

# A Pledge for Racial Equity and Systemic Change in Opera

Monday, September 14, 2020

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Dear Colleagues in the Opera Art Form:

The past several months have seen a worldwide awakening and enlightenment concerning long-standing injustice on matters of race. The Black Opera Alliance (BOA), comprising more than 600 Black opera professionals throughout the world and steadily growing, has observed your willingness to commit to substantively aligning the morality of your organization with principle and policy that evaluates, exposes, and expels racism in opera. To further your cause of solidarity in crucial anti-racist work, we ask that you acknowledge the artistic and financial contributions of Black artists and administrators, join with us, and sign this Pledge, demonstrating your active commitment to dismantling racism and its structures in our art form.

I hereby pledge to do the following:

**1. Hire Black artists who reflect, at minimum, the racial demographics of New York City.** This action works to restore equity for Black performers and enables audiences to digest living art that is inclusive of our multifaceted experiences, encouraging diversity in donors and increased patronage of the opera. Active recruiting from institutions of higher learning (such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities), Young Artist Programs and Studios, and online resources can be utilized to help achieve this result;

**2. Require that administrative staff, orchestra members, and independent contractors reflect, at minimum, the racial demographics of New York City.** This builds infrastructure that supports equity in our hiring practices through active and dynamic recruitment. This includes, but is not limited to: creating an evaluation and accountability process for affiliated artist unions, recruitment firms, and artistic management agencies, and insisting that equitable mechanisms be implemented in any new search, hire, or orchestra contract. This level of intentionality allows for powerful opportunities to deepen the organization's impact, relevance, and advancement of the art form. Inclusive organizational personnel brings a broad range of ideas, skills, and views that would not otherwise be considered;

**3. Program and prioritize works by Black composers on the mainstage, especially those that feature storytelling true to the complexity and broad experience of Black culture. Wrestle with operatic classics as if they were contemporary stories, letting them speak to realities in our contemporary America, including those of racial inequity and the fight for racial justice.** Hiring Black creative team leaders, in the telling of stories by Black composers, and of all stories, is crucial. This validates the humanity of Blackness and strengthens our commitment to include, empower, and uplift diverse perspectives on the stage and throughout our organization;

**4. Hire more Black creatives and production personnel at every level of the organization.** This includes, but is not limited to: stage managers, directors, conductors, costume designers, hair and makeup artists, and lighting designers. If the size of the candidate pool is insufficient, apprenticeship opportunities must be created to actively recruit Black creatives and production personnel in order to ensure this result;

**5. Provide the necessary resources for visual artists to successfully prepare a Black artist for the stage.** This is especially true for wig technicians, makeup artists, and lighting designers. Black artists will not provide their own makeup for shows if makeup is being provided for other cast members. It is the responsibility of the opera organization to ensure that each artist is visually prepared for the stage. There is zero tolerance for Blackface (i.e., the darkening of skin to suggest Blackness);

**6. Review the organization's hiring practices and administrative policies for inherent racism and/or implicit bias.** This includes providing better transparency around artist wages and staff promotions.

Set aside funds in our annual budget to devote towards resources around racial equity. We will engage a third party racial equity consultant, to ensure the soundness and sufficiency of this review process.

While Black opera professionals who are famous or highly regarded by our organization may choose to provide guidance and insight based upon their own experiences, the company must not use them tokenistically as the sole faces of diversity or arbiters of Black talent. Tokenism is a form of gatekeeping and is not a sustainable or far-reaching means of veritable progress. Effective equity and inclusion work requires specialized knowledge and training;

**7. Review the board's recruitment culture and decision-making methodologies for inherent racism and/or implicit bias.** This includes providing better transparency

around organizational leadership hires. The company will publicly announce all General, Artistic, and Executive Director searches and pursue equitable measures to ensure that Black candidates are actively sought for the applicant pool. The board will work to identify the specific blind spots that preclude the onboarding of new Black directors and develop focused strategies to dismantle such barriers.

Make use of available EDI resources, including engaging a third-party racial equity consultant, to work with the board to ensure the soundness and sufficiency of this review process.

**8. Include within the company's official Code of Conduct a commitment to anti-racism and anti-oppression.** This agreement will be signed by every board member, employee, contractor, and subcontractor of the opera organization. It clearly outlines how and where to report instances of racism, hate speech, or implicit racial bias, as well as a clear plan of action for when such instances occur. Staff and leadership will meet for monthly EDI training and reflection sessions. Community agreements containing anti-racist principles will be distributed and signed by all participants of a production at the beginning of the process.

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I hold myself and any organization or professional space with which I am affiliated accountable for upholding the aforementioned principles. I will execute these action items to the best of my ability and within as timely a manner as possible in order to intentionally effect anti-racism in the opera field. I acknowledge that items 1-4 are ongoing commitments and that items 5-8 will be completed within six months of signing this Pledge (by April 1, 2021, at the latest).

Additionally, I will comply with one or several accountability commissions, which will work in conjunction with Opera America, Opera Europa, and Opera.ca, to review the inclusionary progress of companies and hiring entities. This ensures that the aforesated practices are upheld according to written and publicly shared policies and timelines, providing quantifiable and sustained systemic change.

Signed,




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Co-Artistic Director & Producer, Heartbeat Opera

Name Title/Affiliation  
Louisa Proske  Co-Artistic Director


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Name Title/Affiliation  
 Managing Director, Heartbeat Opera

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Name Title/Affiliation  
Daniel Schlosberg  Co-Music Director

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Name Title/Affiliation  
Jacob Ashworth  Co-Music Director, Heartbeat Opera

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Name Title/Affiliation