

# CULTIVATING THE NEXT GENERATION OF ART LOVERS

HOW BOSTON LYRIC OPERA  
SOUGHT TO CREATE GREATER  
OPPORTUNITIES FOR FAMILIES  
TO ATTEND OPERA



by Bob Harlow, Thomas Alfieri, Aaron Dalton, and Anne Field

# WALLAGE STUDIES IN BUILDING ARTS AUDIENCES

## CULTIVATING THE NEXT GENERATION OF ART LOVERS

*How Boston Lyric Opera Sought to Create  
Greater Opportunities  
for Families to Attend Opera*

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## MORE THAN JUST A PARTY

*How the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum Boosted  
Participation by Young Adults*

•

## ATTRACTING AN ELUSIVE AUDIENCE

*How the San Francisco Girls Chorus Is Breaking Down  
Stereotypes and Generating Interest among  
Classical Music Patrons*

•

## BUILDING DEEPER RELATIONSHIPS

*How Steppenwolf Theatre Company Is Turning  
Single-Ticket Buyers into Repeat Visitors*

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## PREFACE

This case study describes how the Boston Lyric Opera created opportunities for families to experience opera in the hopes of engaging future audiences. It is part of a larger set of four case studies, commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, of arts organizations’ efforts to reach new audiences and deepen relationships with current audiences.

These studies come at a time of particular urgency. According to the National Endowment for the Arts’ *2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts*, American adults’ participation in key activities such as attending live performances and visiting museums is at its lowest levels since the survey began tracking it in 1982.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the arts audience has grown older than the general population. The message is clear: Arts organizations need to attract and engage new audiences to ensure their artistic and financial viability.

Yet the work of these four organizations and the case study investigations describing them was undertaken not with a view that actual *interest* in the arts is waning, but with a hope, shared by many, that we are witnessing a dynamic shift in participation, both in amount and in form. Much evidence suggests that Americans are longing to take part in the arts but want to do so beyond how we have come to define (or measure) participation.<sup>2</sup>

1. National Endowment for the Arts, *2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 2–3.

2. Steven J. Tepper and Yang Gao, “Engaging Art: What Counts?,” in *Engaging Art: The Next Great Transformation of America’s Cultural Life*, eds. Steven J. Tepper and Bill Ivey (New York: Routledge, 2008), 17–47.

Twenty-first-century Americans may be looking for a more interactive or participatory experience, for example.<sup>3</sup> In response, inventive organizations are trying to share their art in ways that help their mission and resources dovetail with the preferences and lifestyles of potential audiences.

The cases describe and evaluate newly launched or expanded participation-building programs designed and implemented by four organizations involved in different artistic disciplines: the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Steppenwolf Theatre Company, the San Francisco Girls Chorus, and Boston Lyric Opera. They lay out how these efforts were created and run and also identify strategic and tactical elements driving results. In the process, we explore such questions as: What program and organizational factors produce success? What are the costs, benefits, and trade-offs associated with building participation? What is the broader impact on arts organizations that undertake it?

Each case study in the series includes background information on each organization and the events that led to its participation-building program. The case studies begin with a brief synopsis, much like an abstract, and a “scene-setter” describing an actual component of that program. A section summarizing the specific participation-building challenges faced by the organization and the program it built to address them follows. Then we include more detail about strategy, tactics, and key decisions made as the organization developed its approach. We detail both how program outcomes were measured and their results, and provide an evaluative analysis of those results, highlighting the key drivers behind them. Finally, we pose central questions for

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3. See, for example, Henry Jenkins and Vanessa Bertozzi, “Artistic Expression in the Age of Participatory Culture: How and Why Young People Create,” in *Engaging Art: The Next Great Transformation of America’s Cultural Life*, eds. Steven J. Tepper and Bill Ivey (New York: Routledge, 2008), 171–195.

arts organizations to consider if they’re facing similar audience challenges or weighing the possibility of implementing programs like those described in the case study.

The case studies are the product of multiple interviews with key staff and an analysis of program elements, budgets, and planning documents, as well as qualitative and quantitative research undertaken by independent consultants and the organizations themselves to inform and evaluate their own efforts. We also examined a wide variety of indicators, such as ticket purchase, online activity, and participation in a broad array of programming.

Ultimately, there are limits to the general conclusions we can draw from the case studies: These were not scientifically controlled experiments. And each of the four organizations studied designed a different program aimed at a different target audience. Nonetheless, we can discern some general principles that other arts organizations can learn from and adopt.

**1. Market research can sharpen engagement-strategy development and execution.** Organizations that want to engage new audiences or deepen existing relationships need to understand what audiences are looking for. Many of the organizations profited by using market research to identify more precisely how current and potential audiences think about their organizations, how they think about the kind of art they provide, and the experience those audiences are seeking. For some professionals, especially artistic and programming staff, soliciting audience opinion runs the risk of overtly pandering to public taste, thereby sacrificing artistic integrity (sometimes referred to as “dumbing down”). But listening to participants can provide observations needed to create innovative, creative, and deeply engaging programs—insights

that, for these organizations, sometimes revealed an unexpected level of sophistication among audience members as well. Artistic staff at Steppenwolf and the San Francisco Girls Chorus even found that audiences welcomed bolder artistic choices; the artistic mission was fortified.

The case studies suggest that rigorous research, even though it may not yet be the norm in arts organizations, is crucial to understanding audiences and evaluating progress. It isn't enough, for example, to make assumptions based on ticket sales. Listening to audiences means conducting well-constructed research to pinpoint what they're looking for from your art form and your organization. It requires doing both quantitative and qualitative studies to inform strategy, evaluate results, and make course corrections on the road to meeting participation-building objectives. In uncertain economic times, when every dollar counts, such research is especially important to ensure that participation-building programs are structured correctly and are on track.

**2. Audiences are open to engaging the arts in new and different ways.** All of the organizations were successful when they provided new avenues for audiences to find a “way in” to their art. For example:

- Creating unique social gatherings that encourage discussions around the art collection, as at *Gardner After Hours*
- Facilitating critical thinking and dialogue about theater, as Steppenwolf has done on its website and in post-show discussions
- Providing interactive and educational programs to introduce new audiences to the arts, like the Boston Lyric Opera's preview program, which gives children (and many adults) a first-time glimpse into the workings of

opera in a familiar and comfortable setting

- Using visual communications to telegraph an unexpected level of professionalism and artistic sophistication, as the San Francisco Girls Chorus has done in its carefully designed marketing communications makeover

**3. Participation-building is ongoing, not a one-time initiative.** Cultivating audiences is an effort that can never be viewed as finished. The organizations studied continue to fine-tune their programs, and even alter program objectives as they learn more about their audiences or as the relationships with audiences change. After making strides toward creating a dialogue with existing audience members, Steppenwolf Theatre Company is opening the conversation to an even wider spectrum of new theatergoers; the Gardner Museum continues to examine and revise a program that has exceeded its expectations; the San Francisco Girls Chorus is investigating how it can encourage repeat visits from the new audience of classical music patrons it has attracted; Boston Lyric Opera is reviewing matters related to performance location and strategic partnerships as critical determinants of programs to bring opera to young people.

**4. Audience-building efforts should be fully integrated into every element of an organization, not a separate initiative or program.**

That means they can't be run by just one or two departments or as add-on initiatives unrelated to the overall mission. When participation-building objectives are embraced by the entire organization and conceptualized and implemented as an outgrowth of the overall mission, staff can have clarity of purpose and visitors an “authentic” or deeply felt experience, and the institution's goals can be most fully realized.

**5. Mission is critical.** Programs that emerge from an organiza-

tion's mission, when that mission is clear and supported throughout the organization, develop in an environment in which they can thrive. At the same time, these programs are better able to provide the rich experiences audiences are looking for, because they draw on and offer to the public those things about which organizations care most.<sup>4</sup> The Gardner Museum and Steppenwolf Theatre Company in particular built rich programs around their unique missions and philosophies about experiencing art. As a result, their programs have connected audiences more deeply with their art, and have attracted new audiences in large numbers.

Finally, we hope these case studies inspire. These programs demonstrate what is possible with strategic thinking and solid implementation. They prove that arts organizations don't have to be victims of a trend, but instead can be masters of their destinies, contributing to a vigorous, thriving, and viable artistic community.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A great many individuals and organizations assisted us in our research, and we want to give them our heartfelt thanks. First, this work would not have been possible without the generous support of The Wallace Foundation. We would also like to express our appreciation for their guidance and support to The Wallace Foundation staff members Lucas Held and Pamela Mendels, as well as former staff members Catherine Fukushima, Rory McPherson, and Mary Trudel. Ann Stone of The Wallace Founda-

4. B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, "Museums and Authenticity," *Museum News* 86 (2007): 76-80, <http://www.aam-us.org/pubs/mn/authenticity.cfm>. Pine and Gilmore suggest that in a world of increasing competition for leisure time, people are looking for strong experiences. They suggest that arts organizations can render such strong experiences if they stay true to themselves and express a strong identity outward.

tion tirelessly provided invaluable strategic guidance and insight from the project's beginnings to its final conclusions.

We offer our sincere thanks to the staffs and boards of the four organizations we studied. Their candor will, we trust, pay important dividends in the form of additional knowledge about what works and what does not in engaging audiences. We were fortunate to have liaisons at each of the four organizations who helped us work through the details and dedicated much of their own time to ensuring that the case studies were as informative as possible. These include Peggy Burchenal and Julie Crites at the Gardner Museum, Melanie Smith and Polly Springhorn of the San Francisco Girls Chorus, Judith McMichael and Julie House of Boston Lyric Opera, and Linda Garrison of Steppenwolf Theatre Company. As we sought to formulate the key questions and identify critical learnings from the cases, we were also fortunate to have extensive feedback on strategic direction and conclusions from several leading arts practitioners, including Jim Hirsch of the Chicago Sinfonietta, Molly Smith of Arena Stage, Kelly Tweeddale of Seattle Opera, Laura Sweet of the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts, Bonnie Pitman of the Dallas Museum of Art, and Stephanie Hughley of the New Jersey Performing Arts Center. Finally, Sandra Radoff and Mari Henninger provided important technical assistance as we examined the data the organizations collected. Of course, the final responsibility for the questions posed and conclusions drawn rests with us.

*Bob Harlow*



## SUMMARY

**W**hile participation in all art forms has declined recently, that decrease has been particularly acute in opera. What's more, opera appears to have the narrowest fan base among all the major performing arts. To address these trends, Boston Lyric Opera (BLO), the largest opera company in New England, decided on a plan to nurture a new generation of operagoers. It would take its abridged operas used in school programs, and turn them into high-quality productions for families. Part of its Opera for Young Audiences (OYA) program, the family performances would feature not only professional singers, but also an orchestra and new costumes, props, and sets. In addition, BLO planned to supplement and promote those productions with free previews, scaled-down workshops to be presented at local libraries and other community venues. Ultimately, in all its efforts, BLO hoped to introduce children to the art form, provide more opportunities for their parents to attend performances, and, perhaps, increase attendance at its mainstage productions.

BLO expanded the family performance program to four venues in four neighborhoods in as many years, presenting such works as *The Barber of Seville*, *The Magic Flute*, and *Hansel and Gretel*. Post-show surveys revealed the majority of adult attendees were opera fans who wanted to introduce their children to the art form, thus meeting two of BLO's primary goals—providing children with their first experience of opera and creating

opportunities for their busy parents to attend performances. Two of the venues, however, were in neighborhoods with few opera fans, creating the need to reach out to adults with little or no experience with the art form. Hampered by a lack of research on their new target audience, BLO's efforts to engage members of this community were largely unsuccessful.

Despite the difficulties in bringing new adult audiences to the family performances, the previews held at local libraries did attract a large percentage of adult first-time operagoers. On average, 56% of adults at a preview had never attended a fully staged opera before compared to 12% at the family performances. BLO's preview program is an example of a mutually beneficial community partnership, and offers insights into ways an organization can attract new audiences to art.

*It wasn't your usual opera audience. One Sunday in mid-March, about 150 six- to twelve-year-olds, along with assorted parents and grandparents, attended an abridged production of The Barber of Seville held at the new Melrose Veterans Memorial Middle School auditorium, about ten miles north of downtown Boston. For an hour, the children, many dressed in their Sunday best, sat with rapt attention, with only occasional fidgeting, whispering, pointing, and napping.*

*At the conclusion of Rosina's coloratura aria, Una voce poco fa, sung while juggling oranges, the audience showed its appreciation through prolonged applause and enthusiastic "bravas." After the performance, dozens of excited young attendees lined up to meet members of the cast and ask them to sign their autographs in the glossy programs handed out before the performance began.*

*Part of Boston Lyric Opera's Opera for Young Audiences (OYA) program, the family performance of Rossini's masterpiece was tailored to appeal to elementary school-age children, while approaching the quality of a BLO mainstage production. Reducing the running time meant losing the overture, the intermission, several arias, and supporting characters. But Figaro, Almaviva, Rosina, Bartolo, and Basilio were all there, in costume, in front of a gleaming set, accompanied by a 16-piece orchestra, and giving performances worthy of any professional production meant for adults.*

*In fact, presenting such high-quality opera—and generating*

*an enthusiastic response from an appreciative young audience—is exactly what BLO was after when it expanded its family performance program in 2007. By providing a convenient, affordable way for families to introduce top-of-the-line opera to their children, the organization hoped to ignite a lifelong appreciation for the art form, provide new opportunities for existing patrons, and create a new generation of opera lovers.*

## **OPERA COMPANIES FACE AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE**

It's no secret that the audience for opera is dwindling and graying. While participation in most art forms has declined in recent years, nowhere has that decrease been more pronounced than in opera. Only 2% of U.S. adults went to an opera in 2008, according to the National Endowment for the Arts, the lowest attendance level for any arts activity tracked in their recent survey, as shown in Table 1. In contrast, 9% of adults saw a classical music concert, and nearly 17% attended a musical play. What's more, from 2002 to 2008, opera experienced the largest drop in participation of all performing arts forms, down 34%. Opera also tends to have one of the oldest audiences among the performing arts.<sup>5</sup> The implications are dire: Opera fans, the oldest cohort among arts participants, are aging and not being replaced.

One explanation for opera's low participation rates is its particularly narrow fan base. Roughly 8% of American adults like opera, compared to about 26% of adults who enjoy classical music and 20% who are fans of musical theater (see Table 1). Another factor is reduced opera schedules: In large part because opera performances are expensive to mount, the number of productions is limited. In fact, there were about nine classical music concerts for every opera performance during the 2007–2008

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5. National Endowment for the Arts, *2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 20–21.

**Table 1. Percentage of U.S. Adult Population Participating in Different Art Forms**

	Percentage of adults attending		Change	Percentage of adults “liking” in 2008
	2002	2008		
Opera	3.2	2.1	-34%	8.3
Classical Music	11.6	9.3	-20%	25.7
Jazz	10.8	7.8	-28%	24.2
Musical Theater	17.1	16.7	-2%	19.7

Source: National Endowment for the Arts, *2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 18, 57.

season, according to estimates by Opera America and the League of American Orchestras.<sup>6,7</sup>

It was an attempt to address these bleak trends—and the very future of opera—that led BLO, the largest opera company in New England, to create the family performance series. BLO staff believed that those most likely to participate in opera as adults were introduced to the art form at an early age. In addition, BLO staff believed children needed to be given an opportunity to experience opera firsthand and decide for themselves if it was an art form they enjoyed—before they learned the negative stereotypes surrounding it.

With that in mind, management developed a plan to give children the opportunity to experience the full razzle-dazzle of opera. Drawing from productions already created for its Opera for Young Audiences (OYA) program, BLO would launch a series including performances of one of three operas each year, complete with professional singers and orchestra, as well as new costumes and refurbished sets. The operas would be presented in

6. “Quick Opera Facts 2008–2009,” Opera America, <http://www.operaamerica.org/content/research/quick0809.aspx>.

7. “Quick Orchestra Facts 2010,” League of American Orchestras, [http://www.americanorchestras.org/images/stories/knowledge\\_pdf/Quick\\_Orch\\_Facts\\_2010.pdf](http://www.americanorchestras.org/images/stories/knowledge_pdf/Quick_Orch_Facts_2010.pdf), 3.

different neighborhoods in the Greater Boston area to provide opportunities for a large population of families to attend. And performances would be aimed both at giving children a glimpse of just how exciting the art form could be and at providing their parents with an enjoyable, high-quality, affordable opera experience.

At the same time, BLO planned to supplement and promote the family performances with much simpler, free workshops adapted from lecture-recital programs used in schools. These previews would be presented at local public libraries and community venues located in the same neighborhoods where upcoming family performances were going to take place. “We can’t survive without people loving opera. The more we expose people to the art form, the greater the chances we have of increasing the number of people who love it,” says Judith McMichael, director of marketing and business partnerships.

Ultimately, a series of complications including difficulties finding appropriate venues and the challenges of introducing this art form to new audiences, resulted in mixed success. But, BLO’s experience presenting both the family performances and

previews provides lessons for any arts organization interested in increasing the participation and engagement of its audience—and building a new generation eager to continue that involvement.

### **BOSTON LYRIC OPERA AT A GLANCE**

- Mission: To produce artistically excellent productions of a diverse repertoire that entertain and inspire audiences; to feature emerging operatic talent; and to engage and educate the community of all ages about opera
- Founded in 1976
- Merged with Opera New England in 1998
- Largest opera company in New England
- Produces four operas a year, and one Opera for Young Audiences
- General & Artistic Director: Esther Nelson
- Director of Marketing and Business Partnerships: Judith McMichael\*
- Education and Community Programs Manager: Julie House
- Number of employees: 23
- Audience size: 22,300 during the 2009–2010 season, plus an additional 15,000 attending an Opera for Young Audiences performance
- Annual operating budget: \$7 million, FY 2010–2011

*\*Left BLO in May 2010*

## **FAMILY PERFORMANCES: EVOLUTION AND KEY STEPS**

**T**he roots of the family performances date back to the early 1970s, thanks to a unique collaboration between Linda Cabot Black, a philanthropist and longtime supporter of opera; Sarah Caldwell, a noted opera producer and conductor; and Opera New England (ONE), a Boston-based opera company that merged with BLO in 1998. At the time, ONE was looking for a way to introduce children to opera through school programs. For her part, Cabot Black wanted to create an environment where “a love of opera could be sparked.”

While a number of companies already presented opera written specifically for children, Cabot Black had other ideas—to produce “opera for children, not children’s opera.” That meant introducing young people to works they might see again as adults, as opposed to operas created specifically for children and unlikely to have appeal among adult opera fans. Choosing an appropriate repertoire for children from the standard canon of operatic titles was easier said than done, of course, since the majority of productions involved any number of themes, from adultery to murder, that were far from child-friendly. And they were all too long to keep children’s attention.

But Cabot Black felt strongly that children would enjoy opera because children love stories. She identified a handful of

age-appropriate works, and commissioned new productions with abridged running times of one hour, music scores for an orchestra of approximately 20 instruments, and the librettos translated into English. At the same time, ONE produced study materials to be used as part of a school curriculum.

When BLO merged with ONE in 1998, it acquired four school productions: *The Barber of Seville*, Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel*, and Donizetti's *The Daughter of the Regiment*. Now a cornerstone of BLO's OYA program, the company performs one opera each spring at schools throughout New England, although the majority of performances have replaced the small orchestra with piano accompaniment. Cabot Black currently sits on BLO's board of directors and continues to play an active role in the use and evolution of these productions.

From the beginning, the school performances have had a distinct marketing approach: they're promoted directly to educators (music teachers, administrators, and teachers in general), many of whom have long-standing relationships with BLO's OYA program and see value in giving young children the opportunity to experience opera. As a result, they're happy to participate and to encourage the students in their classes to participate as well.

According to Julie House, education and community programs manager, in addition to the performances' high production quality, teachers also respond to BLO's comprehensive extra-performance materials. That includes in-school previews and a 100-page study guide designed to help teachers find links between the OYA school performances and current Massachusetts learning standards in subject areas of not only music and art, but also the sciences, math, and history. "We want to give teachers as many points of entry as possible," says House.

The family performance series grew out of BLO's OYA school program. After acquiring the school productions in 1998, BLO decided to continue ONE's annual fund-raising event, held to support the school program. The high point of this daylong event was a performance of the opera being shown that school year, referred to as a family performance, but reintroducing the 17- to 20-piece orchestra. As time went by, McMichael and Janice Mancini del Sesto, then general director, came to a realization: they could expand the popular family performance, and, by making it another arm of the OYA program, transform it from a fund-raiser for BLO supporters to a larger event aimed at families in general. In the process, the performances could help BLO fulfill its mission-driven goal to "engage and educate the community of all ages about opera."

In fact, BLO believed an expanded family performance program could accomplish several educational, artistic, and marketing goals at once: it would introduce elementary school-age children to the art form, provide an opportunity for parents to experience a live performance with their children, and create the seeds of a new generation of opera lovers. What's more, it might help increase audiences for BLO mainstage productions.

Figure 1 and Colorplates 1 & 2 show scenes of two OYA productions.

To that end, the following steps were particularly important to building the program:

## **1. REMOVING BARRIERS: TACKLING OBSTACLES PREVENTING PARENTS FROM SEEING OPERA**

**E**xpanding the family performances meant dramatically altering the way BLO had marketed the OYA program previously. No longer could they rely upon educators, many of whom already

**Figure 1. Scenes from BLO's OYA Productions of *Hansel and Gretel* (right) and *The Magic Flute* (below)**

Photo on right by Paul Lyden for Boston Lyric Opera © 2008

Photo below by Greg Del Sesto for Boston Lyric Opera © 2009



appreciated opera and who could fill twenty or more seats with their students. Instead, BLO would have to promote and market the performances directly to parents—the gatekeepers of their children’s participation—and build an audience one family at a time.

In order to promote the family performances effectively, BLO would initially target parents who were already fans of opera. The big selling point of the program, BLO staff reasoned,

would be that it eliminated many of the key barriers keeping potential patrons—and especially parents of young children—from attending opera. Previous conversations with audience members had revealed important insights into the obstacles preventing opera devotees from seeing traditional, mainstage performances. Generally well educated and affluent, the typical opera fan did not find the relatively high price of a ticket to be the biggest deterrent. Instead, the largest obstacle was the time involved in traveling from a suburb to downtown Boston, not to mention the length of productions, which typically last for as long as three hours.

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**“THE SINGLE BIGGEST CHALLENGE FOR THIS ENTIRE GROUP IS THAT THEY ARE BUSY WITH CHILDREN.”**

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For parents of young children, attending a mainstage performance involved a number of other concerns, as well. They needed to find someone to look after their children while they were out of the house, for example. Then there was the matter of the relatively small number of opera performances in the area. For busy parents, seeing an opera meant coordinating their personal activities with a limited performance schedule. And that required planning ahead, something younger audiences, who prefer to make entertainment choices close to the time of the event, are less likely to do now than in the past. “The single biggest challenge for this entire group is that they are busy with children,” says McMichael. “We’re not really getting those parents to mainstage because that’s not their priority right now.”

In fact, other attempts to attract parents of young children to mainstage performances failed because they didn’t fully address those concerns. For example, in 2009, BLO introduced Date Night at the Opera, a program designed to attract young

couples to mainstage productions. With taglines such as “Leave the kids at home” and “Remember getting swept away in each other’s eyes,” the campaign played upon the romantic nature of many operas and included special offers at local restaurants and deals on parking. But those enticements didn’t do the trick, and the campaign was not successful, according to McMichael.

Ultimately, BLO’s initial audience engagement strategy involved promoting the performances to parents/families who were already fans of opera or at least placed value in bringing their children to see it. As Kevin P. McCarthy and Kimberly Jinnett wrote in their groundbreaking work, *A New Framework for Building Participation in the Arts*,<sup>8</sup> “broadening” audiences, defined as increasing participation by those who already are inclined to do so, requires identifying and removing such practical barriers as constraints of time and money. Making opera easier to attend by, for example, offering it at convenient locations, would, therefore, most likely result in an increase in attendance by audience members already interested in the art form.

On the other hand, according to McCarthy and Jinnett, attracting new audiences not already inclined to participate, referred to in their model as “diversifying” audiences, involves more than eliminating practical barriers. Instead, diversifying audiences requires identifying and removing perceptual barriers. Unlike practical barriers, which are often concrete, perceptual barriers may be vague notions and general impressions that the particular art form has nothing to offer the individual, or the general belief that “this is not for me.”<sup>9</sup>

For BLO staff, an expanded family performance program

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8. Kevin P. McCarthy and Kimberly Jinnett, *A New Framework for Building Participation in the Arts* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001), <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/audience-development-for-the-arts/key-research/Documents/New-Framework-for-Building-Participation-in-the-Arts.pdf>, 32–33.

9. McCarthy and Jinnett (2001), 32.

could broaden its adult audience by addressing most of the key practical barriers preventing parents of young children from attending mainstage opera. The performances would be held at convenient times (Sunday afternoons) and locations, sometimes in the same neighborhoods where attendees lived, at a price point that could fit the budgets of many young families (\$20 for adults, \$14 for children, compared to the \$34–\$140 range for mainstage opera).

It was an expensive proposition, however. Receiving a Wallace Excellence Award in 2007 allowed BLO to get moving on a five-year plan to increase the number and locations of the performances. The primary expense involved artist fees, but BLO also wanted to use the money to refurbish costumes, props, and set pieces, which, after 30 years of use, needed major repairs or complete overhauls.

In addition, to promote the family performances, the organization planned to expand its preview program. Originally developed to be used in conjunction with the OYA school performances, the previews are a lecture-recital blend lasting approximately 45 minutes. They are designed to supplement lessons about music, opera, and the upcoming school performances, and are often held on the campuses of schools participating in the OYA program. BLO would tweak the preview program to appeal to family audiences and hold it in local libraries and other community venues near the site of upcoming family performance shows.

## 2. FINDING THE BEST VENUES

**T**he decision to present fully staged operatic productions may have made sense for a variety of reasons. But it had significant, unanticipated implications for the type of venue that was



suitable for the expansion. The search for acceptable locations, in fact, proved to be a major hurdle and one that ultimately would hurt BLO's ability to reach as many families as it had originally hoped to attract.

**Complex requirements.** Initially, according to McMichael, the plan was to conduct a systematic search of Boston area neighborhoods, and expand the family performances into neighborhoods with a significant "density of audience." That meant finding areas where there would be sufficient demand to fill the venues and choosing locations far enough away from one another to maximize the geographical areas covered. BLO staff had at its disposal a database of zip codes from its ticketing system that could help in pinpointing neighborhoods in the Greater Boston area where a demand for opera already existed.

Almost immediately, it became clear the requirements needed to stage a full-scale production narrowed the pool of potential venue choices. First, BLO required an adequate space to put the orchestra. Also, the stage needed to be large enough to house the set and have extra space in the wings for singers to enter and exit. Plus, venues required sufficient lighting capabilities. And the acoustics of the hall needed to be appropriate for an opera performance. Once a suitable space was located, then rent and usage fees had to fall within the OYA budget. Finally, the hall needed to fit enough people to generate revenues able to cover a "reasonable amount" of the costs—or at least, keep losses to a minimum, according to McMichael.

Scheduling posed another problem. As part of the OYA program, the family and school performances used the same singers, production teams, and crew. The overlap in personnel between the family and school performances helped BLO manage costs and stay within its budget. But the schedules for the two types of performances also needed to be coordinated. Because school

performances had to take place around holiday and statewide testing schedules, February and March were the only time when the two sets of performances could overlap. Therefore, the family performances needed to be scheduled on a Sunday in late February or early March, and that further restricted the pool of potential venues. It was, according to McMichael, "like navigating a minefield."

**Finding venues in areas with opera fans.** For the first two years of the expansion, BLO planned to produce family performances in only two locations. And it had a relatively easy time finding venues in downtown Boston and affluent suburban neighborhoods. The most obvious choice (and first venue selected) was John Hancock Hall in Boston, where the original fund-raising event had taken place from its inception to 2006. It was a familiar location to many arts patrons in the area and easy to reach via mass transit or car, with plenty of parking garages and restaurants nearby.

The first new venue was Regis College in the affluent suburb of Weston, about fifteen miles west of downtown Boston. It was an area that BLO's ticket database revealed to have a relatively high concentration of opera attendees. Plus, the college was easily accessible by car, with a lot of available parking. During the second year, the venue wasn't available in February or March because of scheduling conflicts, but the BLO staff was able to find replacements in Waltham and Marblehead, two other upscale towns with large numbers of operagoers. During the third and fourth years of the program, the performances went back to Weston. Also in the fourth year, BLO moved from John Hancock Hall to the Wheelock Family Theatre in downtown Boston, a move that would prove to be the start of a genuine partnership between two organizations with similar missions. (See sidebar.)

## A NEW PARTNER IN DOWNTOWN BOSTON

In the fourth year of the program, BLO decided to find a less expensive substitute for John Hancock Hall in downtown Boston. The choice was Wheelock Family Theatre, a move that proved to be more than just a cost-saving shift in location, but also the beginning of a genuine partnership. Part of Wheelock College, the 30-year-old Wheelock Family Theatre traditionally has presented three productions each year targeting family audiences. That long-established relationship with families interested in attending theater made Wheelock an ideal partner for BLO. The opera company not only advertised regularly in Wheelock programs to publicize the family performances, but Wheelock promoted BLO to its list of members. As a result, BLO's family performances at Wheelock have had near-capacity crowds.

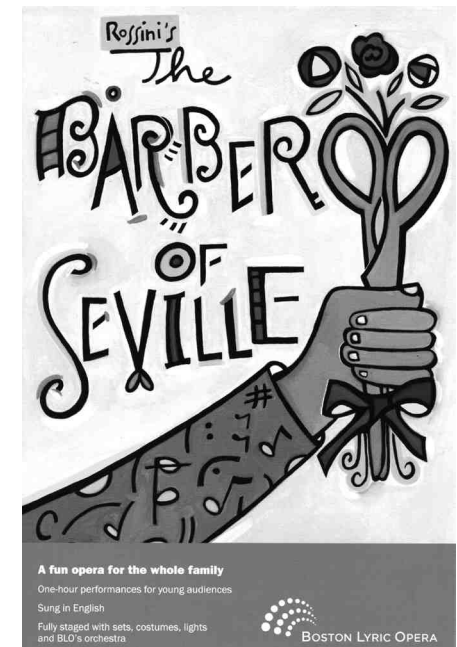
**New adult audiences.** By the third year of the program, BLO was scheduled to expand to two additional locations. This expansion enabled BLO to move forward with a plan to return the OYA program to the Strand Theatre, located in the Upham's Corner section of Dorchester, an ethnically diverse neighborhood about four miles south of downtown with low- to middle-income families. Originally a vaudeville and movie palace, the Strand had recently completed a \$6 million, multi-year renovation funded by the city of Boston. In 2006, before the completion of the renovations, BLO's OYA school program had used the theater for what would have been a near-capacity audience of children if electrical problems hadn't forced the cancellation of the perfor-

mances moments before curtain time.

The other venue BLO chose was Melrose Veterans Memorial Middle School, with a recently constructed, 900-seat auditorium, in Melrose, a primarily white, working-class neighborhood about 10 miles north of downtown Boston. Both venues had all the necessary physical qualities required to present the family performances, but they were located in neighborhoods lacking a significant pool of opera devotees. The strong response BLO received when it used the Strand for its school performances encouraged it to bring the family performances to that venue. BLO would learn, however, that promoting opera directly to the adult residents of Upham's Corner, most of whom were not operagoers, was significantly more challenging than marketing through the school system.

### 3. PROMOTION: MARKETING OPERA TO FAMILIAR—AND UNFAMILIAR—AUDIENCES

Promotion for the family performances primarily took the form of direct mail. See Figure 2 for an example of a piece of direct mailing. BLO staff gathered addresses from its database, as well as from shared community lists like the Arts Boston Big List, a collaborative mail-



**Figure 2. Example of a Promotional Postcard for an OYA Production**

ing list created by more than 40 arts organizations in the Greater Boston area. Previews, which will be discussed in a later section, were also an important promotional tool.

In addition, BLO featured the family performances prominently on its website, using it as both a promotional and educational vehicle. (See sidebar on the next page about BLO's website). And, almost immediately, McMichael launched a word-of-mouth campaign targeting parents who had attended a family performance and were interested in opera and in supporting the program. McMichael understood that people often make entertainment and leisure-time activity choices based on recommendations from friends and peers. In fact, surveys conducted by BLO among adult attendees of the family performances indicated that 60% of parents regularly consider "word of mouth from a friend" when planning cultural activities for their children. In addition, McMichael realized that parents tend to be connected through a variety of social and activity-based networks.

With those insights in mind, according to McMichael, she decided BLO could capitalize on the enthusiasm of attendees to help "spread the word through the social networks that naturally exist among parents." To this end, she provided interested parents with a "word-of-mouth kit" that included an introductory letter, posters, promotional postcards, and a URL address for a website containing additional information about the family performances that could easily be forwarded to friends and family.

But moving the family performances to Melrose and Upham's Corner, neighborhoods lacking a critical mass of people already inclined to attend opera, required a different audience-engagement strategy. It meant introducing the art form and BLO to a completely new audience for opera, something that was unnecessary when promoting the family performances in down-

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**BLO'S WEBSITE:  
AN EDUCATIONAL, PROMOTIONAL,  
AND SALES TOOL**

**B**LO prominently featured the OYA family performances on its website, with a description of the current season, lists of past performances, and a host of promotional materials. But, in addition, the site included information for parents. For example, BLO adapted the existing curriculum guide for the school productions, packaging the most relevant material into small articles. These pieces, which included a story synopsis, background about the work and the composer, and basic information describing what to expect when attending an opera, could be downloaded easily from the website.

The content clearly appealed to audiences. Post-performance surveys revealed that approximately 67% of the audience visited BLO's website before attending. Of those people, 88% had read the plot synopsis of the opera and 49% had looked at the additional articles about the work that were posted there. In addition, the site served another important purpose. Approximately 82% of those who visited it purchased tickets online for the family performances, representing roughly 55% of all sales. Audience feedback indicated they preferred buying tickets online at their own convenience, rather than having to call BLO directly during office hours.

town Boston and affluent Weston.

BLO marketing and education staff pinpointed a number of local organizations and sought their help promoting the performances, particularly in the Upham's Corner neighborhood. "We knew we couldn't just rent the Strand, load in all our stuff, and say, 'Here we are, we are doing an opera,' and expect that to mean anything," says Education and Community Programs Manager Julie House. "So we looked for partner organizations that resonated with the neighborhood and could endorse us and our program." BLO presented tickets to charter schools in the area, as well as to the Boston Centers for Youth and Families, an organization operating community centers all over Boston. They also established relationships with two local newspapers, which gave the production prominent coverage, emphasizing BLO's intentions to perform at the Strand for three years. "We tried to make it clear this was not a drive-by experience," says House.

The primary source of promotion, however, continued to be direct mailing, using shared arts community lists to obtain addresses of local residents who were identified as arts patrons. Initially, McMichael advertised full-price tickets, although she suspected the amount would be too steep for many potential audience members. "We didn't want it to look like we were assuming that people would need half-price tickets," says House. But, after receiving feedback from community partners that prices were indeed too high, BLO started offering discounts. Still, McMichael understood that no reduction would be effective in attracting an audience without any particular existing interest in opera.

In 2010, BLO launched a version of its word-of-mouth campaign, but this time working through the Upham's Corner Main Street group. Many Boston neighborhoods have similar

organizations comprised of business owners who work together to help boost the community. BLO supplied the group's promotions committee with information about their performance, along with posters and postcards, materials that were similar to those used by volunteers in Weston. Promotions committee members canvassed their neighborhood, distributing the posters and postcards, as well as offers of discounted tickets, and making sure other businesses in the neighborhood knew about the upcoming performance. Efforts to start a separate word-of-mouth campaign among parents, however, were not successful.

## FAMILY PERFORMANCES: RESULTS

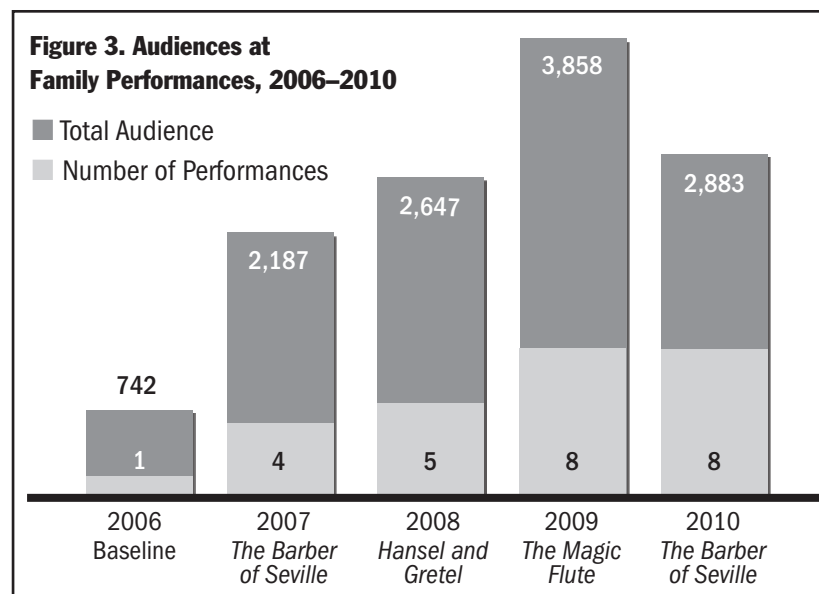
BLO's efforts to expand the family performances were successful in many respects—but, ultimately, the results were mixed. Specific findings include:

### 1. EXPANDING THE NUMBER OF PERFORMANCES INCREASED AUDIENCE SIZE

**B**y 2010, BLO's family performance series had grown from a single performance at a downtown location to include four venues in four neighborhoods in the Greater Boston area. The operas were presented twice at each venue, one early Sunday afternoon and the second in mid-afternoon later that day, for a total of eight performances.

Of course, increasing the number of performances allowed BLO to reach a larger audience. As shown in Figure 3, about 740 people saw *The Daughter of the Regiment* as part of BLO's annual fund-raiser in 2006. Three years later, more than 3,850 people attended the family performances of *The Magic Flute*, featuring refurbished sets, costumes, and props.

Despite the increases in overall audience size, however, BLO noticed at a certain point that the audience was not growing in proportion to the number of performances. For example, in 2010, BLO produced eight performances of *The Barber of Seville*, compared with four in 2007. However, the total audience



Source: Boston Lyric Opera

increased by only 32%—nowhere near the increase that one might have expected when doubling the number of shows.

When analyzing these numbers, BLO considered a variety of factors likely to affect audience size. One was the popularity of the opera. Obviously, the more well liked a piece, the greater the possibility it would attract a bigger audience. For example, according to McMichael, *The Magic Flute* has tended to be the most popular of the OYA repertoire and *The Barber of Seville* the least popular, a trend that the data seems to confirm. In fact, a conscious decision was made not to include lesser-known works, because they would be harder to market. BLO had received a fourth production from ONE, *The Daughter of the Regiment*, and not only retired it from the school program, but never included it in the family performances repertoire. According to BLO, chil-

dren enjoyed the production as much as the others, but its relative obscurity made the show more difficult to promote to adults.

Other factors with an impact on audience attendance included the seating capacities of the various venues, changes in overall economic conditions, and even the weather. One performance of *The Magic Flute* in 2009 was held during a snowstorm, while a production of *The Barber of Seville* in 2010 took place during record-breaking rain. There also was the matter of repeat performances of *The Barber of Seville*. This opera was shown in downtown Boston at Hancock Hall and in Weston in 2007 and then again in downtown Boston at Wheelock Family Theatre and in Weston in 2010. Informal feedback from the Weston audiences suggested that some people were less inclined to attend *The Barber of Seville* in 2010 after having seen it in 2007. And, in fact, the 2010 audience at Weston was 25% smaller than the 2007 audience. At the same time, the audiences in downtown Boston held steady, thanks largely to the new partnership with Wheelock Family Theatre.

## 2. FAMILY PERFORMANCES REACHED OPERA FANS AND THEIR CHILDREN

**B**LO had success drawing in existing opera attendees and their children; its record attracting new audiences was more problematic.

To measure audience demographics, reactions to the productions, and reasons for attending, BLO conducted surveys after each family performance. The day after the show, an e-mail invitation to complete an online survey was sent to ticket buyers who provided an e-mail address; the message included a link to the survey page. Results, together with the overall pattern of

**Table 2. Percentage of Children Experiencing Opera for the First Time at Family Performances**

2007 <i>The Barber of Seville</i>	2008 <i>Hansel and Gretel</i>	2009 <i>The Magic Flute</i>	2010 <i>The Barber of Seville</i>
73%	65%	69%	52%

Source: Boston Lyric Opera

audience attendance, led to a clear conclusion: the family performance program appealed primarily to adults who had attended opera already. Approximately 88% of adult attendees at the family performances were already operagoers.

In fact, survey results suggest the audience profile for the family performances largely mirrors the makeup of mainstage production attendees, and what numerous studies have shown to be the predominant audience for opera—high-income whites. Over 90% of family performance audience members identified themselves as white and 70% of them reported household incomes of more than \$100,000, similar to BLO mainstage productions. The one notable difference was age; adult attendees at family performances were slightly younger than mainstage audiences.

The program also served as an introduction to opera for most of the children in attendance, in support of what has been BLO’s primary goal: introducing children to the art form. During the first year of performances, nearly three-quarters of the children were new to opera. By the conclusion of the fourth year, the percentage of children who had never seen an opera dropped to 52%, as shown in Table 2. The decrease in first-time operagoers among the children suggests that some of the families may have

**Table 3. Family Performance Audience Sizes by Venue  
(% Capacity in Parentheses)**

	<b>2007 <i>The Barber of Seville</i></b>	<b>2008 <i>Hansel and Gretel</i></b>	<b>2009 <i>The Magic Flute</i></b>	<b>2010 <i>The Barber of Seville</i></b>
<b>“Strong” Opera Markets</b>				
Downtown Boston: John Hancock Hall	1,129 (52%)	1,165 (53%)	1,716 (79%)	
Downtown Boston: Wheelock Family Theatre				1,143 (88%)
Regis College, Weston	1,058 (85%)		1,144 (92%)	791 (63%)
Brandeis University, Waltham		1,131 (76%)		
Marblehead Veterans Middle School		351 (51%)		
<b>“Weak” Opera Markets</b>				
Melrose Veterans Memorial Middle School			729 (40%)	730 (40%)
Strand Theatre, Upham’s Corner			269 (19%)	219 (16%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,187</b>	<b>2,647</b>	<b>3,858</b>	<b>2,883</b>

Source: Boston Lyric Opera

returned year to year, and that the family performances started to build a repeat audience.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. VENUE LOCATION: A KEY CONTRIBUTOR TO AUDIENCE SIZE

**B**y far the most important ingredient affecting audience size was the physical location of the performance. Quite simply, venues in areas known to be strong opera markets—downtown Boston and upscale suburbs—consistently outperformed the locations in Melrose and Upham’s Corner. For a detailed breakdown of audience sizes by venue, see Table 3. Venues in strong

10. This is an assertion based on the pattern of the data. BLO did not track the percentage of families/children who returned year to year.

opera markets were filled, on average, to 73% capacity, including Regis College in Weston, with an average 80% capacity. On the other hand, Melrose Veterans Memorial Middle School was filled to 40% capacity, and the Strand Theatre in Upham’s Corner averaged 17% capacity.

Those stronger opera markets also tend to be areas with a greater percentage of affluent whites, as outlined in Table 4. In Weston, for example, 67% of households report incomes in excess of \$100,000, according to the New England Foundation for the Arts/CultureCount, and 90% of residents are white. On the other hand, while 95% of Melrose households are white, just 23% make over \$100,000. As for Upham’s Corner, although it’s the most densely populated of the three areas, the neighborhood

**Table 4. Summary of Neighborhood Characteristics of New Family Performance Locations**

	Regis College	Melrose Veterans Memorial Middle School	Strand Theatre
Neighborhood	Weston	Melrose	Upham’s Corner
Population	11,469	27,134	33,618
Area in Square Miles	17.3	4.7	3.1
Racial Composition			
White	90%	95%	35%
African American or Black	1%	1%	31%
American Indian	0%	0%	1%
Asian	7%	2%	11%
Other	0%	0%	15%
Household Income \$100K+	67%	23%	7%

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<http://www.culturecount.org>



also is the most ethnically mixed and the least affluent, with a high proportion of recent immigrants. Just 35% of residents are white and 7% of households make more than \$100,000.

#### **4. LITTLE CROSSOVER: FEW ADULT ATTENDEES BECAME MAINSTAGE PATRONS**

**W**hile it wasn't a primary goal, BLO hoped adult attendees at the family performances might go on to see mainstage productions. That didn't happen. By analyzing BLO's ticketing system, McMichael estimates that approximately 3% of adults at the family performances also purchased a ticket for a mainstage production. In retrospect, it's not a surprising result. Removing important practical barriers allowed parents to attend family performances with their children. But those obstacles still existed at mainstage productions, preventing parents from going to those performances. Still, if the presence of practical barriers keeps parents from seeing mainstage opera now, it's possible those people will increase their attendance once their children are older.

## **RESULTS DRIVERS OF THE FAMILY PERFORMANCES: ANALYZING WHAT WORKED AND WHAT DIDN'T**

BLO's family performances succeeded in some respects, but were less successful in others. Key factors influencing results included:

### **1. ADDRESSING BARRIERS**

**T**he family performances appear to have addressed effectively many of the practical barriers facing families who want to attend opera. The increased choice of dates, convenient times, and affordable price points all contributed to audience gains in neighborhoods where an interest in opera already existed. Staging performances in easily accessible, familiar locations appeared to be particularly important, as audiences predisposed to liking opera clearly preferred attending well-known venues in downtown Boston or theaters in their own neighborhoods. Relatively few people ventured out of their own neighborhood to attend in Melrose or Upham's Corner compared to downtown Boston and Weston.

Of course, while the family performance program was designed to appeal to children and diversify young audiences, it was not specifically designed to diversify adult audiences or address perceptual barriers among adults. That need emerged

only after BLO moved into venues in areas with a limited number of adult opera fans. The task of diversifying audiences is difficult and time-consuming, requiring an in-depth understanding of the relevant perceptual barriers—such as whether potential attendees would feel out of place or enjoy the music—as well as developing marketing messages that address those issues. In addition, addressing perceptual barriers is made easier by identifying and forming relationships with trusted community partners. But, resources simply had not been allocated for reaching out to new audiences. What’s more, in 2010, BLO added a fourth mainstage production—it had traditionally presented three per year—that was part of a new effort to produce less-well-known operas. The new production placed additional demands on the marketing staff and may have curtailed the ability to expand promotional efforts aimed at the family performances. “I don’t know that our organization has even close to the resources needed to

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**THE FAMILY PERFORMANCE PROGRAM WAS NOT DESIGNED TO ADDRESS PERCEPTUAL BARRIERS AMONG ADULTS. THAT NEED EMERGED ONLY AFTER BLO MOVED INTO AREAS WITH A LIMITED NUMBER OF ADULT OPERA FANS.**

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build demand with kids for whom the parents have no prior interest in opera,” says McMichael. BLO’s task of diversifying its audience was made even more difficult by a lack of research into the specific perceptions of opera and BLO held by community members in Melrose and Upham’s Corner. Without that information, the staff was forced to create marketing strategies blindly, without necessary guidance. Research also could have helped guide BLO in its search for trusted community partners able to promote the

performances more effectively. Quite simply, McMichael and the rest of the organization didn’t fully understand whether the local business associations and newspapers they approached really were influential in their neighborhoods. With further research, they might have identified different and more effective partners—local churches, say, or civic groups.

## **2. OFFERING A HIGH LEVEL OF QUALITY, LINKED TO THE BLO BRAND**

**F**or BLO, the OYA productions, including both the school and family performances, have never been second-class citizens. They’ve been regarded as an important part of the BLO brand. That’s one reason why the website gives equal billing in multiple places to the family performances. It’s also, in part, why the productions reflect the high quality standards established for mainstage shows.

In fact, BLO realized that the family performances, if presented with a sufficient level of professionalism, could accomplish an additional goal: strengthening BLO’s brand and helping to create an audience devoted not just to specific works, but to the opera company itself. “We want to enhance BLO’s reputation as an artistically vibrant organization,” says General & Artistic Director Esther Nelson, who started with BLO in 2008.

Ensuring productions had the same quality standards as mainstage performances was important for another reason, as well: BLO wanted children to be enthralled by the shows and for their parents, particularly those familiar with opera, also to enjoy the experience. (See the sidebar for more information on BLO’s efforts to create high-quality productions.)

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**FOCUSING ON FUN AND QUALITY:  
PRESENTING ENJOYABLE, PROFESSIONAL PERFORMANCES  
FOR CHILDREN AND THEIR PARENTS**

**T**o appeal to parents and children in the target audience, BLO understood productions had to be enjoyable for the entire family. That meant creating a fun experience for children—productions specifically designed so that even six-year-olds could understand and follow the story, while appreciating the emotions and music. In an age of innumerable entertainment options, when children are constantly exposed to a variety of media, says Nelson, “the quality of the opera has to capture the kids. If they don’t like it, they are never coming back.”

But beyond that, performances needed to be “captivating,” providing at least moments when children would feel they were seeing something they’d never witnessed before. To that end, according to Tim Steele, music director and conductor for the OYA performances, BLO determined that, while productions would retain many of the best-known arias and include some broad, physical comedy, they wouldn’t rush from one show-stopping aria or amusing pratfall to the next. “We allow ourselves some challenging moments, when the

music and story warrant it,” he says. “We want to stretch the ears and patience of the kids, and a lot of times that’s when they are drawn into something in a way they have never been drawn in before.”

At the same time, BLO staff also wanted parents to enjoy the opera. For that reason, performances had to have a high level of artistry, with not only professional singers and musicians, but also a full orchestra and well-appointed sets. Such an approach was particularly important for reaching adults already familiar with opera. In addition, if the performances ultimately were to attract audience members to attend mainstage productions, they had to reflect positively on the BLO brand, providing a tantalizing taste of what full-scale productions could offer.

As Table 5 indicates, the vast majority of adults (on average 89%) rated the singing, acting, orchestra, and overall production as “excellent” or “very good.” More important, however, BLO achieved its goal of providing an experience that children would find “captivating.” During the four years of post-performance surveys, 57% to 76% of adults indicated their children were “completely captivated” by the family performances, as shown by Table 6.

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**3. RESHAPING OPERAS TO APPEAL TO CHILDREN**

**I**n fact, BLO paid a significant amount of attention to shaping productions to be not just shortened versions of adult operas, but tailored to the way children watch and understand the performing arts. House, who has an MA in theater education, has used her background, as well as feedback from both family and

school audiences, to help ensure the stage direction and actions are appropriate for children’s social and emotional development levels. She explains: “Children do not follow offstage action. They are linear thinkers, so flashbacks do not work well. And love duets, while beautiful, do not have the same meaning for children as for adults, especially if they are three minutes long. The tempo of different scenes also has to balance keeping the

**Table 5. Audience Evaluations of Singing, Acting, Orchestra, and Production in Family Performances (% rating “Excellent” or “Very Good”)**

	<b>2007 <i>The Barber of Seville</i></b>	<b>2008 <i>Hansel and Gretel</i></b>	<b>2009 <i>The Magic Flute</i></b>	<b>2010 <i>The Barber of Seville</i></b>
Singing	85%	91%	87%	97%
Acting	89%	90%	91%	88%
Orchestra	87%	86%	95%	95%
Production	80%	83%	93%	88%

Source: Boston Lyric Opera

**Table 6. Percentage of Children “Captivated” by Family Performances**

	<b>2007 <i>The Barber of Seville</i></b>	<b>2008 <i>Hansel and Gretel</i></b>	<b>2009 <i>The Magic Flute</i></b>	<b>2010 <i>The Barber of Seville</i></b>
<i>Percentage rating “4” or “5” on five-point scale in response to question “To what degree were your children captivated by this performance?”</i>	57%	72%	76%	68%

Source: Boston Lyric Opera

energy, getting the emotions across, and being understood by young ears not used to sung words. If the children get distracted, there is usually a reason for it, and it's probably something that we've missed."

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**"IF THE CHILDREN GET DISTRACTED,  
THERE IS USUALLY A REASON FOR  
IT, AND IT'S PROBABLY SOMETHING  
THAT WE'VE MISSED."**

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Based on feedback from post-performance surveys and informal reviews written by children, BLO's creative team also engaged in a process of continual improvement. Some of the changes were relatively small, such as rejecting a prop that didn't make sense to the children, or changes to stage directions. At one point in *The Magic Flute*, for example, Papageno and Papagena kiss. Feedback revealed it made most of the children uncomfortable. Because the characters wore costumes that made them look like birds, the kiss was changed to a nuzzle of beaks. The gesture effectively conveyed the characters' mutual affection while keeping the children's attention focused on the main dramatic points. Figure 4 and Colorplate 3 show scenes from *The Magic Flute* and *The Barber of Seville*.

Other adjustments were more significant. During the first years of the performance, survey feedback showed that the single biggest complaint among audience members was the number of distractions from late arrivals and fidgeting children. In response to these complaints, BLO introduced a pre-curtain speech from one of the performers aimed at giving the audience time to settle, reminding children to yell "bravo" at the appropriate time, and focusing attention on the stage. Practicing "bravo" calls had another benefit, as well: It was a great way for the young audience to release any pent-up energy. At the completion of the second year of performances, there were literally no complaints about distractions from other audience members.



**Figure 4. Scenes from BLO's OYA Productions of *The Magic Flute* (above) and *The Barber of Seville* (below)**

Photo above by Greg Del Sesto for Boston Lyric Opera © 2009

Photo below by Roger Farrington for Boston Lyric Opera © 2010



Survey feedback also indicated that audience members had trouble understanding the words, even though they were sung in English. For that reason, BLO hired a diction coach and experimented with surtitles on plasma screens placed at the sides of the stage; when the surtitles received negative reviews, the staff enlarged the font. After research revealed they still were too distracting—and not helpful for children who couldn’t read—the surtitles were removed. The diction coach, however, has remained a part of the rehearsal process. Other changes influenced by audience feedback included establishing the post-curtain “meet and greet” with members of the cast, creating simpler plot synopses and cast biographies in the programs distributed at each family performance, changing the programs to look more like the playbill distributed at mainstage performances, and including additional “fun facts” about the performances. One such fact was the director’s explanation of the modern costumes used during the 2010 production of *The Barber of Seville*, a change made in the hope that children would relate more easily to the new clothing than to traditional opera attire, as Figure 4 and Colorplate 3 show.

## **PREVIEW PROGRAM: EVOLUTION AND KEY STEPS**

**A** portion of BLO’s Wallace Excellence Award was allocated toward the expansion of its preview program. Originally created as lecture-recital hybrids, they initially were designed for schools and meant to take place a few weeks before students attended a performance. The programs introduced children to basic opera concepts and techniques and piqued their curiosity for the upcoming show. To build excitement for the family performances, BLO expanded the program, holding free previews in public libraries located in the same neighborhoods as the production, with a few exceptions: in 2009, one took place at the Boston Children’s Museum and in each of 2009 and 2010, a preview was held at the studios of local public broadcaster WGBH.

Aimed at providing a taste of the upcoming performance, previews are forty-five-minute programs that are considerably less ambitious than the OYA family or school performances; there are no sets, for example, and only one singer and a pianist. Figure 5 and Colorplate 4 show a picture of a preview. In the first part of the program, the singer invites the children in the audience to imitate such vocalizations as sirens and trills, and then to attempt singing in “operatic voices.” The children also are asked to reproduce a variety of rhythmic patterns. These basic listening and repeating tasks serve to focus the children’s attention and get them excited about the idea of making music.



**Figure 5. A Preview for BLO's OYA Family Performances**

Photo by Julie House for Boston Lyric Opera © 2010

Next, the singer introduces the concept of opera, exploring what the audience already knows about the art form, and helps the children understand how music can add emotion to a story, asking them to name a feeling. (Common responses include “happy,” “sad,” and “silly.”) Then, the pianist plays a piece conveying that emotion, while the singer pantomimes actions further expressing the feeling. “These simple exercises are great illustrations of the essence of opera—adding music and emotion on top of actions and words,” says McMichael.

In the last portion of the program, the children learn about what to expect when attending an opera—for example, how to

show appreciation of the singers by shouting “bravo.” Then the singer tells the basic story of the upcoming family performance and sings portions of arias that help to illustrate key plot points and various emotions felt by the characters. To help children keep track of which character is being portrayed, the singer uses simple props or hand gestures. A male performer singing the part of a female role, for example, might make a simple movement suggesting he has long hair, which often can engage children in laughter even as they follow the story.

Finally, a BLO staffer talks about the upcoming family performance—avoiding turning the preview into a “hard sell,” according to House—and distributes short questionnaires asking for feedback about the preview, collecting them before participants leave. To encourage people to complete the survey, a pair of tickets to the family performance is given to one respondent in a random drawing.

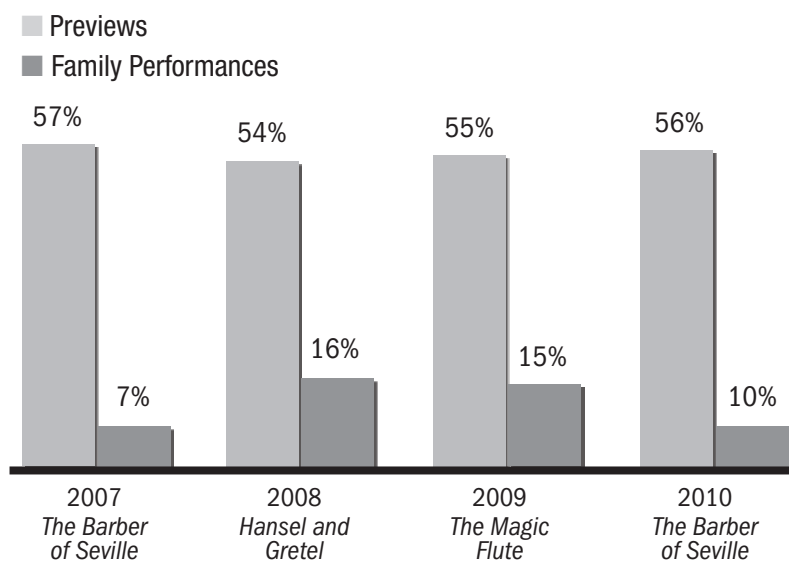
## PREVIEW PROGRAM: RESULTS

Over the first four years of the OYA expansion, BLO has produced between four and nine family performance previews annually, for a total of twenty-three family performance previews (in addition to more than sixty school performance previews). The family performance previews have been well attended and well received. Average audience size has been twenty to eighty participants—near capacity at most libraries. At the Children’s Museum and WGBH studios, audiences were considerably larger, about 200 at each preview.

Perhaps more notable than the near-capacity crowds is the fact that the previews also attracted significantly more people experiencing opera for the first time than the family performances. For example, the adults at the previews were much more likely to be first-time operagoers compared to their counterparts at the family performances. On average, 56% of the adults at the previews had never attended a fully staged opera before, compared to only 12% at the family performances, as shown in Figure 6. What’s more, the number of opera neophytes remained at around the same level each year.

Not only were a significant number of attendees new to opera, but survey results revealed the majority of adult participants enjoyed the program as well. On average, 59% indicated

**Figure 6. Percentage of Adults Attending Live Opera for the First Time**



Source: Boston Lyric Opera

they found the program “extremely enjoyable.” The clear implication: BLO’s preview program, originally designed to introduce opera to schoolchildren, also has served as an effective way to introduce adults to opera.

Unfortunately, because the previews were not designed to sell tickets, BLO has not tracked the crossover audience to the family performances. As a result, how effective the program has been at selling tickets for the shows remains unclear. Nonetheless, approximately 19% of the surveyed adults said they had either already purchased tickets or would “definitely” purchase tickets to the upcoming family performance. While this number in isolation is not particularly meaningful, it could be used as a benchmark when evaluating the marketing effectiveness of future preview programs.



## RESULTS DRIVERS OF THE PREVIEW PROGRAM

Although they lacked the spectacle of the family performances and had a more limited objective, previews were successful in attracting new audiences, and likely so for a variety of reasons.

### 1. PUBLIC LIBRARIES ARE EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY PARTNERS

**F**or one thing, the libraries at which the previews took place provided a successful, low-cost partnership. For the libraries, BLO's programs were high-quality events offered at no cost. According to McMichael, many libraries are looking for high-quality programming to present to their constituents. And the need for low-cost programming has increased dramatically with recent budget cuts happening just about everywhere in the U.S. For BLO, the libraries offered an appropriate, free space. In fact, since they usually had a piano, producing the preview was "just a matter of showing up," says McMichael. What's more, scheduling was easy, typically involving a call to the library's coordinator of public programs. The only complication: because many libraries have had their weekend hours cut back or eliminated, it's become harder to find available dates.

Perhaps most important, libraries generally do a good job of promoting their programs to their local constituents. By leveraging existing relationships with community members, they're

routinely able to fill lecture halls with interested participants. What's more, "attendees are lovers of lifelong learning, and they bring their kids to try new things," says House.

### 2. PREVIEWS ADDRESS PRACTICAL AND PERCEPTUAL BARRIERS

**S**urvey responses indicated that adult audience members at the previews cited many of the same practical barriers facing attendees at family performances—a lack of time, scheduling problems, the difficulties of leaving children at home, affordability of tickets, and an unwillingness to travel to inconvenient venues. The previews held at public libraries eliminated many of these barriers. They were offered for free and lasted just forty-five minutes. What's more, attendees were familiar with the library, generally located nearby, in their neighborhoods.

But the previews accomplished something the family performances did not: they also addressed perceptual barriers. Asked why they had not attended opera in the past, those attendees who had never seen an opera before pointed to such perceptual barriers as concern they would find it boring or "not fun," while others said they "did not know enough" about opera to attend. Yet the previews were able to overcome these perceptions, while the family performances were not, suggesting that some neophytes were more comfortable trying out opera in a library. The implication appears to be that libraries offer a familiar and non-intimidating setting, one that doesn't arouse concerns about such issues as how to act, what to wear, and whether attendees will feel out

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**"THE TRADE-OFF FOR ALL THE BEAUTIFUL SETS AND COSTUMES IS THE INTIMACY AND ABILITY TO ASK QUESTIONS. IT BRINGS OPERA OFF OF THE PEDESTAL."**

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of place. “The library is very good at saying, ‘This is a space for you. You’re the community and this space belongs to you.’ Less so with the Shubert Theatre, for example,” says House.

### 3. PREVIEWS CONVEY THE ESSENCE OF OPERA IN A COMFORT-ABLE FORMAT

**W**hile the preview lacks the grand spectacle of traditional opera, it does contain many of its key elements—story-telling, music, singing, and the depiction of deep emotions. And it provides a more accessible experience. “The trade-off for all the beautiful sets and costumes is the intimacy and ability to ask questions,” says House. “It brings opera off of the pedestal,” yet continues to provide an enjoyable experience, according to the post-preview surveys.

## THE OUTLOOK FOR SUSTAINABILITY

### 1. FAMILY PERFORMANCES

**D**espite the expense of producing fully staged, high-quality performances and mixed success in audience expansion, the family performances have a strong earned income ratio.

**Costs.** Because the expenses of the family and school performances are so closely linked, sharing cast, crew, costumes, and sets, BLO combines the two in its accounting under the OYA umbrella. In FY10, total direct costs for the OYA program were \$188,000, with approximately \$146,000 in production costs, \$26,000 for marketing costs, and \$16,000 for educational costs. These figures do not include start-up expenses, since BLO already owns these productions, or any BLO staff salaries associated with running the shows. BLO has kept per-performance expenses low by introducing an aggressive production schedule over a short period of time. For example, in 2010, BLO presented twenty school performances and eight family performances. Estimates of the typical per-performance cost for the school program were about \$5,400; those expenses were \$8,700 for the family performances.

To achieve these relatively low per-production costs, BLO built a number of efficiencies into the program. For example,

the school and family performances employ the same cast and crew, thereby requiring only one rehearsal period. Also, singers receive weekly salaries, allowing BLO to spend less than it would booking each performance individually. In addition, some of the school and family performances share the same venue, reducing transportation costs.

The majority of expenses generally have been in artists' fees. Year-to-year maintenance costs on sets and costumes tend to be only \$5,800. However, BLO did use a portion of its Wallace grant to refurbish the *Hansel and Gretel* production, at a cost of \$17,500. There were other one-time expenses, as well, such as the introduction of surtitles, but they were considerably smaller.

**Revenues.** The OYA program, including both school and family performances, has an earned income ratio that is higher than mainstage performances. Although there is a fair amount of variability, BLO generally finds that ticket sales account for about 50% of the typical mainstage production's direct costs, and only about 30% of BLO's total budget (approximately \$7 million in FY10–11). But ticket sales cover considerably more—about 67%—of the school programs' direct costs and 71% of the family performances' direct costs.

While these percentages do not include indirect costs, which primarily consist of BLO staff compensation, they are promising. Most important, stronger ticket sales in downtown Boston and Weston appear to have helped mitigate weaker results in Melrose and Upham's Corner. A decision made close to the completion of the writing of this report reflects exactly that change. The spring 2011 OYA family performances of *Hansel and Gretel* are limited to Weston and Wheelock Family Theatre, although the 2011 OYA school performance will include the Strand Theatre in Upham's Corner.

## 2. PREVIEWS

**Costs.** Direct costs are minimal—only \$200 in artist fees for each preview, in addition to travel expenses which, depending on the location of the preview, can top performers' compensation. The library space is free. The upshot: Depending on the size of the audience, the per-person cost has ranged from \$1 to \$10. There also were minor expenses (\$2,000) related to redeveloping the school script to be appropriate in the new community settings. Despite cutting back on the number of family performances, BLO has scheduled nine previews for 2011, the same number as in previous years.

**Revenues.** Since the programs don't generate revenues, they're useful only as marketing and educational vehicles. And because there's only anecdotal evidence they drive audiences to the family performance or mainstage productions, research is needed to understand more fully their effectiveness as an audience development tool. Still, the indications thus far are that they introduce new attendees to opera, a highly encouraging development for an art form struggling to do so. As important, if they do, indeed, drive audiences to performances, they could hold a key to long-term sustainability.

## IN CONCLUSION

**B**LO's family performance series succeeded on many fronts, especially in introducing children to high-quality opera and reducing the practical barriers keeping fans of the art form who are parents from attending a production. But the small number of opera fans in general, along with difficulty finding appropriate venues, led to an unanticipated need to reach out to new adult audiences. And, in that, BLO was considerably less successful.

BLO's understanding of current opera fans' needs was based on years of observations and conversations with their audiences. But, perhaps more important, this knowledge was bolstered by BLO's post-show surveys done after each family performance. Using readily available online tools, the surveys were an inexpensive and easy way to "check in" with their family performance audiences. And they not only gathered demographic information, but also measured motivations for attending and evaluations of the performances, and even served to recruit members into the word-of-mouth campaign—thus benefiting the marketing, education, and programming departments.

On the other hand, BLO's lack of knowledge about the new communities it targeted made the task of bringing opera to these areas even more difficult. Introducing opera to different adult audiences was not part of the original plan, of course. Nonetheless, BLO missed the opportunity to address the perceptual barriers keeping Melrose and Upham's Corner residents away from opera. Addressing those barriers would have been no easy feat,

requiring gaining further insights to pinpoint those obstacles, as well as potential effective community partners. Such information could have helped their efforts considerably and resulted in larger audiences in those neighborhoods.

Ultimately, the scaled-down, intimate previews appear to have been more successful in introducing new adult audiences to opera than the larger, more expensive family performances. And although fewer people attended the previews, their low cost and ease makes this program more readily expandable than the family performances. Public libraries proved to be highly effective community partners for BLO, helping the organization to begin understanding and addressing perceptual barriers facing new audiences—an approach that could serve as a model for other groups tackling similar issues.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

**F**or arts organizations interested in introducing children and families with little previous exposure to their art form, as well as those already familiar with it, BLO's experience provides useful lessons. Some key questions to consider include:

- What do parents—the key gatekeepers—know about your art form and your organization? And do you understand why they may not be visiting your organization in larger numbers?
- Do you have the resources to investigate fully the needs and preferences of your target audience? Do you know the community partners that are most relevant to your target audience?
- Do you need to present a full-blown production or would a less ambitious program achieve your goals (and even be more successful by not intimidating new audiences)?
- Are there potential arrangements you can form with like-minded organizations, such as BLO's partnership with Wheelock Family Theatre?

## ABOUT THE LEAD AUTHOR

**B**ob Harlow, PhD, develops custom research programs that help organizations identify how their brands, offerings, and messages intersect with what matters most to their target audiences. He has held senior and management positions at IBM and at market research consulting groups such as Yankelovich Partners, RONIN, and KRC, and currently leads Bob Harlow Research and Consulting, LLC, a market research consulting organization. He has partnered with marketing managers and senior executives at some of the world's largest companies and leading nonprofit organizations to build brands, target offerings, and design effective communications supporting them.

Bob has written hundreds of surveys and conducted hundreds of focus groups and interviews with broad audiences in thirty countries. He has more than a dozen scholarly publications in social psychology and research methods. He has a PhD from Princeton University in social psychology and completed the postdoctoral program in quantitative analysis at New York University's Stern School of Business and Graduate School of Arts and Science. He speaks English, Spanish, French, and Portuguese.



**Colorplate 1. Scenes from BLO's OYA Production of *Hansel and Gretel***

Photo by Paul Lyden for Boston Lyric Opera © 2008

Colorplate 2. Scene from BLO's OYA Production of *The Magic Flute*



Photo by Greg Del Sesto for Boston Lyric Opera © 2009



Colorplate 3. Scenes from BLO's OYA Productions of *The Magic Flute* (above) and *The Barber of Seville* (below)

Photo above by Greg Del Sesto for Boston Lyric Opera © 2009

Photo below by Roger Farrington for Boston Lyric Opera © 2010







**Colorplate 4. A Preview for BLO's OYA Family Performances**

Photo by Julie House for Boston Lyric Opera © 2010



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