

BLO RETHINKS ITS 2020/21 SEASON, HITTING THE STREETS WITH ON-THE-GO LIVE SHOWS, AND HOME SCREENS WITH GROUNDBREAKING ONLINE CONTENT

Two planned mainstage performances will move to 2021-22 Season.

A new BLO streaming service, operabox.tv, debuts this fall.

Conductor Vimbayi Kaziboni joins artistic team as BLO Artistic Advisor.

EMBARGOED until 5 PM on Tue, Sep 8, 2020 – Boston, Mass. – Boston Lyric Opera (BLO) announced today it will reimagine its previously announced lineup for this fall and next spring. The company will reschedule new productions of Puccini's MADAMA BUTTERFLY and Blanchard/Cristofer's jazz opera CHAMPION into the 2021/22 Season, and postpone its version of Humperdinck's HANSEL & GRETEL to a future date. Instead, BLO will deliver opera and opera-inspired content in two ways: through unique outdoor performances this fall and next spring; and with newly commissioned, groundbreaking opera content delivered in its new online and streaming platform, **operabox.tv**.

Reviving live performances

Leveraging a decade of developing distinctive performances in non-traditional spaces, BLO announces its new **operALIVE** effort to bring outdoor performances to regional audiences eager for live musical experiences. First up is **BLO Street Stage**: the company launches its specially designed mobile performance stage bringing solo and small-group performances to Boston neighborhoods and surrounding communities. With eye-catching street art designed and painted by talented teen artists employed at Artists For Humanity (AFH) – and led by AFH co-founders Jason Talbot and Rob “ProBlak” Gibbs – BLO Street Stage performances and audience configurations will be guided by recommendations from BLO's Health Task Force for Opera Artists. Led by MGH-affiliated BLO physician Dr. Susan Bennett, the Task Force includes high-profile medical experts in epidemiology, pulmonology, biology, sports medicine and infectious disease control, as well as BLO singers and musicians. Locations of BLO Street Stage performances, additional operALIVE events, and information about audience gathering protocols will be released through the season. In Spring 2021, BLO plans to bring opera back in a big way to Boston, mounting a major, live celebratory concert. More details will be announced later.

A new streaming service with new commissions

Building on its successful move into digital content through its **[insert:opera]** platform, BLO will move much of its Fall 2020 artistic programming to **operabox.tv**, a new digital streaming platform it has created. Operabox.tv provides a central online location for traditional content aimed at longtime opera lovers, as well as new commissioned works, opera-inspired original content, and projects designed to bring opera to broader audiences. The service will be available online at www.operabox.tv later this month, and via branded apps on Android TV, Apple TV, Roku, and Amazon Fire TV in November. The experience of operabox.tv will appeal



to users familiar with Netflix, and easily accessible to those unfamiliar with streaming technology. Award-winning theater and graphic designer **Myung Hee Cho** serves as art director, helping BLO with design and aesthetics for the project launch.

BLO greenlights new high-profile streaming content

Among new works planned for operabox.tv this season is a cinematic version of composer Philip Glass and librettist Arthur Yorinks' opera **THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER**, based on the short story by Boston-born Edgar Allen Poe, and originally scheduled for live performances this fall. USHER will feature performers **Chelsea Basler** (BLO's **FELLOW TRAVELERS**), **Jesse Darden** (**FELLOW TRAVELERS**, **SCHOENBERG IN HOLLYWOOD**) and **Daniel Belcher** (**THE THREEPENNY OPERA**), all of whom were announced for the stage production. BLO **Music Director David Angus** will conduct and supervise the audio recording.



Ellen Reid. Photo: James Matthew Daniel

Also commissioned for operabox.tv is the world premiere of a new eight-part episodic series, **DESERT IN**. An operatic story of love, loss and redemption in a strange, run-down motel in the American West, **DESERT IN** is being developed by composer **Ellen Reid** (r.), 2019 Pulitzer Prize for her opera "p r i s m," and film and opera director **James Darrah**, who directed "p r i s m" and brought cinematic flair to BLO's 2017 production of **THE THREEPENNY OPERA**. Playwright and screenwriter **christopher oscar peña** – well-known for his work on the acclaimed TV shows "Jane the Virgin" and "Insecure" -- joins Reid and Darrah in building the series through a television-inspired "writers' room" approach that includes a number of today's best stage and screen writers and a curated group of additional composers. Additional details about these and other operabox.tv projects will be announced later. *[Editor Notes: "p r i s m" is all lower case, with a space between each letter. Playwright peña prefers his name in lower case.]*

Operabox.tv will roll out online and on mobile devices with initial offerings that include **Retro+**, a multimedia series focusing on traditional opera works from BLO's archives. Debuting at launch time is "**Retro+ Short Cuts**," which sets familiar opera music to evocative videos with found footage and iconic imagery. Details about BLO's operabox.tv streaming service will be announced this fall.

Ongoing commitment to free content

BLO's free digital platform, [insert:opera], debuted in spring 2020 with the live audio recording of BLO's shuttered production of **NORMA**. Recorded by 99.5 WCRB/Classical Radio Boston during final dress rehearsal, the performance became a streaming hit, bringing thousands of visitors to BLO's website from around the world. Since then, the platform has become a home for new and evolving content. In addition to its home base on BLO.org, [\[insert:opera\]](#) will be available free on operabox.tv. Next season's [insert:opera] offerings include:

[insert:opera]
wherever you are.

- "**We Need to Listen**," a new web series hosted and moderated by public radio journalist, bestselling author, and classically trained soprano **Celeste Headlee**. With guests from across the music universe, this series focuses on timely conversations that affect the world of opera and classical music, and the people who make it. Headlee is the granddaughter of composer William Grant Still.
- "**The Tonic Hour**," a live, Zoom-based, make-your-own-opera series that pairs participants and professional artists to create fresh, funny new operas based loosely on familiar storylines (next "Tonic Hour" events are Sep 17 and Oct 15 @ 5:30p EST);

- [“At Its \(s\)Core,”](#) which chronicles the experiences of a life in music by bringing together opera artists with a shared affinity for a chosen piece of music (Season two debuts Sep 16 with guests **Anne Bogart** and mezzo-soprano **Jennifer Johnson Cano**);
- [“Bedtime Lullabies Online,”](#) the charming video series where professional singers and musicians perform classical, folk and original lullabies for children and weary parents alike (Season two debuts this fall);
- [BLO Book Club,](#) a monthly interactive event that pairs books and operas based on themes relevant to modern times (Sep 22, Oct 20, Nov 17 @ 7p); and
- [“Spotlight Kids,”](#) which highlights original artistic creations from BLO’s school partnerships and creative youth-development programming.

Vimbayi Kaziboni appointed Artistic Advisor



As part of BLO’s season announcement, **General & Artistic Director Esther Nelson** also confirmed today the appointment of internationally renowned conductor, music professor and former Fulbright Fellow **Vimbayi Kaziboni (I.)** to the existing artistic team, in the role of Artistic Advisor. Originally scheduled to conduct the now-postponed production of **CHAMPION**, Kaziboni impressed Nelson and BLO **Music Director David Angus** with his passion for, and experience with, contemporary music. After **CHAMPION** was moved to the 2021/22 Season, Nelson and Angus sought a more-formal working relationship with the Zimbabwe-born, Boston-based artist. Kaziboni will work with BLO leadership on artistic planning. In this role, he joins veteran theater designer and NEA Opera Honors recipient John Conklin, who has been a BLO Artistic Advisor for several years.

Speaking to his personal artistic philosophy and approach to his work, Kaziboni says: “I believe that the *ideal artist* is a conscious, reflective, global citizen - a steward of humanity, whose art at its least expresses the inner struggle and spirit of one’s soul, and at its best also reflects, engages and affects the nexus of human history, culture, and society. This is my guiding ethos as a conductor, curator and practitioner of classical music.”

“In light of this calling,” he says, “my goal in this new position is to apply my artistic mission to champion unsung voices and tell new stories in opera. I hope to guide a conversation about inclusion, not only as it concerns personal identity and onstage representation, but also as it pertains to diversification of ideas and aesthetics in the works BLO audiences will hear.”

Kaziboni has led critically lauded performances with orchestras across the globe, after beginning his career as assistant conductor for France’s Ensemble Intercontemporain and Germany’s Ensemble Modern—two of Europe’s foremost contemporary music orchestras. He has worked directly with many of today’s leading composers including Helmut Lachenmann, Augusta Read Thomas, George Lewis, Liza Lim, Dai Fujikura, Olga Neuwirth; George Benjamin, Rebecca Saunders, and many others. His upcoming projects include an international tour of a new work by German opera director and composer Heiner Goebbels, with debuts at the Berlin Philharmonie, Royal Concertgebouw, Vienna Konzerthaus, and Cologne Philharmonie, as well as collaborations with London Sinfonietta, San Francisco Symphony, Ensemble Contrechamps (Geneva) and Ensemble Modern (Frankfurt). Kaziboni is in his third year at Boston Conservatory at Berklee, where he serves as Assistant Professor of Orchestral Studies and Contemporary Music.

Education Programs

Boston Lyric Opera’s acclaimed programs in schools and libraries throughout the region each year will also pivot to digital delivery for the 2020/21 Season. BLO Education Department’s **Artist Classroom Visit: Opera 101** program, which has brought singers, musicians and an opera-discovery curriculum to thousands of elementary students over the better part of a decade, will be delivered in a live, online format available to teachers and parents in early 2021.

Digital Subscriptions

Ticket holders for the previously announced 2020/21 Season will have options to convert to upcoming live and online experiences, including a new Digital Subscription program that offers full access to operabox.tv content, access to special additional content, preferred seating options at future live performances, and more. BLO Audience Services representatives will be in touch with subscribers over the next few weeks.

Funding for Programs

Boston Lyric Opera's 2020/21 Season is made possible in part by donors to the Catalyst Funding Initiative, which supports the board-approved action plan for recovery and opportunity after the impact of the coronavirus. The initiative includes support for BLO's artists and creative personnel, incubator projects, education and public programming, and technology and business needs. DESERT IN is supported in part by OPERA America's Opera Grants for Female Composers program, supported by the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation.

About BLO

Since its founding in 1976, Boston Lyric Opera (BLO) has led the way locally and regionally in celebrating the art of the voice, through innovative programming and community engagement initiatives that redefine the opera-going experience. In its 44 years, which makes it the largest and longest-lived opera company in New England, BLO has staged world premieres, U.S. premieres, co-productions and co-commissions of note with artists and organizations around the world. Under the leadership of Stanford Calderwood General & Artistic Director Esther Nelson, who recently celebrated a decade with the company, BLO has served more than 25,000 people each year, and employed more than 300 artists and other professionals. It has strengthened connections to leading local cultural institutions, including the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Boston Public Library. Engaging the twin strengths of nimbleness and creativity it gained in the last five years by creating unique opera experiences in both traditional and found spaces, BLO has pivoted smoothly to the digital realm during the coronavirus pandemic and continues to innovate in the industry.

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MEDIA NOTE: BLO representatives, as well as artists creating, or featured in, this fall's programs are available for interviews about the company's new fall programming. For more details, photos, and interviews, contact John Michael Kennedy at jmk@jmkpr.com or 781-620-1761.

Comments from BLO's season partners

"We are so thrilled to continue our partnership with BLO by adding the voice of Artists For Humanity teen artists and mentors to this unique opera experience," -- **Susan Rodgers**, AFH Founding Executive/Artistic Director.