



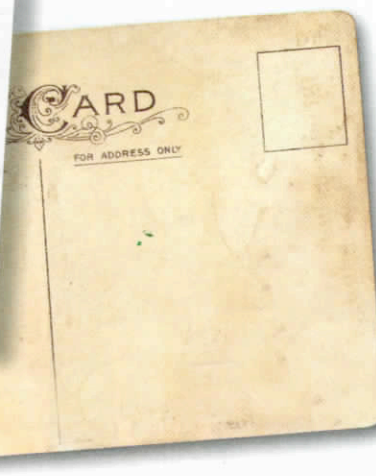
# POSTCARD FROM NEW YORK

By Dan Booth

For a city associated with culture at its most cutting edge, New York's operatic tastes have been surprisingly conservative.

For more than a century the Metropolitan Opera (founded in 1880) was synonymous with the city's moneyed elite, mounting lavish productions generously supported by wealthy patrons and featuring top international singers.

Meanwhile, New York City Opera was founded in 1943 as a counterbalance to the Met's highbrow remit, bringing affordable large-scale opera within the grasp of ordinary New Yorkers. This honourable mission has had its fair share of artistic success, but the company has also been dogged by financial problems that threaten its very existence.



## METROPOLITAN OPERA

The first Metropolitan Opera House launched its inaugural season in 1883 with Gounod's *Faust*. This opulent theatre was established by New York's new rich in reaction to the highly exclusive Academy Opera, a bastion of the city's so-called 'Knickerbocker Aristocracy', made up of old establishment families of Dutch descent.

From the outset, the Met has been a symbol of New Yorkers' social ambitions, beginning with the patronage of prominent 19th-century industrialists and entrepreneurs such as the Roosevelts, Astors and Vanderbilts.

The Met has never shaken off its association with status and money. In a cultural environment where state subsidy is minimal, the need to generate income is paramount in order to survive. So the opera's fortunes are intimately linked with New York's economic health. The institution almost collapsed after the Great Depression and during the war years; but the firm artistic hand of the Canadian tenor Edward Johnson, general manager from 1935 to 1950, and the establishment of the Metropolitan Opera Guild to raise money for the ailing enterprise, meant that by the 1950s, the opera house was once again on a healthy footing.

The opening in 1966 of the Met's current home, a modernist theatre in the Lincoln Center on New York's arty Upper West Side, expanded the audience capacity to 3,750, which meant that for the first time New Yorkers were able to buy affordable seats in their city's premier cultural venue. However, top-price tickets in the orchestra stalls and parterre boxes still retail at between \$300 to \$400, and the recent gala opening for the Met's new production of Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* (starring Anna Netrebko) saw tickets in the super-posh parterre priced at between \$1,450 and \$1,750, making the Met the most expensive opera house in the world.

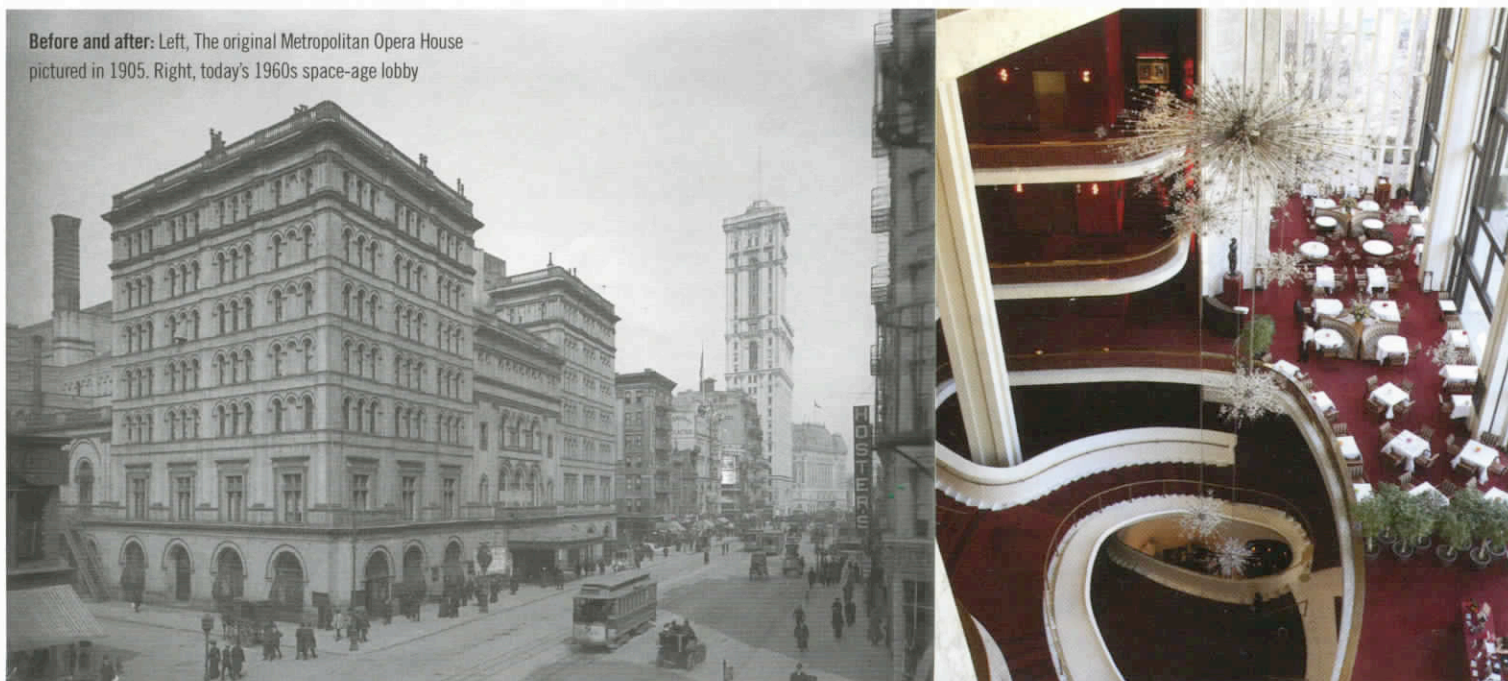
The all-star casts and the Met's superlative orchestral and choral forces (presided over by music director James Levine for the past 40 years) mean that for lovers of old-style opera at its grandest, the Met remains the *sine qua non* of the art form.

Throughout much of its history, the Met has resisted the trend to have all-powerful stage directors presiding over productions. Great singing and top-flight musicianship have been the hallmark of Met shows, and 'safe', crowd-pleasing producers such as Otto Schenk and Franco Zeffirelli have been favoured. p34

### The Met's 2011/12 Season

The Met's 2011/12 season features 26 productions, with casting that includes many of today's most celebrated singers and several eminent stage directors. Currently running is David McVicar's new staging of *Anna Bolena* featuring Anna Netrebko in the title role. This will be relayed live to cinemas on 15 October. Other highlights include the concluding sections of Wagner's *Ring* cycle in Robert Lepage's visually spectacular production. The New Year brings a world premiere of a 'Baroque' opera, *The Enchanted Isle*, a masque-like pastiche of music by Handel, Vivaldi and Rameau to a new libretto by Jeremy Sams and featuring Plácido Domingo, Joyce DiDonato, David Daniels and Danielle de Niese.

[www.metoperafamily.org](http://www.metoperafamily.org)



Before and after: Left, The original Metropolitan Opera House pictured in 1905. Right, today's 1960s space-age lobby



Peter Gelb,  
mastermind of  
New York's operatic  
renaissance

The programming at the Met has traditionally been built around the tastes and ambitions of rather autocratic impresarios, foremost among whom was Sir Rudolf Bing, general manager from 1950 to 1972.

Bing, an Austrian-born émigré, had been one of the founders of the Edinburgh Festival in 1947. Setting his sights on opera in America, he revolutionised the Met, turning it into one of the finest opera companies in the world by insisting on top-quality production values and establishing a roster of stars including Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Joan Sutherland, Renata Tebaldi, Jon Vickers, Franco Corelli and, controversially at the time, Marian Anderson, who in 1955 became the first black singer to appear in a major role at the Met (she sang Ulrica in Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera*).

Bing's legacy was consolidated by one of his successors, Joseph Volpe, who joined the Met in 1966 as a carpenter. By 1990, Volpe had worked his way through the ranks to become general manager. His strong commercial instincts and his insider knowledge of the workings of unions

served the company well during a time of international expansion and technological innovation.

Today, the Metropolitan Opera is something of a paradox. It still has a reputation as a bastion of elitism and a temple of 'high' culture in a city where courting the establishment is key to survival for large arts institutions. But Peter Gelb, general director since 2006, has instigated far-reaching changes and risk-taking ventures that seem to be paying off in terms of building a true mass market for opera for the first time in over a century.

Foremost among these innovations is the Met's transmission of its productions, filmed in high definition, into cinemas around the world, including a series of live relays of its major titles. Last season, more than 2.6 million tickets were sold for Met shows in cinemas (live and pre-recorded). This is expected to increase in the forthcoming season, with 11 live relays to 1,600 cinemas around the world, including new ventures in China and Israel.

The future of the Met, and perhaps of opera as an art form, seems to rest on the numbers game that 57-year-old Peter Gelb is playing so cleverly as he embraces mass media to generate audience levels that seemed impossible for opera a decade ago. As president of Sony Records classical music division before his Met appointment, Gelb was credited with rescuing classical music recording from

financial oblivion by championing film scores such as James Horner's *Titanic* and signing crossover artists such as Charlotte Church to the label. The tactic drew accusations of 'dumbing down' when his appointment was announced at the Met.

However, Gelb's populist tendencies come from his commercial instincts rather than his cultural bent. He's something of an intellectual at heart, intent on pushing boundaries whenever he can. He looks dry, academic even, but his sense of adventure is palpable. He marked his coming of age at the Met when he threw out Franco Zeffirelli's staunchly traditional production of *Tosca* in favour of a new staging by the post-modernist Swiss director Luc Bondy. The Met's old guard booed loudly even before the curtain went up on Bondy's mildly controversial show.

Meanwhile, the traditionalists can't complain about the singing. The Met under Gelb remains a repository of the world's finest artists. This season's superstars include Domingo, Fleming, Gheorghiu, Netrebko, DiDonato, Terfel, Flórez... the roll-call of today's operatic greats seems endless.

In a sign that Gelb's strategy is working: in June, the Met announced that it expects a balanced budget for its last season, the first time this has happened since 2004. In spite of an economy in decay, there is a sweet smell of success lingering around the Lincoln Center that promises great things to come.

#### Juilliard Opera

The Department of Vocal Arts at New York's Juilliard School offers an advanced opera training programme for exceptionally gifted young singers at graduate and post-graduate levels. Emphasis is placed on finding and developing singing actors who are intellectually curious, physically adept and emotionally fearless.

As well as access to its world-class faculty, Juilliard Opera students also benefit from an ongoing collaboration with the Metropolitan Opera's Lindemann Young Artist Development Program. This includes one full production each year conducted by James Levine, with the Juilliard Orchestra in the pit and Lindemann and selected Juilliard Opera singers on stage.

Other performance opportunities throughout the year include two main-stage productions and one semi-staged

production plus concert and recital work, including contemporary music projects and collaborations with Juilliard's new Historical Performance programme.

'I came to Juilliard Opera from the young artist programme at Florida Grand Opera,' says Juilliard graduate Jennifer Zettan. 'In my experience, Juilliard provides more intensive training and experience than young artist programmes connected to most US opera companies. I also don't know of any other course that places so much emphasis on acting, which in today's changing world of opera is increasingly important. How wonderful to spend two intensive years focused on the self and the voice in an intimate setting, which I feel prepared me to leave Juilliard a fully equipped A-level artist.'

[www.juilliard.edu](http://www.juilliard.edu)

## NEW YORK CITY OPERA

**Y**ou have to feel sorry for New York City Opera (NYCO), the second largest opera company in New York. Founded with the noblest of aims to make opera affordable for ordinary people at a time when the Met functioned as an exclusive club for the wealthy, the company has been dogged by problems throughout its history, often precipitated by tense relationships between its managers and its board.

It's just as well, then, to have an opportunity to accentuate the positive. Few opera companies have done more than NYCO to nurture young American talent that has gone on to gain international recognition. René Fleming, Carol Vaness, Elizabeth Futral, Samuel Ramey and David Daniels all had their careers launched by the company. Domingo and Carreras both made their New York debuts at NYCO before being snapped up by the Met.

Above all, the company's development is closely associated with one of America's finest sopranos, Beverley Sills, who launched her career with NYCO in 1955 and later ran the company, showing a prodigious talent for fund-raising, until 1979.

The company also has a reputation for championing new and challenging work that the Met, even in the more risky Peter Gelb era (see above), wouldn't dare touch. Since its first season in 1944, NYCO has given 29 world premieres and around 62 American premieres of works ranging from the Renaissance to the present day.

Now for the bad news. Without the rich donor-base of the Met, NYCO has suffered massive losses in the economic downturn. But the financial crisis isn't enough to explain NYCO's decline. Poor governance has played a big role, culminating in the bizarre and short-lived appointment in 2008 of the esoteric Belgian Gerard Mortier as general manager, a distinctly controversial pair of hands in troubled times.

Desperate times have called for radical measures that focus on cost-cutting. Also on the agenda is a bid to re-invent NYCO in a world where the Met has stolen many of its trump cards and overshadowed its brand identity. In July of this year, NYCO announced that it would move out of its expensive home opposite the Met in the Lincoln Center and spend the coming season as an itinerant company, pitching camp in various venues around New York, saving around \$2 million in rent.

The move out of the Lincoln Center comes, ironically, in the wake of a massive redevelopment of the theatre to better suit the needs of an opera company. Many artists, most vociferously the leading US soprano Catherine Malfitano, have spoken volubly against the move, fearing that without a permanent home, the company will lose its soul. This sense of discontent was compounded when music director George Manahan had his contract with NYCO terminated along with a raft of full-time employees with the company.

George Steel, NYCO's managing director since 2009, has rebuffed criticisms saying that the cuts were the only way to ensure survival, and that the move out of the Lincoln Center provides an opportunity to take opera out to a much wider constituency than culture-saturated, swanky lower Manhattan.

Plans are afoot to push the boundaries even further to New York's populous outlying areas, such as Queens and the Bronx, which have had little access to opera in the past.

For now, NYCO will be performing in Brooklyn, East Harlem and Central Park. Finding the perfect sound bite to put a positive spin on the difficult task ahead, Steel has announced to the world that NYCO is taking opera back to the people. 'The company's stage will be New York City itself: A theatre with eight million seats.'

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George Steel, steering New York City Opera through troubled waters.

#### NYCO's 2011/12 Season

With just 16 performances of four fully-staged operas, NYCO's programme has to pack a punch to make an impact on New York's opera scene. Verdi's *La traviata* (directed by Jonathan Miller) and the New York premiere of Rufus Wainwright's *Prima Donna* come to the Brooklyn Academy of Music, a venue with a strong reputation for opera. Director Christopher Alden's edgy take on Mozart's *Così fan tutte* takes place at midtown-Manhattan's John Jay College in March 2012; and Georg Telemann's rarely performed 1726 opera *Orpheus* will be staged at the Museo del Barrio on upper Fifth Avenue in East Harlem. Additional concerts are planned in venues all around New York – wandering minstrels indeed.

[www.nycopera.org](http://www.nycopera.org)

Marcy Richardson in  
*Kurt Weill Uncovered*  
at operamission.  
Photo by Cory Weaver



## THE NEW YORK FRINGE

There are alternatives to the 'big boys' in New York, some traditional, some innovative, occasionally über-cool but always musical and serious about opera.

Among the biggest and most innovative of New York's smaller groups, straddling the mainstream and the fringe, is **Gotham Chamber Opera**, which presents new and rare work at venues around the city. Founded by artistic director Neal Goren, it aims to give audiences an unusual and intimate experience of opera in imaginative venues (think Haydn's *Il mondo della luna* staged in a planetarium, and you'll get the gist...).

This season marks the company's 10th anniversary with a revival of the opera that launched the new company – Mozart's *Il sogno di Scipione* (scheduled for April 2012). Bringing things right up to date, meanwhile, is the world premiere this November of a specially commissioned work by composer-of-the-moment Nico Muhly: *Dark Sisters* is the story of a woman's struggle with life in a religious cult.

With an unusual focus on Baroque repertoire, **Opera Omnia** performs in a fine, cabaret setting in Greenwich Village. Three years ago they offered a knockout English-language version of Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* and just followed it up with Cavalli's *Giasone* – its first staged performance in New York. Future

plans are still to be announced.

At the other end of the time-line is **American Opera Projects** and **Opera on Tap**, two groups that also collaborate with one another occasionally in a series called *Opera Grows in Brooklyn*. AOP showcases works that have not been presented anywhere before. Notable among these have been Tarik O'Regan's *Heart of Darkness*, a preview of Stephen Schwartz's *Séance on a Wet Afternoon*, premiered at the New York City Opera, and a one-act monodrama commissioned from Daniel Felsenfeld (with a libretto by Will Eno) called *Nora, in the Great Outdoors*, which is what happens to the heroine of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* immediately after she slams the door. AOP and Opera on Tap have commissioned a full-length touring opera called *The Inner Circle*, based on the life of the famous sexologist, Dr. Kinsey.

Daniel Felsenfeld also curated *Sex, Cigarettes and Psychopaths (A Night of Laughs)* for the outré **Opera Grows** in Brooklyn, an evening of naughty opera and art song. The pub-audiences for these spirited events can meet the artists and composers after the performances.

A group called **operamission**, under director and conductor Jennifer Peterson recently presented – both on site and on the web – a fully orchestrated, unrehearsed, assembled-on-the-spot one-act-per-evening performance of

*La bohème* with fine, professional singers. Referring to the evening as 'Assembly Required' is a hint at the group's style.

Back on more traditional ground is the **Dicapo Opera Theatre**, operating out of a jewelbox of a 204-seat theatre in a church basement on East 76th Street. A few years ago they offered Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* in its three different editions by the composer, presented over the course of a weekend: the La Scala version on Friday, Brescia on Saturday, and the standard version on Sunday afternoon.

Dicapo alternates standard rep with more adventurous programming; this coming season includes Puccini's *Tosca*, Tchaikovsky's *Iolanta*, Frank Loesser's *The Most Happy Fella*, Verdi's *La traviata* and Menotti's *The Consul* (four performances each, sprinkled from October through April).

Over in Chelsea on Manhattan's West Side is the **Chelsea Opera**, with Menotti's *The Medium* (November) and Lee Hoiby's *This is the Rill Speaking* (June) on the roster.

And last – for the moment – but not least, is the **Bronx Opera**, which this season will give Ralph Vaughan Williams' *The Poisoned Kiss* (January) and *Hansel and Gretel* (May). Also wandering minstrels, they perform in both the Bronx and Manhattan. **ON**

Robert Levine