

Boston Lyric Opera renews its vision

By [Jeremy Eichler](#) | Globe Staff September 20, 2014



On a Monday night earlier this month at Oberon, Boston's opera scene threw itself a party. The club-style event, which went by the social media-friendly name #iamopera, was a showcase for 13 presenters including local schools, each of which performed for an audience full of designers, singers, composers, and "opera makers" working in the city. It was refreshing to see this coming together of a scene whose members are so often consigned to their own silos, and intriguing to watch how each group represented itself in a short performance.

When Boston Lyric Opera's turn came up, you could be forgiven for expecting something straight-laced and traditional from New England's largest and longest-running company. Instead, soprano Heather Johnson walked out carrying a murder weapon. An ax, to be precise, from her title role in "Lizzie Borden" last season. She bantered with baritone Matthew Worth and deadpanned about some missing cast members ("cutbacks"). Then the two of them braved it alone, singing all four parts to the famous quartet from "Rigoletto" in a nimble sendup that skewered the genre's conventions and clichés while also reveling in them. The packed club thundered its approval. I would be surprised if anyone there had seen it coming.

Over the last few years, under the general and artistic direction of Esther Nelson, BLO has become a less predictable place. The company has been quietly reinventing itself, reaching

broadier audiences, rethinking its theatrical values, deepening its community involvement, and pushing the boundaries of its repertoire. It has also grown its endowment, co-commissioned its first new work, prepared to release its first commercial recording next month, and built up partnerships with the Boston Public Library and the Museum of Fine Arts. Most importantly, it has become more open to taking risks.

“Timid arts organizations are not vibrant,” Nelson said in an interview last week at BLO’s office. “I really do believe that it’s better to try and fail than never to try at all.”

That approach has required Nelson to sharpen her skills in tightrope walking, as she faces the same dilemma so many mainstream performing arts organizations do, grappling with how to modernize their outlook without alienating the traditional subscribers who are their lifeblood. Nelson knows that BLO’s core audience is most likely to turn out for the great operatic staples, the Carmens and the Butterflies, but also that the company’s mission — and its artistic vibrancy — require reaching beyond the greatest hits.

Not all of her attempts at innovation have ended with great opera. Looking back at recent seasons, BLO’s attempt to reimagine the frame for “The Magic Flute” detracted more than it added. And John Musto’s “Inspector” was simply too anodyne to make an effective case for contemporary opera. But there is no mistaking the larger shift in posture.

The current season offers a glimpse of the company in microcosm. It will open with “La Traviata” and close with “Don Giovanni,” which is quite continuous with the BLO of old (except that both operas will be staged in new productions). Yet in between these two staples comes a pair of events that should spark the interest of the city’s more adventurous opera fans. In March, the company will stage Janacek’s “Katya Kabanova.” The fact that in the company’s nearly four decades of existence, this will be its very first performance of a work by Janacek — a hugely vital composer routinely heard in opera houses around the world — only underscores the import of this production.

But first, November will bring this year’s installment of BLO’s Opera Annex series, to feature the local premiere of the Swiss composer Frank Martin’s Tristan-themed chamber opera “Le Vin Herbé” in a new English-language translation that BLO is calling “The Love Potion.”

The Annex series, which springs the company once a year from its de-facto home at the Citi Shubert Theatre, is surely Nelson’s signature innovation since her arrival in 2008. It stems from her ambition to release opera — as a living, breathing art form — from its association with what she calls “high temples of art.” It has also become a way of refreshing the company’s repertoire without sending its more traditional subscribers packing.

First up in 2010 came Britten’s “Turn of the Screw” at the Park Plaza Castle, a historic armory building. Later came Viktor Ullmann’s “Emperor of Atlantis” in the Calderwood Pavilion at the Boston Center for the Arts, James MacMillan’s “Clemency” at the Artists for Humanity Epicenter in South Boston, and most memorably, Peter Maxwell Davies’s “The Lighthouse” at the JFK Library, with the action playing out before bay windows looking out onto the harbor. As word of the Annex series spread, out-of-town critics began turning up, boosting BLO’s national

profile. Some works, of course, fared better than others. But as a cumulative argument for injecting adventurous opera into the more complex geography of the city, the Opera Annex has been extremely persuasive.

Financially speaking, the company faces many of the same trends and cost pressures that have roiled (and in some cases, closed) opera companies on both coasts. It is in fact the only company in Boston that exclusively employs union members for its orchestra, chorus, and production team. Its ticket income makes up only about 25 percent of its total annual budget, which this year is \$8.2 million, and yet Nelson knows that this part of the equation cannot be further squeezed. “Going up in our ticket prices is not a wise long-term position,” she said frankly. “I think opera as a whole needs to be much more affordable.”

BLO’s control over its own future — both artistically and financially — will ultimately be limited until it finds a venue truly tailored for the demands of grand opera, and it is working behind the scenes to change that central variable in the long-term equation. In the meantime, Nelson hails the Shubert as the best possible theater available.

Upcoming plans include new productions of popular classics but also some works more rarely spotted in Boston, including Lehar’s “Merry Widow,” Massenet’s “Werther,” and possibly operas by Philip Glass and Kurt Weill as well as new commissions. Nelson would not disclose which composers she’s in discussion with. But the bigger picture is already clear: This midsize company has a welcome new tempo, new ambitions, and new capacities. It should be fascinating to see, as BLO approaches its 40th anniversary in 2017, where it goes from here.