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Opinion

LISTENING TO LATIN AMERICA Opera the South American Way: The Case of Brazil and Gehad Hajar's Pioneering Festival
by Mahima Macchione (*Published on August 28, 2020*)

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Brazil has its own way of doing opera. The number of festivals keeps increasing, and opera performances - whether full productions or recitals - are being offered by theatres and opera houses across the country. That's not to say, though, that state and national politics don't get in the way: as is often the case in Latin America, everything gets affected by a volatile political system, including the arts. And, yet, many of the top names in opera today come from this part of the world, so surely they must be getting something right? At the moment, Brazil seems to be doing especially well in building audiences, with a new festival created by the enterprising opera 'impresario' (and of course opera lover) Gehad Hajar, who is changing the cultural landscape of the southern state of Paraná with his unorthodox approach. He is indeed proof that it only takes one man with a vision to change the opera world, one opera buff at a time.



Rio de Janeiro, historically one of the main centres of opera in the Americas.

Opera in Brazil reflects the commercial history of the country. Its main centres remain the old 'port cities' of Rio de Janeiro, Manaus and Belém. Inevitably today this list also includes São Paulo, the sprawling financial heart of the nation. Alongside these major hubs, further activity can be found in concert halls and theatres dotted around other parts of this huge country, such as Belo Horizonte, Jaraguá do Sul, Porto Alegre, Curitiba and Ouro Preto (which has the oldest functioning theatre in the Americas, the 'Casa da Ópera', built in 1769). The main theatres in Brazil, as is often the case in other Latin American countries, offer opera only as part of their general musical programmes - there are no full seasons of opera from a fully dedicated 'opera house'. Opera and instrumental music are normally housed together, without the distinction you might find in European and American capitals between opera houses and concert halls. The scene in Brazil revolves around a few operas put on by the main theatres of the cities in question throughout the year and, in parallel, annual opera festivals which provide bursts of activity at different times.

Neighbouring Argentina, instead, offers full opera seasons at the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires on top of a host of other theatres focusing on opera - notably the Teatro Argentino de La Plata and a number of provincial theatres such as the Teatro El Círculo in Rosario. The operatic cultures of Uruguay and Chile are arguably more similar to that of Brazil in that opera is offered alongside concerts and ballet. Montevideo counts the Teatro Sodre and Teatro Solís, both offering a few operatic titles every year.

Many challenges remain, however, for opera houses in South America and there is still at times a perception of unreformed cultural institutions, debilitated by funding issues and *clientelismo*, a mechanism whereby the managers of opera houses, and theatres, are obliged to resign every time there is a change in political party or mayor, rendering the whole system not quite as effective as it could be. This inhibits forward planning and means that budgets can be pulled away suddenly.

But theatres and programming have modernized and recalibrated with international artistic standards in the last decade or two and, as for singers, Latin America doesn't seem to have a problem. Those who have attained international recognition at the very top of the profession include Juan Diego Flórez (Peru), Rolando Villazón (Mexico), Javier Camarena (Mexico), Erwin Schrott (Uruguay), José Cura (Argentina), Bernarda Fink (Argentina), Marcelo Álvarez (also Argentina), Paulo Szot (Brazil), and Ana María Martínez (Puerto Rico). But given they are seen much more often in Europe and the U.S. than in their countries of origin, it's clear that the operatic circuit still has more to offer elsewhere.

Change, though, is definitely taking place and part of the credit must be given to institutions like Ópera Latinoamérica (OLA), whose aim is to advance and promote opera in the region. One of the founding members of OLA is the main opera festival in Brazil, the Festival Amazonas de Ópera, which takes place in the Teatro Amazonas of Manaus - a legacy of the 19th-century rubber boom in the northern part of the country. While the municipal theatres of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo offer opera performances as part of their seasons of orchestral music, the Amazonas festival is one of the go-to festivals for opera lovers in the country. It's the oldest in the region, having started in 1997, and until 2001 the only one of its kind in Latin America. Located in the centre of the world's largest rainforest, it has so far produced more than 70 operas for an audience of over 370,000.

The 22nd edition of the festival in 2019 featured a webinar on 'Opera Houses and the Creative Economy in Latin America' organized by OLA to investigate the development of the industry as a whole. Central to the discussion was of course surviving the Covid19 crisis, but also the role of opera organizations in the development of a strong, inclusive and democratic opera 'market'. OLA's work has been key, however, to opening up and facilitating dialogue not only between Latin American institutions but also with organizations in other parts of the world. So far, OLA has organized over 15 of these kinds of events with guests from the Royal Opera House, Opera Vision, Seattle Opera, Teatros del Canal, Teatro Real de Madrid, Liceo de Barcelona, Los Angeles Opera House, Palau de les Arts Reina Sofia, and others.

The Festival de Ópera do Teatro da Paz in nearby Belém is the second oldest festival in Brazil, in another city that profited greatly from the rubber trade in the 19th century (and was dubbed the 'rubber capital'). The festival programme isn't normally extensive but includes interesting choices, which are often national premieres, as well as talks, workshops and masterclasses, and takes place in August and September. It's latest edition (2019) offered a slightly offbeat repertoire: Cimarosa's *Il Matrimonio Segreto*, Puccini's *Suor Angelica* and Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. 2019 also saw the first year of the Festival de Ópera de

Pernambuco in the northeast of the country, in what appears to be a desire to honour the history of the area and, as a result, the opera house built there in the mid-nineteenth-century. Taking place at the Teatro Santa Isabel in Recife, the Festival opened with *Leonor*, the first opera composed by a local, Euclides Fonseca, and which premiered there in 1883. An opera festival started in 2015 in Brasilia, Brazil's capital, didn't go past its fourth year - evidence that not all festivals are automatically successful.

But it's really the entrepreneur, opera lover and overall Renaissance man Gehad Hajar who's making waves in the country with his Festival de Ópera do Paraná, currently in its sixth year. Backed by the state municipality for culture and the local Teatro Guaíra, Hajar and his marketing strategy have been hugely successful, with flash mobs in streets and transport hubs - so that opera does the job of selling itself - alongside local media coverage. The cleverly planned programme shows the hallmarks of an ambitious festival, with crowd-pleasers such as *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *Magic Flute*, *Carmen* and *Die Fledermaus* but also slightly more unconventional repertoire like Donizetti's *Rita*, Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona* and Debussy's *L'enfant prodigue*. It's actively curated to appeal to as wide a demographic as possible, and has included opera for children (Humperdink's *Hänsel und Gretel* and *ASapateira Prodigiousa*, an adaptation of Lorca's play), as well as the 'cineopera' *Hawwwah* and a 'rock opera'.



Gehad Hajar, General Director of the Festival de Ópera do Paraná; Aniele Nascimento/Gazeta do Povo © 2015.



Cavalleria Rusticana by Pietro Mascagni; Festival de Ópera do Paraná © 2017.

The Paraná festival has also distinguished itself by recovering and staging forgotten Brazilian operas. Highlights of recent editions included the world premiere of 'A festa de São João', an operetta by mestizo Brazilian female composer Chiquinha Gonzaga (1847-1935), composed in 1879. It 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. Gehad Hajar himself has also uncovered two operatic works by Padre 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' survived, but Gehad 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 performance in Portugal in the early 19th century. What's more, 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*, by local composer Benedito Nicolau dos Santos (1878-1956).



Festa de São João by Chiquinha Gonzaga; Caroline Pellegrini © 2017.



Marumby, operetta by Benedito Nicolau dos Santos;
Festival de Ópera do Paraná © 2015.

But its eclectic programming is only a tool in the festival's overarching aim of increasing accessibility. In fact, the area in which Hajar is really breaking new ground is in taking accessibility to a whole new level by being completely free of charge to everyone - possibly the first opera festival ever to do this. Capacity is only limited by the number of seats available in each venue - and the theatres are full. They offer sight-reading for the blind and sign language for the hard of hearing. Many of the operas are wholly translated into Portuguese, or have their recitatives translated while the arias and other numbers are kept in the original language. The performances take place in several theatres in the city of Curitiba but his unwavering commitment to accessibility and maximizing exposure to the artform means that they have also put on productions for children in shanty towns, on streets, on buses, in state schools, squares and fruit and vegetable street markets. The festival also takes its productions to smaller towns in the state of Paraná, and has put on the first opera production at a location near the Iguazu Falls. In a highly original move, Hajar and his festival also took opera (Donizetti's *Rita*) to a tribe of 200 Guarani indians who had never before encountered the operatic voice. Their astonished reactions can only be imagined.



Rita by Gaetano Donizetti; Festival de Ópera do Paraná © 2016.

Hajar's mission of 'opera for all' has been a complete success so far: in its first year the festival presented four operas to an audience of 2,000. By the second year audience numbers more than tripled, with 12 operas on show. At the time of writing, 52 operas have been staged to nearly 130,000 spectators across 9 cities, alongside masterclasses, talks and courses for professionals and the general public - all free of charge. But, above all, Gehad Hajar seems to have cracked one of the biggest challenges in opera today. A study of the festival so far shows that more than half of the audience are young people under 30, a demographic not usually associated with opera. He has given many the opportunity to experience opera in person for the first time - and they're hooked. It's not clear whether the festival will continue to be free, but it seems like a powerful and effective way to build a local audience who could in future become paying opera-goers. So a real game-changer in how to truly widen opera's appeal, especially among the young. Artistic standards are also of course at the top of his mind, with, among other things, exacting rehearsals for all works. His vision? To take Curitiba back to the position it held in the late 1990s as the opera capital of Brazil (and, some say, of Latin America). But his current ambition is clear: to see a packed theatre, every single time. And it's working.



An average day at the Festival de Ópera do Paraná; Festival de Ópera do Paraná © 2017.