Syracuse Opera files for bankruptcy, one of numerous smaller companies in the US in trouble or simply closing down

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We wrote a few days ago about the calamitous conditions facing popular musicians, under circumstances in which a handful of conglomerates control the field and suck up a vast proportion of the revenue.

Classical music ensembles and opera companies also face immense difficulties, aside from a handful of prestigious, well-endowed institutions. Orchestras and operas in smaller US cities in particular are suffering immensely, as they face what *Living Opera* terms “scaling” a “financial cliff.”

The latest casualty in the ongoing crisis is the Syracuse (New York) Opera Company, which filed for bankruptcy earlier this month. The company has been operating continuously since 1974. The announcement does not come out of the blue. In November 2023, Syracuse Opera canceled the remainder of the 2023-24 season and furloughed its staff.

The *Violin Channel* reported at the time that the company

> cited waning post-COVID audience numbers as the primary factor in the decision, with board chair Camille Tisdel saying that ticket sales have dropped between 40% and 60% since the pandemic.

Tisdel wrote in a note to Syracuse Opera members

> While our recent productions have been artistically excellent and impactful, like many opera companies across the country, ticket sales have been considerably lower than projected, and we do not have the financial ability to continue the season. …
> Additionally, given the economic climate and uncertainty in our world, grant support, sponsorship, and donations are all in jeopardy with no real promise of a return to pre-pandemic giving levels.

She told the *Post-Standard* that “Truthfully, opera is an expensive art form.”

In 2011, the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra filed for bankruptcy, after half a century of performing.

Of course, given the wealth of the super-rich in the US, the *collective* debt of the country’s opera companies and orchestras amounts to mere pocket change. However, the ignoramus-billionaires have no interest in or knowledge about serious music, and, in any case, instinctively, they recognize that every deterioration in the cultural atmosphere assists their dominance. A thinking, feeling public is always a threat.

The Syracuse Opera bankruptcy is the latest in a series of similar actions forced upon regional companies.

The *Buffalo News* in July 2023 reported that programming and training at the Chautauqua Opera Company, “the nation’s oldest continuous summer opera company,” in western New York, would be

> dramatically scaled back to help close the Chautauqua Institution’s projected funding shortfall. Full-scale opera productions, a staple at Chautauqua since 1927, will be eliminated starting in 2024. Instead, stripped-down operas, in a workshop format, will be presented starting in 2025.

The *News* indicated as well that the company’s fully professional young artist program “will be slashed. … Production jobs for sets, costumes and lighting, among other backstage positions, will also be gone.”

In October 2023, the *Washington Classical Review* reported that the “Maryland Lyric Opera, one of the Washington area’s rising opera companies, will be closing its doors.” In an internal memo, the group’s founder and artistic director, Brad Clark, announced he would end the operations of Maryland Lyric Opera, “effective immediately.”

Lyric Opera Baltimore, which brought opera back to the Baltimore area in 2011 after the Baltimore Opera Company closed down during the Great Recession of 2008-09, ceased operations in 2017.

In February of this year, the board of the Inland Northwest Opera in Spokane, Washington sent an email to staff and supporters informing them that the company was suspending operations after being

> a cherished part of the community for 24 years. Despite the board of directors’ and staff’s unwavering passion for the arts and commitment to providing enriching cultural experiences, there is a stark reality of financial challenges that have become insurmountable.

After the email, the opera’s website was no longer available. According to the *Spokesman-Review*, the opera board’s chair, Mary Velasquez, said

> raising money after the COVID-19 pandemic has been challenging.
> “There’s economic hardship out there,” Velazquez said. “There’s

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> uncertainty with the economy. Opera can easily be crossed off the list when it comes to discretionary income. That's the way it is in our country and across the world.
>
> "Many organizations have suffered significant drops in funding. In '21 and '22, those seasons were propped up by federal relief funds, and in '23 those funds dried up."

The company's website previously noted that the Inland Northwest was "the only professional opera company serving Northern Idaho and Eastern Washington with world-renowned talent and emerging artists in the opera world."

In April, Raffaele Cardone, the founder and long-time general and artistic director of the Miami Lyric Opera, announced he was closing the company down after 22 years.

> Last November's double bill of Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* and Puccini's *Suor Angelica* was the company's final show. Cardone said the main reason for closing the company was, no surprise, money difficulties. "The principal reason is financing—not enough being available to make a decent production," said Cardone. "Venue, labor, musicians and artist costs and others, have all increased."

Other companies confronting budget problems have so far stopped short of shutting down.

The Tulsa (Oklahoma) Opera, incorporated as a professional organization in 1953, encountered difficulties in 2022-23. Various shifts in management positions were announced, at the same time as the cancellation of Tulsa Opera's two mainstage productions for the 2023–24 season, with budgetary issues being cited as the reason for the cancellation.

The company wrote to its supporters in June 2023 that

> The Pandemic and resulting economic downturn continue to strain revenues everywhere. OPERA America cites that 20% to 30% of subscribers have not returned to theaters. Some of our nation's most celebrated opera organizations have seen similar struggles, including the Metropolitan Opera, San Diego and Minnesota. We have confidence they will persevere.
>
> Here in Tulsa, we saw a 39% drop in revenue last year and this year, we're facing a 44% decline. Further, the average cost of a large production is up by 22%, now costing well over $400,000 per show. As you can imagine, these numbers are simply not sustainable.

The San Diego Opera, in a statement announcing performance cutbacks, asserted that "with the cost of producing opera skyrocketing and box-office revenue down from pre-pandemic levels, the fiscally responsible action is to cancel these performances."

In an interview with *San Francisco Classical Voice*, San Francisco Opera General Director Matthew Shilvock spelled out some of the difficulties. Shilvock described the arts in America as "a tale of two realities." On the one hand, "exhilarating energy in the opera house," and, on the other, "the financial model of the performing arts is at a breaking point, felt across America and resulting in the programming of more modest seasons in many companies."

The pandemic, he suggested, had not caused the problems, but had "accelerated" certain trends, "at least two decades in which expense growth has outpaced revenue growth in the arts."

Shilvock contended in the interview that the opera company was now obliged to bring in "$15-18 million of new revenue … each year, and that is almost exclusively from donors." He added:

> Ticket sales now only cover 16 percent of our revenue—a linear decline from 60 percent in the 1960s resulting from increases in total expenses, a gradual reduction in the total number of performances over many years, and changing buying habits away from full subscription packages. This means that donors are being asked to take on a larger and larger obligation each year. …

Government support for the arts has been on the decline for decades, despite soaring costs, and private donations are also falling.

In "Financial Headwinds in the Performing Arts: Evidence from United States Opera, 2005-2022," Christos A. Makridis argues that "Artists, especially those in performing arts, have faced increasing financial precarity" over the period of his study.

Living Opera sums up Makridis' three "critical patterns" behind the "troubling financial" trends:

> 1. Shifts in Revenue Sources: Box office revenues and private donations have declined steadily. While public funding provided temporary relief during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is not a long-term solution.
> 2. Rising Administrative Costs: Administrative expenses have nearly doubled as a share of total costs, while program and development expenses remain flat.
> 3. After adjusting for inflation, real operating income has stagnated since 2005, with significant dips during economic crises.
>
> These findings point to systemic challenges threatening the financial sustainability of opera houses, particularly smaller organizations that lack diversified funding streams.

Large-scale artistic performance, such as opera, is dependent on government subsidies. By its very nature, opera under the present economic and cultural conditions is not a profit-making enterprise. It cannot survive without public assistance. The US is one of the most backward of the advanced capitalist countries in this regard, offering a pittance to its artists, while it spends hundreds of billions on weapons and hands corporations and the wealthy massive tax breaks of various kinds.

The results of the process described above will be the loss of thousands of jobs, both artistic and technical, and the creation of "opera deserts," with various regions in the US increasingly devoid of more complex and challenging musical theater.

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