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EVANESCENCE AND PERMANENCE The connection between music, religion and immortality **OPERA FOR ALL** The Brazilian festival attracting huge crowds **MY BRILLIANT ADAPTATION** How to bring fresh life to literature in the theatre **WAGNERISM** An extract from Alex Ross's ambitious new book



LIMELIGHT – December 2020

6 *On Stage*

The buzz around this month's live performance

12 *In the Limelight*

Arts industry news and views

16 **Opera for All**

The groundbreaking Brazilian festival where every event is free
by Mahima Macchione

24 **My Brilliant Adaptation**

The art of bringing new life to literature on stage
by Jane Albert

34 **Music, Religion and Immortality**

How cultural rituals have helped humans deal with death
by Carole M. Cusack

42 **Wagnerism**

An extract from the new book about Wagner and his legacy
by Alex Ross

46 *Soundings*

46 *A Single Voice by Nick Gordon* INSTALLATION

48 *Franz Schmidt: Complete Symphonies by Phillip Scott* RECORDING OF THE MONTH

49 *On The Record by Clive Paget* RECORDINGS

50 *Cutting Edge by Dylan Crismani* NEW MUSIC

52 *Cursed! by Kate Prendergast* THEATRE

53 *The Father by Lynden Barber* FILM

56 *On Air & Online*

62 *Coda*

62 GUY NOBLE'S SOAPBOX 63 SACRED COW

64 PLAYING UP 65 5 QUESTIONS FOR... 66 MY MUSIC



La Serna Padrona, Festival de Ópera do Paraná 2016. Photo supplied

Opera for All

The Festival de Ópera do Paraná in Brazil has become a headline cultural event, breaking down barriers and attracting wider and younger audiences. What's more, it's completely free. **Mahima Macchione** explores the unorthodox approach taken by the pioneering festival Director Gehad Hajar.

Imagine an opera festival like no other. Imagine your city being taken over once a year by opera productions in the major theatres and cultural venues, but also in open-air spaces and public areas, as well as other unusual and unexpected locations. Imagine a festival program, which is as exciting for seasoned opera-goers as it is accessible for those unfamiliar with the artform, including not just children and young people but also the blind and the hard of hearing. Imagine also exacting artistic standards, national and world premieres, and springboard opportunities for singers. And, last but not least, imagine it all being completely free of charge, for every single member of the audience. Well, that festival exists; it's the brainchild of the pioneering Brazilian director Gehad Hajar, who is changing the cultural landscape of the state of Paraná in Brazil with the Festival de Ópera do Paraná. His unorthodox approach is proof that it only takes one man with a vision to change the opera world, one opera buff at a time.

The Festival de Ópera do Paraná, which takes place mostly in the city of Curitiba, is now in its sixth year, and is distinctive for its unique ethos. Brazil has two other major opera festivals, in the northern cities of Belém and Manaus, the latter running for over 20 years. They are both, however, very much what you'd expect from a good opera festival: they have interesting programming, good quality performances and – importantly – cater mainly for what one could call an 'opera audience'. And that's where Hajar's festival stands out: it is not just aimed at opera audiences, it is aimed at anyone who might be captivated or intrigued by opera itself.

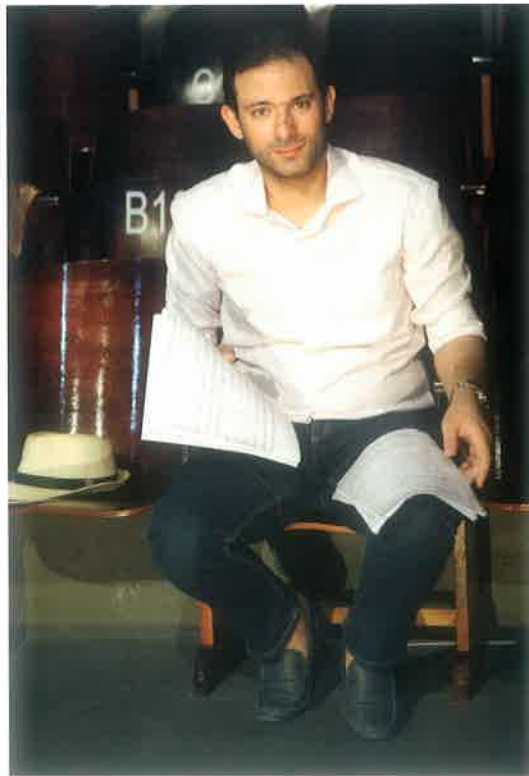
The festival was a couple of years in the making before it actually saw its first edition back in 2015, and by then Hajar was clear it wasn't going to be plain sailing: "At the beginning I was told all kinds of things, that I was too young to set up a festival, that opera was elitist, that culture in Brazil needed to be 'decolonised'." None of that seems to have stopped him. He found a way to work

with the system to create a small miracle in the musical world of Paraná. He has proved to be exactly the right person for the job: a lawyer by training, he is especially adept at dealing with a heavily bureaucratic system with the finesse and eloquence of an experienced legal practitioner, an essential skill – along with plenty of charm and charisma – for securing the government support and funding to get it all off the ground. A natural leader and communicator (not to mention, of course, a dedicated opera lover), Hajar is a violinist and previously worked as an opera director. For the festival, however, he also often takes on the roles of researcher, historian and musicologist, when he's not acting as entrepreneur and publicist. "There were times," he explains, "when I had pages and pages of manuscript scores covering the floor of my living room, and we were all here working overnight trying to piece it together."

An unstoppable Renaissance man, Hajar was backed by the state department for culture and the local Teatro Guaíra, the city's main and biggest theatre, to create something he believed would not only work but was also a 'necessity' for the region. He was convinced there was fertile ground in the city for an opera festival. Although Curitiba had only seen sporadic opera productions in the last two decades, it used to be a hive of operatic activity at the end of the last century – of which Hajar has memories as a child – and so in a way there was a sort of dormant audience that could be tapped into. To that he adds that Curitiba's main theatre (the Guaíra) is among the best in the country for staging opera, having all the necessary technical requirements. The city also trains the requisite talent – it has three universities and academies offering

degrees and other qualifications in music, so all the necessary elements were already present and all he had to do was bring them together. Or, as he likes to put it: "We already had all the ingredients for the cake, I only had to bake the cake!"

The most notable feature of the Festival de Ópera do Paraná is its groundbreaking approach to accessibility, and the huge audience numbers that have resulted from it. One of the key drivers has been Hajar's hugely successful marketing strategy, with flash mobs in streets and transport hubs, often taking opera to people who had not encountered the artform before. This, alongside local media coverage, mostly undertaken by Hajar himself, has proven highly effective in generating interest. The cleverly planned program also shows the hallmarks of an ambitious festival, with crowd-pleasers such as *La Traviata*, *The Magic Flute*, *Carmen*, *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Die Fledermaus* but also slightly more unconventional repertoire like Donizetti's *Rita*, Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona*, Debussy's *L'Enfant Prodigue* and Menotti's *The Old Maid and the Thief*. It's actively curated to appeal to as wide a demographic as possible, and has included opera for children (Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel* and *A Sapateira Prodigiosa*, an adaptation of Lorca's play *The Shoemaker's Prodigious Wife*), as well as the 'cineopera' *Hawwwah* and even a rock opera. Hajar's thinking was clear from the beginning: "I wanted to reach all segments. Our job was to show that opera is not elitist, that it has a social function and that its audience is truly diverse. So one of the things we really wanted to do was to bring together opera and audiences who might not have experienced it before."



The Paraná festival has also distinguished itself by recovering and staging forgotten Brazilian operas, an original move and something in which Hajar is often personally involved. Highlights of recent editions included the world premiere of *A Festa de São João*, an operetta by Brazilian female composer Chiquinha Gonzaga (1847–1935), composed in 1879. A well-known composer in Brazil, this was her first work for the theatre, but was turned down by all stages in Rio de Janeiro at the time for being written by a woman. Hajar has also uncovered two operatic works by José Maurício Nunes Garcia (1767–1830), the foremost Brazilian composer of the Classical period who became Chapel Master to the Portuguese court of King John VI in Brazil in 1808. Only the scores of *O Triunfo da América* and *Ulissea* were thought to have survived, but Hajar unearthed the original librettos from the archives of the Ducal Palace of Vila Viçosa in Portugal, enabling the works to be staged for the first time since their original performances in Portugal in the early 19th century. In addition, two works by Júlio Reis (1863–1933), which had never before reached the stage also saw their world premieres at the Paraná festival, as well as *Marumby*, a satirical operetta set in 1920s Curitiba by Benedito Nicolau dos Santos (1878–1956), a composer and native of the city. “We wanted to give audiences the opportunity to hear Brazilian music of the 19th century,” he explains. The work of Leonardo Kessler, a Swiss composer who lived in Paraná and incorporated Brazilian rhythms in his operas, has also been featured.

But its eclectic programming is only one aspect of the festival’s overarching aim of increasing accessibility. In fact, the area where they are really breaking new ground is in taking accessibility to a whole new level by being free of charge to everyone – possibly the first ever opera festival to have done this. “During the planning stage of the festival back in 2012, we were incredibly lucky to receive the support of the Centro Cultural Teatro Guaíra and its president, who is a huge culture enthusiast, and of the Culture Secretary for the State of Paraná, without which none of this would have happened,” says Hajar. This meant that the festival would be open to everyone and that capacity would only be limited by the number of seats available in each venue – and, since then, theatres have been full. The festival also offers sight-reading for the blind and sign language for the hard of hearing. Many of the operas are wholly translated into Brazilian Portuguese, or have the recitatives translated while the arias and other numbers are kept in the original language.

The performances take place in several theatres and other venues in the city of Curitiba but Hajar’s unwavering commitment to accessibility and maximising exposure to the artform means that they have also put on productions for children in shanty towns, on streets, buses, state schools, squares, and fruit and vegetable street markets. Equally, Hajar doesn’t want the festival to be exclusive to the population of the main urban centre, the city of Curitiba, and so every year the festival also takes its productions to smaller towns around the state of Paraná,

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making use of local theatres. In fact, they have put on the first opera production ever near the Iguazu Falls and in a highly original move, took Donizetti’s *Rita* to a tribe of 200 Guaraní indians who had never before encountered the operatic voice. Their astonished reactions can only be imagined.

Hajar’s mission of ‘opera for all’ has been a complete success: in its first year the festival presented four operas to an audience of 2,000 – with publicity that only started three days before the festival. In the second year audience numbers more than tripled, with 12 operas on show. At the time of writing, they have staged 52 operas seen by nearly 130,000 people across nine cities, alongside a number of courses for both professionals and the general public – all completely free of charge. But above all, the festival seems to have cracked one of the biggest challenges in opera today: more than half of the audience are young people under 30, a demographic not normally associated with opera. The festival has tempted them to experience opera for the first time – and they are hooked. In fact, Hajar’s festival could be likened to a Brazilian equivalent of Gustavo Dudamel’s Orquesta Sinfónica Simón Bolívar. In his own words: “We give everybody access and the right to occupy the places and spaces of opera.” The Paraná festival seems an interesting case-study: a financial investment is obviously necessary but when marketed in this way, opera appeals to people of all backgrounds, including the young.



(Above) Adriana Rengifo performing at the Iguçu Falls, Festival Ópera do Paraná 2020. Photo supplied
(Below) Opera flash mob on a Curitiba bus, Festival Ópera do Paraná 2016. Photo supplied

Another feature of the festival has been its promotion of local talent, in that it serves as a unique platform for singers. It tends to make full use of the pool of singers available, not only in the city of Curitiba but also in the state of Paraná (in addition to professionals from other parts of the country), providing them with opportunities that would not otherwise be available. Alongside the music program, the festival also offers lectures, workshops and masterclasses for the general public. It has included the first Brazilian Singing Symposium, with a number of professional courses on offer, such as courses on working with the voice, vocal technique for opera singers, physiology and the voice, operatic choral singing and the national singing style. In the last five years, the festival has gone from strength to strength and is now a sizeable operation: last year, 700 professionals were involved, from singers and musicians, to technicians, set and costume designers, dancers, choreographers, managers and other personnel.

When it comes to its contributors, Hajar believes that one of the main features that differentiates the Paraná festival is its unique spirit. The festival isn't only opening up access and making opera available to many and to new audiences – everybody working in it is ready to buckle down and do whatever is needed to ensure it runs smoothly. "I don't feel I own the festival. I make people dream with me, and we all do what it takes to make

things happen. There's a real spirit of what we call *mutirão* [collective effort]. If we're at the theatre rehearsing, for instance, a singer might help to carry something heavy, or a pianist or a répétiteur might help with setting up coffee or food. Yes, there are some divas, but everyone takes responsibility. I have myself been found sweeping the foyer and halls when it was needed! And I don't think that's something you'll find elsewhere."

In fact, Hajar can be found doing anything from digging around in archives and re-constructing scores, to mentoring singers, liaising with state government, promoting the festival on local media and cleaning.

It's perhaps not a coincidence that the festival has blossomed in Curitiba. As a city in Brazil, it has a unique character. Curitiba is known for its high quality of life, as the 'Green Capital' and as a model city for urban planning, thanks to the initiatives undertaken by the former mayor Jaime Lerner, starting in the 1970s. The city's cultural life really took off when the Cultural Foundation was established, and today it hosts a Biennial art exhibition, the most important annual theatre festival in the country, a classical music festival and other events throughout the year. Curitiba's links with opera, however, are more recent, and not as long-standing as in other Brazilian cities.

Brazil has an unlikely connection to opera, and performances of works by Italian masters in the country date to at least the 18th century. During the 19th century,



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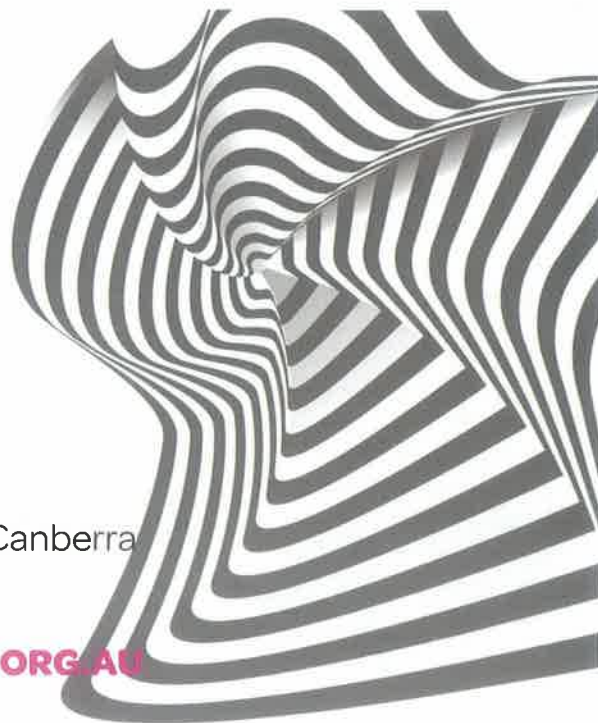
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The Canberra Times



We all do what it takes to make things happen. There's a real spirit of what we call *mutirão* [collective effort]

Italian opera was part of the urban culture of Rio de Janeiro, with a stream of Italian and French companies visiting the then Brazilian capital. Brazil won its place on the opera map through the creation of a national school of opera in the mid-19th century, whose most well-known composer is Antônio Carlos Gomes (1836–1896). His best known opera, *Il Guarany*, had its world premiere at La Scala in Milan in 1870 and dealt with what was deemed at the time a truly 'Brazilian' subject, with the chief of a Guarani tribe as one of its main characters. It was a success in Italy and the first Brazilian opera to gain acclaim outside Brazil. Many of his works dealt with national themes: his *Lo Schiavo*, for instance, is one of relatively few operas to address the subject of slavery, and was premiered in Rio de Janeiro in 1889. A number of other Brazilian composers also worked within the genre, such as Heitor Villa-Lobos, Chiquinha Gonzaga, Júlio Reis, Benedito Nicolau dos Santos – and this is the kind of repertoire that the Festival de Ópera do Paraná is now uncovering and finding an audience for.

However, like many things that were thriving until COVID-19 hit earlier this year, the Festival de Ópera do Paraná has had to adapt. The current health crisis in Brazil means that it has so far recorded more than four million cases (out of a population of more than 209 million) and is currently ranking third among countries with the highest number of infections. At the time of writing, social isolation measures have been lifted to an extent in some parts of the country, but the general population is still under localised lockdowns. "The festival this year will be the product of sheer determination," says Hajar emphatically. "Local government has not authorised me to do anything in person, not even with social distancing, and not even drive-ins, so it will all have to be streamed. Obviously some of it has to be live, otherwise we don't have a festival."

This has left Hajar with few options, but a version of the festival will go ahead this year, albeit, in a shorter and different format. Given the current restrictions, they have decided to stream two European and two Brazilian

operas from previous festivals. Like most arts institutions, Hajar is finding ways around it and, when we speak, is planning to have Johann Hasse's comic intermezzo *Larinda e Vanesio* as the opening piece for this year's festival, performed live. An opera for only two voices – soprano and baritone – it will be performed by singers in two completely different locations, ensuring the performance is entirely COVID-safe. César Cui's *A Feast in Time of Plague*, composed for a small cast, is another opera under consideration. As for diffusion, Hajar is currently working on securing satellite transmission for television and radio broadcast across Brazil and South America which, if made available, could change the reach of the festival's future editions, potentially transforming the COVID crisis into a considerable opportunity.

So how about its future? So far the festival has been hugely popular, but its long-term funding is currently under review. Hajar will have to make use of legislation for investment in culture, the so-called Rouanet law, under which companies are encouraged to invest in arts and culture through a tax deduction. "The festival will probably become more commercial and will lose its more social, educational and popular character," he explains. "I regret the subjugation of culture, but it's a way of making it viable. It will have to have a more commercial side so it can continue to have a side geared towards social action – that's the format I'm aiming for."

At this point, it's not clear whether the festival will continue to be free for everyone. After six years there is now an established audience for opera in the region, which was not the case back in 2015. Either way, Hajar's project so far could serve as an example. Opera houses around the world have for some time been struggling with the challenge of making sure there is an audience for opera in the future, given current audience age trends. The Festival de Ópera do Paraná seems to demonstrate that once certain barriers are removed, opera does become music to everyone's ears. *
The 2020 Festival de Ópera do Paraná takes place between 4–13 December, festivaldeopera.org