

November 10, 2020

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for the work the Black Opera Alliance has done to clearly identify the barriers Black members of our opera community face, for the emotional burden you have shouldered to advocate for systemic change in this industry, and for the spirit of collaboration with which you have approached companies including Opera Theatre of Saint Louis (OTSL). We are grateful for your leadership and welcome the opportunity to work in partnership with you to create an art form that is diverse and equitable, as we also work to foster a more inclusive culture – on stage and off stage, at every level – at OTSL.

While diversity and inclusion have long been part of OTSL’s core values, we acknowledge there is much more we can and should do to make change at our company. We have outlined below Opera Theatre’s past efforts and new steps we are taking to make our company a welcoming and inclusive place for Black artists, administrators, and audiences as part of OTSL’s overall commitment to BIPOC individuals. This is by no means a final list, and we acknowledge our commitment to equity must be ongoing, adaptive, and comprehensive in its scope. We are working with our board to develop a detailed EDI plan and accountability measures for our company and would be happy to share this plan with you when it is complete. We are eager to incorporate the principles outlined in the Black Opera Alliance “Pledge for Racial Equity and Systemic Change in Opera” in this work and we hope you will consider this letter OTSL’s commitment to “signing on” to the Pledge. We also welcome continued dialogue with you about Opera Theatre’s specific actions and accountability.

Acknowledging that this commitment starts with Opera Theatre’s leadership, OTSL’s Board of Directors launched a diversity and equity initiative in 2018, focused on identifying and cultivating new prospects for board membership, and to building a board which mirrors the racial demographics of the St. Louis metropolitan area as a whole (18.1% Black or African American, according to 2018 DataUSA/ Census Bureau ACS information). Some progress has been made, with a 5% increase in Black board members to reach 14% of the board. We recognize there is more work to do and are committed to continuing this path with renewed focus, and to reviewing our recruitment and onboarding culture for implicit bias.

To advance and expand this work and create an institution-wide equity plan, Opera Theatre’s board created an EDI Assessment Working Group in August that is charged with assessing the company’s current state regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion, and reporting on areas of opportunity, challenges, and continued work. This working group, led by the Chairman of the Board and the General Director and consisting of a small group of Executive Committee members and staff, is conducting a thorough audit of the company’s current practices and policies and will develop a comprehensive report detailing recommendations for advancing equity at Opera Theatre. These recommendations will be presented to the Board of Directors before the end of 2020. The board, in collaboration with staff leadership and an external facilitator, will work together to create and implement an institution-wide equity plan to address these recommendations and to develop accountability measures.

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On its mainstage, Opera Theatre has welcomed opportunities to program the work of Black composers – from Scott Joplin, to Anthony Davis, to our two recent commissions with Terence Blanchard. We are dedicated to building on this work with intentionality in the years ahead. Our 2021 season will include short commissions from composers including Damien Sneed and librettists including Karen Chilton and Taura Stinson, and a new production of *Highway 1, U.S.A.* by William Grant Still. Works by Black creatives are also planned for the 2022 and 2023 seasons and beyond, and we will seek out creative teams that include Black directors, conductors, and designers to help us tell these stories.

We recognize Opera Theatre has an important role to play in the training and development of young artists. In an effort to remove barriers to participation for Black artists, we are committed to continuing the practices of not requiring an application fee for our young artist program, providing complimentary housing for all young artists, and having a clearly stated, competitive fee structure for the company's YA program. In addition, we are committed to reviewing and adapting our audition processes to remove additional inherent barriers for Black artists. In the 2020-21 season and future years, we have committed to providing virtual master classes for young artists with our artistic staff and clinicians across the country in the months leading up to OTSL's festival season. This additional time for learning will allow OTSL to accept young artists into the program who have demonstrated talent but who may not have had equitable access to more advanced educational opportunities.

On the education front, one of OTSL's key initiatives has been the Artists-in-Training program, launched in 1980 with a goal of offering a pathway to advanced music training for high school students from underrepresented backgrounds—to date, more than \$550,000 in college scholarship support has been awarded to these students. We are also committed to deliberately casting artists who reflect the diversity of the St. Louis community for the company's education programs that serve thousands of local students each year.

Opera Theatre's past mainstage principal casting has often reflected the company's desire to echo the diversity of the St. Louis region, but has not been done with consistency or intentionality. We commit to changing that practice going forward and will be guided by the Board's new EDI plan. While we cannot directly control the hiring of our orchestra, the St. Louis Symphony, or the practices of our unions, we commit to using our interactions with these groups to highlight Opera Theatre's commitment to racial equity and our desire to work with like-minded partners.

We seek designers and production personnel who are knowledgeable and experienced in working with Black artists, particularly in the Wig/Makeup department, and will provide qualified training for these individuals to ensure every artist feels welcomed and supported at Opera Theatre. We make this same commitment to EDI training for our front-of-house staff, acknowledging their important role as front-line workers who embody OTSL's values.

Additionally, as part of the EDI assessment, we are in the process of reviewing our HR and hiring policies and practices to eliminate inherent racism in these efforts. This includes reviewing the language in OTSL's current code of conduct to ensure it clearly states that we are committed to actions that promote anti-racism and anti-oppression and outlines how to report instances of behavior that run counter to these goals. We are also putting specific recruitment efforts in place to ensure Black candidates are aware of openings across all levels and departments, and are represented in the candidate pools for positions. In 2021, we are launching the Clayco

Future Leaders Fellowship program – designed to cultivate future leaders in arts administration who come from historically underrepresented backgrounds – to create a clear path for BIPOC arts administrators. Each year, three fellows will serve in full-time, paid positions with benefits and travel and professional development stipends.

In the coming years, we will work closely with Opera Theatre’s Engagement & Inclusion Task Force, a group of community members who represent BIPOC communities across the St. Louis region that was formed in 2013, to garner their candid feedback on our community engagement efforts as we develop and implement the Board’s EDI plan. We know that their guidance and external perspective will help hold us accountable to our community.

The mission of Opera Theatre of Saint Louis is to bring people together through the power and beauty of opera. We believe passionately that opera can be for everybody, but also recognize that there is much work ahead of us to make that aspiration true for our entire community. We believe our intentions reflect those articulated in the Black Opera Alliance pledge and agree that accountability in all this work is critical. Our EDI strategic plan will establish concrete goals against which we will measure our progress, and we welcome continuing feedback from the Black Opera Alliance and its accountability commissions.

Thank you again for your call to action and for your leadership.

Sincerely,



Andrew R. Jorgensen  
General Director



Noëmi K. Nerdorff  
Chairman, Board of Directors