

## **OMAI Open Letter: Addressing the Covid-19 crisis after one year**

### **Solutions Needed for the Global Culture Drain**

#### **Countries around the globe that provide public support for freelance artists in the performing arts will recover faster and a more vibrant post-pandemic culture.**

The month of February marked the first anniversary of the La Scala opera house in Milan, Italy, one of the world's greatest cultural and historic icons, shutting down due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Within weeks of La Scala closing, almost all opera and concert halls around the globe were shuttered, including New York's Metropolitan Opera. One year later, 90% of theaters are still closed to the public and plans to reopen are undetermined.

The pandemic shutdown has been devastating on opera and the arts industry. In the U.S., the arts contribute \$763.6 billion to the US economy – 4.2 percent of the GDP (US Bureau of Economic Analysis – March 8, 2019). The performing arts sector, which includes orchestra musicians, coaches, dancers, stage directors, and designers, has been out of work for an entire year. While opera houses and artists are producing streamed performances, they cannot replicate the live experience for the audience or provide a living wage for the artists.

Can the industry survive this? Opera has existed for over 450 years and has survived many global crises. But what the future will look like when the curtains reopen is uncertain.

Opera Managers Association International (OMAI) was founded to address these questions. We are concerned about the welfare of the artists we represent and the viability of the profession and industry that we so passionately care about.

In countries where public support for the arts is provided, artists are doing better. In Germany, artists employed by opera houses receive support through a social insurance program known as Kurzarbeit. Health insurance is compulsory and covers everyone living in Germany. The chorus at the Deutsche Oper Berlin, for example, while unable to perform, is still receiving full salary and health insurance benefits.

In the U.S., where the arts are funded primarily through ticket sales and private donations, virtually no social safety net was in place when the pandemic hit. Singers work either as self-employed freelance artists or with union contracts when employed in the major houses.

It came as a shock when the Metropolitan Opera in New York invoked force majeure clauses cancelling freelance artist contracts and laying off the union musicians. Due to lack of a safety net in the U.S., these artists were left with no income and in many cases no unemployment benefits or health insurance. Columbia Artists Management, the famed international talent management agency for over 90 years that represented legendary classical artists such as Leontyne Price, Vladimir Horowitz and Herbert von Karajan, soon followed by shutting down amid the “prolonged pandemic environment”. Stop gap measures such as the CARES Act and the SOS (Save our Stages) Act have provided some relief, but with only a fraction of usual income and no long-term security. Today we represent approximately 35% of opera managers internationally and cooperate closely with professional organizations as well as major actors in the industry.

Freelance artists who sing the lead roles on the world's stages often do not qualify for support. They perform in theaters in many different countries, leaving them uncovered by social security systems in any country. These artists are tragically falling through the cracks.

Particularly heartbreaking is the situation for the younger generation. Many emerging artists are leaving the field before even getting started. They simply can't afford risking an uncertain career in the profession, especially if burdened by student debt from American universities.

A worrisome culture drain is underway that needs to be recognized and addressed. With hope for their futures dwindling, many opera talents are permanently leaving the field.

Countries that value opera and the performing arts as a vital part of a vibrant, cultural community must consider the long-term effect of shutting down an entire sector for what may be years. While we advocate for reopening when it's safe, we also want our governments to address the financial hardships this pandemic has caused those in the arts at every level. A consequential first step in the U.S. would be the appointment of a cabinet level position dedicated to arts and culture.

Are we willing to finally provide greater stability and resiliency in the form of a better safety net world-wide? Opera and the performing arts are a global industry, and we are advocating for global solutions. We must act now before the damage already inflicted becomes even worse.



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**Opera Managers Association International**

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