



Newsletter Article: May 2021

## Opera Outside the Box and Online: Lessons Learned from Central City Opera's Journey through the Pandemic

Central City Opera's mission is to sing extraordinary stories to spark imagination, inspire creativity and open minds to the breadth of human experience. Founded in 1932, Central City Opera is the fifth oldest professional opera company in the country and is renowned for exquisite world-class productions, a competitive and robust young artist training program and creative year-round education and community engagement activities.



CCO's annual summer opera festival typically takes place in the historic, 143-year-old jewel-box opera house in the small town of Central City, about 35 minutes west of Denver in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. But this summer, due to the ongoing pandemic, we found ourselves needing a new home. We are pleased to announce a partnership with The Hudson Gardens & Event Center to present the 2021 Festival mainstage productions. Rodgers & Hammerstein's beloved musical *Carousel* and Verdi's thriller, *Rigoletto*, will be produced as open-air, socially-distanced performances at Hudson Gardens in Littleton, Colo., while Purcell's bewitching, hour-long opera *Dido and Aeneas* and the CCO *Al Fresco* concert series will be presented in the Opera House Gardens in Central City.



How did we get here, and how did the company – and specifically education and community programs – adapt to the new normal? What is planned for the future? Read on to find out.

On March 13, 2020, everyday life in Colorado — and the world — ground to a halt. In the face of COVID-19, opera seemed...frivolous. Pointless. Nonessential. But as time went on and shutdowns continued, people came to realize two things. 1) This pandemic was not going to be over soon, and 2) The arts are powerful — even necessary — forces in boosting mental health and strengthening coping skills. They are a source of emotional release, inspiration, beauty and community, and Central City Opera's team swiftly reimagined and developed programs and performances, intentionally centering those qualities.

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We released our first virtual education program, a self-guided online course called **Opera Up Close** April of 2020. As teachers and students acclimated to video and online learning, we began using those same tools to partner with schools. “While we



didn't book virtual programs very often in the beginning of the pandemic, teachers have become much more comfortable and confident with this style of learning,” says Education Coordinator Meg Ozaki Graves. “We are now teaching virtual programs every week.”

Since launching that first course, CCO's education department developed a total of 14 customizable virtual programs. They range from

remote masterclasses, to **Yoga and the Voice** workshops, recorded performances with artist talkbacks, to our newest offering for students, **Storytelling with Sound**. “Teachers seem to appreciate that we pivoted quickly to provide resources that enhance their existing curriculum,” says Director of Education Emily Murdock. Happily, the team also discovered that remote programs are a great way to reach the farthest corners of Colorado, opening up opportunities to students and teachers in rural communities in a way that we were not able to before.

In addition to school programs, we launched a seven-part virtual lecture series for the general public about the 2021 summer festival called **Lunch & Learn**, which has been incredibly successful. People crave community. While nothing can replace the magic of live performance, we've uncovered many educational tools that work well virtually. That growth is here to stay.

Summer of 2020, we took Governor Polis' advice to “enjoy the great outdoors,” leaned into the idyllic outdoor setting around the Central City Opera House, the company produced eight “CCO Al Fresco” concerts. The series was such a success that we are doing it again in 2021, this time with Apprentice and Studio Artist singers from the Bonfils-Stanton Foundation Artists Training Program.

The CCO staff also dove into an unprecedented time of professional development over the last year, immersing ourselves in the resources and community of Opera America and Alliance for Music Education Equity (AMEE). We are inspired to forge ahead with the diversity, equity, inclusion and access values that are increasingly central to our company and industry in mind.

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Starting fall of 2021, Central City Opera's education team is excited to produce in-person performances of the children's opera, ***Frida Kahlo and the Bravest Girl in the World***. This new 30-minute work premiered in 2019, commissioned by Fort Worth Opera and written by Joe Illick and Mark Campbell. It tells the true story of a Mexican girl named Mariana, who asks the famous painter Frida Kahlo to paint her portrait. Mariana learns about Frida's experiences and is inspired to live bravely and boldly, just like Frida. The production will be led by Denver-based director and actor Iliana Lucero Barron, music directed by Steven Aguiló-Arbues and will feature singers Kira Dills-DeSurra and Armando Contreras.

It's been quite a year, one of the most challenging ever for the performing arts. Central City Opera could not have survived the pandemic without the incredible support of donors. We launched the COVID Relief Fund campaign in May 2020 that *surpassed* its goal by 21%. The money raised went to the 2020 Festival artists and staff who were out of a job, doing our part to support them through these challenging times. Much has changed in the past year, but what has decidedly not changed is Central City Opera's commitment to our community. We are here to educate and entertain; to open audiences' worlds to the grand art form of opera and all its storytelling power. We are here to inspire students to pursue careers in the performing arts – on and offstage – and feel at home in theaters long into the future. We are here to teach the living history of Central City, Colorado. We are here to sing extraordinary stories.

**Learn about Central City Opera's upcoming summer festival, year-round education programs and more at [centralcityopera.org](https://centralcityopera.org).**

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