



MEDIA RELEASE

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CINCINNATI OPERA ANNOUNCES INITIATIVES TO ENHANCE DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

Julie Grady Heard hired as Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Opera star Morris Robinson appointed as Artistic Advisor

**CO Next: Diverse Voices to present new works:
Blind Injustice, a collaboration with the Ohio Innocence Project and the
Young Professionals Choral Collective, to premiere in 2019**

**The *Girls* project, a collaboration with WordPlay Cincy and the
Music Resource Center–Cincinnati, to premiere in 2020**

CINCINNATI, OH—Cincinnati Opera announced a slew of new appointments and projects in support of its renewed dedication to the areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion. This focus is the result of an internal strategic planning process, Vision 2021, which identified five strategic priorities. In addition to increasing the company's investment in community connections, exciting repertoire, audience growth, and storytelling, the company will prioritize producing experiences that are relevant and attractive to diverse audiences, and work to expand the diversity of the Opera family.

"Cincinnati Opera has been committed to increasing the diversity of our board, staff, Guild, and artists since the early 1990s," said **Patricia K. Beggs**, The Harry Fath General Director & CEO of Cincinnati Opera. "We are thrilled to announce these developments as a continuation and outgrowth of those early efforts. These initiatives will spark positive growth both within the company organization and on the mainstage."

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Staff and Board Committee

In September, **Julie Grady Heard** was hired to fill the newly created part-time position of Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. In this role, she will serve as the staff liaison to the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee, a joint committee of the Opera's Board of Trustees, Guild Board, and Center Stage Board Associates (CSBA). The committee is chaired by board member **Alva Jean Crawford**, with Guild member **Bo-Kyung Kirby** and CSBA member **Priya Sonty** acting as co-chairs.

Julie Grady Heard is a longtime supporter of the company. A member of the Opera Guild, she served as its president from 2003 to 2004, and has been a member of the Opera Board of Trustees since 2008. Ms. Heard played a central role in the *Margaret Garner* community engagement programs. She was a senior director of human resources at Cintas for 12 years, and a senior vice president of human resources at Huntington Bank. Ms. Heard is a former board member of the YWCA and WGUC.

Morris Robinson Appointed as Artistic Advisor

After performing with Cincinnati Opera numerous times, bass **Morris Robinson** has accepted the new role of artistic advisor to the company. Robinson has previously appeared as Ferrando in *Il Trovatore* (2015), Ramfis in *Aida* (2013), the Night Watchman in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (2010), and the Grand Inquisitor in *Don Carlo* (2009). A regular performer at the Metropolitan Opera, San Francisco Opera, and Lyric Opera of Chicago, he made his role debut as Porgy in *Porgy and Bess* at Teatro alla Scala in Milan earlier this year. As part of the appointment, Robinson will reprise that role in the company's 2019 production of *Porgy and Bess* at Music Hall.

"In addition to his breathtaking talent, Morris is a fantastic colleague and a true team player," said **Evans Mirageas**, The Harry T. Wilks Artistic Director of Cincinnati Opera. "I am thrilled that he will join us in this capacity, and I happily anticipate the positive impact his involvement will have on our company."

As Cincinnati Opera's artistic advisor, Robinson will contribute to both the company's public offerings and internal planning. The role will involve such activities as performing, master classes, community engagement activities, and speaking engagements, as well as working with Opera staff and board members to develop programming. The initial three-year appointment will continue through the 2020 season, which will mark the company's 100th anniversary.

No stranger to community engagement, Robinson has performed in several Opera Goes to Church concerts and has appeared onstage at a Friday Flow concert at Washington Park to speak about opera.

"It is indeed an honor and a privilege to be appointed to this position," said Robinson. "Cincinnati has been the city in which I've had the pleasure of experiencing a variety of professional firsts. As my musical performances there have been both exciting and enjoyable, I am exponentially more excited about the tremendous opportunity to work intricately with Cincinnati Opera in this new and exciting administrative capacity. I'm looking forward to joining the team and working with the company in their efforts to continuously promote and share the incredible beauty of this art form that we all truly love."

Five-Year Plan for CO Next: Diverse Voices

In July, Cincinnati Opera announced a new initiative, **CO Next: Diverse Voices**, which will showcase new or existing works by diverse composers or librettists, or works that prominently feature diverse characters in the storyline. CO Next: Diverse Voices will add a fifth production to the company's usual summer festival lineup of four operas. These productions will be presented in a variety of smaller venues on the Opera Campus in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood, and are envisioned to include a collaborative element with a community partner.

Presented in partnership with **concert:nova** in July 2017, *Song from the Uproar*, composed by **Missy Mazzoli** to a libretto by **Royce Vavrek**, provided a soft launch of the CO Next: Diverse Voices program. The opera, which meditated on the extraordinary life of the adventurer and journalist **Isabelle Eberhardt**, was the company's first mainstage opera by a female composer. The work was presented in four sold-out performances at the black-box Fifth Third Bank Theater at the Aronoff Center.

In 2018, CO Next: Diverse Voices continues with the intimate opera *As One*, to be performed in the brand-new Wilks Studio in the renovated Music Hall. In this chamber piece for two singers and string quartet by composer **Laura Kaminsky** and librettists **Mark Campbell** and **Kimberly Reed**, a mezzo-soprano and a baritone depict the experiences of its sole transgender protagonist, Hannah, as she endeavors to resolve the discord between herself and the outside world. The work has previously been presented by Seattle Opera, Opera Colorado, Long Beach Opera, Pittsburgh Opera, Urban Arias in Washington, D.C., and Brooklyn Academy of Music. Cincinnati Opera will partner with the **University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music** on the production, and it will be directed by **Robin Guarino**,

who made her Cincinnati Opera directing debut with *Die Fledermaus* in 2016, following recent engagements at the Metropolitan Opera and San Francisco Opera. Guarino is the J. Ralph Corbett Distinguished Chair in Opera at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music and the co-artistic director of Opera Fusion: New Works.

For the 2019 season, Cincinnati Opera is partnering with the **Ohio Innocence Project** (OIP) and the **Young Professionals Choral Collective** (YPCC) to present *Blind Injustice*, the first new work to be commissioned as part of CO Next: Diverse Voices. This original performance piece will be based on the work and stories of the OIP, as captured in University of Cincinnati law professor **Mark Godsey**'s book of the same name, as well as interviews with people exonerated through the efforts of the OIP. The opera will bring to life the grace, perseverance, and forgiveness of these incredible men and women, and will be composed by **William Menefield** to a libretto by **David Cote**. **Robin Guarino** will act as stage director and dramaturg.

"Cincinnati Opera is looking for innovative ways to collaborate with nontraditional partner organizations in an authentic way, to tell current stories of societal importance," said **Marcus Kuchle**, Director of Artistic Operations and New Works Development at Cincinnati Opera and the co-artistic director of Opera Fusion: New Works. "We are keenly interested in breaking through the stereotypes of what opera is in the 21st century, and *Blind Injustice* is a perfect example of the type of new works Cincinnati Opera will pursue in future seasons."

The opera will focus on the stories of six exonerees: **Ricky Jackson, Nancy Smith, Clarence Elkins**, and the **East Cleveland 3 (Derrick Wheatt, Laurese Glover, and Eugene Johnson)**. The final performance piece will feature no more than 12 singers, a chorus composed of YPCC members, and a small orchestra not to exceed 12 musicians. As part of the work's presentation, the collaborators will offer education and engagement events to further tell the story of this important work.

The Ohio Innocence Project was founded at the University of Cincinnati Law School in 2003 and is led by **Mark Godsey**. The OIP's young professionals board, which works to build awareness for the organization and its mission, reached out to YPCC, a 1,000-member amateur chorus, in the hope of hosting a joint event. Realizing the potential scope of the project, YPCC Artistic Director **KellyAnn Nelson** contacted Cincinnati Opera.

"The stories of these six exonerees are powerful tales of perseverance and forgiveness after going through an ordeal most of us can't even imagine," said Godsey, OIP Director. "Although the stories are inspirational in their own right, the music exponentially magnifies their emotional impact. So we are incredibly excited that the public will get to learn more about these heroes in such a compelling, moving way. We know that once you hear their stories, your heart will be touched. We feel incredibly lucky to be working with the Opera and YPCC on this important project."

"These stories are compelling. Music so often provides a unique voice for these storytellers—especially those whose stories are often overlooked," said **KellyAnn Nelson**, artistic director of YPCC. "Art provides a powerful platform for connecting people, and YPCC is so excited to be part of this work. It's also exciting to bring enthusiastic young professionals closer to OIP's mission through the power of artistic collaboration. Very few community choruses have the chance to share the stage with a professional music organization of Cincinnati Opera's caliber, and having this opportunity paired with the meaningful work of the OIP, a brilliant team of composer, librettist, producers, and more, is groundbreaking and impactful."

In sharing the real-life case stories of exonerees, it is hoped that the work will bring greater understanding and empathy to the work of the OIP and other innocence organizations, as well as create opportunities for broader conversations about wrongful conviction in the United States.

2020 marks the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, granting women the right to vote; that year also marks the 100th anniversary of Cincinnati Opera, and the season's offerings will focus on women's stories. For the 2020 season's CO Next: Diverse Voices project, Cincinnati Opera is collaborating with **WordPlay Cincy** and **The Music Resource Center–Cincinnati** (MRC) to develop an original performance piece based on the life experiences of young women aged 11 through 17 who participate in the two partner organizations.

MRC is a multifaceted teen center that uses recording and performing arts as well as life skills mentoring to create a sense of empowerment and accomplishment in the urban community. WordPlay has a very similar mission and methodology, but with a focus on literature and poetry as a means to develop reading and writing skills and the art of storytelling.

The goal of the **Girls** project, as it is tentatively titled, is to develop a work with a continuous narrative, music, and sung and spoken elements, co-created by the participants of WordPlay and MRC with the aid of Cincinnati Opera artists. The piece would rely to a significant extent on the performances of the children, telling their own stories from their point of view and in their language. As envisioned, the libretto would be created by the students of WordPlay with the aid of an Opera stage director and dramaturg, and the music would be composed by the students of MRC with the help of an Opera composer and arranger.

Another CO Next: Diverse Voices project will be included as part of Cincinnati Opera's 2021 season, with details to be announced at a future date.

Founded in 1920 and the second oldest opera company in the nation, Cincinnati Opera presents a thrilling season of grand opera every June and July. The company's repertoire includes beloved classics and contemporary masterworks brought to life by some of the world's most dynamic performers and creative teams.

*Cincinnati Opera's 2018 Summer Festival runs June 14 through July 31, featuring Giuseppe Verdi's **La Traviata**, Claudio Monteverdi's **The Coronation of Poppea**, Richard Wagner's **The Flying Dutchman**, Laura Kaminsky's **As One**, and the United States premiere of **Another Brick in the Wall**, based on the Pink Floyd album The Wall. Cincinnati Opera's 2018 season is made possible with support from ArtsWave, Ohio Arts Council, Macy's, The Louise Dieterle Nippert Musical Arts Fund, and many generous individuals, corporations, and foundations.*

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