
Opera Cleveland board names president, begins business of merging companies

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Opera Cleveland, the long-anticipated merger between Cleveland Opera and Lyric Opera Cleveland, officially was born Wednesday during the first meeting of the new company's board.

Made up of trustees from the two troupes, the board approved a business plan and signed merger agreements that call for the combining of artistic and financial resources. Opera Cleveland will receive \$1.1 million in transition funding and working capital from a consortium of regional foundations.

The funders are led by the Cleveland Foundation, which has pledged \$500,000; the Gund Foundation, which is providing \$100,000; and the John P. Murphy, Kulas and Reinberger foundations. Other funds are pending from the GAR, Bruening, Kelvin and Eleanor Smith, Thomas H. White and Abington foundations.

The Cleveland Foundation commitment includes a \$100,000 challenge grant that requires Opera Cleveland to raise at least another \$100,000 from the public for the transition plan.

The board elected Peter Rubin, who was president of Cleveland Opera, president of Opera Cleveland. The new board officers and committee chairs are Gary Bombei (vice president, finance/investment and treasurer), Pauline Ramig (vice president, development), Michael Folkman (vice president, governance), Don Scipione (vice president, audit), Viiia Beechler (vice president, marketing), Margaret Anne Cannon (vice president, artistic) and Mark Wallace (secretary).

Opera Cleveland will initiate a spring-to-fall calendar in April 2007, though the new company first will celebrate with a gala event Friday, Oct. 6, at Playhouse Square featuring "a couple of opera luminaries," in concert with orchestra and chorus, said Rubin.

Repertoire for the first season will be determined by an artistic committee working with Cleveland Opera Artistic Adviser Leon Major and Lyric Opera Cleveland Artistic Director Jonathon Field. The latter has a contract with Lyric Opera through the 2008 season.

The first full Opera Cleveland season, to be announced in mid-May, will include four performances each of single productions in spring and fall at the State Theatre - down from Cleveland Opera's previous four productions per season - and six performances

each of three productions, and possibly an apprentice production, at the Cleveland Play House during the summer.

This summer's three productions at the Play House will remain under the umbrella of Lyric Opera Cleveland, which gives performances with picnic intermissions.

Subscription materials for Opera Cleveland's new five-production schedule will be available in June.

The board of the new company is about to embark on a national search for an executive director to work with Major, Field and the board on management and administration. Rubin, who is heading the search committee, said the new business plan calls for artistic leadership issues to be resolved before the end of the 2009 season.

The budget for Opera Cleveland's first year - January to December 2007 - will be \$4.2 million, a drop of slightly more than \$1 million from the combined budgets this season of Cleveland Opera (\$4.7 million) and Lyric Opera Cleveland (\$540,000).

The funds from local foundations make it possible for Opera Cleveland to begin operating without debt. Cleveland Opera has paid out \$650,000 since July 1 to help retire an accumulated deficit. Lyric Opera has been debt-free in recent months. The new company is starting life with an endowment of \$600,000.