# The real causes of the New York City Opera bankruptcy

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The New York City Opera made it official last Thursday, filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection and setting in motion the shutdown of the famed company that was launched in 1944.

All non-essential employees were laid off on September 30, leaving only those necessary to implement the company's closing. The bankruptcy filing listed $5.6 million in liabilities and $7.7 million in total assets. The liabilities include $4 million in pension and other employment obligations. The company's endowment has also shrunk by more than 90 percent in recent years, to only about $4.5 million.

Predictably cynical comments in the *Wall Street Journal* and elsewhere, pointing to the existence of some smaller and newer companies in New York, have suggested that the loss of the City Opera is no great matter. The smaller companies do not come close to replacing the NYCO, however, either in the scope of their work or in the affordability of their ticket prices.

Although the City Opera has seen its productions collapse to only four in the last few years as its financial crisis deepened drastically, as recently as ten years ago it was mounting nearly 120 performances of 16 or 17 operas per year.

This was apparently a greater number than any other company in the US was staging with the exception of the much wealthier Metropolitan Opera next door at New York City's Lincoln Center. In its current season, the Met is presenting 209 performances of 28 operas.

Furthermore, the musical history and significance of the NYCO go far beyond the mere number of performances. A number of well-known American operas received their world or New York premieres at the City Opera, including Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah* in 1956, Douglas Moore's *Ballad of Baby Doe* in 1958, and Leonard Bernstein's classic *Candide*, produced on Broadway in 1956 and reaching the City Opera for the first time in 1982.

The first full-scale operatic production by an African-American composer, William Grant Still's *Troubled Island*, came to the City Opera in 1949. Four years earlier Todd Duncan, the original Porgy in *Porgy and Bess*, became the first African American singer at a major American opera company, when he appeared in Leoncavallo's classic *Pagliacci*. In contrast, Marian Anderson did not make her debut at the Metropolitan Opera until almost 10 years later, in 1955.

Then there were the productions of masterpieces that had never been staged at the Met, including Erich Korngold's *Die Tote Stadt* (*The Dead City*), revived in 1975 after an absence of 50 years and most recently performed in 2006. Other operas receiving their US premieres at the NYCO included Bartok's *Bluebeard's Castle*, Schoenberg's rarity *Moses und Aron* (*Moses and Aaron*) and Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites*.

In 1966 the City Opera launched the career of New York-born soprano Beverly Sills with a revival of Handel's *Giulio Cesare* (*Julius Caesar*), at a time when performances of Handel's operas were virtually unheard of. In later decades *Julius Caesar* came to the Met, while a whole number of Handel operas, including *Rinaldo*, *Serse* (*Xerxes*), *Alcina* and others, were revived to great acclaim at the City Opera.

Sills was by no means the only famous singer whose career was either launched at or closely connected to the City Opera. Others include mezzo-soprano Tatiana Troyanos, soprano Lauren Flanigan, bass Samuel Ramey, countertenor David Daniels and the late great Lorraine Hunt Lieberson. Placido Domingo, perhaps the world's most beloved tenor and still active as both a singer and conductor at the age of 72, launched his international career at the NYCO in 1966. He said last week, as the company prepared to file for bankruptcy, "it would be an absolute tragedy for [the City Opera's] legacy to come to

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an end."

The way in which the 70-year history of the NYCO has ended is unquestionably of historical significance. Conductor Julius Rudel, whose work at the opera goes back to its beginnings and who was its music director for more than 20 years between the late 1950s and late 1970s, commented this past week that, at the age of 92, he never expected that he would outlive the company with which he was so closely associated.

Amidst many postmortem comments on the City Opera from reporters, critics, arts administrators and others, the issues raised by its demise are studiously avoided. Typical was a report a few days ago in the *New York Times* headlined, "The Frenzied Last-Act Effort to Save the City Opera."

The article repeated the by-now familiar comments about the supposedly inevitable decline of the company, including New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg's dismissive remark that the opera's "business model doesn't seem to be working." This was supplemented by the statement of Bloomberg's Commissioner of Cultural Affairs, Kate Levin, who sneered that the company had not been "very realistic about their financial position for a very long period of time."

It is hard to know exactly what Bloomberg and Levin are suggesting. Should the City Opera have sold its cheapest seats for $100 or more? Did it simply not devote enough time and energy to massaging the egos of the city's plutocrats? This in fact was not the case. The plutocrats were simply no longer interested.

The dependence of most sections of what is often termed high culture upon the super-rich is now almost complete. As the *Times* reports it, this dependence has reached almost ludicrous proportions. In the days before City Opera's bankruptcy, for instance, general manager George Steel met with investor Alberto Vilar in an attempt to raise money. He also met with oil and gas billionaire David Koch, whose name now adorns the former home of the City Opera at Lincoln Center.

Vilar is the Cuban-born opera aficionado who promised the Metropolitan Opera $100 million about a decade ago, and later was jailed for fraud when it and other promised gifts evaporated. Koch, the reactionary tycoon who is one of the prime backers of the Tea Party "movement," is busy plastering his name not only onto the former New York State Theater in Lincoln Center, but also the new "David H. Koch Plaza" that is being built as part of the renovation of the front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Apparently Koch, despite having rescued the City Opera in recent years, refused to do so again. One issue, according to the news report, has to do with the opera with which the NYCO ended its existence. *Anna Nicole* is based on the story of the marriage of the former Playboy model, Anna Nicole Smith, to the late Texas oil billionaire J. Howard Marshall II. Marshall owned 16 percent of Koch's oil and gas business. As the *Times* explained, "the Marshall family might be less than pleased" with further gifts from Koch to the City Opera.

The self-serving fatalism of the media and political establishment in New York in regard to the City Opera's demise is as telling as it is ahistorical and deceitful.

It is true, of course, that art and culture have depended on the ruling elite for much of human history. However, as Trotsky noted, "Each class has its own policy in art, that is, a system of presenting demands on art, which changes with time." The "Maecenas-like protection of court and grand seigneur" ended with the fall of the feudal regimes. The bourgeois revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries, with their "wider, more popular, anonymous character," created new conditions.

The impact of the Enlightenment and then the rise of the modern working class witnessed the emergence of far broader, more democratic conceptions about culture and its availability. This was so particularly in the decades after the Russian Revolution, despite the awful degeneration of the revolution and the devastation of fascism, dictatorship and war.

The birth of the New York City Opera dates to precisely that period, and its death comes at a time when official public opinion barely acknowledges the right of the working class to culture, education and a better future. This disgraceful episode in the history of the opera world will perhaps be seen in the future as one of the last straws that helped provoke a new struggle for the revival of culture and social consciousness, as part of the struggles of the working class.

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