

WHAT'S NEW

OPERA LYRA OTTAWA TAKES THE STAGE (AGAIN)

In 2011, tragedy of the wrong kind faced **Opera Lyra Ottawa**: they'd simply run out of funds. The doors were closed, the season canceled. Hope was alive, but fragile. In a November 2011 website post, board member Richard Jenkins cut to the heart of the company's fears: "If the stage goes dark, maybe the audience won't come back."

But in September 2012, back they came, with audiences applauding a sold-out *La bohème*.

"It was a near-death experience," says new General Director John Peter "Jeep" Jeffries, chosen by the company's new board to help guide its renaissance. Canceling the season was a painful blow to Opera Lyra Ottawa audiences, but behind the scenes even tougher sacrifices had to be made. Staff was reduced from 11 full-time and three part-time to three full-time and one part-time. New bylaws sliced the board from 18 to 12 members. The board was reorganized, including new financial oversight procedures and a "rescue committee" tasked with gathering advice and community support.

That support is what Jeffries credits with the company's recovery: "You can't solve an issue like this without the community behind you," he says. When subscribers were offered a refund on their outstanding tickets, 70 percent opted to convert their funds to a charitable donation to the company. The National Arts Center (Opera Lyra Ottawa's home) suspended some rental costs. Both gestures provided respite and allowed the company to pay other outstanding debts.

However, in order for that stage to see opera again, Opera Lyra Ottawa had to do more than clear the books. They had to entice audiences back. McMillan Advertising developed a pro bono campaign that Jeffries credits with a key tone shift — "more about community awareness than about sales." Nine local champions, including Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson, were chosen for an "I'm Going to the Opera" print and online campaign in which they spoke about opera's personal appeal.

One ad was in French, targeted directly to Ottawa's sometimes-overlooked Francophone community. Though the company has always encouraged French-speaking patrons (all productions have dual subtitles), this was a particularly warm welcome with dramatic results: French-speakers jumped from 9.4 percent to 18.4 percent of all tickets sales. When the 2012-2013 season became a real possibility, the company decided to come back with a classic: the run of *La bohème* was a smash, with ticket sales from 80.4 to 99.9 percent capacity throughout.

Opera Lyra Ottawa is revived, but the rebuilding continues. In addition to their performances at the National Arts Centre they are looking ahead to the possibility of smaller-scale productions that could tour other Ottawa venues. Jeffries is quick to stress these are long-term goals; board and staff know they're only just out of the woods. But they remain optimistic. "Things are looking up," he says.

— Genevieve Valentine

I'm going because I want to feel transported. Watching La Bohème, I feel like Owen Wilson in Midnight in Paris, carried away by gorgeous singing voices and unforgettable music.

Eric Friesen
Writer, speaker, broadcaster
Opera Lyra Ottawa supporter since 2004

I'M GOING TO THE OPERA.

LA BOHÈME

Conductor: Alexander Shelley
September 8, 10, 12 & 15
Four nights only at the National Arts Centre
Ticketmaster.ca | 1-888-991-2787
NAC Box Office | operalyra.ca

OPERA LYRA OTTAWA

To support Opera Lyra Ottawa's return to the stage, McMillan Advertising developed a print and online campaign featuring community leaders.