore*

Gershwin's *Blue Monday*

- "This new production, presented by the innovative On Site Opera company and the Harlem Opera Theater, was performed at the legendary Cotton Club in Harlem where old-time jazzmen teamed up with an African- American cast of singers and dancers." – *BBC News*
- Dancers choreographed by George Faison enhanced a seductive production staged by Eric Einhorn, On Site Opera's artistic director, and attractively costumed by Candida K. Nichols. – *The New York Times*
- This is a quick, thrilling ride in a time machine, and effective use of a performance space to create atmosphere and mood...another excellent argument for freeing opera from the constraints of the auditorium. – *Super Conductor*

Shostakovich's *Tale of the Silly Baby Mouse*

- "A year ago the newly formed On Site Opera made its initial splash with Shostakovich's *Tale of the Silly Baby Mouse* at the Bronx Zoo. An economical staging and whimsical puppet protagonists enchanted audience members of all ages; connoisseurs, meanwhile, could hardly miss the seriousness and skill of the undertaking." – *The New York Times*
- "Now and then you witness a debut so happy and so rich with potential that you can't wait to share the news." – *The New York Times*

FEATURES

LaScena Musicale

PUTTING OPERA ON THE SPOT, WITH ON SITE OPERA

By Charles Geyer | October 26, 2016

"Waiter! There's a diva in my soup!" Actually, there wasn't any soup – but a double helping of diva was definitely on the menu at Manhattan's Upper East Side Harmonie Club on the evenings of September 29th and 30th. That's when On Site Opera, a spry and peripatetic company that has been generating surprising, up-close opera experiences around the city since 2012, served up their evening of "monodramas" in the club's swank ballroom. The evening began with Hector Berlioz' 1829 *La Morte de Cléopâtre*, performed by mezzo-soprano Blythe Gaisert; and continued with Dominick Argento's 1979 *Miss Havisham's Wedding Night*, starring soprano Leah Partridge.

What a Feeling The evening brimmed with revelations. First, there was the novelty and sense of discovery in encountering the two pieces themselves – each so rich, so compact, so full of drama and compelling musical ideas, and both rendered with energy and virtuosity. Then, there was the gobsmacking experience of having the performers right there at one's elbow, inches away – Cleopatra's gown wafting against your shoulder as she passed, Miss Havisham's old lace perfuming the air as her doleful countenance met yours in a transfixing intimacy. And, above all, there was the sound! Who among even the most devoted opera-going laity ever gets to be this close to the source of surreal, high-superhuman vocal production? The outrageous and rich hyper-functionality of the operatic voice at proximities such as these is palpable to a fare-thee-well, engendering effects tantamount to an aural contact high. These are close encounters of a very special kind. "You can feel it vibrate right in your bones," says Eric Einhorn, the founder and artistic director of On Site Opera (and himself a former singer). "There's always that audience shock of 'I knew there weren't any microphones, but that was amazing!'"

Bunch of Animals! On Site Opera began its adventures in 2012 with a live production outdoors at the Bronx Zoo – a presentation of Dmitri Shostakovich's 1939 mini-opera for children, *The Tale of the Silly Baby Mouse*, originally intended as the score for an animated cartoon. The On Site production featured special puppet-like animal getups for the singers, created on request by the celebrated Puppet Kitchen, which has also fabricated pieces for (among many other projects) the Met's *Madama Butterfly*. "We did an English translation [of the Shostakovich]," recalls On Site's producer and executive director, Jessica Kiger. "Parents would ask, 'When are you doing this again? When can we come back? My kids never pay attention to anything like this!'" With that, Einhorn, Kiger and company knew they were onto something special, and potentially very important. If children could be entranced by opera in so distraction-rich an environment as the Bronx Zoo, surely this was a model for drafting and holding onto future opera audiences that was worth pursuing. And pursue it they have.



Jessica Kiger, Eric Einhorn, and Geoffrey McDonald, Photo: Fay Fox

Three is a Company... Einhorn's and Kiger's collaboration might seem foreordained. They met working at the Metropolitan Opera – Kiger as a score consultant and production associate for the Met's Live in HD series; Einhorn as a member of the Met's stage directing staff who also directs productions at other opera companies around the country. Einhorn had developed a first-sketch version of his On Site operating ideal – bringing opera to life in various nonconventional settings around New York City – as early as 2011. Meanwhile, Kiger had arrived in New York with both training as a singer and experience as a theater producer – and a particular enthusiasm for site-specific theater. Einhorn's and Kiger's interests and energies thus meshed, and – with the addition of accomplished and versatile music director

Geoffrey McDonald – a crackerjack triumvirate was formed. On Site Opera was underway.

Members of the Wedding On Site's central conceit for the September 29 and 30 Harmonie Club performances was that audience members were guests assembled to celebrate the wedding of Miss Aurelia Havisham (of Dickens' *Great Expectations* fame) to her beau, Mr.

Matthew Compeyson. Handsome commemorative handbills announced as much, and the room, quite posh, seemed ideally suited to the occasion – if it should occur. (Though, of course, those familiar with the Dickens novel harbored sound suspicions that there'd likely be more breach than observance). Still, even before any musical performance began, as wine and champagne flowed, On Site's immersive legerdemain proved its potency, to the amazement even of its prime spell-master. "I was surprised by the energy and the vibrancy of the room," confesses Einhorn. "People seemed to embrace it. There was this vibe, like truly going to a wedding," as strangers, seated together at flower-laden tables, introduced themselves to each other, and chatted with the familial exuberance of in-laws to be. As it turned out, however, the room first would have to contend with a notable wedding crasher – one not to be ignored.

Famous for Barging In... Cleopatra rushed headlong into our midst, propelled by the urgent introductory bars of Berlioz's passionate score. Mezzo-soprano Blythe Gaissert was the imperious, woebegone Egyptian queen – her voice by turns potent, keening, indignant. She recriminated with herself for her political and amorous misadventures, bewailed the loss of both Caesar and Antony, and cursed the now-conquering Octavius – the first and only powerful man ever successful at resisting her blandishments and ample charms (what's with him?). The queen, however, now became resigned to her vanquishment, and as her voice throbbed in tones of glorious tragedy, wine glasses vibrated in sympathy. Speaking of which....At last, moving to what had a short time before been the bar, Cleopatra fetched the agent of her doom. She turned back toward the audience, and a delicious shiver coursed through the room. A live snake writhed indolently in Cleopatra's hands as she moved majestically toward the exit, intoning the score's final words – hoping to be worthy of Caesar in death – and Berlioz's lurid, final orchestral pulse-beats mirrored our own racing hearts.

Expecting the Unexpected In some respects, Einhorn is bringing the opera experiences back full circle for New York audiences, to a model that at one time was much more "interactive" than it tends to be today. "Wagner put the audience in the dark," Einhorn remarks. And, indeed, it was no less a commentator than Mark Twain who observed, during an 1891 trip to Bavaria, that Wagner audiences at Bayreuth "sit in the dark and worship in silence," whereas "[a]t the Metropolitan in New York they sit in a glare, and wear their showiest harness; they hum airs, they squeak fans, they titter, and they gabble all the time. In some of the boxes the conversation and laughter are so loud as to divide the attention of the house with the stage." Of course, a paradigm of unruly horseplay is not what Einhorn is hoping to revive. But he is alive to the fact that many among 21st-century audiences "want our entertainment differently," as he puts it. "It's no longer about being passive. We crave a bit more of a personal experience, a bit more interactivity whenever possible." But what of Einhorn's performers? Do they, too, appreciate this collapsing of distances and barriers between themselves and their public? "There's always a questions about what it's going to feel like," says Einhorn, "if a performer isn't used to site-specific performance." Still, he continues, there's also "an incredible amount of interest, and generally an eagerness to work in this kind of form." During On Site rehearsals, Einhorn stresses to his company the likelihood of the unexpected. "I'll suggest something," he says, "but it will always be qualified with 'we'll see when we get there. Remember, there could be an audience member's foot right there.'" Ultimately, performers almost always seem to embrace the experience. "As an artist, you put that performance out there and you crave that energy back," says Einhorn. "It's what you feed off. You want an engaged, participatory audience. The exciting thing about site-specific as we do it is you get that." And the performers of the two September monodramas affirmed precisely that excitement. Of playing Cleopatra, mezzo Gaissert said she found it remarkably empowering to think of audience members as servants or temple priests or handmaidens mutely attending at her hour of crisis – not to mention that, as an intrepid Texas native, Gaissert loved the reaction to her handling of that snake. ("When we first worked with Blythe [in *Silly Baby Mouse*]," says producer Kiger, "we didn't know what an animal whisperer she was going to turn out to be!") And soprano Leah Partridge, as Miss Havisham, inevitably drew rich imaginative inspiration from turning her audience into the various, hazily remembered characters from our composer Argento's tour-de-force one-act fever dream.

Never a Bride After Cleopatra's retreat, and an intermission to catch a breath and replenish glasses, it was time for the Harmonie Club ballroom's banner nuptial event. Partridge's portrayal of Aurelia Havisham was a fascinating and complex interplay of genteel fragility and raging acrimony. Dressed in faded lace, hair in vivid red curls, her eyes wide, her movements lithe, her sanity in shambles and her voice phenomenally affecting, Partridge plied every nuance of Argento's ingenious, modernist score, playing the room expertly, caressing our sensibilities at one moment as the expectant young bride, her voice delicately evoking the charms and decorum of a bygone era; then, as the scorned, embittered spinster, giving vent to despair that skirted the verges of self-destruction, all of it building to a climax of shattering histrionic and vocal combustion as she flung a clock from the mantelpiece, dashing it to pieces, seemingly in vain hope of stopping time itself. It was a dazzling performance – with one more surprise to come. After a suspended moment of gathered silence specified in the score,

director Einhorn cleverly leveraged the final moments of Argento's drama to bring the evening's two performance pieces into convergence. A knock at the door was followed not by a hallucinated visit from Havisham's one-time lover, but no less a companion than Cleopatra. A closing tableaux presented both ladies poised languidly at the mantle, ready for tea and chat, casting cynical glances over the assembled crowd, evidently assessing how little the opposite sex has changed through the centuries. The monodrama's final line: "I will tell you all about men." Wedding cake (delicious, and far fresher than the one moldering in Dickens's narrative) followed applause. Accompaniment for both monodramas was provided by a 15-member chamber orchestra (which included all five members of celebrated string quintet Sybarite5), led by music director Geoffrey McDonald with great vigor and expressiveness. Wonderfully effective enhanced lighting for the shifting moods of the evening was designed by Shawn Kaufman. Costumes were by Fay Leshner and hair and makeup designs were by Affan Malik.

On the Town While the Harmonie Club event was conceived as a company fundraising event, On Site has made a general point of targeting a wide and diverse array of New York neighborhoods and audience demographics, and of striving to keep ticket prices low and obstacles to



attendance at a minimum. In 2013, the company created a fully immersive, site-specific performance centered around a rare revival of George Gershwin's one-act jazz opera *Blue Monday*, in collaboration with Harlem Opera Theater. Replete with open dancefloor, cocktail service and a performance of the Gershwin piece, the audience enjoyed authentic 1920s ambiance at New York's Cotton Club on 125th Street. In 2014, the company produced Rameau's *Pygmalion* – about a statue brought to life by the power of passion – at Madame Tussauds NYC, with additional performances at the appropriately mannequin-tenanted Lifestyle-Trimco Showroom in Manhattan's Garment District. And the company's most ambitious – and ongoing – project to date has been its multi-year presentation of a trilogy of operas all based on Pierre Beaumarchais' 18th-century series of Figaro plays. For this series, On Site has eschewed the obvious choices of Rossini's and Mozart's famous *Figaro* operas in favor of highlighting the virtues and delights of lesser known adaptations – Giovanni Paisiello's 1782 *Barber of Seville* was produced in 2015 in and around the Upper East Side's beautifully restored Fabbri Mansion on 95th Street. And, this past summer, the company presented the North American premiere of Marcos Portugal's 1799 *Marriage of Figaro*, staged throughout the premises of the West Village's eclectic and fantastical architectural refurbishment known as "632 Hudson." On Site will conclude its Figaro Project in the summer of 2017 with a production of Darius Milhaud's 1966 *The Guilty Mother* (*La mère coupable*), which adapts Beaumarchais' controversial and transgressive 1791 sequel to his two earlier Figaro hits. How and where will On Site's trademark production elements – surprise, novelty, theatrical immediacy – be brought to bear on Milhaud's exploration of the dissipations and darker themes of Beaumarchais' final work? No venue for this final Figaro piece has yet been announced, but it will likely contrast sharply and intriguingly with the opulence of the company's first two installments.

The Why and Wherefore Asked to reflect on why opera matters so much to him – and why it should matter to audiences – Einhorn rises eloquently and passionately to the occasion. "It's a communal ritual, really," he says. "Who doesn't sing in the shower? From the time you're nine months old, you sing. There's such a deep-seated connection to that. So, for me, opera's not important just because of narrative. There is an inherent primitive quality to it that brings us together. Music is a great uniter." And when that music radiates in full, cultivated splendor from operatic organisms, the primal compulsion can be irresistible. "The aural stimulation of it – at times it borders on over-stimulation" Einhorn says. "Singers creating these sounds that are superhuman. It's why people like to watch the Olympics. We're projecting ourselves onto these people, looking at these characters and these performers as higher versions of our collective selves." And liberating the operatic enterprise from exclusive containment within formalized venues, passive seating arrangements and the neutralizing frame of a proscenium helps make this primal connection all the more acute. Producer Jessica Kiger agrees, citing the experience of even passers-by who heard the sound of the company's *Barber of Seville* emanating from the Fabbri Mansion courtyard. "People just wanted to stop and listen, take in a few moments of it. A very interesting dynamic that you don't have when you're inside a theater." "There's something special that you only get in opera," Kiger continues. "A feeling that I felt when I did my first opera at the age of 16. Massenet's *Manon*. It was a wonderful professional company. I was in the chorus. It was unlike any other feeling I've ever had. Being on stage with the orchestra right there, the other singers close to me. Music just in my lap! It really is unlike any other art from."

In a high-tech entertainment age, the hunger for heightened theatrical intimacy is often satisfied via gadgets and electronic wizardry, exemplified by shows like Broadway's current hit, *The Encounter*, which exploits cutting-edge audio technology, and provides each audience

member with a separate headset that simulates intimate, multi-source sound. On Site Opera, however, offers the rapture of song and the human voice unmediated by anything but humanity's original audio technology – the miraculous resonance of the human body.

The Music of Tomorrow Avid in its mission, On Site Opera is forging ahead with energy – and it's not alone. Indeed, On Site is in the vanguard of a growing slew of modest-sized "alt-opera" enterprises springing up in and around New York City and beyond. (Over 40 varied member companies currently constitute an initiative called the New York Opera Alliance, fiscally sponsored by OPERA America.) "We're really excited to be doing a performance that's free and open to the public in the Spring," says Kiger of their plans to produce Mozart's youthful opera of intrigue, jealousy and abduction, *La finta giardiniera*, in early 2017, at Manhattan's West Side Community Garden on West 89th Street, between Columbus and Amsterdam Avenues. "It's a kind of tucked-in location that holds between 150 and 170 people." But, as with the spontaneous outreach that was effected by the echoing sounds of Paisiello's Barber from the Fabbri Mansion, "anybody who's walking by on the street will get a chance to see what's going on and listen in." And the company has recently announced plans for its first original, commissioned work – a family-friendly, young persons' adventure opera to be entitled *Rhoda and the Fossil Hunt*, which On Site will premiere at New York's American Museum of Natural History in the fall of 2017. With a libretto by Einhorn, and music by prolific American composer John Musto, the opera is based on the girlhood adventures of Rhoda Knight Kalt, whose grandfather, celebrated artist Charles Knight, was deemed "the most influential paleoartist of the early 20th Century" for his imaginative and detailed murals of dinosaurs and other Mesozoic life at the New York natural history museum and other museums worldwide. A native of New York City, young Rhoda was privileged to accompany her grandfather on regular weekend trips to the museum to witness his visionary recreations coming to life, and to have her imagination fired by a growing acquaintance with the museum's premiere fossil collection. Call it a kind of *Eloise at the Plaza meets Night at the Museum*. The opera was originally suggested to On Site by Mrs. Kalt's own daughter, and her mother has since gleefully contributed her reminiscences to the project, putting flesh on the bones, so to speak, of this delightful odyssey of discovery. The work will be integrated with curricular programming at the Natural History Museum, and will subsequently be mounted in other U.S. cities, as well, as co-productions with Chicago Lyric Opera's Lyric Unlimited, and Pittsburgh Opera. If a girl-meets-dinosaurs opera doesn't succeed in building opera audiences of the future, what will?

The There There On Site Opera is a registered 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization, funded by philanthropic donations. It's a company that deserves to be sampled and supported by opera aficionados and newcomers alike, for the sheer exuberance and intoxication of helping to bring exquisite music out of the opera house – literally thinking outside that box – and instead creating glorious sounds and indelible experiences at zoos and on street corners, from museums to mansions to gardens to...who knows? When next you're out and about, and find you've got a beautiful melody going round in your head, take a closer listen. It may be an unexpected gift coming to you compliments of On Site Opera.



IN NEW YORK FESTIVAL, OPERA SHOWS DIVERSE INCARNATIONS

By Shaun Tandon | May 11, 2016



Jessica Kiger (L) and Eric Einhorn. (AFP Photo/Shawn Tandon)

New York (AFP) - New York is famous for the Metropolitan Opera but the city is home to more than 50 smaller opera companies, performing everywhere from parks to bars to private homes. In a first-of-a-kind festival, an alliance of the small companies is putting on performances across New York, hoping to reach new audiences but also to cross-pollinate by showing opera aficionados the breadth of offerings across the metropolis. The New York Opera Alliance chooses not to define "opera" or to set quality benchmarks, admitting to its fold any group that thinks it fits the bill and can chip in \$75. The inaugural New York Opera Fest, which runs throughout May and June, features classics plus innovative fare including operas designed for video and pieces about sex education performed by Opera on Tap, which plays in bars and other public spots.

One company, On Site Opera, will put on Marcos Portugal's version of "The Marriage of Figaro" inside an ornate house in Manhattan, which will serve as the count's palace with the audience watching inside. Jessica Kiger, the company's executive director and producer, said that such on-location performances were complementary rather than a replacement for grand opera as seen at the Met.

"For us it's just important to match the space with the story. So it's not just about taking opera outside the opera house, but to find a space that really resonates with the story or where the characters live, or would be, so that we can have a truly immersive experience," she said. Kiger, whose previous productions included staging Rameau's "Pygmalion" inside the Madame Tussauds wax museum, said that on-site operas were also more fluid, with performers reacting more to the audiences and developing their characters. "That to me has always made a huge difference. It's a lot of talking about who your character is and less about, 'Now I cross here in the music,'" she said.

-Reaching broader audience -Some opera companies reflect their neighborhoods. The Bronx Opera Company, based in New York's northernmost borough, aims to bring performances that are accessible and affordable. The Bronx Opera keeps some of the trappings of grand opera, playing in proscenium theaters with a conductor and orchestra, but its two performances a year are always in English. During the New York Opera Fest, the Bronx Opera staged Rossini's "Cinderella" sung in English rather than Italian. "The art form doesn't have to look like it looks at the Met," said Ben Spierman, the company's associate artistic director. "The Met's a fantastic thing in the city but it almost doesn't necessarily relate to the kind of thing that we all do, which is a little more grassroots and community-driven both in terms of the artists and where we perform," he said. Return to opera's roots? -The rise of the opera alliance comes amid financial challenges for the Met and other major US music institutions, which enjoy less generous government funding than counterparts in much of Europe. The New York City Opera, created as a more populist alternative to the Met, went bust in 2013 as it faced mounting debts. But a group of philanthropists and businesses recently revived the "people's opera," staging Puccini's "Tosca" at a theater near the Met in Lincoln Center. The reborn New York City Opera next month will reach a Spanish-speaking audience with "Florencia en el Amazonas," a work of magical realism by Daniel Catan.

Small companies have seen a growth of interest since the New York Opera Alliance was created five years ago as they benefit from unique characteristics in the metropolis -- a huge potential audience and a cultural shift toward independent art. Annie Holt, executive director of the alliance, said that the festival's lively, small-scale productions may be more in line with opera as envisioned in the art form's formative years

in Italy. "For me it's Wagner who engenders the sort of modern way that we thought about opera across most of the 20th century -- it's high art, it's through-composed, you sit down in your seat and you're quiet and the lights are off," she said. More casual productions "are actually in some ways for me a return to the origins of opera, not a departure from it," she said.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

ALT-OPERAS UNITE THE 'BEER AND CHAMPAGNE CROWDS'

By Pia Catton | Feb. 19, 2016

The lights come up. A song by the Eurythmics blasts from speakers as hipsters clamber up from their floor cushions and head to the burgeoning beer line. Welcome to intermission at the opera. The scene—in Gowanus, Brooklyn, in December—is typical for LoftOpera, one of several scrappy opera companies that have blossomed in recent years. Rejecting the luxury connotations of the art form, they are cultivating new audiences with tickets as low as \$10, oddball locations and aesthetically slick but low-budget productions. "It's something that feels like a movement," said Daniel Ellis-Ferris, co-founder of LoftOpera, which will present Puccini's "Tosca" in an old bus garage in East Williamsburg this March for \$30 a seat.

Much like their foodie peers launching artisanal pickle brands, the drivers of the micro-opera trend are resetting expectations for consumers hungry to try something new. Led mainly by conservatory grads and freelance directors, the upstart companies often tend to perform operatic rarities or new takes on classics in unconventional settings or site-specific locations that enhance the narrative.



Justine Aronson in On Site Opera's "Pygmalion" at Madame Tussauds wax museum.
Pavel Antonov/On Site Opera

Some groups rarely perform twice at the same venue: In 2014, On Site Opera presented Rameau's "Pygmalion," in which an artist falls in love with a sculpture, both at the Madame Tussauds wax museum in Times Square and in a mannequin showroom. Artistically, the events often have an underground, experimental feel.

This January, the Prototype Festival, an edgy, three-year-old event focusing on productions melding opera and theater, showcased works such as "Angel's Bone," which wove in punk rock, cabaret and electronics. In 2014, On Site Opera experimented with delivering subtitles via Google Glass. Often, folding chairs and benches bring the audience within a few feet of the action.

The budgets are modest by most performing-arts standards: A LoftOpera production costs between \$50,000 and \$75,000, according to Mr. Ellis-Ferris. About 80% of the costs are covered by the box office and sales of donated alcohol. The trend isn't just a New York phenomenon. Last fall, the mobile opera "Hopscotch" took place at carefully plotted locations throughout Los Angeles. Patrons were seated in 24 cars as hired drivers delivered them to scenes, or chapters, of an unfolding romantic tale. In 2013, Chicago Opera Theater staged "Orpheus and Euridice" in a swimming pool. On Thursday, it won an \$800,000 award from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation for its innovations. "Everyone is looking for what their culture is. What do they want to see and be a part of?" said Eric Einhorn, general and artistic director of On Site Opera, founded in 2012 and staging its fifth full production—Marco Portugal's "The Marriage of Figaro," far lesser known than the one by Mozart—this summer. This isn't the first wave of alt-opera. Groups such as Regina Opera, singing in Brooklyn since 1970, and Encompass New Opera Theatre, founded in 1975, began to carve out their own territory between the Metropolitan Opera's classical repertoire and the then-City Opera's more populist bent. With boundary-pushing newcomers, plus startups from the mid-2000s, like Underworld Productions Opera, a community has grown and organized.

In 2013, a consortium of about 35 independent opera entities, the New York Opera Alliance, was officially launched under the umbrella of Opera America, a national organization supporting the art form. Whether the activity is expanding the audience for opera, or just playing to friends and family, shows do tend to sell out, many organizers said, even when the venue is a GPS-vexing warehouse in Bushwick. And there is enough momentum for a festival: The inaugural New York Opera Fest will run in May and June, featuring about 20 companies in venues ranging from a basketball court to traditional theaters. The Alliance's goal is "combining the beer and Champagne crowds," said its executive director Annie Holt, also head of Morningside Opera, an artists' collective founded in 2008.

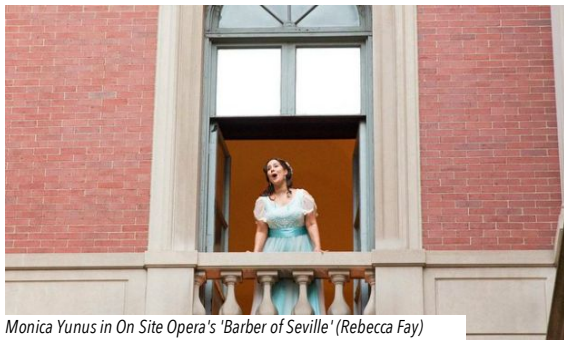
At January's Prototype Festival, "there were hipsters with green hair, and I saw a lady in a full-length mink. She was there to go to the opera," said Ms. Holt, stressing the traditional glamour. For Jonathan Kriner, a 26-year-old digital marketer, the ability to show up casually dressed is

a selling point for LoftOpera, which he has seen twice. "It's like a no-fail good time. It's not going to break the bank," he said, adding that he's more likely now to try the Met.

The city's mainstays for grand opera might appreciate the assist. The Met faced a serious budget shortfall in fiscal 2014, which it closed after recent cost-cutting. City Opera, founded in 1943, closed in 2013 after filing for bankruptcy protection; in 2015, it reformed as NYCO Renaissance, under new management. For some, the shake-ups opened a window. "After City Opera, there was a cultural impetus to do something urgent," said Mr. Ellis-Ferris. "We are competing with movies...not with the Met," said LoftOpera's general manager Brianna Maury. LoftOpera, though, is competing with the big dogs in one way. In January, it hired its first full-time employee, a 28-year-old fundraiser who spent six years at the Met—and left to work for the renegades.

WHEN OPERA IS ABOUT LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

By Fred Plotkin | June 16, 2015



Monica Yunus in On Site Opera's 'Barber of Seville' (Rebecca Fay)

When one talks about real estate value in New York, the old saw is that it is based on "location, location, location." And so it seems with how opera is presented around town. New York is its own summer opera festival this year with delectable offerings available for those who seek them. While the Metropolitan Opera means unrivaled grandeur, major voices and splendid musical forces in the other three seasons, summertime opera provides more unusual repertory and performance styles than any world city I can think of. I was reminded of this on June 12 as I sat in the tranquil courtyard of the Fabbri Mansion on East 95th Street. Although I am often in that neighborhood, this hidden gem had escaped me. And, on a Friday evening

when all the wealthy residents of the block had repaired to their weekend homes, the street was completely quiet and an ideal place to hear an opera.

The work in question was Giovanni Paisiello's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (The Barber of Seville), which had its premiere in St. Petersburg in 1782. The libretto is by Giuseppe Petrosellini, based on the famous play and characters by Beaumarchais. Paisiello (1740-1816) is undervalued today. His work as part of the 18th century Neapolitan school of opera influenced the evolution of the art form in its elegant and seamless integration of theater and music in which comedy and wistfulness are present in every moment. When done properly, Paisiello operas are Mozartian in their knowing awareness of the human condition. Here is a performance of the opera given in Athens in 2010. It will serve to familiarize you with the music. The *Barbiere* I attended was a production by the innovative On Site Opera, which specializes in presenting unusual works in site-specific locales. I have enjoyed their productions of Gershwin's noirish *Blue Monday* at Harlem's Cotton Club and Rameau's *Pygmalion* at Madame Tussaud's wax museum on West 42nd Street. Their thinking is that these very distinct settings add to the experiencing of a particular work even more than seeing them in a theater with custom-built scenery.

In this case, the first act was in the courtyard of the mansion, which neatly served as the Sevillian plaza where Almaviva (David Blalock) and Figaro (Andrew Wilkowske) communicate to Rosina (Monica Yunus) at her window above. She is locked in by her ward, Dr. Bartolo, and we meet him and his servants at the entrance to the mansion. For the second act, the audience walked up to the mansion's gorgeous library, where the rest of the story played out in a perfect space. For each act, a small orchestra was placed at one end of the space.

Seeing the opera this way, it was a pleasure to focus on the gradual unfolding of the story, familiar though it might be to anyone who knows every detail of the famous Rossini 1816 version. The staging of the Paisiello by Eric Einhorn emphasized narrative rather than attempt to be kinetic and farcical, as is now the standard in productions of the Rossini. This opera is the first in a planned Figaro trilogy to include the U.S. premieres of Marcos Portugal's *The Marriage of Figaro* (1800) and Darius Milhaud's *The Guilty Mother*.

It dawned on me as I watched this performance that another estimable company, Loft Opera, seems to be doing what On Site Opera is by using spaces around town for their productions and having audiences be very close to the singers. But there are important differences. In On Site Opera's productions the settings are meant to enhance the experiencing of the story. The company favors little-known works while Loft has done mostly mainstream repertory. These novelties expand what we see and hear. They appeal to opera cultists who are eager to stretch their boundaries and knowledge and I have been grateful to discover works new to me.

In contrast, Loft will take a rough or unfinished space, add minimal scenery and props and put on a show. In short order, the surroundings recede from the audience's thoughts and we focus intently on the action. The direction at most Loft productions is visceral and direct, but almost never gimmicky. This is the key to their success—each moment is truthful and played as written. Loft's early productions of *Don Giovanni* and *La Bohème* remain vivid in my memory for how effectively they made familiar works seem new. And their recent *Lucrezia Borgia*

was one of four I attended in a year and was, from a theatrical point of view, far and away the best. It is no small accomplishment that Loft can make standard repertory opera exciting in an era when most of the big companies in the U.S. and Europe are not as sure-footed.

Attending an opera at Loft elicits an audience energy that simply cannot be bought or manufactured. It does not feel anything like a traditional night at the opera but more like a social mixer in which an outstanding opera performance appears. In contrast, On Site audiences have a great desire to learn and grow. It is opera education in the best sense. Both On Site and Loft, in their respective approaches, are not necessarily breaking the confines of opera but reshaping them to make us experience the art form in valid new ways. Would I abandon the traditional proscenium arch grand opera format? Never. Creating something new does not mean throwing away the old.

I TURNED GOOGLE GLASS INTO OPERA GLASSES

OKAY GLASS, TRANSLATE THIS ARIA

By Adi Robertson | June 27, 2014

In 1983, at a showing of Strauss' *Elektra*, the Canadian Opera Company changed opera forever. It introduced a concept that its creator termed surtitles, which projected translated lyrics alongside the performers. It allowed viewers to read the dialogue as they heard it sung in German, rather than having to read the plot beforehand or buy a paper libretto with the text. It also launched a veritable culture war. To some, projections allowed audiences to appreciate operas on a new level. To others, they were a pointless, tasteless, even "pathetic" distraction. Metropolitan Opera music director James Levine was quoted in 1985 saying that the Met would show surtitles (often known as supertitles) "over my dead body." But today, supertitles are ubiquitous. Levine himself came around in 1995, when seat-back systems let individual patrons turn the titles off. A technology that was once despised had become indispensable.



The underlying lesson is not lost on Eric Einhorn, the founder and artistic director of On Site Opera. The New York-based company, founded in 2012, performs operas that eschew the traditional stage. For its latest project – an adaptation of Rameau's *Pygmalion* performed amidst wax statues and mannequins – it tested a new kind of translation, projected not on a wall but on the lens of Google Glass. Working with veteran supertitling company Figaro Systems, On Site Opera streamed its lyrics through a web app called MobiText, allowing them to be played on Glass or a cellphone. It's not just an experiment, it's a way for On Site Opera to expand beyond an English-only repertoire. "There are some companies that do translations in English, singing translations, and that's not something that we want to do. We like the idea of doing it in the original language," says Einhorn. But the venues it picks – including Harlem's legendary Cotton Club and the Bronx Zoo – can't effectively support projectors. "It became a real question for us – how do we do that? How do we get titles to people effectively?"



At a showing last week, the system worked surprisingly well. Readable but minimally distracting translations floated in the corner of my vision, allowing me to move my eyes instead of my head. And unlike a seat-back or projection system, it didn't matter which direction I was facing. That meant that performers could walk down the aisle singing, or start dancing in the back rows, and there was no reason not to watch them. Glass has rarely felt natural to me, but this replaced a system that was already artificial and sometimes inconvenient, requiring nothing more than a glance upward. Few things seem like obvious fits for Google Glass so far, but this is one of them.

Despite this, Glass' rough edges showed through. On Site Opera's original plan, at one point, was to get enough Glass sets for an entire audience. But the price tag – potentially \$150,000 – wasn't even the biggest problem. "It's a technology that has a learning curve," admits Einhorn, a Glass owner himself. Most attendees would be getting a crash course in fitting and navigating an unfinished device they'd never used. "It was a blessing in disguise that we were unable to secure those 100 pairs of Glass that I was hoping we would get. It would have turned into a tutorial nightmare." My biggest problem was power: the roughly 45-minute, one-act opera drained half my battery.

Despite being advertised as "*Pygmalion* for Glass Explorers," most people weren't actually wearing Google Glass. Einhorn estimates there were 10 to 15 people wearing headsets in the 50-person audience at my show; I saw slightly over a half-dozen in an informal count. At a second 100-person show over the weekend, On Site Opera passed a few sets out to the audience, where around a dozen people tried it for at least a little while. Most people spent the opera periodically looking down at their phones to see the translations, an experience that, while it didn't look bad, seemed significantly less seamless.

If Glass becomes common – which will almost certainly require improving the hardware and user experience and slashing the price – the ratio will change. But right now, it raises an obvious question: what are you trading off by asking audiences to rely on their own hardware? On Site Opera is geared towards a wide range of ages and experience levels with opera, and Einhorn says he's working to make sure no one gets left out, even with more widely available technology. On Site Opera might not be able to provide Glass, but it's considering lending attendees iPads or simple printed librettos. "There might be people in any portion of that audience base that either don't have a smartphone or don't want to use a smartphone," he says. "There are people who the idea of that is not quite nice, to them. They want to turn their technology off and experience the event."

What On Site Opera gains is the chance to experiment with new, more dynamic productions. It may have taken place in a temporarily converted showroom full of mannequins, but *Pygmalion* took place mostly on a traditional stage. Now that Glass and Figaro's online supertext system has passed its first test, the team is looking at more unorthodox settings – like an opera where performers pass through multiple rooms over the course of the story. "The idea of not having to set up six different projectors and have all that equipment, for all of it to run off of a single computer, is really exciting," says Einhorn.

But all this, he notes, depends on what Google does with the technology. Given that, was he disappointed when Glass wasn't mentioned at all in the I/O keynote? "I was a little disappointed. I was just surprised, more than anything," he says, referencing Glass' recent launch in the UK and the improved version that came out the day before the keynote. "It just seemed like there would at least be some mention of it."

For now, Glass is a niche and polarizing device. In addition to raising privacy concerns, it's frequently seen as strange or tacky, and Einhorn says he's seen some pushback from people both online and in the industry. But though On Site Opera will continue to gauge audience reception to Glass, he hopes that like supertext, Glass can win over critics. "Some people think Glass is a wonderful thing, like I do, and other people don't really care for it. So the idea of implementing a technology you don't like into an art form that you love ... people get very passionate about their opera, which is what makes it so great," he says. "What's fantastic about it is when something in opera can start a conversation this way. It's certainly not a staid museum relic anymore."

GERSHWIN FAN PRODUCES MINI OPERA AT HARLEM'S COTTON CLUB

By Patrick Cole | June 17, 2013



Eric Einhorn at the Cotton Club, after a rehearsal for his co-production of George Gershwin's "Blue Monday." Einhorn's venture, On Site Opera, specializes in producing site-specific operas in smaller, intimate venues. Photo: Eshama John/Bloomberg

When a teacher at his New Jersey high school loaned Eric Einhorn George Gershwin's "Blue Monday," the brief jazz opera became an ear worm.

"It was like the skies had opened," said Einhorn, 32. "I felt a connection to the piece, and it was something I've always wanted to do." Einhorn, who has worked on productions at the Metropolitan Opera, has in recent years pursued smaller stage works through On Site Opera, a venture he founded that is applying for nonprofit status.

Last year, he created a small production of Shostakovich's "The Tale of the Silly Baby Mouse" at the Bronx Zoo. Einhorn's version of "Blue

Monday" opens at New York's Cotton Club tomorrow night. The three-night run is co-produced by Einhorn and Gregory Hopkins of the Harlem Opera Theater. Dancers choreographed by Tony Award-winner George Faison will complement the drama, and the Harlem Chamber Players will provide the music.

"Blue Monday," set in a Harlem bar, tells of a love triangle in which singer Tom woos Vi, the sweetheart of a gambler named Joe. Vi shoots Joe dead after Tom falsely claims Joe got a telegram from another woman. The opera's title comes from an aria sung by a cafe worker lamenting his losses at dice on a "Blue Monday."

Site Specifics

"For the character portrayals, it was about finding those moments of real human experience," Einhorn said. "The performers will be among the audience and around the club, so it will give them a wonderful insight into these people. That's something that only site-specific opera can achieve."

A precursor to Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess," "Blue Monday" inspired the opera's first band leader, Paul Whiteman, to request that Gershwin compose a concert piece. The result was "Rhapsody in Blue."

"Blue Monday" opened in 1922 to mixed reviews, with some critics praising Gershwin's music and others slamming it for its use of white actors in black-face. The current production's all-black cast includes Chase Taylor as Joe, Alyson Cambridge as Vi and Lawrence Craig as Tom.

"The initial reception to 'Monday' wasn't great, but there's a wealth of material in the score that led to what Gershwin did in 'Porgy and Bess,'" Einhorn said. "Gershwin did a wonderful handling of pacing and drama."

Darker Story

Einhorn said he spent many hours researching Gershwin and the history of "Blue Monday" to get a feel for the story's emotional core.

"Gershwin's original version was a darker story that portrayed the darker side of the 1920s," Einhorn said. "These characters aren't caricatures. These are real people, and 'Monday' is an experience that is relatable to anyone."

REVIEWS

NEW YORK

ON TAKING THE 'HALL' OUT OF 'CONCERT HALL': NONTRADITIONAL SPACES OPEN UP

By Justin Davidson | October 26, 2016



Berlioz's *La mort de Cléopâtre*. Photo: David Andracko

A shoeless, slightly puzzled crowd milled uncertainly around the open floor of the Synod House at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, searching the gallery and timber rafters for a sign that something was going to happen. Somewhere, a piano played the introduction of Brahms's *Ein Deutsches Requiem*, and then quiet voices lifted among us, so dispersed in the stone-walled room that they seemed to have no source. I looked around at the audience, casually dressed for Indian summer, and a venue without seats, and noticed that here and there, people were moving their lips. At my shoulder, a soprano's voice detached itself slightly from the ensemble, and I turned to find her smiling at me as she sang. Soon, the members of the Berlin Radio Choir began circulating, lightly touching listeners on the shoulders and stirring currents of music into

the still warm air. It felt like bathing in an effervescent spring of alternately anguished and consoling counterpoint.

To convert Brahms's German requiem into *Human Requiem*, a bright flash in this year's White Light Festival conceived and directed by Jochen Sandig, Lincoln Center's planners ventured afield. They needed a venue for mystery, one without seats or stage, capacious enough to give the choral ensembles their majestic bloom, small enough to make it feel like an intimate experience shared with strangers. The choir clustered and scattered like starlings in slo-mo, now parading up the center of the room, now huddling around a recumbent body, never losing sight of the roaming conductor, Simon Halsey, or letting their intonation or balance slip so much as a degree from perfection. At times, Sandig's production tried too hard – I could have done without singers on swings – and the relationship between the choreography and the text was often obscure. Still, 75 minutes spent in direct physical contact with such glorious music felt like a rare kind of luxury.

Theater, opera, and virtual reality have discovered *immersive* as the ultimate buzzword, promising to obliterate the fourth wall or the screen, or the stage, or whatever divides performers from passive consumers. In music, this is often a matter of real estate rather than technology. The traditional concert hall, with the players facing one way and the audience facing the other, its forbidding ticket prices and arcane conventions (*Clap later, not now! No texting! No playing air violin!*) has acquired a reputation for stultification. Even as Lincoln Center and the Philharmonic prepare to scoop out everything inside the white travertine shell of Geffen Hall and replace it with a new auditorium designed by Thomas Heatherwick and Diamond Schmitt Architects, they are also working around its imperfections. Lincoln Center's programming guru Jane Moss interprets her jurisdiction's boundaries loosely enough to include a theater on 42nd Street, an East Side church, and the Park Avenue Armory, all to find the perfect architectural match for a particular artistic idea. She is not alone. Even moderately intrepid concertgoers have become accustomed to craning around columns at (le) Poisson Rouge, stretching out on the floor of the Armory's Drill Hall, or shuffling around a museum gallery, trying not to trip the performers. In pursuit of musical intimacy and surprise, audiences have embraced discomfort and poor acoustics. For *Human Requiem*, we all acquiesced to rules that might have gladdened the heart of a TSA agent: remove shoes, leave bags at home, check coats, dress comfortably.

The concert hall and opera house had a relatively brief and never secure monopoly over musical life. Late-18th-century London audiences vied for scarce seats in Carlisle House and the Hanover Square Rooms, but the construction of entire buildings acoustically engineered for large orchestras and audiences in the thousands was a late-19th-century phenomenon. Already in the mid-20th, the avant-garde had no use for the expensive infrastructure of the Establishment, and instead drifted off to lofts and galleries, where the rent was low, the wine was cheap, and decorum nonexistent.

By now the deinstitutionalization of music has become institutionalized. Groups that started in scavenged spaces in Gowanus regularly get invited to Alice Tully Hall, eclectic contemporary music has a new official home in Williamsburg, Carnegie Hall dispatches musicians to neighborhood libraries and outer-borough museums. Arts administrators are united in the belief that spreading music as far as possible, in both the digital and physical worlds, is more than just a marketing gimmick: It's a strategy for survival. The world is full of intellectually curious, artistically adventurous young people who would no more buy a ticket to hear Brahms's requiem in concert at Geffen Hall than they would stick a stamp on a handwritten letter. Maybe soon they'll reclaim ye olde auditorium concert with a sense of retro irony, but for now it's still foreign territory.

The desire to take opera out of the opera house is often a matter of economics. The Metropolitan Opera starts each night with a daunting number of seats to fill (3,800). New York City Opera died after leaving its Lincoln Center home, though it is now struggling back into existence. At the other end of the spectrum is an ecosystem of tiny companies that built their identities around a life on the road. On Site Opera matches the venue to its repertoire of rarities, almost never returning to the same place twice. Gershwin's *Blue Monday* at the Cotton Club, Marcos Portugal's (not Mozart's) *The Marriage of Figaro* in a townhouse on Hudson Street, Rameau's *Pygmalion* at Madame Tussaud's. I recently attended a double bill of one-act monodramas, *Miss Havisham's Wedding Night*, by Dominick Argento, and Berlioz's *La mort de Cléopâtre*, performed in the impeccably neoclassical ballroom of the Harmonie Club, designed by Stanford White. I would not have wanted to hear either opera anywhere else. No meal was served the night I went, but the tables were set, cobwebbed chandeliers burned bright in the Beaux-Arts salon, and a cake sat rotting on a table. Leah Partridge sang the role of the jilted bride from Dickens's *Great Expectations*, who spends her life bitterly waiting for her missing groom. With the orchestra tucked in an alcove, she darted among the tables, her manic girlishness gradually spinning off into hysterical rage she seemed constantly on the verge of taking out on one of the listener/guests. Mezzo-soprano Blythe Gaissert one-upped her hysterics as the suicidal Cleopatra, sashaying imperiously around the room, clutching the instrument of her demise: a live snake. Both Berlioz and Argento wrote stagey one-woman shows meant to bridge a proscenium and vocal lines that can carry to the back of the house. But without that separation from the audience, Partridge and Gaissert leveraged the closeness, relying on the transparency of their characters' damaged psyches, indulging in murmured pianissimos and quick turns that might get lost in a bigger house. The result was both lavish and intimate.

Some more venerable organizations step out of the concert hall in pursuit of a not entirely convincing patina of cool. Stodgy institutions should try new things, and a change of venue can be bracing, but there's an occasional hint of fear in their expeditions. The New York Philharmonic, which will evict itself from Lincoln Center in a couple of seasons while it rebuilds Geffen Hall, has been sending scouting parties out into the city. I attended its first Off the Grid event of the season, a chamber-music happy hour at Pondicheri restaurant, which offered \$6 Indian frankies, \$14 cocktails, and an assortment of free musical snacks: a raga, plus snippets of Philip Glass, Schubert, and Terry Riley. A crowd of millennials, new to the orchestral world and fortified by the knowledge that they belong to the nation's most coveted demographic segment, jammed up close to the tiny stage and examined the offerings.

A few Philharmonic staffers looked on, fervently hoping that the event would persuade at least a small slice of the crowd to come hear a regular concert at Geffen Hall. Or, at least, that they would generate a big enough storm of tweets, posts, and Snapchats to break down the Philharmonic's reputation for codgerliness. As with most start-ups, success is an inefficient process, hard to define. Last year's Off the Grid pop-ups cost about \$48,000 each, and attracted a few hundred people, 9 percent of whom bought Geffen Hall tickets. That means that the Philharmonic spent roughly \$2,500 on every ticket it sold. This season's events are a little more Spartan, at \$30,000 each, and I hope that the return on investment is climbing sharply.

It's always laborious and difficult to build up new audiences, but the real weakness of this particular program is that it sells the Philharmonic short. If I had never heard the full orchestra in all its immersive glory, with those waves of complicated sound ricocheting off the walls and thrumming through the floorboards – if I were innocent of the way a long Mahler crescendo can whip like surf through your hair, or the way a distant English horn solo can conjure a whole landscape – I would have gotten no hint of the orchestra's magic from the wan, under-rehearsed fragments I heard at Pondicheri. It seemed to me that most of the objects of marketing desire who were amiably texting and

munching their way through the music went out into the night entertained but unawed. If I were one of their number, I would feel I had been condescended to.

At other times, when the Philharmonic ventures forth, it's to find the magical alignment of art and space – to serve music rather than sell it. The week before the Pondichery gig, the Philharmonic moved into the Armory for a program of music by Kaija Saariaho. The Drill Hall is vast, and even when you shrink it by erecting bleacher seating and cutting off one end with a giant video screen, you still sense the way sounds go fluttering into the rafters and never come back, almost as if the performance were taking place outdoors. Saariaho's music, with its cosmic flutings and painterly shades of instrumental color, makes use of that immensity. In her clarinet concerto with the untranslatable title *D'om le vrai sens*, the clarinetist Kari Kriikku emerged from above and behind the audience and slowly made his way to the stage, an avant-garde pied piper. The spare darkness lit up by wild, uncanny sounds gave Saariaho's language an intensity it might have lost in the bright normalcy of a concert hall.

While they colonize other locations, the Philharmonic and Lincoln Center are girding themselves for a \$500 million renovation of their shared home base. The principal goal is to repair the acoustics, whose faults have outlasted various overhauls and name changes – it was Avery Fisher Hall until last year and Philharmonic Hall before that – but the new space will have to do more than improve a sonic experience that is not great but not atrocious either. It will aspire to a contemporary vibe, seductive to hip young neophytes and graying mavens alike. Administrators crave the sort of place where Mahler and ragas and Saariaho's mysteries can all be equally at home. If the Philharmonic does manage to build itself the ultimate all-embracing concert hall, will it still seem as exciting and urgent to keep breaking out of it?

SO MUCH MORE THAN 'SLEEP NO MORE'

By James Jorden | June 22, 2016



You might call On Site Opera's production of *The Marriage of Figaro* "Sing No More," because its immersive performing style recalls that of the long-running off-Broadway hit *Sleep No More*. But, on second thought, that's not such an accurate description. This lively young cast was so irresistible that you wouldn't ever want them to stop singing.

For this site-specific staging of a romantic comedy set in Count Almaviva's palace, On Site took over the arguably palatial event space 632 on Hudson, wedging performers, a mini-orchestra and an audience of about 50 into various and different rooms for each act. An antique kitchen represented Figaro and Susanna's servants' quarters; later, a luxe Art Deco parlor stood in for the Countess' boudoir. For the pivotal wedding scene on Wednesday night, we trooped into in a spacious atrium to be

seated in fancy cane-back chairs festooned in white tulle.

As if the production style were not novel enough, the music was also new...or at least utterly unfamiliar. Instead of the standard Mozart/Da Ponte opera, On Site served up the North American premiere of an alternative take, Marcos Portugal's 1800 setting of a libretto by Gaetano Rossi, further adapted with English lyrics and dialogue. Though Portugal's music cannot rival the genius of Mozart's (whose can?) the score is pleasant and tuneful with a piquant Mediterranean tang entirely suitable to the opera's Spanish setting.

One slight but interesting difference in emphasis notable in Portugal's version is a strong focus on the two leading male characters of the piece, the lustful Count Almaviva and his antagonistic servant Figaro. Appropriately, these two roles boasted On Site's strongest casting. Tenor David Blalock made a powerful case for the Count's vigorously florid vocal writing and projected the disturbing sense of fratty entitlement of a grown-up Patrick Bateman.

In contrast, Jesse Blumberg's honeyed lyric baritone created a vulnerable, boyish Figaro you could easily believe the Count might crush like a bug. The happy denouement for once seemed not the product of force of will but simple good fortune, a curiously satisfying conclusion.

If the leading women's roles are less grateful musically, they do offer strong theatrical values for the melancholy Countess and her resourceful lady's maid Susanna. As the noblewoman, Camille Zamora had only a brief lamenting aria to show off her tawny soprano before she plunged into the intrigue plot, but at least she got to show a bit of spunk, unlike the hapless victim the character so often seems in stagings of the Mozart opera.

Jeni Houser's sparkling performance as Portugal's Susanna, funny and human with nary a trace of forced cuteness, suggests she could have a triumph in Mozart's richer realization of the character. Though she flung out the brittle roulades of her elaborate last act aria with nonchalant ease, the soprano's musicality and charm made me long to hear the simple, golden phrases of "Deh vieni non tardar" in the *Figaro* we all know and love.

Also rollicking through the rooms of 632 on Hudson was soprano Melissa Wimbish, a slender-voiced but ideally androgynous Cherubino. (At one point she switched genders by simply removing a pair of Jackie O sunglasses.) Met veteran Margaret Lattimore boomed out the brief role of the Figaro's long-lost mother Marcellina, wittily playing the would-be queen bee as Joan Collins by way of Kohl's.

Eric Einhorn's whirlwind staging included plenty of fine detail suitable for viewing at arm's length, and Geoffrey McDonald kept the music not only precise but also breezy. He was particularly effective in the opening scene in the kitchen, when he conducted with little more than a few shrugs and a raised eyebrow.

The New York Times

FOLLOWING 'FIGARO' FROM ROOM TO ROOM IN A TOWNHOUSE

By Anthony Tommasini | June 15, 2016



The baritone Jesse Blumberg and the soprano Jeni Houser in Marcos Portugal's "The Marriage of Figaro." Photo: Michelle V. Agins

The valet Figaro bustles about, measuring the floor space of the new quarters he will soon occupy with Susanna, while, off to the side, she tries on a bridal hat. These are the beloved characters we know from Mozart's "Le Nozze di Figaro." But the unfamiliar music is by Marcos Portugal, born in Lisbon in 1762 and renowned in his time. On Tuesday night, the enterprising On Site Opera gave what it called the North American premiere of Portugal's "The Marriage of Figaro," also adapted from Beaumarchais's incendiary French play. Portugal composed the work in 1799 for a Venice production (13 years after Mozart's "Figaro" first played Vienna).

This is the second installment of On Site's presentation of unfamiliar operatic versions of Beaumarchais's Figaro trilogy. It began last June with a charming production of Paisiello's 1782 "The Barber of Seville." That opera, so popular in its day, was later nudged aside by Rossini's version.

On Site Opera presents the ultimate in intimate productions by performing works in spaces that fit the setting of the story. The audience (inevitably small) follows the performers from room to room, along with a roving roster of instrumentalists. This delightful staging of Portugal's "Figaro" takes place at 632 on Hudson, a beautifully renovated townhouse in the West Village, available for all manner of events. For this modern-dress staging by the imaginative director Eric Einhorn, the townhouse becomes Count Almaviva's summer palace.

The action begins in a large kitchen with long wooden tables. Chairs are set up for only some 50 audience members. (The run is sold out.) And talk about immersive opera – it's quite dramatic when, say, the hearty baritone Jesse Blumberg, as Figaro, and the bright-voiced soprano Jeni Houser, as Susanna, exchange full-voiced phrases just inches away from you as they dash around that kitchen. When the opera shifts to the countess's private chambers, the cast and audience move to a plush salon. The encounters in the garden take place in a bright atrium.

On Site Opera's music director, Geoffrey McDonald, working with José Luis Iglésias, has arranged the orchestra score for violin, cello, clarinet, oboe and, to provide some Iberian color, accordion, guitar and Portuguese guitar. Opera fans today, who know Mozart's masterpiece, have to cut Portugal a little slack. The fetching, lyrically rich music, if lacking in depth and contrapuntal intricacy, abounds in vitality and wit. The opera (cut considerably) is performed here in a snappy English translation, with Portugal's recitatives replaced with new spoken dialogue (by Joan Holden) based on Beaumarchais's play.

The wonderful cast includes the charismatic tenor David Blalock as the count, the plush-voiced soprano Camille Zamora as the countess, the formidable mezzo-soprano Margaret Lattimore as a take-charge Marcellina, and the soprano Melissa Wimbish in a show-stealing turn as the hormonal pageboy Cherubino. Ryan Kuster as Basilio, David Langan as Bartolo, and Antoine Hodge as Antonio were also excellent. Part 3 of On Site's Figaro Project, presenting Milhaud's "The Guilty Mother," will be staged next year. The company has yet to figure out where.

THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO (PORTUGAL)

NEW YORK CITY

On Site Opera | 6/14/16

ON SITE OPERA offers the delightful fly-on-the-wall experience of observing—practically participating in—lesser-known operas in intimate domestic settings. Having successfully launched its three-season Figaro Project last year at the Fabbri Mansion with Giovanni Paisiello's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, the company presented the North American premiere of Marcos Portugal's *The Marriage of Figaro* (1799) in the elegant triplex 632 on Hudson (June 14). Portugal and his librettist Gaetano Rossi likely had a copy of the libretto to Mozart's iconic 1786 work, and there are multiple echoes of Da Ponte's outlines, even in the accessible but sometimes clunky English translation by Gilly French and Jeremy Gray. Uncanny musical similarities, as in the letter duet for Susanna and the Countess, suggest that Portugal had also heard Mozart's work. Portugal's florid score shines brightest in the lively ensemble pieces, and the fado-inspired orchestration by music director Geoffrey McDonald and guitarist José Luis Iglésias, added flavor and poignancy. To keep the evening to an intermission-less 115 minutes, artistic director Eric Einhorn made substantial cuts to the score, and Joan Holden adapted the recitatives into efficient, contemporary spoken dialogue.

The action moved from room to room, with each offering a mix of challenges and advantages. Figaro, somewhat improbably, measured for his bed in the kitchen, but the large table and nooks and crannies allowed Cherubino and the Count to hide credibly. The Countess's boudoir was the trickiest, with much of the seating to the side of the main playing area, and the cramped space hosted the lustiest ensemble singing without physical room for the voices to bloom. However, it provided the most voyeuristic experience and boasted an actual closet and bathroom, where the concealed Cherubino made his presence known by dropping the toilet seat. The last two acts were played in the open atrium, which allowed the sound to travel up to the top of the townhouse, as the tight-knit, seven-piece orchestra played from the balcony above. The singers embraced their realistic circumstances with gusto (even receiving their "wedding guests," i.e. the audience, in a pre-show improv).

Baritone Jesse Blumberg centered the proceedings as an impetuous, energetic and robustly sung Figaro, responding accordingly in falsetto when his feisty, glittering Susanna, Jeni Houser, kneed him the groin after catching him in Marcellina's embrace. David Blalock's smooth, sensual tenor made him an ingratiating and sympathetic Count, while Camille Zamora sang with a rich, earnest soprano as the Countess. Melissa Wimbish as a slouchy, impish Cherubino (here the highest soprano) was the most successful in scaling the size of her performance to the space. She was partnered nicely by Ginny Weant as "Cecchina," as her tenacious love interest was called here.

Margaret Lattimore contributed an elegant, forceful and funny Marcellina, dominating David Langan's sturdy Bartolo. Bass-baritone Ryan Kuster was a suitably smarmy peeping-Tom Basilio, while Antoine Hodge doubled as a saucy Antonio and a hilariously narcoleptic judge Gusmano (in lieu of the stuttering Don Curzio.) Einhorn's clever modern-day directorial touches included the Countess sadly revisiting My Wedding Video before her introductory aria, Basilio whipping out *Contract Law for Dummies* in support of Marcellina, and port and petits fours all around after the wedding ceremony, courtesy of the Portuguese Consulate in New York, the evening's co-sponsor. More, please!

—Joanne Sydney Lessner

The New York Times

REVIEW: ON SITE'S 'THE BARBER OF SEVILLE' UNFOLDS IN A SURPRISING SETTING

By Anthony Tommasini | June 10, 2015



Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

A charming episode in "The Barber of Seville" seemed so familiar, and yet not. Count Almaviva, having fallen for Rosina, the ward of the jealous Dr. Bartolo, sings a melting serenade to this pretty young woman from the courtyard outside her balcony. This was not Rossini's eternally popular 1816 opera, however, but Giovanni Paisiello's version, first performed in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1782. A huge success the following year in Vienna, Paisiello's "Barber" prodded Mozart to follow it up with "The Marriage of Figaro" (1786), which adapts the second play in Beaumarchais's trilogy of incendiary French comedies.

Paisiello's "Barber" has been pushed off the boards by Rossini's staple. But the enterprising On Site Opera company presented a delightful production of this clever, sure-paced and musically inventive earlier opera

on Tuesday night, the first of four performances. True to the company's mission of staging little-known works at unconventional sites, this "Barber" was presented at the Fabbri Mansion (the House of the Redeemer), an elegant townhouse on the Upper East Side. So this production's Count Almaviva (the appealing lyric tenor David Blalock) serenaded the smitten Rosina (the rich-voiced, feisty soprano Monica Yunus) while standing in the mansion's courtyard. Ms. Yunus's Rosina leaned out a second-floor window to

In one corner of the courtyard, the conductor, Geoffrey McDonald, drew stylish, nimble playing from an eight-piece ensemble, including a guitar in place of a harpsichord for the recitative accompaniments, an idea that lent a touch of Spain to a story set in Seville. The setting was updated to around 1916, the year the mansion was completed; the work was sung in the original Italian, with English translations projected on a screen in a corner.

The space allowed room for only 80 folding chairs, all of them taken. The two-hour running time (without intermission) included the 10 minutes or so it took for the players, cast and audience to walk upstairs to the mansion's spacious library to continue the story, which shifts from a street outside Dr. Bartolo's house to Rosina's room. The commodious space proved ideal for the intrigues of the opera, as various characters pop in and out of doors and spy on one another.

This "Barber" is the first installment of the Figaro Project, the company's plan to present operatic adaptations of Beaumarchais's trilogy, but not those most opera fans know. Next year comes Marcos Portugal's "The Marriage of Figaro" (1799), followed in 2017 by Darius Milhaud's "The Guilty Mother" (which had its premiere in 1966).



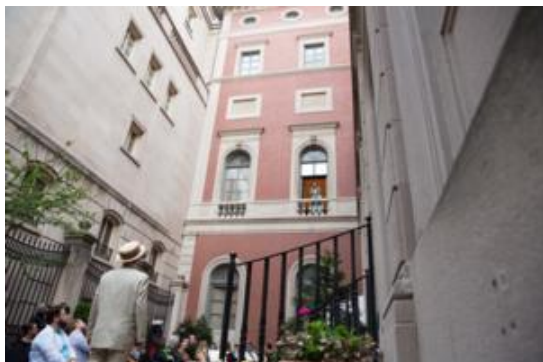
Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

The vocally hardy baritone Andrew Wilkowske made a jocular Figaro. Rod Nelman brought a booming bass-baritone voice and comically oafish presence to Dr. Bartolo. Isaiah Musik-Ayala, a solid bass-baritone, conveyed the sly ways of the unctuous Don Basilio. Paisiello gave Bartolo's two servants meaty roles, sung with flair by the baritone Benjamin Bloomfield and the soprano Jessica Rose Futran. Alas, this run is reportedly sold out. On Site Opera's program may be modest, but this visionary company could be on to something big.



BWW REVIEWS: IN THE BATTLE OF THE BARBIERES, ON SITE OPERA PICKS A WINNER

By Richard Sasanow | June 19, 2015



Pity the poor also-rans in operatic history: Leoncavallo's *LA BOHEME* and Rossini's *OTELLO* are perhaps the most famous titles. Oh, yes: We mustn't forget Giovanni Paisiello's *IL BARBIERE DI SIVIGLIA*--and after hearing On Site Opera's production in New York last week, we can't. Downstairs, upstairs, in milady's library, On Site introduced much of its audience last week to an "alternative universe" version of the Almaguivas and the wily barber, Figaro, in a *BARBIERE* composed decades before the familiar version by Rossini.

Based on the same play by Beaumarchais, the first part of the Figaro Trilogy, this is a different animal altogether from its more familiar cousin: A pocket opera that manages to make all its points with a cast of seven, a chamber orchestra and, in Artistic Director Eric Einhorn's very appealing production staged in the Renaissance-style Fabbri Mansion on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, it was a sheer delight.

Today, the version of the story by Paisiello has long been overshadowed by the uber-famous Rossini opera in the battle of the *BARBIERES*. It's hard to believe that, at the start of the 19th century, the operatic version of *BARBIERE* that everyone was humming was by Paisiello. It was so popular that Rossini's audacity in composing a competitive version--first called *ALMAVIVA*--was incomprehensible.

Indeed, Paisiello's opera has a score that's not without its charms--particularly in a pair of arias for Rosina, performed wonderfully by soprano Monica Yunus, and its buoyant, hilariously evil version of "La calunnia" from the sonorous Basilio of bass-baritone Isaiah Musik-Ayala. The cast, in general, showed off the score's strengths: David Blalock's lovely tenor was just right and appropriately droll as Almaguiva, while the smooth baritone of Andrew Wilkowske made the most of Figaro, who is less central here than in Rossini. The Dr. Bartolo conceived by librettist Giuseppe Petrosellini is just as big a blowhard in this version of the story and bass-baritone Rod Nelman milks the comedy without going overboard. The cast is rounded out by neat performances from baritone Benjamin Bloomfield and soprano Jessica Rose Futran as the servants.

But it's hard to hear all the song cues in the libretto without waiting for the well-known and frequently audacious melodies of Rossini. Instead, we are treated to unfamiliar music that is, for the most part, no match for the more famous versions, despite a winning cast and the lovely performance of the orchestra under Music Director Geoffrey McDonald. (Kudos for the usual continuo music played on guitar here by Liz Faure.)

That's really not the point, as far as On Site is concerned. It succeeds brilliantly in making opera-going an intimate experience, where the singers are a few feet away from the audience and drawing us into the story in a way that a night at the Met or any other grand opera house can hardly ever do. The action has been updated to the early decades of the 20th century, when the mansion was built, staged in a small front courtyard and in its library and, for once, it fits the action neatly. While there's no scenery beside the building itself, the costumes by Candida K. Nichol and wigs and makeup from Elyn Miller were just right. It will be interesting to see what On Site has up its sleeve when it continues its "alternate universe" look at the Almaguivas and Figaro next June with the North American premiere of Marcos Portugal's *MARRIAGE OF FIGARO*, written 13 years after Mozart. According to the program, "Portugal stays more grounded in the original play than the more famous operatic adaptation." I can hardly wait to hear whether he can out-Mozart's Mozart.

Photo by Rebecca Fay

GIOVANNI PAISIELLO: *IL BARBIERE DI SIVIGLIA*

By Andrew Moravcsik | June 15, 2015



Written in 1783, Giovanni Paisiello's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* reigned for three decades as one of Europe's most popular operas, before being overshadowed forever by Rossini's classic work. Rossini was ruthless, ripping off swaths of both Paisiello's libretto and his music. This infuriated diehard Paisiello fans, whose cries of anger famously caused the 1816 premiere of Rossini's opera to flop. Yet they could not keep a good work down for long. Rossini trumps his predecessor at every turn: his music has greater vitality, originality and wit, and his dramatic conception imbues the stock characters of Italian *commedia dell'arte* with a universal humanity that we still recognize today.

This famous history poses a psychological problem for any listener at a rare revival of Paisiello's opera: how can one avoid keeping score? One is constantly tempted to engage in number-by-number comparison with the more famous version, which distracts from the virtues of the earlier one. After all, Paisiello's *Barbiere* was famous for a reason: it is a minor masterpiece on its own terms, with simplicity of musical expression, directness of utterance and suave 18th century gentility all its own. A recent production at *On Site Opera* in New York achieved the seemingly impossible. The performance I attended on June 11th was so fresh, original and immediate that,

within minutes, it banished any thought of Rossini from my mind.

Much of the success was due to the magic of *in situ* performance, which is the calling card of this company: its productions are set in appropriate "everyday" spaces throughout New York, where singers perform just a few feet from a small audience. This *Barbiere* was presented in and around the lovely Fabbri Mansion on East 95th Street, built in Italian Renaissance style. For the first scene, an audience of just 80 was seated in a small front courtyard. Figaro and Almaviva entered through a front ironwork gate, Bartolo peered out of the front door of the mansion, and Rosina sang from a second-story window. We then moved upstairs to a balconied Italianate library room that might have been in Pesaro, Parma or Seville. Throughout, there were no sets and few props, just this appropriate setting. All this seemed just right for an opera written for audiences of a few hundred gathered in small theaters, often in mansions or palaces. Though the combination of intimate surroundings, superb diction and fine acting all but dispensed with any need for supertitles, they were provided on modest HD screens. To revive a second-tier opera in an intimate setting, a company needs singing actors who are completely secure technically and credible, musically and dramatically, even with spectators just three feet away. Credit for the brilliant success of this production is thus due, above all, to the cast. Despite oppressive 90+ degree heat, they rendered this opera as fresh and immediate as it must have appeared to listeners in Paisiello's heyday. The performers, mostly in their 30s with solid national and international successes, seemed to revel in the challenge, responding with completely credible singing and acting.

Andrew Wilkowske's warm and full-voiced baritone was well-suited to his charismatic and characterful portrayal of Figaro. His voice sounds like it has the potential to evolve into the rarest of all things in modern opera: a great Verdi baritone. Soprano Monica Yunus made a winning Rosina. She succeeded almost entirely in warming up an essentially lyric coloratura voice to fit this more lyric role—musically and dramatically, Paisiello's Rosina is more pensive and less forward than Rossini's—aided by exceptionally lovely breath control and phrasing. As Almaviva, tenor David Blalock looked the part and sang competently, though he struggled at times to generate an appropriately light and warmly elegant tone, for example in Lindoro's serenade (in the 18th century, the opera's most famous number). Bass Rod Nelman blustered his way through Bartolo's travails with a focused, brilliant tone, while bass-baritone Isaiah Musik-Ayala acted and sang well in the part of his buddy Basilio, paying scrupulous attention to Paisiello's dynamics in the big aria, which are subtler than those of Rossini. Baritone Benjamin

Bloomfield and Jessica Rose Futran rendered the servant's slapstick credible, with the former deploying an extraordinarily large voice and the latter a voice noticeably smaller than those around her.

The orchestra was a slimmed down to eight and played under the inspired direction of Geoffrey McDonald. A few intonation issues aside, inevitable at that scale and with different environments, the players were skilled and energetic. The musical preparation was superb. At no moment did the flow of the music threaten to fray, despite the extraordinary challenges of conducting a group of singers often facing away from the conductor. Overall I enjoyed this evening as much as any live opera I've attended in the last decade. The performance captured the spirit of the work. I was surely not alone: I looked around the room as we exited and everyone was smiling. More than that, this performance spoke to the state of opera as an art form. As larger companies like the Met, just across the park, continues to struggle with resources and relevance, smaller companies like *On Site Opera* are experimenting with performance in non-traditional spaces, generally at something closer to the scale at which these many works were historically meant to be heard. Perhaps they are have found a viable route back to the future.

Il barbiere di Siviglia

New York

October 2015

New York's fringe opera companies do valuable work, but their productions are often put together on a shoestring budget and look it. To judge from its presentation of Paisiello's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (seen on June 9 at the first of four performances), ON SITE OPERA has found a way around this problem without spending scarce funds on decor: find a visually congenial locale in which to perform an opera, move in and forget about designing and building sets.

The chosen setting for *Barbiere*, a beauty, was a mansion on East 95th Street built in 1914-16 for a member of the Vanderbilt family and now operated as the HOUSE OF THE REDEEMER by the Episcopal Church. For Act 1 of the four-act opera, which plays out in a manner similar to Rossini's later version, with many of the same plot details, the action took place in a courtyard, where Rosina received the Count's serenade and other gestures of amorous esteem from a second-floor window. For the rest, the museum's handsomely appointed library served resplendently as the interior of Dr Bartolo's house. Only 80 people could be accommodated, which made those present feel privileged but kept others away.

Grove Opera gives Paisiello's *Barbiere* (1782), which was written for the new Hermitage Theatre in St Petersburg after Catherine the Great had enjoyed a production of Beaumarchais's underlying play, a backhanded compliment. It calls it a 'masterpiece', yet also says 'it pales in comparison with Rossini's' version (from 1816), in the process suggesting that musical progress in technical and expressive means achieved during the intervening years made a crucial difference. As On Site Opera's captivating performance demonstrated, Paisiello's opera holds up very well, thank you, and so does the musical style of his day. One can spot moments that are at least as good as-or even better than-comparable places in Rossini's opera. The Count's gorgeous serenade (quoted in Stanley Kubrick's film *Barry Lyndon*, its vocal line rendered by cello) is a case in point. Paisiello's parody of an old-style da capo aria for the Letter Scene is also a winner, as is the ensemble-complete with a 'buona sera' section-in which everyone tries to get rid of Basilio.

With the possible exception of Rosina, each role calls for roughly the same voice type as Rossini's opera, and one could well imagine the fine cast here giving a first-rate account of that work. Monica Yunus brought a lovely stage presence and a creamy, technically assured soprano to Rosina, and David Blalock sang the Count in an appealing tenor. Andrew Wilkowske offered a sprightly, assertively sung Figaro, and Isaiah Musik-Ayala was a fine Basilio who delivered an aptly oily account of his calumny aria. Rod Nelman's rich bass-baritone and the ease with which he expressed outrage made him an outstanding Bartolo.

Eric Einhorn's inventive direction was high spirited, with Candida K. Nichols's attractive costumes supplying an early-20th-century timeframe for the action. An instrumental ensemble of seven (string quartet and three winds) couldn't give a complete picture of the orchestration, which also includes trumpets and horns, yet proved quite satisfactory under Geoffrey McDonald's leadership. *Barbiere* is the first instalment of On Site Opera's Figaro Project to present lesser-known operatic versions of Beaumarchais's three Figaro plays, which will also include in successive years Marcos Portugal's *Le nozze di Figaro* and Milhaud's *La Mere coupable*. It would be good if a donor could supply the company with a harpsichord in time for the Portugal opera. Here recitatives were rendered by a guitar with amplification.

GEORGE LOOMIS

Pygmalion

NEW YORK CITY

On Site Opera

6/21/14

Molding its productions to off-beat locales, the innovative On Site Opera placed Rameau's *Pygmalion* in Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum and at Lifestyle, Trimco & Viaggio, a mannequin showroom in Chelsea (seen on June 21). If your Ovid is rusty, think *Frankenstein* or *My Fair Lady*, stories about an artist's creation coming to life with disturbing consequences. Now imagine a sculptor's studio strewn with unfinished projects – mannequins surrounded the audience in the 6000 square foot showroom – and a gorgeous female figure captivating its maker, whose real-life relationship is on the rocks.

While Rameau's short *acte de ballet* ends with Pygmalion spurning his demanding girlfriend and dancing off with the less challenging statue, here director Eric Einhorn explored a deeper lever, where obsessing about art is a copout for dealing with difficult human relationships. The tortured artist, his girlfriend Céphise, the adored statue, and plot-spoiler Cupid achieved a dramatic intimacy that was beautifully detailed and effective. Hidden in an alcove, the eleven-member New Vintage Baroque Orchestra, led by Jennifer Peterson at the harpsichord, contributed stylishly, while the four-member chorus, jumping up from their seats among the audience, enthusiastically distributed Cupid's press cards.

Rameau's many instrumental pieces were handled cleverly by choreographer Jordan Isadore and his dance partner Eloise DeLuca, with a romp through dance history wittily referencing the French Baroque. The happy ballet finale is only achieved after struggle, as the tortured and obsessive Pygmalion integrates art with reality, opting for the real-life Céphise over his attractive doll.

Emalie Savoy's delicate, affecting portrayal of the heart-broken Céphise was as eloquent in silence as in her sweetly clear singing. Although some high notes went astray, Camille Zamora brought the statue to life with consummate physical control and a richly attractive voice. Justine Aronson played Cupid as an obnoxiously triumphant brat, with high energy and a well-projected voice, if not much linguistic point.

In the title role Marc Molomot embodied a gently forlorn quality that matched his impeccably stylish singing. Although the tenor took awhile to gain control of vocal registers in this high-lying part, Molomot delivered the final, virtuosic "Règne, Amour" with an attractive ease that suited Einhorn's happy real-life ending.

In collaboration with Figaro Systems, On Site Opera offered supertitling with GoogleGlass, the first ever such use, as well as the customary projections.

JUDITH MALAFRONTÉ

The New York Times

CUPID FLITTED ABOUT BRISKLY, WHILE THE TV STARS JUST STOOD THERE

by Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim | June 18, 2014



Benjamin Norman for The New York Times

Julia Roberts couldn't stop smiling during Tuesday's On Site Opera performance of Rameau's "Pygmalion." Kim Kardashian maintained a more skeptical pose, hands on peplum-frilled hips, a hint of a pout on her closed lips. Of course, neither of them was a reliable measure of the show's success. Their facial expressions, like everything else about them, were perpetually frozen in wax.

On Site Opera's central mission is to bring opera to unusual locations, each one fitting to the work at hand. For Rameau's one-act setting of Ovid's tale of a sculptor who falls in love with his creation, the company's artistic director Eric Einhorn made a beeline for the most natural – or unnatural – setting in town: Madame Tussauds.

It would have been an inspired idea were it not for the noisy air-conditioning system in the ninth-floor courtyard, which rivaled the clamor of Times Square outside. So while I can confidently state that the production was fun and inventive, and that the young cast brimmed with acting talent, I can offer only cautious opinions about the music. (The production is to be repeated at a different location, among the mannequins at the Lifestyle-Trimco Showroom, on Friday and Saturday.)

At any rate, it seemed that the tenor Marc Molomot was well cast as the sculptor Pygmalion. He has both the high range required of the part and the nimbleness to navigate its runs and ornamental flourishes with ease. The soprano Emalie Savoy was affecting as Céphise, the girlfriend who fights a losing battle for Pygmalion's attention and affection with the sculpture, sung by the beautifully poised soprano Camille Zamora. There was a nice contrast between Ms. Savoy's vibrant yet vulnerable delivery and the gleam of metal in Ms. Zamora's focused voice.

The soprano Justine Aronson was delightful as the brisk and bossy Cupid, who on a whim brings the statue to life and infuses it with passion for its creator. A quartet of ensemble singers doubled as her press gang, merrily wreaking havoc on Pygmalion's relationship with Céphise and interacting – as far as is possible – with some of the celebrity wax figures around the room.

The period-instrument New Vintage Baroque ensemble, led by Jennifer Peterson at the harpsichord, valiantly battled to make itself heard over the ambient roar. I thought the violins fizzed off pitch a few times, but the music's rhythmic spring and verve came through clearly.

Two dancers, Jordan Isadore (in his own choreography) and Eloise DeLuca, made great use of the limited space, quoting many different of dance styles with wit and charm. In its original incarnation, Rameau's work was an acte de ballet, in which the dance was the main attraction, well ahead of the music. Unfortunate acoustics aside, this production very nearly leveled the scales.



Benjamin Norman for The New York Times

The New York Times

IN HARLEM, GERSHWIN'S BRIEF, BRASH, EARLY OPERA

By Steve Smith | June 19, 2013



Alyson Cambridge in the opera George Gershwin wrote for a Broadway revue in 1922, now being staged at the Cotton Club by On Site Opera and the Harlem Opera Theater.

Familiar sights and sounds greeted visitors to the Cotton Club in Harlem on Tuesday night. Stepping into the modern-day incarnation of that storied Prohibition-era nightclub, you heard swing standards brightly played by the Cotton Club All-Stars: "In a Mellow Tone," "Take the 'A' Train," "In the Mood" and so on. Out on the dance floor, nattily garbed dancers cut a figurative rug.

Just after 8 p.m., a new pianist discreetly slipped into the band. A string quartet suddenly materialized. Without warning, an opera broke out: "Blue Monday," a brief, brash work by George Gershwin and Buddy DeSylva, enacted here by On Site Opera and the Harlem Opera Theater.

Taking opera out of its traditional milieu is something companies, particularly independent ones, have been doing more frequently in recent years with exciting and illuminating results.

Some presenters have played to an opera's dramatic content: Vertical Player Repertory staged Puccini's "Tabarro" on a boat moored at Red Hook and Gotham Chamber Opera mounted Cavalli's decadent "Eliogabalo" in a nightclub. Others institutions have targeted specific audiences. A year ago the newly formed On Site Opera made its initial splash with Shostakovich's "Tale of the Silly Baby Mouse" at the Bronx Zoo. An economical staging and whimsical puppet protagonists enchanted audience members of all ages; connoisseurs, meanwhile, could hardly miss the seriousness and skill of the undertaking.

For its second offering On Site Opera set the jazzy "Blue Monday" in the kind of Harlem gin joint where its action takes place, playing it for an audience presumably inclined to swing. The torrid story, inspired by Leoncavallo's "Pagliacci" down to its sung prologue, concerns a love triangle among Joe, a gambler; Vi, his lover; and Tom, a nightclub singer and Joe's rival for Vi's affections. All too quickly, a tragic mistake leads to murder.

Written for "George White's Scandals of 1922," a popular revue, and originally performed by white singers in blackface (a convention happily dispensed with here), "Blue Monday" packs considerable ambition into its roughly half-hour span. The music, a hybrid of verismo opera and big-band swing, anticipates future triumphs in "Rhapsody in Blue" and "Porgy and Bess." The story, though, is only serviceable, its drastically curtailed dramatic arc straining credibility.

Still, "Blue Monday" is well worth encountering when enacted by a cast and crew as good as those mustered here. The soprano Alyson Cambridge was sensational as Vi, her radiant smile and focused voice illuminating the club's darkest recesses. The tenor Chase Taylor played Joe with a virile sound and swagger; Lawrence Craig, a baritone, was a wily, calculating Tom. Clayton Mathews, a bass-baritone, and Alvin Crawford, a bass, admirably handled supporting roles. Dancers choreographed by George Faison enhanced a seductive production staged by Eric Einhorn, On Site Opera's artistic director, and attractively costumed by Candida K. Nichols. Gregory Hopkins, Harlem Opera Theater's artistic director, did an outstanding job of conducting widely dispersed performers, including a string quartet from the Harlem Chamber Players, with Jennifer Peterson, best known as a vocal and opera coach, here sitting in on piano. And if the playing by the Cotton Club All-Stars wasn't entirely without blemish, it had an authentic bounce hard to find among less seasoned big-band players.

Blue Monday

New York

September 2013



■ Chase Taylor and Alyson Cambridge as Joe and Vi in Gershwin's 'Blue Monday' at the Cotton Club

When the Met closes shop and the spring rains arrive, little New York opera companies pop up like mushrooms, some delicious, some deadly. Of their recent presentations, the most piquant was a collaboration between the newish ON SITE OPERA and the HARLEM OPERA THEATER at the COTTON CLUB (still in Harlem, but a couple of miles from the iconic Cotton Club of Duke Ellington, where white swells slummed it uptown). The vehicle was George Gershwin's *Blue Monday* (June 19). Lasting 25 minutes and composed in five days, it was first heard at a revue called, *The Scandals of 1922*, with Paul Whiteman and his jazz orchestra, sung by whites in minstrel blackface. A success in its out-of-town try-out in New Haven, it bombed on Broadway and was dropped from the revue after the first night. Critics found its downbeat ending inappropriate for an already long, upbeat revue, and many heaped condescension on a Tin Pan Alley tunesmith daring to attempt a quasi-opera. Yet *Blue Monday*, despite a creaky libretto by Buddy DeSylva, still counts as Gershwin's first 'serious' work, and led to Whiteman's commission for *Rhapsody in Blue* (1925).

The score was revived a few times, with shifting titles and orchestrations, but Gershwin lost interest in it. Only in recent decades have recordings and performances cropped up. But the music is good, a prescient mixture of blues, opera and showbiz, full of juicy parts for the singers. Those at this performance were all up to the mark, although all had operatic voices and so

were really loud (even though unamplified) when heard close up (in 1922 there was apparently a blend of operatic and Broadway voices). Alyson Cambridge offered glamour and a full-throated soprano as Vi, who shoots her gambler boyfriend dead after a jealous misunderstanding. Chase Taylor, a tenor, was Joe the gambler; other parts, all baritones were taken by Clayton Mathews, a particularly vibrant Alvin Crawford, and Lawrence Craig, who was so hammy villainous that he would have twirled his moustache had he had one.

The conductor was Gregory Hopkins, the director of Harlem Opera Theater, which seems largely devoted to operatic excerpts, recitals and educational activities. On Site Opera's founder, Eric Einhorn, directed. The intimate Cotton Club was atmospherically ideal, with a handy big band called the Cotton Club All Stars providing an hour of music for enthusiastic Swing dancing (Performed it seemed by a few ringers joined later by actual audience members). For the Gershwin the band was supplemented by a rather sour-sounding string quartet, the Harlem Chamber Players. The dancing in the opera was overseen by the noted choreographer George Faison, and Candida K. Nichols handled the spiffy period costumes.

John Rockwell

The New York Times

NEW TROUPE CHOOSES BRONX ZOO FOR A DEBUT

By STEVE SMITH | June 25, 2012



"The Tale of the Silly Baby Mouse" – On Site Opera presented its debut production, a short work for children with a score by Shostakovich, at the Asia Plaza Stage at the Bronx Zoo. Photo by Richard Termine

Now and then you witness a debut so happy and so rich with potential that you can't wait to share the news. In the case of On Site Opera, a fledgling company that mounted its inaugural production on Saturday afternoon, it seems especially vital to spread the word, since few cognoscenti were on hand to witness its opening splash. True to the troupe's mission of presenting operas in unconventional settings, the performance took place on the Asia Plaza Stage at the Bronx Zoo.

"On and around the stage" more accurately describes the company's production of "The Tale of the Silly Baby Mouse," a Russian fairy tale about a young mouse who refuses to go to bed, as set by Shostakovich in 1939 for an animated

cartoon. Last November the Brooklyn Philharmonic played this 15-minute piece with a screening of the cartoon during a Brighton Beach concert.

Here, in a staging by Eric Einhorn, the artistic director of On Site Opera, six singers equipped with clever, colorful puppets, designed by the Puppet Kitchen, mingled among boisterous young audience members and parents, who seemed equally enthusiastic. (Some puppets wrapped over the performers' backs and heads, practically amounting to costumes.) Onstage Jennifer Peterson conducted a septet in a thrifty arrangement for winds, brasses and percussion, well suited to the setting.

Ms. Peterson knows a lot about presenting opera in unconventional locations; her own company, Operamission, staged Handel's "Almira" in the lobby of the Gershwin Hotel in May. Some of the singers from that production performed here: The striking soprano Christy Lombardozzi showed maternal concern as Mrs. Mouse, and the supple baritone Michael Weyandt was a compassionate Mrs. Pig.

Rebekah Camm, a soprano, was a slyly devious Mrs. Cat. Blythe Gaissert, a mezzo-soprano, sang pertly as Auntie Duck. Marc Webster, a bass, was robust and comical as Mr. Frog and Polkan the Dog. And in addition to her cheery, stylish singing, the soprano Melissa Wimbish produced authentically grating tantrums in the title role: I mean this as high praise.

Anyone who has ever seen very young children squirm in an opera house would have been amazed by the attentiveness and engagement on display during the first of two shows on Saturday afternoon. (Granted, 15 minutes of bubbly music stretches no one's attention span unduly.)

"Wake up!" shouted a boy standing next to me when Baby Mouse nearly fell prey to Mrs. Cat's seductive charms. At the end, the same boy's shouts of "Bravo!" resounded amid giddy applause.