THE KRESGE EMINENT ARTIST AWARD HONORS AN EXCEPTIONAL ARTIST IN THE VISUAL, Performing OR LITERARY ARTS FOR LIFELONG PROFESSIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO METROPOLITAN DETROIT’S CULTURAL COMMUNITY. DAVID DICHIERA IS THE 2013 KRESGE EMINENT ARTIST. THIS MONOGRAPH COMMEMORATES HIS LIFE AND WORK.
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The CD of David DiChiera’s “Four Sonnets” may be found inside the back cover of this publication.

Opera is an extension of something that is everywhere in the world – that is, the combination of music and story. It’s really a universal art form.

- David DiChiera, 2013 Kresge Eminent Artist
Would Detroit have grand opera without David DiChiera? Thankfully it’s a question we need never ask. Fifty-one years ago he moved to the area and the rest, as you will read in the pages of this book, is his story.

The Kresge Foundation — its trustees and staff — applauds David DiChiera, our 2013 Eminent Artist, for his lifelong devotion to the magic of opera.

He is impresario, the founder of Michigan Opera Theatre and its stunning home, Detroit Opera House.

He is composer, crafting the luminous score for “Four Sonnets,” poems by Edna St. Vincent Millay (an original recording is included in this book), and the highly acclaimed full-length opera, “Cyrano.”

He is arts activist, launching the careers of performers of color and mounting productions that reflect the stories of those who live in our community — African Americans, Armenians, Poles and others.

Opera has been captivating audiences for some 400 years. Patrons locally, regionally, nationally and internationally cherish David DiChiera for his passion, his creativity and his unrelenting drive toward the future. He is a community treasure.

Rip Rapson
President and CEO
The Kresge Foundation

An opera begins long before the curtain goes up and ends long after it has come down. It starts in my imagination, it becomes my life, and it stays part of my life long after I’ve left the opera house.”

– Maria Callas
half a century ago I arrived in Michigan as a teacher and composer to help build the school of music at the newly established Oakland University. But I soon discovered that opera — the art form I so passionately loved — had little presence in this major urban center. So after a decade of producing staged operatic excerpts and touring them to schools and community centers, the time seemed right to find a home in which to establish a permanent professional opera company in Detroit. Of course, there was significant pushback: an opera company in a blue collar town? A home in the core of a city that had recently experienced devastating riots?

But in 1971 we opened the Music Hall as the opera’s first home and the beginning of an entertainment district. Building bridges into the community was a primary mission — making sure that the African American community, the majority of Detroit’s population, was represented on the stage. Not only by nurturing artists such as Kathleen Battle and native Detroiter Maria Ewing, who have gone on to great international careers, but by producing works that reflected the African American experience.

There were other ethnic communities whose traditions should also be celebrated. We produced the North American premieres of “Anoush,” the Armenian national opera and the first American performance of Polish operas “The Haunted Castle” and “King Roger.” We look forward to presenting an opera on the life of Frida Kahlo in the 2014-15 season. The mission of embracing and reflecting the incredible diversity of our community is an ongoing part of the Detroit Opera House mission, because we are all enriched as we share and experience one another’s culture.

My own music making was set aside, as I strove to make a difference for opera as a national artform. Using my presidency at OPERA America as a bully pulpit, we established an initiative dedicated to encouraging opera companies to commission new works. In 1979, my first year as president, only one new opera had been premiered in North America. Nothing can persuade directors of opera companies like money, so with the establishment of a fund called Opera for the ‘80s and Beyond, a decade of new operas emerged. Even with the wealth of these operas, it was still very clear that repertoires were not reflecting the diversity of cities across the country. So taking a page from our experience in Detroit, we established a new initiative called Opera for a New America, and provided grant-based support to companies for the commissioning of new works that reflected their various constituencies. Remaining true to that mission to this day, with the completion of our own Detroit Opera House, we presented the world premiere of “Margaret Garner,” with libretto by Toni Morrison and hosted OPERA America’s national conference, which was devoted to diversity.

I am particularly proud of our work in education. It was Karen DiChiera’s devotion to the concept that every child can create and perform — whether they live in the inner city of Detroit or in the most remote areas of the Upper Peninsula. The audience of tomorrow needs the opportunity to experience and participate in the arts. As the arts become more and more marginalized in our schools, the outreach of our cultural institutions becomes ever more essential.

Opera is an extension of something that is everywhere in the world — that is, the combination of music and story. It’s really a universal art form. I believe all arts are transformative, in terms of art, quality of life, as well as quality of community.

Over these last 40 years I’ve brought arts that I’m passionate about to our home here (the Detroit Opera House) and to people around the state, through extensive programs where we go into communities. So people can enjoy an art form on many levels — on a grand stage or in the intimacy of a small community center. It can take many formats. It’s all about the same thing – expressing emotions through the power of music.
“Here we will sit, and let the sounds of music creep into our ears.”
- William Shakespeare
Spring arrives slowly in Detroit. The first hint of a thaw is evident, however, in the office of David DiChiera, general and artistic director of Michigan Opera Theatre, grand duke of the Detroit Opera House and patriarch of the performing arts in Michigan.

Mountains of paczki, traditional pre-Lenten Polish pastries savored by Detroit’s Catholics on Shrove Tuesday, balance precariously on every available surface. “Have one, have twenty!” offers DiChiera. Such gestures of affection are familiar at MOT’s Grand Circus headquarters in downtown Detroit, sweet evidence of how much the impresario is beloved by his fans and supporters in this most unlikely of opera towns. “They all seem to think I need to eat,” says the silver-haired DiChiera. “What I really need is to sleep.”

Not likely, given the 78-year-old DiChiera’s schedule. He has just returned from New York, where he has seen a production of the new opera “Anna Nicole,” — “it’s so much of our time” — and is dealing with last minute casting changes in MOT’s coming production of “Fidelio” — “the male lead had to be replaced.” He’s due to review MOT’s finances with Board Chairman R. “Rick” Jamison Williams Jr., and must offer critique of proposed sets for the 2013-14 roster of productions. There’s press coverage to discuss, donors to dine with and, of course, the opera house itself, where he attends every performance.

There is little time for sleep, as DiChiera’s day invariably expands to include the many jobs that are his job: rainmaker, composer, publicist, marketer, fundraiser, talent scout, staff psychologist, community activist, showman, visionary.

By any standard, David DiChiera is the master juggler in the world of contemporary opera, the only founder of two opera companies — the Michigan Opera Theatre and Orange County’s Opera Pacific — and the only general director in opera to lead three opera companies simultaneously.

He is a living legend in the performing arts, known for encouraging African American artists in all aspects of opera, for forging collaborations with other opera companies, and for supporting the composition and productions of new operas that reflect the communities in which they are performed.

His achievements and leadership have been recognized internationally, culminating in 2010, with his selection by the National Endowment for the Arts for its Opera Honors award, the nation’s highest accolade for lifetime achievement in opera. He has received numerous honorary doctorates and been recognized by the mayors of New York, San Francisco, New Orleans and Detroit, as well as by the governments of France and Italy.

In 2013, David DiChiera was named Kresge Eminent Artist by The Kresge Foundation for his achievement in bringing opera back to the city, making it accessible.
to new audiences and creating the Detroit Opera House from an abandoned theater just off Grand Circus Park.

"His vision — and what he has done with it — has certainly encouraged others to create their own vision, and given companies like Ford a reason to make a significant investment in Michigan Opera Theatre and in Detroit," says Ford Motor Company Fund President Jim Vella. "I can’t imagine what the entertainment district in Detroit would look like if not for David DiChiera."

First Notes
David DiChiera was born in 1935 in the town of McKeesport, Pa. His parents, Cosimo and Maria DiChiera, were Calabrian immigrants who settled in the Pittsburgh area in 1920 to escape the economic devastation in Sicily after World War I. DiChiera’s father supported the family working in Pittsburgh’s steel mills; his mother took in laundry to help with bills.

McKeesport is a gritty town, a "place to get out of," according to another formative influence, Michigan Opera Theatre board member, Nora Moroun. Yet DiChiera’s earliest musical impressions were made there, when as a young child he would spend Saturday afternoons creating imaginary theater presentations in his bedroom while listening to broadcasts from New York’s Metropolitan Opera.

DiChiera would later say he found the broadcasts "thrilling and overwhelming," sensations that were only reinforced when he attended his first opera, "Il Trovatore," on a school outing. It was a seminal experience for DiChiera. "It was something that I couldn’t live without in some way or another."

David’s interest in music and opera would continue to grow after his family moved to California, his passions further fueled with the donation of an old, dilapidated upright piano. "It was out in the garage. I’d go out there by myself, afraid, but I wanted to practice, so my sisters would come and bring their books and sit while I played on," said DiChiera in an interview for the National Endowment for the Arts.

DiChiera’s dedication to music would lead him to turn composer and pen a concerto for unaccompanied piano by the time he was 12. His first performances were given audience in the charismatic church his mother attended. "I was considered a little prodigy there and it did have a big effect upon me," says DiChiera. "Being looked upon as I was in the church, it did help to build a confidence in my own abilities."

David entered a junior competition in San Diego at age 13, played his concerto and earned first prize.

DiChiera won a full scholarship to study piano, composition and musicology at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), with the intention of becoming a concert pianist. But "there were so many talented pianists around, many of them not even performance majors but engineers!" says DiChiera in remembering his time in the music department.

The possibility of a different career path presented itself when David joined UCLA’s open workshop as a pianist and coach, where the collaborative aspects of the operatic form proved enormously satisfying. "Being in opera in whatever way, whether you were singing, whether you were the pianist or whether you were working backstage, you were part of something that was such an exciting adventure of putting a great work together," says DiChiera.

DiChiera studied composition with noted American composer Lukas Foss while at the university, and earned his MA in 1956 with highest honors and election to Phi Beta Kappa. He was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to Italy where he was commissioned by the United States Information Service to compose a sonata for the Naples Festival of Contemporary Music. He concurrently researched and contributed a series of articles on 18th-century Italian opera for the world’s leading music encyclopedias, including Ricordi’s Enciclopedia della Musica, Groves Dictionary of Music and Barenreiter’s Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart.

DiChiera would culminate his studies at UCLA with a Ph.D. in musicology, writing his thesis on the Neapolitan School operas of the 18th century.

Destiny: Detroit
"La Forza del Destino" — fate — has its own ideas in Verdi’s great opera and so it proved for DiChiera when he received a phone call from the chancellor of what was Michigan State University-Oakland in 1962 (becoming Oakland University in 1963). The institution was growing and looking for a musicologist to develop its music and theater departments.

DiChiera was intrigued and accepted the chancellor’s offer, becoming a professor and ultimately the chairman of music at Oakland University. "I went there and got involved in developing what was called the Meadow Brook Theater and the Department of Music and the Meadow Brook Festival," says DiChiera.

Yet the siren call of opera never diminished, and DiChiera was soon nursing the idea of establishing an opera company in Detroit.

Opera wasn’t a stranger to Detroit, having made its first appearance at the Old Detroit Opera House (1869–1963) at Campus Martius in downtown Detroit. The city had played host to the annual tour of the Metropolitan Opera, but a full-scale Detroit-based opera company? That was an entirely new notion.

DiChiera began slowly, seeing the potential in an education program of the Detroit Grand Opera Association called Overture to Opera. (The association supported the Metropolitan Opera’s Detroit visits.) DiChiera reinvented the program in 1963, focusing on the educational aspects the program offered and seeing the possibilities of this new programming in terms of audience growth. Programming and community education united as marketing tools for the new venture, a practice that would continue through DiChiera’s career. "An opera company should be working in the schools year round," says DiChiera. "It should be giving opportunities to local singers. It should be building audiences, it should be all those things."

It was an approach whose importance was underscored by DiChiera’s wife to be and associate at Michigan Opera Theatre, Karen VanderKloot, a passionate advocate of arts education. DiChiera and VanderKloot would marry in 1965 and have two daughters, Lisa and Christina.

But "there were really three children in our family," says DiChiera’s younger daughter, Christina. "Guess which child got the most attention — the opera!"

David DiChiera was nothing if not patient in his pursuit of his dream and in 1971, thanks to his energy, organizational abilities and charisma, he established Michigan Opera Theatre, Michigan’s own professional opera company. (The name was formally changed from Overture to Opera to Michigan Opera Theatre in 1973.) The company made its first home in Detroit’s Music Hall Theater, a landmark that had been headed for demolition. DiChiera also spearheaded the establishment of the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts in 1973, becoming its founding and artistic director in addition to acting as general and artistic director of MOT.

DiChiera’s selection of the Madison Avenue home for his opera company was questioned by many of the city’s most influential arts patrons, given the tremendous exodus of residents into the suburbs during the 1960s. But the impresario was passionate in his belief that “cultural institutions belong in the heart of the city,” a conviction shared by his young family, who declared the Music Hall their “friend, a warm, second home.” “We felt like ‘Eloise at The Plaza,’” remembers his daughter, Lisa, “meeting dignitaries, sneaking into rehearsals, trying on costumes, running the elevator. We often fell asleep on the couch in Dad’s office, books open on our laps.”

It was a family affair, with Karen VanderKloot DiChiera, herself a composer, educator and stage
Resourceful Leader

David DiChiera had become an admired and respected leader in regional opera by the time he was tapped to serve as President of OPERA America, the national association of professional opera companies. He served in this position from 1979 to 1983, expanding his purview from one opera company to opera organizations nationwide.

When DiChiera assumed leadership of the organization, there were essentially no new operas produced on America’s opera stages (MOT was the exception with “Washington Square.”) Under his aegis, OPERA America sponsored two programs: Opera for the 80s and Beyond, which developed innovative methods of encouraging and funding new American musical theater works, and Opera for a New America, which supported companies in their efforts to reach previously underserved segments of the population.

These initiatives were so successful that by the middle of the 1990s, 20 to 25 new works were being consistently produced on the stages of America’s opera companies.

A Historic Achievement

DiChiera’s talent did not go unnoticed and he soon received a number of invitations to lead other companies. In 1981, he was appointed artistic director of Ohio’s Dayton Opera Association, greatly increasing ticket sales, raising the company’s artistic standards and earning favorable critical reviews.

DiChiera’s reputation as an artistic director who was willing to experiment and extend the aesthetic encounters of his audiences would bring a third company under his wing in 1986, when he became the founding general director of Opera Pacific in Orange County. “He took this job when we had no money in the bank and no staff, and built a very successful opera company here,” recalls then Opera Pacific board member Tom Hammond.

DiChiera remained with Dayton Opera until 1992 and Opera Pacific until 1996, when he resigned to devote more time to the opening of the Detroit Opera House.

A New Cultural Landmark

The campaign to create a permanent home with a stage large enough for the grandeur of opera productions began in 1989, when Michigan Opera Theatre purchased the Robert’s Fur building next to the former Capitol Theatre on Grand Circus Park.

MOT’s new home would not be ready for six more years, opening with full fanfare in April 1996 as Dame Joan Sutherland cut the ribbon on the 2,700 seat building. The opening of the Detroit Opera House upon the occasion of MOT’s 25th Anniversary was a historic event for the Motor City, the pinnacle of a crusade by MOT’s supporters and the city’s arts activists, and an epic achievement for the man who, according to his daughters, “lives, breathes, eats and sleeps opera.”

Joanne Danto, one of the prime benefactors of MOT’s Dance Program recalls the opening as “spectacular, an amazing day in this city. It was the beginning of an era for all of us who love David and wanted to see this opera house succeed. It’s not just an opera house, it’s an icon for strength and survival, for expression and freedom, for the way the city can reinvent itself.”

A Reflection of the Community

DiChiera has oft been quoted in his belief that “opera’s an art form that speaks to everyone, and if it does, then you have to find ways that everybody can feel as if they can access it as well.”

Under David DiChiera’s artistic direction, Michigan Opera Theatre expanded its traditional operatic repertoire to celebrate ethnicities and nationalities and build bridges into the various communities of southeastern Michigan.

Throughout MOT’s history, Detroiters flocked to productions of the Gershwin’s ‘Porgy and Bess,’” Scott Joplin’s “Treemonisha,” and the North American premieres of the Polish “King Roger” and “Anoush,” the national opera of Armenia. Detroit’s growing Latino community will be celebrated in the coming production of “Frieda,” an opera about Mexican painter and cultural icon, Frieda Kahlo. An opera centering around Arab Americans (whose metro Detroit community is one the nation’s largest) and their experience is in the planning stages.

Perhaps no aspect of DiChiera’s reputation in the opera world exceeds his advocacy of minorities. He has been an industry leader in color-blind casting, helping advance the careers of sopranos Kathleen Battle, Maria Ewing, Leona Mitchell and tenor Vinson Cole. He commissioned and staged “Margaret Garner,” an opera by Richard Danielpour and Toni Morrison based on a true slave story set in pre-Civil War America, which became the first world premiere on the Detroit Opera House stage in 2005. The work reverberated not only in Detroit but also in communities across the country.

The Composer Returns

“When did he ever have any time of serenity to compose a work of such beauty and maturity?” was a question an opera lover could ask when DiChiera’s full-length grand opera, “Cyrano,” made its debut on the stage of the Detroit Opera House in 2007. Artist and fellow virtuoso Glen Michaels still marvels at DiChiera’s compositional triumph, saying, “David surprised everyone with ‘Cyrano’ when it premiered. It was simply stunning.”

DiChiera had composed music since his teens, writing his “Four Sonnets” for voice and piano in his 20s. Composition had long taken a back seat to artistic administration when longtime friend, director
Bernard Uzan approached David with the idea of composing the score for the libretto he had written, based on the classic tale of Cyrano de Bergerac. “I knew he was a great composer and this story would suit his lush, romantic style,” says Uzan. “He trusted me and he was ready to do it. In life, whenever we make a big decision, there is never one reason, there are always a multiplicity of reasons and such was the case with David, at that point in his life and work.”

David was 62 when “Cyrano” had its premiere in Detroit, an event occasioned through the intercession of MOT’s board chairman, R. “Rick” Jamison Williams Jr. DiChiera had intended on producing the opera with another company, thinking it inappropriate for “me to run my own work.” “I insisted it was a rare privilege, one that belonged to his hometown and his own company. Fortunately, he agreed with me,” says Williams. Together, they raised $1.5 million towards the production “in a very tough economy.”

“Cyrano” was a success in Detroit, and in Florida and Philadelphia as well, as “it really contains everything that people go to an opera production for,” said Robert Heuer in 2011, then general and artistic director of the Florida Grand Opera. “It has absolutely gorgeous music for all the principals. The final scene between Roxane and Cyrano is extremely moving. I watched the premiere in Detroit and audiences were in tears.”

**Cocktail, from the left: the composer at work in the grand salon of his Detroit home; photos of family, friends and colleagues, Dame Joan Sutherland and DiChiera after her swan song performance of “Norma”; photos of celebrities in DiChiera’s Detroit Opera House office include Bette Davis, Martha Graham, and Sammy Davis Jr. with wife Altovise; the 1994 MOT Opera Ball at the Detroit Opera House.**

Mon *Panache*  
“Ritardando,” to “gradually slow down” will not come easily to maestro DiChiera. “It will be an adjustment to stop with the general director duties, when I step down to artistic director in 2016. It will be hard to give up this office,” he says, gazing around the spacious corner suite, a high-ceilinged space aglow with the morning light of its many oversized windows. Filled with couches, high-backed chairs, a massive desk, piano, books, hundreds of musical scores, celebrity photos, sculpture, posters, mementoes, kitchen and dining table, it has been more of a home to DiChiera than his art-filled palazzo in Detroit’s Palmer Woods. “It’s like my house,” he says softly.

DiChiera is actively involved in the search for new talent to carry on his legacy at MOT, more than ready to embrace a future devoted to his personal creative ambitions. There will be a new opera. New compositions for orchestra and voice have been drafted. “Change is part of life, you know,” says DiChiera.

And he will make the change, as did his hero Cyrano, with “mon panache.” “It means my achievements, my courage in life, the way I behave, my way of being with people, my creativity, my invention,” says Bernard Uzan. “It goes very, very well with David.”

“How many people get to see their biggest dream, their grandest vision in life fulfilled?” asks longtime MOT board member Betty Brooks. “David DiChiera did. And we are all the richer for it.”
Born in McKeesport, Pa. 1935

Awarded Fulbright scholarship for studies in Italy 1958

Founder & General Director of Michigan Opera Theatre (MOT) 1971

Named Chairman of the Board for OPERA America 1979

Founder and General Director of Opera Pacific (concurrent with MOT & Dayton Opera) 1986

Awarded Bridge Builders honor by Partners for Livable Communities 2000

Premiered his opera, "Cyrano," at MOT, with subsequent performances by Opera Philadelphia and Florida Grand Opera 2007

Commissioned and premiered Richard Danielpour and Toni Morrison’s "Margaret Garner" at MOT 1996

Championed the efforts that led to the opening of the Detroit Opera House, on the occasion of MOT’s 25th anniversary 1996

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Launched his opera, "Cyrano," at MOT, with subsequent performances by Opera Philadelphia and Florida Grand Opera 2007

Recognized by The National Endowment for the Arts for NEA Opera Honors 2010

Lifetime Timeline of a Lifetime

1956
1962
1975
1981
1996
2005
2010

1956
Earned MA in composition from UCLA

1962
Earned Ph.D. in musicology from UCLA

1975
Founder and Director of Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts, Detroit

1981
Appointed Artistic Director of Dayton Opera (concurrent with MOT)

1996
Championed the efforts that led to the opening of the Detroit Opera House, on the occasion of MOT’s 25th anniversary

2005
Commissioned and premiered Richard Danielpour and Toni Morrison’s "Margaret Garner" at MOT

2010
Recognized by The National Endowment for the Arts for NEA Opera Honors

2013
Recognized by The National Endowment for the Arts for NEA Opera Honors

Named 2013 Kresge Eminent Artist

David Dichiera 2013 Kresge Eminent Artist
David DiChiera was an assistant professor of music at Oakland University in 1963, when he was asked to become director of Overture to Opera. DiChiera was fresh out of the music school’s doctoral program at the University of California at Los Angeles and had only one year of teaching under his belt. Yet, in that short time he caught the attention of Virginia Yntema, general chairwoman of the Detroit Grand Opera Association, who suggested he take charge of Overture because of his expertise and enthusiasm in discussing the opera performances as an Education Committee panelist. He served as producer-director of Overture to Opera for nine seasons, laying the groundwork, securing financial support and establishing the reputation that would lead to the founding of Michigan Opera Theatre.

DiChiera had come to Oakland University because of the university itself was new and he saw a compelling opportunity to build its music program. While directing Overture to Opera in the mid-1960s he was instrumental in launching the university’s major cultural offerings, the Meadow Brook Music Festival and Meadow Brook Theatre. It was the building of an opera company, however, that was to hold his primary interest.

DiChiera’s first three seasons with Overture were, as planned, programs of scenes from the operas the Met would perform in its annual Detroit season. In an approach very much like Leonard Bernstein’s Young People’s Concerts, DiChiera saw it as a chance to present, the way the company can capture and project a dramatic movement; in general, the high level of competence of the performances make them worthwhile. The verve, the spirit with which everything is presented, the way the company can capture and project a dramatic movement; in general, the high level of competence of the performances make them worthwhile.

In 1970, Overture produced its first full-length opera, Rossini’s “The Barber of Seville.” It starred Maria Ewing in her professional debut and was directed by and featured Italo Tajo, the renowned bass and star of the Met and Milan’s La Scala. The season continued growth of regional companies.

I couldn’t accept that fact. I knew the constituency for it was here.” In addition, he was committed to the idea that the future of opera in America was the continued growth of regional companies.

In 1967 he expanded the format of Overture to include a complete opera, the Michigan premiere of Cherubini’s one-act “The Portuguese Inn.” That year Collins George, music critic for the Detroit Free Press, expressed the public’s growing enthusiasm:

The real lesson of the Overture company is that there is a place in Detroit for an operatic stock company. ... Thanks must be expressed to DiChiera for this awakening to awareness of opera of such a large segment of the population.

In 1970, Overture produced its first full-length opera, Rossini’s “The Barber of Seville.” It starred Maria Ewing in her professional debut and was directed by and featured Italo Tajo, the renowned bass and star of the Met and Milan’s La Scala. The season also included performances at the Detroit Institute of Arts, with a full orchestra. Overture to Opera had evolved into a full-fledged opera company – one now in search of a home.

Overture’s founding members became the new opera company’s first board of directors. Lynn Townsend, chairman of Chrysler Corp., had served as the Overture program’s board chairman and continued to lead the opera company as chairman until 1980, when he passed the baton to Robert Dewar, chairman of Knart Corp.
With productions that included the Michigan premieres of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat” and Puccini’s “La Rondine,” Overture to Opera ended its 10 nomadic years in 1971 with its first season in the Music Hall. Locating the opera on Madison Avenue in downtown Detroit was the spark that ignited the rebirth of the city’s theater and entertainment district; DiChiera and his young opera company were the first to commit to downtown and reinvest in a district that had seen many years of serious decline. It was a significant moment in the history of Detroit.

In 1972 the fledgling company was accepted into OPERA America, the national organization for opera companies. That year, an eclectic main-stage season included works by Mozart, Menotti and Puccini. Education and outreach activities continued, notably with the creation of an Opera in Residence; Michigan communities were now able to host the company for a week of opera experiences that included classes, workshops and a full production featuring members of the community performing alongside opera professionals. Karen VanderKloot DiChiera, DiChiera’s then wife, directed the company’s outreach and education activities. Her leadership proved to be key to building and sustaining an audience for the regional opera company and was an invaluable contribution to the character and strength of a company that was garnering national recognition for its unique and varied programming.

In 1973 the company changed its name from Overture to Michigan Opera Theatre. The new name reflected the company’s mandate to serve the entire state and give equal emphasis to the operatic repertory and classic American musical theater, a dual purpose that was a novel concept at the time.

The opera company had finally found a comfortable home in Music Hall, but the building’s future was by no means secure. To protect the structure from possible demolition, a group of volunteers established the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts. DiChiera was its executive director, running the opera company from offices on one floor of the Music Hall and the nonprofit center from another.

The Music Hall years were filled with artistic successes for which MOT quickly established a reputation as a company of distinction. It stepped into the national limelight when it commissioned and produced the world premiere of Thomas Pasatieri’s “Washington Square,” starring Catherine Malfitano. A 1976 Time magazine article observed, “Nothing testifies to the growing up of a regional American opera company quite like a world premiere.” The Christian Science Monitor dubbed MOT “Detroit’s Showcase”; Variety

Wearing two hats (for the first of many times) agreed with DiChiera and both organizations. In May 1976 the entertainment journal Variety wrote:

The flourishing of Michigan Opera Theatre and Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts is due to the efforts of a great many interested people, but no one doubts that the prime mover in what is happening in Detroit is 39-year-old David DiChiera. Because of DiChiera, Detroiters now have a spread of theater, music, dance, opera, pop and ethnic entertainment. DiChiera is doing what, three years ago, was thought impossible — he is bringing Detroiters back downtown at night, in droves, and he is garnering a portfolio of excellent reviews.

The Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts, under the leadership of David DiChiera, expanded the opera company’s artistic and educational programs, and contributed to the revitalization of downtown Detroit. The center’s impact was felt not only in the performing arts, but also in the city’s overall cultural and economic landscape.

In 1979, MOT launched the Detroit Youth Opera Project, providing training and employment opportunities for young people. This initiative was a significant step towards creating a new generation of artists and leaders. The project’s success demonstrated the power of arts education in fostering creativity, discipline and self-confidence.

The following year, MOT presented the world premiere of “The American Dream” by John Corigliano, a work that continues to be performed by opera companies around the world. This moment marked the company’s commitment to commissioning and performing new works, a hallmark of its programming.

Throughout the 1980s, MOT continued to produce innovative and engaging productions, attracting national attention and a growing audience. The company’s commitment to opera as a vital art form and its dedication to community outreach were instrumental in shaping the development of the Detroit cultural scene.

In 1985, MOT was awarded the National Medal of Arts, the highest honor given to artists in the United States, recognizing its role as a leading cultural institution. This recognition was a testament to the company’s impact on Detroit and the nation.

In 1994, MOT merged with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra to form the DSO/MOT, a joint arts organization that sought to create a dynamic and integrated cultural experience for audiences. This partnership aimed to enhance the cultural life of the city and provide new opportunities for collaboration and innovation.

In 2010, MOT opened the new Detroit Opera House, a state-of-the-art facility that continues to serve as a cultural center for the city. The building’s design incorporates elements of the original Music Hall, preserving its historical significance while providing touring companies with a modern and flexible performance space.

Today, Michigan Opera Theatre remains one of the country’s leading opera companies, known for its innovative programming, community engagement and commitment to artistic excellence. The Music Hall years were a transformative period in the company’s history, setting the stage for its continued success and impact in the Detroit cultural landscape.
declared the “Washington Square” premiere “a first for Michigan Opera Theatre and a milestone for Detroit and Michigan.” Opera News praised MOT as “a triumph of regional opera.”

Other highlights of the company’s main-stage Music Hall performances included:

- the professional operatic debut of soprano Kathleen Battle,
- the revival, telecast and ensuing Broadway run of “The Most Happy Fella,”
- actor Sal Mineo’s directorial debut, with Menotti’s “The Medium,” in which he also played Toby,
- the national telecast of Aaron Copland’s “The Tender Land,” conducted by the composer himself,
- the American opera debut of Cleo Laine, in “The Merry Widow,”
- Catherine Malaffitano’s first “La Traviata.”

Its presentation of the Polish opera “The Haunted Castle” and the Armenian opera “Anoush” distinguished MOT as one of the first companies to present major premieres of national operas that reflected the makeup of the community. Further national recognition came from mounting important revivals of such American works as George Gershwin’s “Porgy and Bess,” Marc Blitzstein’s “Regina,” Scott Joplin’s “Treemonisha” and Louis Gruenberg’s “The Emperor Jones.” Fully 25 percent of the company’s main-stage productions were devoted to opera and musical theater works by American composers.

In 1979 DiChiera was named a Michiganian of the Year by The Detroit News and was elected president of the Detroit Newsmen’s Club. In 1980, DiChiera was named general director of California’s Opera Pacific; its first performance season that year was on the stage of the new Orange County Performing Arts Center. Now, as general director of the two companies and artistic director of Dayton Opera (a position he held from 1981 to 1991), DiChiera could essentially collaborate with himself, sharing the artistic resources and leveraging the financial resources of all three institutions for considerable savings and higher-quality productions.

The unique, tri-company framework DiChiera created was regarded as a formula for the future of opera production.

In 1983, after extensive strategic planning, MOT announced it would broaden the scope of the company by producing large-scale grand opera at the Masonic Temple Theatre along with the offerings at Music Hall. In 1984 following the Met’s spring tour, MOT produced its first grand opera in the Masonic Temple, Donizetti’s “Anna Bolena”; it featured a cast of international stars including soprano Dame Joan Sutherland and conductor Richard Bonynge, the then-unknown Ben Heppner and the Midwest premiere of English surtitles.

In spring 1985 the Detroit Grand Opera Association announced it would no longer bring the Met to Detroit; MOT was ready and able to produce grand opera on the same scale. The 1985 and 1986 seasons returned to the Masonic Temple for Verdi’s “Aida” starring Leona Mitchell and the composer/director, John Pascoe’s production of “Norma” was regarded as a formula for the future of opera production.

That same season, MOT added classical ballet to its programming with a production of Richard Strauss opera, “Ariadne auf Naxos,” starring Leonora Mitchell in her first performance in the title role, followed by Bulgarian soprano Ghena Dimitrova and conductor Richard Bonynge, the then-unknown Ben Heppner and the Midwest premiere of English surtitles.

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During the 1987-88 season, with a budget topping $5 million and subscribers numbering more than 9,000, MOT launched its biggest season ever, highlighted by the historic Detroit concert debut of Luciano Pavarotti to a full house at Joe Louis Arena, the 20,066-seat hockey arena. The 1988-89 season opened with MOT’s 500th public performance and concluded as the sixth consecutive year in the black. It featured Douglas Moore’s “The Ballad of Baby Doe,” presented for the first time in 28 years, and the Detroit premiere of Stephen Sondheim’s “Follies,” starring Juliet Prowse, Edie Adams and Nancy Dussault.

Michigan Opera Theatre commissioned a new production of Bellini’s “Norma” in 1989 from English theater artist John Pascoe for Dame Joan Sutherland’s final performances of the role, a production that garnered the company its first NPR broadcast. That same season, MOT added classical ballet to its programming with a production of “Swan Lake” starring Cynthia Gregory. The combined audiences for main-stage and outreach programs that season exceeded 230,000. In 1990 MOT mounted a revival of “Show Boat” and produced its first-ever Richard Strauss opera, “Armande auf Naxos,” starring soprano Alessandrina Marc. It also unveiled a new production of Mozart’s “Don Giovanni” designed and directed by John Pascoe, which along with Pascoe’s production of “Norma” was shared with Opera Pacific and Dayton Opera. Continued on page 30.
Setting Stories to Song in MOTown

Under the direction of David DiChiera, Michigan Opera Theatre has become one of the most respected opera companies in the world, with a repertory ranging from grand opera to operatic productions of musical theater. Below, a reader’s guide to MOT’s most significant productions.

The Abduction From the Seraglio

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s high comedy with touching tragedy in the wild story of two men rescuing their lovers from a pasha’s harem.

Anna Bolena

Gaetano Donizetti’s tragic opera takes place in 15th Century England during the early 16th century, focusing on the dramatic story of the most famous of Henry VIII’s six wives.

The Ballad of Baby Doe

Douglas Moore’s opera is one of the few American operas to be in the standard repertoire. The work is based on the lives of actual historical figures Horace Tabor and Augusta Tabor, and follows their scandal-plagued story from Colorado’s silver mines to Washington’s popular politics at the end of the 19th century.

Boris Godunov

Modest Mussorgsky’s only completed opera takes place at the end of the 16th century in Russia, where this robust baritone confirms his own dark past and the trials and loneliness of power.

Brundibar

Jewish composer Hans Krása’s children’s opera uses fairy tale elements to tell the story of a young boy and his father who manage to outwit the title character, an evil organ grinder, and sing in the market square to earn money for their mother. The opera was originally performed by children in the Theresienstadt concentration camp. It had occupied Czechoslovakia.

The Barber of Seville

With the help of a wily barber, a strong-willed young woman outwits a lecherous old man in this sparkling comedy. Count Almaviva, the feisty Rosina, steals the show.

Carmen

Georges Bizet’s surreal opera, based on Prosper Mérimée’s novella, tells the tale of a handsome bullfighter Escamillo, with tragic results.

Cyrano

David DiChiera’s grand romantic opera is based on Edmond Rostand’s “Cyrano de Bergerac,” the French nobleman doomed to an unrequited love for his distant cousin, Roxane.

The Daughter of the Regiment

A farcical comedy and drama tells the tale of two young soldiers who disguise their identities to test their lover’s fidelity in a saloon and sometimes startling mix of minuetta and dyeing dramas.

Don Giovanni

Mozart’s opera is based on the story of the godfather of opera, a heartless seducer, who is tricked into buying up bottles of cheap liquor as a guaranteed love potion but finds himself executing the girl he has just loved.

Don Pasquale

Donizetti’s comic opera takes place in England during the early 19th century, focusing on the romance of a snooty duchess, finds true love with a simple girl, unable to transform into a china doll. The Daughter of the Regiment

A 19th century farce full of waltzes and witticisms, and marital infidelity.

Fidelio

In Charles Gounod’s 1859 grand opera, inspired by Goethe, the good Christian heroine Fidelia finds her youth as a doomsday past with the devil, Mephistopheles.

Falstaff

Based on Shakespeare’s “The Merry Wives of Windsor” and “Henry IV,” Verdi’s latest opera is a wise, witty comedy about a self-deceived old man who vainly attempts to seduce two women at once.

Fidelio

Johannes Brahms’s 1855 grand opera, inspired by Goethe, the old drifter with a heart of gold. Fidelia finds his youth as a doomsday past with the devil, Mephistopheles.

Falstaff

Ludwig van Beethoven’s only opera recounts the true story of the few American operas to be in the standard repertoire. The work is based on the lives of actual historical figures Horace Tabor and Augusta Tabor, and follows their scandal-plagued story from Colorado’s silver mines to Washington’s popular politics at the end of the 19th century.

Facade

Based on Shakespeare’s “The Merry Wives of Windsor” and “Henry IV,” Verdi’s latest opera is a wise, witty comedy about a self-deceived old man who vainly attempts to seduce two women at once.

The Emperor Jones

Based on the life of an escaped convict and depicts the story of Brutus Jones, a former Pullman porter and ex-convict who escaped to the island, set himself up as an tyrannical “emperor” and became all too desiring and eventually revolt against him.

The Elixir of Love

Based on Shakespeare’s “The Taming of the Shrew,” this Viennese operetta is a comedy and drama tells the tale of two young soldiers who disguise their identities to test their lover’s fidelity in a saloon and sometimes startling mix of minuetta and dyeing dramas.

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La Boheme

Gaetano Puccini’s letter perfect favorite. Puccini obsessed with the life of the pasha’s harem. The Abduction From the Seraglio

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Follies
Stephen Sondheim’s biographical musical reunion of aging showgirls as they make a final pilgrimage to the grand theater that once gave them their vocation, as reconstructed by its television impresario. They relive their memories, confront their regrets, and experience their losses. This is a wistful, bittersweet musical in the style of musical theater, where the audience is invited to join them in their search for truth and wisdom.

The Haunted Castle
Stein’s Inspector General is at the heart of this story, which takes place in the American South, where a young woman is abducted by a group of men who claim to be her father and take her to a plantation. The woman is eventually revealed to be a former circus performer who had been taken captive by the men, who believe her to be a witch. The story is told through a series of flashbacks, which reveal the woman’s past and her connection to the circus. The story is a blend of fantasy and reality, and is filled with moments of suspense and tension.

The Magic Flute
Mozart’s famous opera represents a search for truth and wisdom, with a plot akin to a fairy tale: the young, unstable Lucy Ashton is finding her the right husband. The opera is set in a fantasy land, and the plot revolves around the character of “The Barber of Seville.”

The Marriage of Figaro
Italian farce meets human frailty and the curse. This is Mozart’s masterpiece, which continues the story of “The Barber of Seville.”

The Most Happy Fella
Follies’ opera buffa, set in New York, is an exuberant musical with music and lyrics by Jerome Kern, and book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II. It is a story of innocent young people who find themselves in love with each other, and must overcome the obstacles of their families and society to be together.

The Medium
This is a story of a medium who is able to communicate with the dead, and who is called upon to help a widow who is mourning the death of her husband. The medium is convinced that her husband is still alive, and that he has come to her through the medium of a seance. The widow is skeptical, but eventually comes to believe in the medium’s abilities.

Nabucco
Verdi’s opera follows the plight of the Jews as they are assaulted, conquered and subsequently exiled from their homeland by the Babylonian king Nabucco. The opera is set in 50 B.C. Gaul, and features a cast of characters including the priestess Aida, the false prophet Judah, and the narrator Zaccaria.

The Merry Widow
This is a story of a woman who is taken prisoner by the hunchbacked father of her lover, and who is eventually rescued by her lover’s friends. The opera is set in a Calabrian village of Montalto, and features a cast of characters including the hunchbacked father, the lover’s friends, and the woman who is taken prisoner.

Pagliacci
This is a story of a family play within a play where the clown who makes others laugh is himself at the mercy of his own fate. The opera is set in a small Italian village, and features a cast of characters including the clown who makes others laugh, his wife, and his father. The opera is known for its intense and emotional music, and for its exploration of the themes of love, betrayal, and death.

Porgy and Bess
This opera is based on the novel “Porgy” by收回, a story of love won and lost. The opera is set in the American South, and features a cast of characters including the young love birds Porgy and Bess, their friends, and their enemies. The opera is known for its musical score, which features a mix of jazz and gospel influences.

The Tales of Hoffmann
This is a story of an eccentric writer who tells the stories of his great failed romances in this opera fantastique by Jacques Offenbach. The opera is set in Paris, and features a cast of characters including the writer, the opera singer, and the opera’s principal characters. The opera is known for its musical score, which features a mix of classical and operatic influences.

The Tender Land
This is a story of a young girl who is seduced and abandoned by a rich man, who is forced to flee for her life. The opera is set in the American South, and features a cast of characters including the young girl, her lover, and her family. The opera is known for its musical score, which features a mix of blues and gospel influences.

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This is a story of a young girl whose sleepwalking confuses the locals into thinking she’s a witch. She is eventually rescued by a group of friends who believe in her, and the opera is set in a small American town. The opera is known for its musical score, which features a mix of classical and operatic influences.

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**Washington Square**
The trysts and tribulations of first love take unexpected turns in Thomas Pasatieri’s adaptation of the classic Henry James story.

**Werther**
In Massenet’s masterpiece, based on Goethe’s “Sorrows of the Young Werther,” tears never cease to flow from the moment the moonlight idyll is revealed and destroyed.

**West Side Story**
Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim’s masterpiece. Loosely based on Shakespeare’s “Romeo and Juliet” and set in the slums of New York City, the show used the juvenile gangs of local whites (the Jets) and immigrant Puerto Ricans (the Sharks) as the modern Montagues and Capulets.

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**Michigan Opera Theatre Premieres**

**World**
- 1978: “Singers” by Charles Strouse (Commissioned by MOT)
- 2005: “Margaret Garner” by Richard Danielpour
- 2007: “Cyrano” by David DiChiera

**North American**
- 1981: “Anoush” by Armen Tigranian

**American**
- 1982: “The Haunted Castle” (Straszy Dwor) by Stanislow Monuszko
- 2003: “Dead Man Walking” by Jake Heggie

**Midwest**
- 1969: “Der Jasager” (The Choice) by Berthold Brecht and Kurt Weill
- 1975: “La Rondine” (The Swallow) by Giacomo Puccini
- 1977: “The Perfect Fool” by Gustav Holst
- 1980: “Of Mice and Men” by Carlisle Floyd
- 1982: “Treemonisha” by Scott Joplin
- 2007: “The Emperor Jones” by Louis Gruenberg
- 2008: “Of Mice and Men” by Carlisle Floyd
- 2003: “Dead Man Walking” by Jake Heggie
In the late 1980s the company had seriously considered renovating the State Theatre, although the arrangement was not ideal because the facility was available only for rent, not for sale. In the midst of those discussions, the former Capitol Theatre became available for purchase. DiChiera considered the structure ideal because of its opera-house-style interior and surrounding real estate that offered space for a new stage house. He brought in facilities experts to examine the site; they confirmed its structural soundness, acoustical excellence and technical capabilities when properly updated. In 1989 the board secured the first parcel in the Capitol Theatre block. Philip E. Benton Jr., then president of Ford Motor Co., agreed to chair the Opera House Capital Campaign in 1990. Under his leadership MOT ran a successful campaign to name the private grand auditorium; it gave many of the guests their first look at the exquisite (yet dilapidated) interior.

Stage construction began in earnest during the summer; opera presentations that fall included "La Boheme," "The Barber of Seville," "The Merry Widow" and "Aida," starring Leona Mitchell.

The Masonic Temple and Fisher Theater years ended in spring 1995, a season that featured Puccio's production of "Don Giovanni" with Metropolitan Opera stars Jeffrey Wells and Martile Rowland. A production of "Swan Lake," perhaps the most beloved ballet of all time, was choreographed by Detroit's own Jacob Lascu, and Puccini's "Tosca," starring Russian soprano Maria Guleghina, concluded the season.

Sondheim, "The Music Man" and a sumptuous "Samson and Delilah," the highlight of the main-stage season was the American Midwest premiere of the Polish opera "Ring Roger," by Karol Szymanowski. The Polish community responded with an international outpouring of support. Meanwhile, progress on the new opera house continued. The Roberts Fur Building on the Capitol Theatre block fell to the wrecking ball in spring 1993, making way for a new, 75,000-square-foot stage house. Three other developments furthered the momentum:

- a $1.25 million capital challenge grant from The Kresge Foundation
- the acquisition of the last of the eight parcels in the Capitol Theatre block, and
- the 1994 Opera Ball, held inside the unrestored auditorium; it gave many of the guests their first look at the exquisite (yet dilapidated) interior.

The move to the Fisher and Masonic theaters temporarily met the company’s needs for greater technical resources, seating capacity and audience amenities. But the future of the opera company as a permanent resource for the city and state, as envisioned in the strategic plan developed by DiChiera and the board in the mid-1980s, depended on finding or creating — and controlling — a world-class facility to accommodate MOT’s programming.

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You have been a fantastic champion for opera in North America, David, with the commitment, dedication and talent to make the difference. Generations of opera audiences will reap the rewards of your hard work, and that is something to cherish.
Ballet Theatre. In addition, there were Broadway touring productions of “A Chorus Line” and “Damn Yankees,” featuring Jerry Lewis. The 1997 opera season was packed: “Aida”; “Rigoletto”; “The Marriage of Figaro”; MOT’s first Wagner opera, “The Flying Dutchman”; and “The Magic Flute,” complete with set and costume design by Maurice Sendak. Conductors Steven Mercurio, Klaus Donath and John Mauceri were featured at the podium. With spectacular programming, MOT was firmly ensconced in its new home.

The spring season in 1998 opened with MOT’s first-ever staging of Massenet’s “Manon,” featuring Marcello Giordani and Ruth Ann Swenson, followed by Donizetti’s “The Elixir of Love” and Gershwin’s “Porgy and Bess,” starring Gordon Hawkins and Marquita Lister. Having been one of the first opera companies to produce “Porgy and Bess” in 1975, MOT presented a new production in 1998; throughout its history the company has been a leader in seeking out and introducing African American operatic talent. Clio Laine, the soprano Kathleen Battle, Leona Mitchell and Wilhelmia Fernandez; baritone Gregg Baker and tenor Vinson Cole were a few of MOT’s featured artists.

“Porgy and Bess” was followed by productions of “Turandot” starring Richard Margison and Alessandra Marc and “Luisa di Lammermoor” starring Sumu Jo, Fernando da Lora and Evgeny Dmitriev. Le Ballet de Monte Carlo presented “Romeo and Juliet,” and Cincinnati Ballet’s “The Nutcracker.” Dance audiences enjoyed the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, a rare North American appearance by the Kirov Ballet: the MOT stage was the only one in Michigan large enough to accommodate the Russian company’s performance.

Renovation continued at the opera house, and 2002 marked the opening of the Cadillac Café, located at the Madison Street entrance; the pub-like bistro was opened to guests before curtain and after the performance. The year came to a close with a visit from the legendary Bolshoi Ballet, performing “Swan Lake,” and Cincinnati Ballet’s “The Nutcracker.” The year would also see MOT’s first production of “Too Hot to Handle,” a jazz-gospel version of the classic “Messiah” performed by Detroit’s Bucket Symphony Choir that has become a holiday tradition at the Detroit Opera House.

The 2003 opera season also included “The Daughter of the Regiment,” “La Bohème,” and Cincinnati Ballet’s “Sleeping Beauty.” Dance audiences enjoyed the American Ballet Theatre’s “Swan Lake.”

The Michigan premiere of the new American opera “Dead Man Walking,” by Jake Heggie, was a notable production in 2003. London’s The Guardian reported at the time that the new opera made “the most concentrated impact of any piece of American music theater since “West Side Story.”” The opera repertory also included John Pascoe’s production of “Don Giovanni,” conducted by Steven Mercurio, and “Die Fledermaus,” directed by longtime company friend Bernard Uzan and conducted by MOT’s own Suzanne Mallaire Acton. There was also a “Madama Butterfly” as well as MOT’s first production of Verdi’s “A Masked Ball.” Dance audiences enjoyed the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and a rare North American appearance by the Kirov Ballet; the MOT stage was the only one in Michigan large enough to accommodate the Russian company’s performance.

2004 saw two major developments. The first was the completion of the Crowning Achievement Campaign, which allowed MOT to begin its final construction phase — the six-story parking center and the renovation of the office tower on the Broadway Street side of the Detroit Opera House. The second was the election of R. Jamison (Rick) Williams Jr. to serve as MOT’s third chairman of the board of directors.

After six years of preparation, MOT hosted the world premiere of “Margaret Garner” on May 7, 2005, the first world premiere to be presented on the Detroit Opera House stage. The true story of a slave who chooses to kill her own daughter rather than turn her over to bondage, by composer Richard Danielpour and Nobel Prize-winning novelist Toni Morrison, spurred an outpouring of financial support from the Armenians and friends who contributed their time and resources to the success of this production. The year came to a close with a visit by the Kirov Ballet; the MOT stage was the only one in Michigan large enough to accommodate the Russian company’s performance.

The 2005 opera season also included “Tosca,” “The Daughters of the Regiment,” “Norma,” and Cincinnati Ballet’s “Sleeping Beauty,” one of only three appearances in the United States. Michigan Opera Theatre and the city of Detroit also hosted OPERA America’s Opera Conference 2005: Diverse Voices, welcoming the world’s opera establishment to the restored Detroit Opera House and the city’s many other treasures.

One of the highlights of 2006 was the opening of the Ford Center for Arts & Learning at the Detroit Opera House, a new space that enabled MOT to expand the Community Program and the Dance Department. The Ford Center, located on the Broadway side of the opera house, consists of the Chrysler Black Box Theater, a flexible performance space for intimate presentations; the Margo V. Cohen Center for Dance, the locus for all dance activities; the David and Marion Handlerman Classroom Center; the Lee and Roy Barthal Costume Shop; and the Allesse Dance and Opera Resource Library.

MOT’s Opera Festival was one of a number of popular education programs available to young people to learn acting, singing and dancing. Here, a scene from a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta.
The highlight of 2007 was MOT’s third world premiere: the production of David DiChiera’s magnum opus, “Cyrano.” The grand romantic opera, with a libretto by longtime colleague Bernard Uzan, was a tour de force that inspired an outpouring of support and provided a smashing start to the season. The year also included “Turandot,” MOT’s first production of Mozart’s “The Abduction From the Seraglio,” Gounod’s “Romeo and Juliet” and “The Marriage of Figaro.” The season’s dance card included appearances by American Ballet Theatre, Miami City Ballet and Ballet Folklorico de Mexico as well as the Grand Rapids Ballet’s production of “Where the Wild Things Are.”

The next year featured Michigan Opera Theatre’s first production of Bellini’s “La Sonnambula,” Puccini’s “La Rondine” and “Madama Butterfly,” “La Traviata” and a return engagement of “Margaret Garner.” Also notable in 2008 was MOT’s newly formed Children’s Chorus, which presented a full staging of the light children’s opera “The Maker of Illusions.” Chorus members gave concert performances and served as the in-house children’s chorus for all main-stage production requirements.

The nationwide economic crisis that began in late 2008 along with the bankruptcies of General Motors and Chrysler — two major corporate supporters — forced MOT to make a series of financial cutbacks. Most significant to the public was the reduction from five opera productions a season to four. The company soldiered on through 2009 with productions of “The Elixir of Love,” the ever-popular “Carmen,” Sondheim’s “A Little Night Music” and a critically acclaimed production of Verdi’s “Nabucco,” an opera not seen in Detroit since 1961.

Facing the probability of bankruptcy in December 2011, Michigan Opera Theatre reached agreement with its lenders to cut the company’s long-term debt provided MOT pay $11 million by June 30, 2012. The Preserve the Legacy Campaign was launched, raising $7 million with which the company negotiated a new lease, paid off its lenders and attained financial stability. “I cannot overstate the importance of what we’ve just achieved,” DiChiera said at the time.

With the economy beginning to improve and the company’s restructured debt, DiChiera could look with optimism toward the future — one that had to include a retirement strategy and laying the groundwork for the next, financially stable, era of his beloved opera company. “An Opera Hero Plans His Exit” was the headline in the Detroit Free Press on Feb. 3, 2013. After nearly 50 years at the helm, DiChiera announced his retirement. He would transition into the position of artistic director and serve in this capacity until 2016 to assist the transition to a new opera director. Tributes began: The National Endowment for the Arts at the Kennedy Center awarded him its Opera Honors, the nation’s most prestigious opera award.

In the fall of 1971, DiChiera and his young opera company planted the seed that produced the rebirth of Detroit’s theater and entertainment district, one of the largest in the nation at the turn of the 20th century. Equally important were his efforts to present MOT performances that reflected its community, notably with the productions of “The Haunted Castle,” “Anoush” and “Margaret Garner.”

In the first era of the opera company, the names David DiChiera and Michigan Opera Theatre are nearly synonymous. He has been the heartbeat of opera in Detroit for nearly 50 years.
Luciano Pavarotti and Dame Joan Sutherland
Pavarotti was a major contributor to The Detroit Opera House Project, bringing the amount of money to the cause, and by making various appearances around Detroit in performances designed to raise money for the project. Dame Sutherland officially opened the new opera house as she cut the ribbon at the Gala Performance opening night.

A Constellation of Stars

“As I think back over my 50 years of producing operas and musicals, I am flooded with memories of the incredible artists that I had the pleasure of working with, some wonderful and some less than easy to work with. But all in all, I wouldn’t trade any of those experiences for the thrill of the most exciting and talented artists in the world.”

- David DiCicco

Dame Joan Sutherland

Many of opera’s superstars offered their talents in the support of David DiCicco and Michigan Opera Theatre, with none more than Dame Joan Sutherland.

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- David DiCicco
Crane was the architect of the Capitol Theatre, which would eventually become The Detroit Opera House. It was built in 1922. He designed at least 250 theaters during his career, including Detroit’s Madison Theatre (1917), Orchestra Hall (1919), the State Theatre (1925), and the Fox Theatre (1928).

Crane’s original Capitol Theatre was appointed in the “opera style,” with crystal chandeliers, frescoes, brass fixtures, and marble stairways and drinking fountains.

Painters, plasterers, plumbers, electricians, stagehands and riggers were among the skilled craftspeople, tradesmen and technicians needed to complete the renovation and restoration.

More than 500 gallons of paint and 10,000 hours went into painting the Detroit Opera House. Paint historian Steve Seebohm researched the original color scheme and established the palette of royal blue, cream, gold and a deep red called “Old Italian Rose.” These colors were applied throughout by Grosse Pointe’s Eugenio Paint Co.

Originally seating 4,250, the Detroit Opera House now seats 2,700. Its stage is the largest in Michigan.
The sonnets were first performed at a concert devoted to DiChiera’s music at Oakland University in 1965. The soprano was Roma Riddell, a Canadian who was a musical and theatrical artist and principal singer in the decade of DiChiera’s “Overture to Opera” productions.

“After that, I was so absorbed in running a music department and establishing an opera company that I gave very little thought to promoting my music. But in 1977 I brought the very talented Carmen Balthrop to sing Micaela in my production of ‘Carmen.’ She saw the sonnets on my piano and decided she wanted to sing them in a recital she was giving at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., in 1978.”

In his review, Theodore W. Libby Jr. of The Washington Star called the work “beautifully crafted and warmly expressive of the poetry.” Paul Hume of The Washington Post called DiChiera “a composer with great sensitivity and keen awareness of the beauties for the voice.”

Since then, “Four Sonnets” has been widely performed, most notably by the distinguished soprano Helen Donath. She and her husband, conductor and
pianist Klaus Donath, have performed the song cycle numerous times in North America and Europe, including Lincoln Center and the Salzburg Festival.

“In August of 2002 I was at the Rockefeller Villa in Lake Como, Italy, working with composer Richard Danielpour, who I had commissioned to compose the opera ‘Margaret Garner,’ when I learned that Helen was doing my ‘Sonnets’ in Salzburg,” DiChiera says. “It was so exciting I had to go. It was one of the great thrills of my life … to hear my music in a program that included Brahms, Schumann and Mahler.

“Over the years I have been so fortunate to have these songs interpreted by so many wonderful sopranos, and now The Kresge Foundation has made it possible to record them so that they can enjoy a wider distribution.

“I am delighted to add another wonderful artist to that roster. Soprano Leah Partridge was, after an extensive search, my choice to create the role of Roxane in the world premiere of my opera ‘Cyrano’ and her beauty and expressivity was breathtaking. To have my musical interpretation of Millay’s extraordinary sonnets brought to life again with Leah’s artistry is such a pleasure.”

“I, Being Born a Woman
I, being born a woman and distressed
By all the needs and notions of my kind,
Am urged by your propinquity to find
Your person fair, and feel a certain zest
To bear your body’s weight upon my breast:
So subtly is the fume of life designed,
To clarify the pulse and cloud the mind,
And leave me once again undone, possessed.

Think not for this, however, the poor treason
Of my stout blood against my staggering brain,
I shall remember you with love, or season
My scorn with pity, —let me make it plain:
I find this frenzy insufficient reason
For conversation when we meet again.

What Lips My Lips Have Kissed, and Where, and Why
What lips my lips have kissed and where, and why,
I have forgotten, and what arms have lain
Under my head till morning; but the rain
Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh
Upon the glass and listen for reply,
And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain
For unremembered lads that not again
Will turn to me at midnight with a cry.

Thus in the winter stands the lonely tree,
Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one,
Yet knows its boughs more silent than before;
I cannot say what loves have come and gone,
I only know that summer sang in me
A little while, that in me sings no more.

Four Sonnets by Edna St. Vincent Millay

Tucked into the back cover of this book is a compact disc of David DiChiera’s composition, “Four Sonnets,” recorded for this monograph on September 28, 2013 at OPERA America headquarters in New York City, with pianist Craig Ketter accompanying soprano Leah Partridge.

Leah Partridge has performed in operas and as a concert soloist across the United States and in Europe. She premiered the role of Roxane in David DiChiera’s opera “Cyrano” and has recently performed at The Metropolitan Opera as the First Niece in “Peter Grimes,” as La Charmeuse in “Thais” and as Manon in “La Fille du Regiment.” She also is an assistant professor of voice at Kennesaw State University.

Craig Ketter has performed as a soloist and chamber musician throughout the world, with a repertoire that includes major piano concertos by Beethoven, Brahms, Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff. He also has taught master classes throughout the United States, served as a guest professor in several institutions and is head of the piano faculty at the American Festival for the Arts in Houston, Texas.
Time Does Not Bring Relief
Time does not bring relief; you all have lied
Who told me time would ease me of my pain!
I miss him in the weeping of the rain;
I want him at the shrinking of the tide;
The old snows melt from every mountain-side,
And last year’s leaves are smoke in every lane;
But last year’s bitter loving must remain
Heaped on my heart, and my old thoughts abide.
There are a hundred places where I fear
To go,—so with his memory they brim.
And entering with relief some quiet place
Where never fell his foot or shone his face
I say, “There is no memory of him here!”
And so stand stricken, so remembering him.

Loving You Less Than Life
Loving you less than life, a little less
Than bitter-sweet upon a broken wall
Or brushwood smoke in autumn, I confess
I cannot swear I love you not at all.
For there is that about you in this light—
A yellow darkness, sinister of rain—
Which sturdily recalls my stubborn sight
To dwell on you, and dwell on you again.
And I am made aware of many a week
I shall consume, remembering in what way
Your brown hair grows about your brow and cheek,
And what divine absurdities you say:
Till all the world, and I, and surely you,
Will know I love you, whether or not I do.
FINDING MY TIMING…
This late in my career

BY DAVID DICHERA

In 1982, I brought the incomparable Cleo Laine to Michigan Opera Theatre for her American stage debut in Sondheim's “A Little Night Music.” As I prepare for the world premiere of my opera, “Cyrano,” I can’t help but think of the wonderful and poignant scene in which Cleo (opposite baritone Ron Raines), as Desirée Armfeldt, a successful but aging actress, questions her attempt to rekindle an old affair in the very poignant “Send In The Clowns.” She sings “Isn’t it rich, isn’t it queer, losing my timing so late in my career.” Taking her cue, I, like Desirée, have returned to rekindle the flame of an old love — my love of composing.

“...Sure of my lines, but no one is there.”

Growing up in Los Angeles — studying piano, composition and musicology at UCLA, I never imagined my career would focus on nurturing opera companies. Instead, I dreamed of being a concert pianist and expressing my emotions through my own music. But, it was the 1960s, a time when writing music in any style other than atonal, serial or even electronic was considered irrelevant and redundant in academic circles, so I felt compelled to abandon my muse. There I was, a neo-romantic totally out of step with what was “in.”

Knowing, as Desirée Armfeldt, that my “Love” and I were simply out of sync, I placed my composing on the back burner, and instead turned to teaching, proselytizing, cajoling and leading the charge to bring opera to Detroit, Orange County and Dayton — the communities I so proudly served. As an impresario, I felt especially rewarded (perhaps a vicarious pleasure) to be in a position that enabled me to revive neglected American works such as Blitzstein’s “Regina” (1977), Copland’s “The Tender Land” (1978) and Gruenberg’s “Emperor Jones” (1979) as well as introduce musical theater, especially works by Sondheim “A Little Night Music” (1983), “Sweeney Todd” (1984) and “Follies” (1988), to the operatic repertoire. Aside from revivals, however, the appearance of new operas in the American musical scene was rare. For example, in 1979, the year in which I was elected president of OPERA America, we learned that there was only one premiere of a new work in all of North America and that by a small company based in Toronto. The barren operatic landscape led us to establish a new initiative entitled “Opera for the ’80s and Beyond.” This fund was devoted entirely to encouraging opera companies to take on the risk of commissioning new works. Within a decade, dozens of new works emerged, including such seminal works as “Nixon in China,” “McTeague” and “The Secret Garden.”

“The work comes into the world at an undetermined hour, from a still unknown, but it comes inevitably.”

— Giacomo Puccini
While this initiative certainly served to improve the state of opera in America (as it related to expanding the repertoire) an even greater challenge stood before our industry. At that time, it became apparent that the demographic of our audiences did not reflect that of our communities, including the dramatically changing face of our urban centers. To better serve our communities, and for our every survival, it was vital that we encourage new works that more directly involved the large African American, Latino, Asian and other diverse constituencies in our cities. To this end, I enthusiastically served as chairman of a new initiative, again under the aegis of OPERA America, that encouraged opera companies to reach out and commission artists from these diverse communities. Entitled “Opera for a New America,” the program brought forth works reflective of the history, music, literature and dance of various cultures. “Opera for a New America” not only gave us exciting new works, but ultimately served to build bridges that at last linked opera to America’s rich diversity. Here in Detroit, my desire to build bridges into our extensive African American community led me to not only nurture many African American artists, but to also present productions such as “Treemonisha,” “Pony and Bess,” and more recently the world premiere of “Margaret Garner.”

“…Just when I’d stopped opening doors…”

So what does all this operatic history have to do with my “Cyrano”? Well, during these decades of intense operatic activity on my part, the secret composer in me observed, with growing interest, a musical environment that now allows composers to draw from all styles and past periods, as well as current trends (including popular and ethnic music). With this, I felt that perhaps I could find the courage to return to my own muse without fear of rejection. At last, I felt liberated to write my opera.

“…Are we a pair?…”

But an opera on what subject? Although the answer to this question wasn’t immediately clear, what I did know is that it should be a great love story — one that might inspire me to write music that would provide even deeper emotional resonance to the passions of its characters. Enter Bernard Uzan who crafted a libretto that is dramatically effective and focused in its retelling of the play. I am especially grateful to Maestro Mark Flint who encouraged me in times of depression and insecurity, and who has provided an orchestration that so clearly reflects my intentions. And, of course, I am so pleased that my colleagues Robert Driver in Philadelphia, and Robert Heuer in Miami have demonstrated their commitment to “Cyrano” by collaborating with Michigan Opera Theatre in the creation of this beautiful production by John Pascoe, and presenting the opera as part of their seasons.

For the past seven years “Cyrano” and I have been intimate companions. Our secret life together took place in early mornings before meetings, or late at night after performances on rehearsals. On a few occasions, I had the opportunity to escape the daily challenges of running an opera company to focus on a full attention on my opera. Through the generosity of friends, I found myself writing in such diverse surrounds as Orange County, Manhattan, and even a half-restored castle in Scotland. I am especially grateful to Karen DiChiera and our daughters, Lisa and Christina, for their patience and encouragement.

It has been a fascinating journey collaborating with Bernard Uzan who crafted a libretto that is dramatically effective and focused in its retelling of the play. I am especially grateful to Maestro Mark Flint who encouraged me in times of depression and insecurity, and who has provided an orchestration that so clearly reflects my intentions. And, of course, I am so pleased that my colleagues Robert Driver in Philadelphia, and Robert Heuer in Miami have demonstrated their commitment to “Cyrano” by collaborating with Michigan Opera Theatre in the creation of this beautiful production by John Pascoe, and presenting the opera as part of their seasons.

When I visited Robert Driver in the summer of 2005 to acquaint him with the opera, he stopped me after minutes at the piano and exclaimed, “David, why have you been wasting your life running opera companies?” The comment took me aback, but then, like Desiree Armfeldt in contemplating her career, I accepted the fact that like Cyrano, I have had, for the past four decades, a very public outer life of community activities and am now ready to return to my youth affair with my inner life.
this kind of music was not just old-fashioned but
downright reactionary. “I would bring in my heartfelt music,” he said with
a slight smile, sitting in a Philadelphia restaurant
before Wednesday’s “Cyrano” performance, “and
my teachers, people like Lukas Foss, would say,
‘Well, yes, but you could do this, and that….’ They
were trying to make it more like what everybody
else was doing.”

Composing, it seemed, was to remain a private
pleasure. DiChiera expressed his love of opera in
other ways, like creating a new 2,700-seat home for
Michigan Opera Theatre in the 1990s. But after that
project was completed, his dream of writing an opera,
in a climate more open to new opera and to a variety
of musical styles, seemed within reach.

Philosophically, DiChiera is not opposed to atonality;
he says he might well use it in another opera about
a different subject. “Opera is theater,” he says —
whatever musical style contributes to the expression
of the drama is there for a composer to use. But
on the evidence of “Cyrano,” there is no question
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fuel a veritable American opera renaissance. You could
say that he has spent his whole career creating the
requisite preconditions to write an opera of his own.

Opera is, fundamentally, an old-fashioned art. And
DiChiera is an old-fashioned composer. Debonair,
with crisp, white hair and a clipped mustache, he
repeatedly evokes the description of “gentleman”
from people who might normally not use the term
— such as Marc Scorca, his current successor at OPERA
America, who calls him both “a pioneer and a
dynamic visionary,” as well as “beloved in our field.”
What DiChiera loves about opera is its potential for
verbal and melodic expression — at least that can
be inferred from “Cyrano,” with its ravishing
harmonies, arching ensembles, full-blooded arias.

In the late 1950s and ’60s, when DiChiera was
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PHILADELPHIA’S “CYRANO”: Actually, They Do Make ’Em Like That Anymore

BY ANNE MIDGETTE, February 15, 2008

PHILADELPHIA — It’s a story of love deferred, love lived by proxy, love finally realized late in life. It’s the story of “Cyrano de Bergerac,” of the prominently proboscised hero of Edmond Rostand’s late-19th-century play, doomed to unrequited love. But it is also the story of composer David DiChiera and his opera, “Cyrano.” For the story of “Cyrano” — which had its world premiere in Detroit in October and is now at the Opera Company of Philadelphia through Sunday — is itself an old-fashioned tale of love and late
flowering. DiChiera is 72, and “Cyrano” is his first full-length opera. But he has spent his whole life loving opera and finding ways to get closer to it — as a student, as a musicologist and professor specializing in 18th-century composers, and as an administrator.

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harmonies, arching ensembles, full-blooded arias.

In the late 1950s and ’60s, when DiChiera was
studying composition in an environment dominated
by serialism and experiments in electronic music,
the conductor and orchestrator Mark Flint — but the musical density of the score is the result of his conception.

"Cyrano" is a new opera that feels old. What is interesting is that it does not feel "neo": the music is melodioud and tonal, but generally involving; evocative of the past, but not openly derivative. Nor is it easy. On Wednesday night in Philadelphia, the orchestra under Stefan Lano audibly struggled in places (and particularly in the brass) with its evocative solo lines.

The opera gives all its performers, and particularly its singers, a tremendous amount to do. By the third performance Wednesday, fatigue was audible in a gravelly quality from the baritone Marian Pop in the title role, although he rallied in the later acts; and in the loss of color and body from the higher register of the soprano Evelyn Pollock, visually well cast as the lovely Roxane. Stephen Costello — a tenor about whom there is already much buzz in the opera world — gave indication of promise as Christian, the handsome but stupid lover who enlists Cyrano's poetic aid to win Roxane's love. Unlike many operas, this one started slow and got better: the balcony scene in Act 2, studded with harp runs and the stars of flute tones, was a highlight, and the final scene an appropriate climax.

DiChiera's late-blooming composing career raises the question of what it means to love opera. Everyone in the field gives much lip service to the idea that we want new operas. Yet opera as it is appreciated by most of its fans is not a new art; those who define themselves as opera-lovers are more likely to embrace Puccini and Wagner than the most prolific American opera composers of our time, John Adams ("Nixon in China,” “Doctor Atomic”) and Philip Glass (who has written more than 20 operas, most recently “Appomattox”). Where new music is experimental and cutting-edge, opera is thought of as big and buxom and romantic, and the meeting of the two is often an uneasy fusion, in terms of its artistic value and in terms of its resonance with the public.

DiChiera is notable in that his approach is completely without pose. He has written an opera that fits any opera-lover's definition, and he is only minimally concerned that it is not anyone's definition of progressive. Its conservatism might make it a difficult work to champion. But it is utterly sincere, and affecting: a love story that comes from the heart.

Anne Midgette’s review appeared on February 15, 2008, in The Philadelphia Enquirer and is reprinted here with permission of PARS.
“When I’m casting a role and there are two people that are equally talented, I will choose the person of color because opera needs to become completely integrated in terms of diversity.”

-David DiChiera

The operatic art form, unlike dance, theater, the visual arts and to some extent the symphony, was almost exclusively a repetition of works of the past, and primarily pre-1900. Naturally, we all lamented that an art form based solely on the past was in danger of eventual extinction if it did not evolve and renew itself into the present. As producers and directors of opera companies we acknowledged the dilemma, but felt rather paralyzed in attacking the problem. 1982 was the third year of my term as president of OPERA America and while we had made substantial progress in establishing initiatives in education and membership expansion, the solution to engendering more new works still loomed as an imponderable.

It was in the summer of 1982, near the end of my term as president, that our then-Executive Director Martin Kagan brought me together with Howard Klein of the Rockefeller Foundation at an OPERA America meeting in Seattle. Through previous discussions, Martin had ascertained that Howard had a deep and committed interest in the need to stimulate the creation of new works.

In our conversation, it was clear that Howard felt that some of the most creative work was taking place outside the opera world. I was absolutely excited that he agreed with me that it was necessary to effect a change within the opera field and not let opera companies be “end run” by the creation of the new music theater within other fields, for that would serve to accentuate even more the atrophy current within our industry.

Because there was so little consensus among the membership about how to approach a problem of this magnitude, we decided to hold an intensive three-day forum to debate the issue and, hopefully, begin to make a difference. The Detroit Conference that took place Aug. 26-28, 1982, was probably one of the most exciting events in my career. We brought together a fascinating mixture of composers, conductors, playwrights, stage directors and general directors of opera companies — representing an incredible array of talents.
of perspectives, opinions and attitudes both positive and negative and every shade in between.

The debate was heated and included lots of grandstanding, but our facilitators, Tom Burns and Larry Hirschhorn, did a great job leading and structuring the proceedings. Only once near the end of the second day, when it was imperative that we determine some priorities for action for the final day, did chaos threaten to abort the process, and our facilitators called on me to step in and get things back on track. While there were many possible solutions and possible approaches that were valid, we prioritized and identified three needs which OPERA America should address.

First, we had to admit that as a group, those of us who were responsible for the repertoire were not exposed to and aware of what was happening creatively outside our narrow world of opera.

Second, opera companies should be given financial incentives to take risks, to bring artists together to develop new ideas and works and, most important, to understand that we need not necessarily produce all the projects we experimented with.

And finally, large amounts of grant support were essential to help companies produce those new works that were deemed worthy. Our challenge was to strike while the iron was hot, and to take advantage of the lucky circumstance that we had a foundation that was impatient to work with us.

With Opera America’s annual conference just a few months away, Martin, Howard and I set out to structure the various components of a program that would be acceptable to the Rockefeller Foundation and also be approved by a membership that had had little time to be involved with the evolution of a project which would turn out to be the largest initiative in the organization’s history. The greatest possible obstacle for ratification was the implementation of a large-scale grantmaking program that might tend to place companies in competition with one another and create a negative dynamic within an organization which had heretofore disbursed minimal funding. Our solution, while perhaps not ideal, was to create an arms-length panel of qualified professionals unaffiliated with Opera America companies that would decide which works should receive major production grants.

My strategy for the annual conference, in December 1983, was to appear personally at various meetings of representatives of member companies to sell the program, answer any questions and allay any doubts before the project came up for vote. The agenda was structured so that the presentation of Opera for the 80s and Beyond became the very last item of business at the end of the conference.

My last act as president was to guide the discussion period by first giving critics an opportunity to proclaim that “we should concentrate on second productions of existing works” and that “giving large grants will tear apart the organization,” then summarizing the value of this unique initiative and finally calling for the vote. The rest is now history.
Perhaps the most-heralded production of DiChiera’s legendary career, “Margaret Garner” — in its creative team, casting, direction and production — is the summation of DiChiera’s vision for diversity on the stage. “We’ve been dedicated at Michigan Opera Theatre to nurturing and discovering African American talent and furthering their careers by putting them on stage. And for our audiences, it’s important for people to see themselves in an art form. That was the reason I produced ‘Margaret Garner,’ with Toni Morrison writing the libretto,” DiChiera said in an interview with Time.com.

“Margaret Garner” is based on the true story of a runaway slave in pre-Civil War Kentucky who killed a daughter rather than return her to slavery. She became the high-profile defendant in a trial arguing whether the crime involved represented murder or the destruction of property.

DiChiera says he felt that the story of “Margaret Garner,” told in operatic form, was a noble idea — “the quest for freedom, a subject connecting our past, present and future” — despite the initial discouragement he felt when sounding out the idea with African American friends and colleagues.

THE CREATION OF “MARGARET GARNER”

BY SUE LEVYTSKY

Composer: Richard Danielpour
Librettist: Toni Morrison

World premiere: May 7, 2005, at the Detroit Opera House
Subsequent performances by co-commissioners Cincinnati Opera in July 2005 and Opera Company of Philadelphia in February 2006

always believed that when we opened the Detroit Opera House that our first world premiere should celebrate and pay homage to the African American experience,” says David DiChiera, recalling the opening night of the internationally significant work, “Margaret Garner.”

Denyce was here at that time, 1999, singing opposite Andrea Bocelli in MOT’s production of Massenet’s ‘Werther,’” DiChiera says. “She brought up the subject of the real Margaret Garner as her friend, the composer Richard Danielpour, was very interested in Toni’s Morrison’s novel of the subject, ‘Beloved.’ Coincidentally, my daughter Christina had brought the book to my attention, as she knew I was looking for an interesting subject for an opera and I hoped to do one about an African American.”

“Denyce was the lead at that time, 1999, singing opposite Andrea Bocelli in MOT’s production of Massenet’s ‘Werther,’” DiChiera says. “She brought up the subject of the real Margaret Garner as her friend, the composer Richard Danielpour, was very interested in Toni’s Morrison’s novel of the subject, ‘Beloved.’ Coincidentally, my daughter Christina had brought the book to my attention, as she knew I was looking for an interesting subject for an opera and I hoped to do one about an African American.”

Denyce Graves starred in the title role of “Margaret Garner” when it premiered at the Detroit Opera House.

Overture to Development

Richard Danielpour, one of the most commissioned composers of his time, and the Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison had already begun a treatment of “Margaret Garner” when Graves, now an internationally renowned mezzo-soprano, approached DiChiera about the idea of producing the opera.
“I thought ‘it’s a wonderful story, and Toni Morrison is a great icon in the black community,’” DiChiera says. “We’re in a city that’s more than 80 percent African American, so if we’re going to be an opera company in the metropolitan area, we have to do things that invite that community to be involved with the art form. We see movies about slavery, we see plays; but an opera, with its music and its power, provides an emotional impact that goes beyond all other art forms.”

Michigan Opera Theatre had much invested in “Margaret Garner” — not just $2 million in expenses, but the prestige of the company’s first world premiere in nearly 30 years. (The first, in 1976, was Thomas Pasatieri’s “Washington Square.”) Recognizing the divisive nature of the subject, DiChiera asked composer Danielpour to speak to a select group of community leaders to tell them “how you see this opera.”

“This was no ‘Porgy and Bess,’” recalls arts and community leader Betty Brooks, who participated in the roundtable. “This was based on our actual culture, the indescribable plight of a woman who killed her children because she didn’t want them to be slaves. I would be very proud if 100 years from now someone in Amsterdam saw a production of ‘Margaret Garner’ and understood how African Americans suffered.”

Moving to Center Stage

With the emotional backing of the community in place, DiChiera reached out to fellow opera companies in Cincinnati and Philadelphia — older American cities with populations as diverse as that of Detroit — to consider becoming co-commissioners and producers of the work. The practice of co-production between opera companies, using their pooled resources to defray the expenses of mounting large productions such as “Margaret Garner,” originated with DiChiera himself during his simultaneous tenure as general director of three opera companies — MOT, California’s Opera Pacific and Ohio’s Dayton Opera.

“To take a step like this, you must have confidence in the integrity and the artistic judgment of the other person,” said Robert Driver, artistic director of the Philadelphia company, in a 2005 interview with The Detroit News. “When David called with the idea of ‘Margaret Garner’ I was very open to it simply because of the person he is. He’s one of the most respected people in the arts in America.”

The consortium of MOT, the Cincinnati Opera and the Opera Company of Philadelphia (now Opera Philadelphia) became a reality, and by the fall of 2000 a commission was in place for Danielpour and Morrison to write the opera.
The high caliber of the creative team, the historical significance of the subject matter, local community connections to the Underground Railroad and the enduring relevance of a story about the fight for freedom encouraged the support of “flocks of angels” in all three commissioning companies. “We organized ‘The Friends of Margaret Garner’ in Detroit to especially reach out to the black community. Friends were dear — $1,000 each,” says Betty Brooks. Funding events enjoyed significant participation from Detroit’s African American community, with a “huge amount of pride” attached to the success of these efforts.

Danielpour and Morrison finally completed work on “Margaret Garner” in December 2004. Three-week workshops, which included two costly orchestra rehearsals, had taken place in August 2003 and August 2004, wherein the score was reevaluated and revised, characters were fleshed out, staging strategies and set design were altered and thousands of rewrites were made to ready the opera for its premiere.

The opera was a smashing success and a powerfully unifying experience for the city of Detroit. It drew a diverse audience, with black, white and Hispanic, old and young, novices and aficionados buzzing about how the opera was a starting point for a discussion of racism in modern-day America. The Detroit Free Press, in its May 7th editorial, called the debut of “Margaret Garner” at the Detroit Opera House “an extraordinary event... The opportunity to see something new of this magnitude in this area cannot be overstated because the whole region still struggles with issues of segregation and inability to talk easily across racial lines.”

The premiere drew to Detroit both national press coverage and the national convention of OPERA America — a coup for DiChiera, who had enjoyed an influential turn as president of the prestigious organization.

“As you diversify faces on the stage, you diversify the audience because people begin to see themselves up there. And then you diversify the board, and the theater or opera really starts to belong to the community,” director Kenny Leon said in an interview with The Detroit News. “This opera, I think, is bigger than all of us.”

“Margaret Garner” has gone on to critical acclaim in numerous productions since its Detroit premiere. It was staged again by MOT at the Detroit Opera House in 2008. It is one of the most significant operas since 1935’s “Porgy and Bess” to focus on the African American experience.
What more wonderful way to learn more about opera than from the man himself, David DiChiera?

Growing up in North Carolina, my exposure to opera was limited to singing the beautiful arias of “Madama Butterfly” with my high school’s Glee Club and listening to opera on the radio. I never dreamed that my world of opera would begin in Detroit, a city known for cars and factories, the place where I would meet so many opera singers and conductors and experience how an opera comes together for an opening night.

For this wealth of experience, I must thank David DiChiera, who encouraged me to become part of his opera world through volunteerism. I have now been involved in volunteer work at the Detroit Opera House for over 20 years. I first met David at the Music Hall, when we were both serving on the board. He soon asked if I would take over as President of the Volunteers Association at the opera house. I did and later became a member of the board of directors and one of three chairs for the Opera Ball that preceded the opening of the Opera House. I enjoyed the rare experience of guiding funders into the house-in-progress wearing a hard hat.

The opera house has been very vital and visual in Detroit since its doors opened on April 21, 1996. What a day that was for the city of Detroit and the state of Michigan! What a grand, theatrical day, with Luciano Pavarotti and a host of opera singers performing on the stage of the new grand opera house. With this achievement, David showed people that opera would work for our blue-collar town of cars. Where else but Detroit can you find an opera house sitting in the midst of two sports arenas — both of which were built after the opera house opened?

Working with David has given me occasion to use my creative and artistic abilities to bring cultural events of great meaning to Detroit. For me, the most important day after the opening of the opera house was the world premiere of “Margaret Garner” in 2005. Working with David as chair of the world premiere committee, we raised close to $2 million for the production and event. The premiere was one of the proudest moments in my life for it created an opportunity to showcase “Margaret Garner,” a black opera, and our grand Detroit Opera House to the world. I also chair African American dance at the Detroit Opera House, which brings in the Dance Theatre of Harlem and Alvin Ailey and other African American dance companies. Most recently, I had the privilege of helping raise $1 million for the world premiere of David’s own grand opera, “Cyrano,” at the Detroit Opera House.

My work with David has brought rich experiences even further afield, first as a panelist for the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C., and then with OPERA America in New York. I am happy to fulfill my dreams of seeing opera on stage in a magnificent house and seeing it through the eyes of Dr. David DiChiera, one of the greatest opera personas in the world.

- Betty Brooks, Michigan Opera Theatre board member, arts philanthropist and community leader

Ever since David DiChiera created the Detroit Opera House, it’s brought about a stronger bond among people who love the arts in Detroit — he has been the life preserver for the arts in the city. Without him, none of Detroit’s arts supporters would have had the stamina, the interest, the “glue” to keep connecting the dots in the city, not only towards the opera and the opera house over the years, but towards the Music Hall, the Max M. Fisher Music Center and the Detroit Institute of Arts. He has really been the catalyst. I don’t think we would have the opera house without his ability to bring people together. He has maintained his role as the nucleus, and we have stayed loyal to him because he has taught us how to be loyal and we love him for that.

- Heidi Ewing, filmmaker, director of “Detropia”
David is probably one of the most amazing people I’ve ever met. He is known as being artistically brilliant, but as you work with him you begin to realize how brilliant of a businessman he is. His charm, his commitment, his talent, he is phenomenal in attracting people to support him who are just as committed as he is and that combination is what has caused Michigan Opera Theatre and the opera house to survive.

- Herman Frankel, Michigan Opera Theatre board member, business and community leader

I look up to Dr. DiChiera because I know he’s about making a difference in the world. I love him.

- Kenny Leon, director of “Margaret Garner”

Picture a little boy whose immigrant parents, working as day laborers, could not read, write, or speak English. Imagine him growing up poor in the hilly town of McKeesport, Pa., with little opportunity for success. Did he dare to dream anyhow? Had he read Langston Hughes’ poem, “Hold fast to dreams/ For if dreams die / Life is a broken-winged bird/ That cannot fly.”? Was he determined never to let his wings be broken? In spite of adversity, did he already nourish the belief that he had the ability to soar to monumental heights?

I first met David DiChiera during the school year of 1965-66 when I was a research associate at Oakland University and he was teaching there. We were two of several persons invited to a dinner party at the home of one of the professors of English. While I have forgotten most of the professors I met during the one year I was at OU, David remained in my memory. I did not know how accomplished a person he was, but I was impressed by his friendliness and modesty. Conversing with him, I tried to find out more about him and his career, but all I learned was that he taught music.

After he left OU and eventually settled in Detroit, I found out much more about his dedication to music and his phenomenal achievements. I will always be grateful that he chose this city to found the Michigan Opera Theatre, a city which had only an occasional taste of opera, a city where most African Americans were not accustomed to attending what little opera was available. Many Caucasians in Metro Detroit were not interested in opera either.

Thank you, David, for holding fast to your dream and for expanding our musical interests and experiences to include a previously unfamiliar genre. Thank you, too, for including African American operatic performers, as well as opera such as “Margaret Garner.” You have made a very positive difference in the arts in Detroit, and I for one will be forever grateful. And thank you, Kresge Foundation, for naming Dr. DiChiera the 2013 Kresge Eminent Artist. This is a well-deserved honor.

- Naomi Long Madgett, publisher, poet, 2012 Kresge Eminent Artist and Poet Laureate of the City of Detroit

WHAT MANNER OF MAN, WHAT MANNER OF PLACE?

Imagine a place, a much maligned, almost mythical place where — let’s call them cultural alchemists — can work their whirly-giggy and reinvent themselves and the possibilities of this place. Think, for instance of a few of these deed-doers, (a short list being all that time and space and focus will allow us here): mark Ford in his flivver factory, mark Gordy in his pop-hit plant, mark Iggy Pop’s “Fun House” Stooges, mark a generation of bebop musicians in a Blue Bird Inn . . . Dr. Wright’s museum, mark them, masters of all of the improbable vision, of the seemingly impossible undertaking.

We have now been officially sanctioned to lengthen the list by one, mark David DiChiera.

A man who faced the improbability of creating an opera house, in this boisterous, hard-knock, heart-breaking, joy-making, nine-plus lives, city that has come back from more standing 8 counts than a B-movie Palooka.

An opera house; the full Monty. Orchestra in the pit, chorus upstage, tenors, baritones and sopranos in full voice, center, left and right. All regaled in the ready-squinted through the silvery beam aloft with motes, casting Technicolor images on a larger than life screen. My fledgling imagination suited the oceans blue, rode the wild, wide western range, cruised the noir night in pursuit of its own improbable dreams. Rather than taking the path of least resistance and easing along escape-route expressways in search of fairer weather or greener grass, David adopted the notion of Matthew 16:18, and, upon a rock in the 1500 block of Broadway morphed the former Capitol Theatre into The Detroit Opera House, home of Michigan Opera Theatre. Proving once again, that there is no improbability that in this experimental city on the Straits, this town of titlers against the towering windmills of doubters; stone slingers against the Goliaths of nay-sayers of impracticable dreams, against smart money red-lining, and the conventional wisdom of Doubting Thomases, that with the proper sower and the proper seed sown on the proper soil even the barely imaginable may blossom.

Until, once again it dawns on us that this business of improbable dreams done by indomitable doers is not an anomaly at all, that this place is in fact a place to be, rather than be from. Causing us, once again, to celebrate this manner of man in this manner of place.

- Naomi Long Madgett, publisher, poet, 2012 Kresge Eminent Artist and Poet Laureate of the City of Detroit
If you watch David, you can learn a style and a way of embracing life that is of tremendous value. David has a gift for identifying talent that I believe is rare. But his gifts aren’t restricted to those in music. It involves everyday people. His ability to communicate with people, to be interested in you and place worth in your presence, is just as much a talent of his as his ability to compose.

- Nora Moroun, arts philanthropist

Luciano Pavarotti, one of the most successful tenors of all time, has been quoted as saying, “People think I’m disciplined. It is not discipline. It is devotion. There is a great difference.”

The residents and business community in the city of Detroit, and really anyone who has a deep appreciation of opera, know the difference that Dr. DiChiera has made in making the glorious Detroit Opera House, and the tremendous talent that performs on its stage, a significant part of what makes Detroit special.

In fact, Pavarotti and a number of celebrities and dignitaries attended the triumphant opening of the Detroit Opera House in 1996, an event made possible through years of hard work by Dr. DiChiera. He was the only person for the job, as the task required both a devoted soldier and the soul of a true artist.

Dr. DiChiera has been a wonderful partner for General Motors and The General Motors Foundation, taking us on the journey to build this landmark every step of the way. We became contributors at the beginning, and we maintain our relationship with Dr. DiChiera and his staff. His devotion to the Detroit Opera House, and to bringing opera to our city, moved private citizens, corporations and foundations to contribute more, to be better patrons of the arts and, frankly, better citizens of the Detroit community.

Today, we enjoy the splendor of an evening at the Detroit Opera House, not only because of its grandeur, or because of the experiences we have within its walls, but because Dr. DiChiera greets us with his wonderful presence, and at the same time gives us a reminder of what devotion can accomplish.

- Vivian R. Pickard, President, General Motors Foundation and Director, General Motors Corporate Relations

David is not the type to press his work on other people. He has always been very discreet about his talent, not imposing anything on anyone. Most artists, we like to talk about ourselves and to expand on how wonderful we are, but not David, he never does that.

What so impresses me about David is his ability to accommodate ideas other than his own. He is not stuck to what he has done, he is always ready to revisit the work.

This quality is part of his personality — I’ve seen this in him throughout our long friendship. David is always questioning other people as much as he questions himself about ideas or knowledge.

- Bernard Uzan, opera director and librettist, “Cyrano”

David is one of my role models in the way he handles his business and in the way he treats people. There’s a lot to be learned from David in how to be a great leader.

To me, David is more than just a guy who runs the opera house. He has inspired other folks to do more in Detroit. It would have been easy for someone in his position to get discouraged, to change their vision when we had very difficult times here in 2007-08 — there was every reason for those in the arts and cultural world to be discouraged because the support dropped away. David never let it daunt him, he always had a vision, he always had encouragement for others. His was a steady hand at a very difficult time and he set the bar for a lot of folks in the community.

We couldn’t have asked for a better gentleman to be involved in our community. David is the consummate professional — he cares about the community, he understands the broader role of what he does, he always has time for people.

And let’s not forget, he’s taught me a lot about opera. For a kid who grew up in Detroit, that’s quite an accomplishment.

- James G. Vella, President, Ford Motor Company Fund

David DiChiera is a superstar in every sense of the word. He is so well known in the opera world — he is as famous in that world as the top baseball players in the baseball world.

David has been consistently committed to Detroit and to the Opera House and to Michigan Opera Theatre for 43 years. No public figure here has that record. I don’t think there is anyone that even comes close — I’m talking politicians, business leaders, other community leaders. David doesn’t make the money he deserves, he’s constantly sacrificing himself, he’s been offered umpteen opportunities elsewhere, but he’s stayed true to his baby here in Detroit. He is universally loved — everybody loves David in that they respect him for the consistency and the integrity of his vision, for the constant dedication to what he has done and his personal determination.

- Dr. “Rick” Jamison Williams Jr., MOT Board Chairman

I consider myself extremely fortunate to have been chosen to sing Dr. DiChiera’s music. When I sang the role of Roxane in “Cyrano,” he wrote an aria specifically for my voice and strengths as a singer. His writing is achingly beautiful and truly expresses the emotional journey of a character. His songs are equally as moving. The songs require a bit more maturity in the sound, and the settings of the St. Vincent Millay texts are very moving. The songs require a bit more maturity in the sound, and the settings of the St. Vincent Millay texts are very moving.

- Leah Partridge, soprano, “Roxane” in David DiChiera’s “Cyrano” and original recording artist of his “Four Sonnets,” the CD of which accompanies this monograph.
June 1, 2013

Dr. David DiChiera
General Director
Michigan Opera Theatre
Detroit Opera House
1526 Broadway
Detroit, MI 48226

Dear David,

Congratulations, for receiving the 2013 Kresge Eminent Artist award.

The presence of a strong arts and cultural community is essential to any major city. The City of Detroit is fortunate to have such a creative and inspirational artist who is committed to revitalizing our community. Through your work at the Michigan Opera Theatre and your community involvement, you have been able to bridge the cultural divide and attract diverse audiences to your performances. You have been a great partner in helping to transform Detroit and improve the quality of life for our residents.

Thank you for your many contributions to the City of Detroit and for teaching people of all ages and ethnicities about the transformative power of the arts.

Sincerely,

Dave Bing
Mayor

July 1, 2013

Dr. David DiChiera
General Director
Michigan Opera Theatre
Detroit Opera House
1526 Broadway
Detroit, Michigan 48226

Dear David:

As Governor of Michigan, it gives me great pleasure to join with The City of Detroit and the Michigan Opera Theatre to congratulate you on being named the 2013 Kresge Eminent Artist.

I would like to applaud your dedication to preserving the arts through opera and continuing the rich tradition of the Michigan Opera Theatre. Through your efforts, you have instilled in many the importance of opera music and performance. Few can say that they have contributed to the future of their art in such a way as you have. On behalf of the people of Michigan, thank you for your many contributions to our great state.

Once again, congratulations on being named the 2013 Kresge Eminent Artist. I extend best wishes to you in the years to come.

Sincerely,

Rick Snyder
Governor
September 19, 2013

David DiChiera
Michigan Opera Theatre
1526 Broadway St
Detroit, MI 48226

Dear David,

Congratulations on being named the 2013 Kresge Eminent Artist. This is a well-deserved recognition of your commitment to the City of Detroit and the arts. Your leadership and vision have made the Michigan Opera Theatre a catalyst for the City’s revitalization.

Thank you for your focus on encouraging an appreciation for music and opera among young and old alike and building cultural bridges through the arts. We are very fortunate to have someone with your commitment and talent in Michigan.

Again, congratulations. I wish you continued success in the future.

Sincerely,

Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator

June 26th, 2013

Dr. David DiChiera, General Director
Michigan Opera Theatre
Detroit Opera House
1526 Broadway
Detroit, MI 48226

Dear Dr. DiChiera,

I would like to extend my warmest congratulations to you on being selected to receive the Kresge Eminent Artist of 2013 Award. This recognition speaks highly of your professional achievements and contributions to the performing arts.

For over half a century, you have helped bring the beauty and passion of opera to new audiences. As artistic director for opera companies in Michigan, Ohio and California, your administrative skill and artistic acumen have brought immense joy to audiences across the country. You have also left an indelible mark on American opera as a composer in your own right.

In addition to creating or presenting great works of art, you have built a remarkable record of making opera available in new ways to new communities. Not only have you provided an important artistic pipeline to the people of Michigan, but you gave art a starring role in efforts to revitalize and unify our city of Detroit. As president of Opera America from 1979 to 1981, you have helped bring opera to previously untouched communities across the country. And you have been a leader in efforts to encourage and provide funding for new American works and artists.

Your accomplishments as an artist, an administrator, and a leader with the vision to seek new audiences and new missions for opera as a force for good are remarkable and unique. Again, I wish to congratulate you on this achievement and wish you all the best in the future.

Sincerely,

Carl Levin
BIOGRAPHY:
DAVID DICHIERA

Born: April 8, 1935, McKeesport, Pennsylvania

Education
1956
B.A., Phi Beta Kappa
UCLA
Los Angeles, California

1958
M.A., Composition
UCLA
Los Angeles, California

1962
Ph.D., Musicology
UCLA
Los Angeles, California

Professional Activities
1957, 1961
Instructor
UCLA
Los Angeles, California

1962
Associate Professor
Michigan State University-Oakland
Rochester, Michigan

1963-65
Assistant Dean
Continuing Education in the Arts
Oakland University
Rochester, Michigan

1963-1974
Director
Overture to Opera
Detroit Grand Opera Association
Detroit, Michigan

1965-1972
Chairman
Department of Music
Oakland University
Rochester, Michigan

1971-
Founder/General Director/Artistic Director
Michigan Opera Theatre (MOT)
Detroit, Michigan

1975-1982
Founder/Artistic Director
Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts
Detroit, Michigan

1986-1996
Founder/Director
Opera Pacific
Orange County, California

Appointments
1979-1983
President
OPERA America
New York, New York (formerly in
Washington, D.C.)

August 23-26, 1983
Chairman
Conference on New American Works
Sponsored by OPERA America, Rockefeller Foundation and
National Endowment for the Arts

September, 1983
Author: Preface
Perspectives: Creating and Producing Contemporary Opera and Musical Theatre
A Series of Fifteen Monographs, Published by OPERA America

1981-1993
Artistic Director
Dayton Opera
Dayton, Ohio

Trustee
National Institute of Music Theatre

Board Member
American Arts Alliance

Panel Member
National Endowment for the Arts
Washington, D.C.

Chairman
Opera/Musical Theater Panel
National Endowment for the Arts
Washington, D.C.

August 3-9, 1984
Chairman
2nd Annual Conference/Verona, Italy
Public Address: “Evolution of the Opera Audience”

Vice President
International Association of Lyric Theatre
Liege, Belgium
Commissions
1976
Washington Square
Thomas Pasatieri/Kenward Elmale
Adapted from the novel by
Henry James
Commissioned and received its world
premiere October 1, 1976, at the Music
Hall Center for the Performing Arts in
a Michigan Opera Theatre production.
2005
Margaret Garner
Richard Danielpour/Toni Morrison
Commissioned and received its world
premiere May 7, 2005, at the Detroit
Opera House in a $2 million Michigan
Opera Theatre production.

Publications
“Giuseppe und Gian Francesco de Majo”
Die Musik in Geschichte und
Gegenwart
Volume VIII
Bärenreiter-Verlag
Heinrich-Schütz-Allee 35-37
Kassel, Germany, 1960

“Giuseppe Marucci”
Die Musik in Geschichte und
Gegenwart
Volume VIII
Bärenreiter-Verlag
Heinrich-Schütz-Allee 35-37
Kassel, Germany, 1960

“Giovanni Battista Mele”
Die Musik in Geschichte und
Gegenwart
Volume IX
Bärenreiter-Verlag
Heinrich-Schütz-Allee 35-37
Kassel, Germany, 1961

“A Producer looks at Kurt Weill”
Impresario Magazine of the Arts
February-March 1969
Village House Publishers, Inc.
Oak Park, Michigan

“Majo, Gian Francesco de”
The New Grove Dictionary of Music
and Musicians
Volume 11
Edited by Stanley Sadie
Macmillan Publishers Limited

“Majo, Giuseppe de”
The New Grove Dictionary of Music
and Musicians
Volume 11
Edited by Stanley Sadie
Macmillan Publishers Limited

*Josef Myslivecek*
The New Grove Dictionary of Music
and Musicians
Volume 11
Edited by Stanley Sadie
Macmillan Publishers Limited

Selected Awards and
Recognitions
1956
Abbeville Kent Award
UCLA
Los Angeles, California

1956
Gernsheim Award
UCLA
Los Angeles, California

1959
Fulbright Scholar
Italian Opera and Composition
Council for International Exchange
of Scholars
Washington, D.C.

Certification of Appreciation
The Honorary Roman Gribs
Mayor of Detroit
Detroit, Michigan

1976
Senate Resolution
Tribute to the Michigan Opera
Theatre on the Occasion of the
world premiere of a new opera,
“Washington Square.”
Michigan Senate
Lansing, Michigan

1977
Cavalieri
Order of Cavalieri
Bestowed by the President of Italy
Rome, Italy

1979
Michiganian of the Year
The Detroit News
Detroit, Michigan

March, 1979
David DiChiera: Downtown Detroit
Ambassador
Certificate of Recognition
Center Business District
Detroit, Michigan

February 14, 1991
Detroit Free Press
Detroit, Michigan

February 14, 1991
Resolution
Honoring David and Karen
DiChiera as winners of the Year
Michigan Senate
Lansing, Michigan

1980
Il Michielangelo for Distinguished Service
to Children
Boys Town of Italy
Detroit, Michigan
1996
Marquee Award
The Theatre Historical Society
Elmhurst, Illinois

1997
Phoenix Award
For Outstanding Accomplishment in Conservation and Preservation Society of American Travel Writers
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

1997
The Preservation Wayne Honor Award
Preservation Wayne
Detroit, Michigan

1997
Merrill-Palmer Award
For Distinguished Service
Merrill-Palmer Skillman Institute
Detroit, Michigan

1998
Commencement Speaker
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan

1998
Honorary Doctor of Music
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan

1998
Award of Recognition
Detroit City Council
Detroit, Michigan

1998
Certificate of Special Recognition
Wayne County Commission
Detroit, Michigan

1999
Spirit of Innovation Award
Michigan Opera Theatre
Michigan Council for the Arts and Cultural Affairs
Detroit, Michigan

1999
The Christopher Columbus Day *Man of the Year* Award
1999 Columbus Day Celebration Committee
Detroit, Michigan

2000
Bridge Builder’s Award
Partners for Livable Communities
Washington, D.C.

2001
Armenian Scroll
In recognition of David DiChiera’s pioneering of the Armenian National Opera “Anoush”
The Armenian Community of Detroit
Detroit, Michigan

2001
Certificate of Appreciation
The Ailand Club of Detroit
Detroit, Michigan

2001
April 28, 2002
Italian American of the Year
Italian Study Group
Detroit, Michigan

2001
Honorary Ph.D.
Doctor of Humane Letters
Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan

2001
Induction into The Leaders Club
School of Business Administration
Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan

2001
Honoree/2004 NANM Award’s Banquet
National Association of Negro Musicians
Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan

2002
Distinguished Service Award
National Opera Association
Canyon, Texas

2003
Closing the Gap Award
New Detroit, Inc.
Detroit, Michigan

2003
Neal Shine Award for Exemplary Regional Leadership
Detroit Free Press
Detroit, Michigan

2003
Honorary Ph.D.
Doctor of Humane Letters
Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan

2004
Honorary Ph.D.
Doctor of Music
University of Michigan
Livonia, Michigan

2005
Honoree
The ACLU of Michigan
Detroit, Michigan

2005
Lifetime Achievement Award
National Opera Association
Canyon, Texas

2005
Certificate of Appreciation
Detroit City Council
Detroit, Michigan

2005
Publisher’s Choice Award/Michigan Opera Theatre
Wilde Awards
Between the Lines Magazine
Livonia, Michigan

2005
Spirit of Giving Award
Franklin-Wright Settlements
Detroit, Michigan

2006
Lifetime Achievement Award
National Opera Association
Canyon, Texas

2007
Closing the Gap Award
New Detroit, Inc.
Detroit, Michigan

2008
Neal Shine Award for Exemplary Regional Leadership
Detroit Free Press
Detroit, Michigan

2008
Honorary Ph.D.
Doctor of Humane Letters
Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan

2009
Kresge Eminent Artist
The Kresge Foundation
Troy, Michigan

2012
Honoree
Italian Heritage Society
Detroit, Michigan

2012
Neal Shine Award for Exemplary Regional Leadership
Detroit Free Press
Detroit, Michigan

2012
Honorary Ph.D.
Doctor of Humanities
Wayne State University
Livonia, Michigan

2012
Honored
The Kresge Foundation
Troy, Michigan

2012
Executive Club Lifetime Achievement Award
Detroit Athletic Club
Detroit, Michigan

2013
Opera Honors
National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)
Washington, D.C.

2013
Molti Grazie!
In celebration of the 40th anniversary of its founding
Michigan Opera Theatre
Detroit, Michigan

2013
Knight Arts
James S. and James L. Knight Foundation
Detroit, Michigan

2013
Top: David DiChiera greeting the next generation of opera lovers at The Detroit Opera House. Bottom: In an effort to expand its audience, the Detroit Opera House opens its doors to a variety of events. Here, David DiChiera at a benefit for the Michigan Humane Society.
## Musical Works

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>Sacred Cantata</td>
<td>For organ, chorus and soloists, Church of Jesus Christ, Los Angeles, California</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Piano Concerto</td>
<td>Master’s Thesis in Composition, University of California at Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Piano Sonata</td>
<td>Commissioned by the United States Information Service, Naples Festival of Contemporary and American Music, Naples, Italy, Broadcast Radio Italiana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Lament for Two Pianos</td>
<td>Premiere, Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Fantasy for Violin and Piano</td>
<td>Premiere, Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Souvenir d’Arras</td>
<td>For violin, cello and piano, Based on themes from the Arras scene in the grand opera “Cyrano.” World Premiere, May 22, 2009, Ambassador Chamber Trio, Théatre d’Arras, Arras, France</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### Our Congratulations

Each year, the Kresge Eminent Artist Award recognizes a metropolitan Detroit artist whose work and career exemplify sustained, outstanding achievement and a commitment to sharing that work with the local community. In what is a quintessential Detroit story, David DiChiera has worked tenaciously for decades, against all odds, to make Detroit a hub for opera, dance and musical theater. It is due to his unwavering dedication to Detroit and his outstanding work as an impresario, composer and artistic director that Kresge Arts in Detroit is proud to name David DiChiera the Kresge Eminent Artist for 2013.

In his accomplished and diverse career, David has been a regional and international force committed to making opera more available and accessible to a wider audience. Notably, he founded both the Michigan Opera Theatre and Opera Pacific and has served as Artistic Director of the Dayton Opera Association and as president of OPERA America. In addition to his work as general and artistic director at Michigan Opera Theatre, David is a critically acclaimed composer; among his most celebrated works is the full-length opera “Cyrano,” composed in 2007.

David is renowned for his commitment to Detroit, for nurturing African American artists in the field, for fostering collaborations with other organizations, and for supporting the composition and production of new operas that reflect the communities in which they are performed. David has always felt strongly that having an opera house in Detroit could help revitalize the city, and we honor him for his pioneering leadership and artistic vision.

Our sincere thanks to the Kresge Arts in Detroit Advisory Council for selecting David from a number of very talented nominees. Kresge Arts in Detroit recognizes that artists are a critical force in the revitalization of our region — David’s sustained accomplishments and care for the cultural life of our city make him a community treasure, and eminent indeed.

Michelle Perron
Director
Kresge Arts in Detroit
A Note from Richard L. Rogers

The College for Creative Studies is proud to partner with The Kresge Foundation to administer the Kresge Eminent Artist Award through the Kresge Arts in Detroit program. CCS believes strongly in the importance of individual artists to society, and we particularly value the role they are playing today in energizing and reimagining our community. As it is the College’s mission to educate the next generations of artists, we are glad to be part of a program that recognizes people who have devoted their lives to art and who have enriched the lives of so many others.

I am particularly proud that CCS is playing a role in honoring David DiChiera, who brilliantly combines the roles of musician, impresario and community advocate. He is a dear colleague and an inspiration to those of us who lead cultural institutions in the region. His deeply honed musical sensibilities combined with a steely determination and deep love for this city have given us great opera in a great opera house. He is a hero to all who want to build a more robust cultural life in Detroit and richly deserves recognition as the 2013 Kresge Eminent Artist.

Richard L. Rogers
President
College for Creative Studies

The Kresge Eminent Artist Award

Established in 2008, the Kresge Eminent Artist Award honors an exceptional literary, fine or performing artist whose influential body of work, lifelong professional achievements and proven, continued commitment to the Detroit cultural community are evident. The Kresge Eminent Artist Award celebrates artistic innovation and rewards integrity and depth of vision with the financial support of $50,000 as judged by the Kresge Arts in Detroit Advisory Council. The College for Creative Studies administers the Kresge Eminent Artist Award on behalf of The Kresge Foundation.

The Kresge Eminent Artist Award, annual Kresge Artist Fellowships, and multi-year grants to arts and cultural organizations in metropolitan Detroit constitute Kresge Arts in Detroit, the foundation’s effort to provide broad support to the regional arts community.

Kresge Eminent Artist Award Winners

Charles McGee
Master jazz trumpet player and recording artist Marcus Belgrave has enthralled audiences worldwide with his musical virtuosity and mentored scores of aspiring young musicians, many of whom went on to become great artists themselves. His tireless work, amazing technical abilities and the joy and spontaneity with which he creates distinguish him worldwide as a jazz master. The internationally recognized trumpet long ago chose Detroit as his home and he remains among its most celebrated performing artists, an icon to musicians and lovers of jazz everywhere. His energy, artistry, and unwavering dedication to the advancement of music education and performance excellence epitomize the distinguishing qualities of a Kresge Eminent Artist.

Bill Harris
Detroit’s distinguished author, literary critic and college educator, has been writing for more than 40 years, winning national acclaim for his poetry, plays, novels, essays and criticism. His plays have received more than 100 productions in the United States. Harris was named as 2011 Kresge Eminent Artist for his commitment to cultivating creative writing talent as a Wayne State University English professor and for his own professional literary contributions as author and playwright. Now professor emeritus, Harris published “Booker T. & Them: A Blues,” an examination in long poem form of the era of Booker T. Washington, with Wayne State University Press in 2012. He is working on three new novels.

Naomi Long Madgett
Award-winning poet, editor, and educator Naomi Long Madgett has nurtured generations of aspiring poets through her teaching, annual poetry award and publishing company. Madgett established Detroit’s Lotus Press in 1972, making it possible for other African American poets to publish and distribute their work. Madgett was named a Kresge Eminent Artist in recognition of her deep and abiding commitment to metropolitan Detroit and its literary artists. Now in her ninth decade, this distinguished woman of letters and Detroit poet laureate continues to harness her own talents in the service of others as she edits poetry manuscripts, gives readings and introduces new poets to the public.
About The Kresge Foundation

The Kresge Foundation is a $3 billion private, national foundation that works to expand opportunities in America’s cities through grantmaking and investing in arts and culture, education, the environment, health, human services, community development and in our place-based efforts in Detroit. In 2012, the Board of Trustees approved 410 awards totaling $130.5 million; $150.3 million was paid out to grantees over the course of the year. For more information, visit kresge.org.

David DiChiera’s Four Sonnets

(with verses by Edna St. Vincent Millay)

“Time Does Not Bring Relief”
“Loving You Less Than Life, a Little Less”
“I, Being Born a Woman and Distressed”
“What Lips My Lips Have Kissed, and Where, and Why”

Soprano: Leah Partridge
Pianist: Craig Ketter

Acknowledgements

With very special thanks to David DiChiera for his time, enthusiasm, and herculean efforts in producing this project. As the author of several essays in this monograph and the composer of “Four Sonnets,” David DiChiera has generously granted permission to The Kresge Foundation to print, either as excerpts or in their entirety, the essays and to record “Four Sonnets” in CD format.

With special thanks to Tim Luntz, Brey Ruddler and the staff of Michigan Opera Theatre’s Allen Library for their efforts in researching information and photos for this monograph, and with many thanks to Bill Austin, special assistant to David DiChiera.

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Photography

Carol Dronsfield
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Julie Pincus
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Additional Photography

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