

Detroit Opera cancels season opener as Trump's cuts impact cultural life across Michigan

Shannon Jones, Valery Tsekov
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The Detroit Opera has cancelled its season-opening production of *The Girl of the Golden West* (*La fanciulla del West*) by Giacomo Puccini. The opera company announced it made the decision to avoid a larger financial crisis in the face of declining revenues and increasing costs.

With public funding for arts already at meager levels, arts and cultural organizations across Michigan and nationally are being staggered by the loss of federal funding as the Trump administration moves to shut down the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). In mid-July the US Senate voted to eliminate funding for public broadcasting as well, including money that had already been allocated.

According to a report in the *Detroit Free Press*, the Detroit Opera suffered a fall in contributions from fiscal 2023–2024 of \$1,889,226, primarily due to a loss of \$1,744,477 from government grants. Public donations in the same period also fell by \$145,749.

Costs, including salaries, increased over the same period while the number of employees on its payroll declined. Detroit Opera management indicated it took the drastic decision to eliminate Puccini's opera from its schedule to forestall more severe difficulties in light of the Trump cuts.

Detroit Opera President and CEO Patty Isacson Sabee told *Crain's Detroit Business*, "Canceling an opera is a very, very serious decision." She added, "For us to make that decision, we have to be thinking about our current and our future state and our ... need to move forward, making sure we're protecting the longevity of our opera company."

Many of Puccini's biographers assert that he considered *The Girl of the Golden West*, which premiered in 1910, his best work. Although the reaction of contemporary critics was largely negative, more recently that view has been reassessed, and the work has been lauded for its musical craftsmanship.

The opera is set during the California Gold Rush and revolves around a love triangle between the local sheriff, an

outlaw and the saloon owner Minnie, an assertive and dominating female character, in striking contrast to the perceived role of women during that period. It complements Puccini's other "mature" operas, *La bohème*, *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly* and the unfinished *Turandot*, all centering on a female protagonist who meets a tragic end.

The Girl of the Golden West was the only opera scheduled for the 2025-26 season from the traditional classical repertoire, perhaps the first time this has happened. This type of opera is typically more elaborately staged and costly to produce. Remaining on the schedule are several more modern productions: *Highways and Valleys: Two American Love Stories*, set for December, an adaptation of author Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* set for March 2026, and *Apartment House 1776*, written by American composer John Cage for the US bicentennial in 1976.

The Detroit Opera closed its 2025 season with a modern opera, *The Central Park Five*, which took aim in part at the role of Trump in the 1989 frame-up of five minority youth for the alleged rape of a jogger in New York's Central Park. The production was supported by a \$40,000 federal grant.

The Detroit Opera operates the only opera house in Michigan, a state with more than 10 million people, a population comparable to several European nations, including Belgium, Sweden, Hungary and Portugal. Belgium, by way of comparison, has four opera houses. This situation reflects fundamental problems with the state of culture in the US.

By and large, Americans, even those who can afford the price of admission, lack access to cultural institutions that expose them to the classical repertoire and to the musical achievements of the past. This inevitably restricts musical understanding and progress, as only aspiring musicians who grow up in the largest cities even have direct access to the most musically complex expressions.

The cultural deterioration and crisis in the US did not happen overnight, with the election of the culturally

depraved ignoramus currently occupying the White House, but it has been ongoing for many decades.

In a possible indication of the direction things are heading, *Crain's* reported that the Detroit Opera is diversifying the performances it is hosting in order to offset its loss in funding. It reports that the Detroit Opera House will host "'Bugs Bunny at the Symphony, 35th Anniversary Edition,' a spoof of the famed 'Barber of Seville' opera along with roughly a dozen other Looney Tunes shorts."

A retired musician with the former Michigan Opera Theatre orchestra (the company was renamed Detroit Opera in 2022) told the *World Socialist Web Site*,

I don't think they necessarily pulled [*The Girl of the Golden West*] because of its being classical as opposed to some of the more modern productions. I do know that the head of Detroit Opera is more interested in contemporary things than what they had in the past. [The late director] David DiChiera [who died in 2018] was steeped in the traditional opera. I don't know what is going on with those dynamics. Maybe they are looking for younger audiences. There is something going on there.

"It is a sign of the times, I believe," he added. This writer noted that conductor Leonard Bernstein had hosted young people's concerts in the 1950s and 1960s that were widely viewed. The musician noted,

When I was in elementary school, the Detroit Symphony would come and put on concerts for young people, and I don't know if they do that much any longer.

The elimination of NEA funding is having an impact across a broad spectrum of art and cultural organizations in Michigan.

In 2024 the NEA gave \$3 million to arts organizations in Michigan, a tiny fraction of the amount spent on corporate tax handouts, police and prisons but still a critical lifeline for these groups. Since the defunding of the NEA by Trump in May, these funds have evaporated, leaving arts groups in the lurch.

For example, according to a report in the *Detroit Free Press*, the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MOCAD) in Detroit was notified May 2 that the NEA had cancelled funding for "The Gun Violence Memorial

Project," "an important and timely exhibition that honors the victims of gun violence and raises awareness for the over 700 weekly deaths in the U.S. caused by gun violence."

The Charles H Wright Museum of African American History had a \$300,000 grant rescinded, and the Detroit Historical Society stands to lose more than \$300,000 in federal grants for digitalizing and other projects.

The Detroit Repertory Theatre is also feeling the pinch. Artistic director Leah Smith told the *Free Press*, "The termination of grants to us and to so many other arts organizations is the opposite of what should be happening in our country." She went on, "It is reckless. The arts are an economic driver and crucial to our collective emotional health."

Much of the arts money being cut by the Trump administration is being redirected toward funding the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C., dedicated to the glorification of American values, i.e., capitalism, which will receive \$257 million in the new budget, up from \$43 million.

The retired musician said, "In this Trump era they are dumbing down everything. They are going after the universities and everything else. Aren't they thinking about renaming the Kennedy Center for Melania Trump?"

"When the [Detroit] symphony musicians were on strike, we lost 25 percent of our season. It has never come back to what it was before then.

"Now they are cutting healthcare for people. Medicaid, all in an effort to give tax cuts to the wealthiest people in this country. Everything is shifting toward the wealthy and have the rest of us do whatever we can to survive."

The struggle to elevate the general level of culture includes the tasks of expanding access to culture for the entire working class, improving the quality and availability of musical education for young artistically inclined workers, and preserving and reproducing the most poignant, sensitive and technically brilliant achievements in musical history at the highest professional level. None of this can be achieved without the intervention of the working class to secure the appropriate allocation of resources for the preservation and progress of classical music and musical culture more broadly.



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