

V101 - The Opera.mp3

Amanda Luberto [00:00:05] The year is 1972, and you've got tickets to the hottest new thing in town. Opera has just come to Tucson.

music [00:00:39] [The Barber of Seville plays]

Amanda Luberto [00:00:42] Rossini's classic, The Barber of Seville was the first performance by the Tucson Opera Company after being established the year before. In that first season, they also showcased Giuseppe Verdi's La Traviata and Giacomo Puccini's Tosca, some of the arts most recognizable operas. Soon, the company was performing in both Tucson and Phoenix. Decades later, a season of opera is still brought to the stage in both cities every year. Welcome to Valley 101, a podcast by the Arizona Republic and azcentral dot com about Metro Phoenix and beyond. I'm producer Amanda Luberto, and today I'm exploring Arizona's history with the art of opera and the longstanding company housed right in downtown Phoenix.

Amanda Luberto [00:01:31] Opera can seem daunting for people who aren't familiar. The lavish costumes, actors often singing in a different language and these long, drawn out vocals that might be hard to follow. But at the end of the day, if you're a fan of musical theater or performing arts in general, it's not really that much different. It's entertainers tapping into human emotion, yet tragedy or comedy through a live performance in front of an audience. Opera's just a little bit more elaborate. And it's been around for a long time. According to Opera North's A Brief History of Opera. The first known production can be traced back to 1607 when Orfeo was presented to the Duke of Mantua in Italy. Here's a snippet of the beginning of that opera performed by la Capella Reial de Catalunya in Barcelona.

music [00:02:50] [Orfeo plays]

Amanda Luberto [00:02:58] But 365 years later, Arizona had its crack at opera. Originally, the Metropolitan Opera would tour some of the more cosmopolitan cities across the United States, and that fizzled out. It left actors scattered around the nation. This created a wellspring of regional performers during this time. Regional opera companies had access to some of the most passionate and talented singers, which so many companies got started. Over 50 years after that, the one in Arizona is still going strong in both Phoenix and Tucson. Joe Specter is the president and general director of the Arizona Opera. He was a professional opera singer before working in finance, a job with the Metropolitan Opera in New York, gave him an opportunity to combine his worlds. But now Joe has been soaking up the Arizona sunrays for almost a decade. However, the extravagance of opera wasn't the kind of over-the-top performance he initially had in mind.

Joe Specter [00:04:04] I wanted to be a hairband rocker when I was a kid. And so I took voice lessons and was in choirs and things like that. But the voice lessons I started when I was a young teenager. Those were for me to make me a really awesome rock singer. That was the point. I needed to have a really great high singing voice that I didn't have as a kid going through puberty at the time.

Amanda Luberto [00:04:35] His mind was more on arena tours like Jon Bon Jovi, not theater runs like Luciano Pavarotti. But his mother insisted that if he was going to be studying music, he should do it the right way. He was accepted into a summer program for

students at Tanglewood in Massachusetts, where the Boston Symphony spends its summers.

Joe Specter [00:04:55] I spent this period of intense immersion in classical music, hearing the Boston Symphony many nights a week. Being around other young classical musicians training classical. Even though the plan was to apply this to rock music and that immersion almost became like a like a seduction. I felt loved. Classical music. Somehow or other, something clicked, and all of a sudden I realized that this was something that moved me in a sense. I know this sounds silly to say, but this was music that moved me as much as rock music did. All of a sudden I got it. And yet no one I know, none of my close friends know anything about this. They're not connected to it. And I thought, this is something I want to be able to share with people. Like a treasure. Like, here's something people don't know, and I want them to know about it.

Amanda Luberto [00:05:40] Sharing this treasure of his is now his whole career. Part of Joe's responsibilities is representing what opera in Arizona can be.

Joe Specter [00:05:49] Because we're the sole professional opera company in the state, and because you have this continuing to expand repertoire of 400 plus years of music. Our goal is to be the organization that brings the fullest expression of this art form to the communities we serve. Whether it is the oldest of those selections or the newest, the largest and the smallest.

Amanda Luberto [00:06:10] This season, they're bringing back The Barber of Seville, one of the most famous operas of all time. Even people who aren't interested in the arts at all can probably recognize it from a notable episode of the Looney Tunes, where Bugs Bunny massages hair oil into Elmer Fudd by playing this tune into his bald head.

music [00:06:30] [Barber of Seville plays]

Amanda Luberto [00:06:49] They also debuted a new show, Frankenstein, based on the novel by Mary Shelley, about the monster created in a lab. Here's a selection that was recorded at a workshop in New York.

music [00:07:00] [Frankenstein plays]

Joe Specter [00:07:19] This year's production of Frankenstein is a great example of something that if you're an opera person, you know an opera about Frankenstein, you need to check that out. And at the same time, you know, if you've never been to an opera before, but you love Goth or you love horror or something like that, you also might check it out. What I know for sure is that storytelling through song is as powerful and resonant a thing today as it's ever been. And we love sharing this art form, which is at its core essence just that storytelling through song.

Amanda Luberto [00:07:51] The Frankenstein opera was completed just this year by composer Gregg Kaylor. Joe told me that the United States is extremely fruitful with operas, and thus a lot more of the contemporary operas happen to be in English.

Joe Specter [00:08:05] People often associate opera with a foreign language, and that's because we're Americans and we speak English and we think of opera, an Italian art form. And there's some basis for that because the origins of the art form itself. But in my time

singing, I sang opera and French and German and Italian, English, Russian, Spanish, you know, you name it. English is just another language in which we can sing opera in.

Amanda Luberto [00:08:28] While modernizing theaters are making it more inviting for people to try out coming to the opera.

Joe Specter [00:08:34] Opera companies in the United States for, say, the past 30 years or so, maybe more, have had regularly projected translations above the stage, even at the smallest opera companies in the country. In Arizona, we do our supertitles in both English and Spanish. The company has evolved at different times, especially in those birth decades. The seventies and eighties regional opera companies largely focused primarily on traditional works in the canon, Madame Butterfly.

music [00:09:22] [Madame Butterfly plays]

Joe Specter [00:09:24] La Traviatta.

music [00:09:32] [La Traviatta plays}

Joe Specter [00:09:33] Bohème.

music [00:09:37] [Bohème plays].

Joe Specter [00:09:42] Carmen

music [00:09:42] [Carmen Plays]

Joe Specter [00:10:33] The shows that you've heard of, even if you've never been to an opera. But again, in the last decade, Arizona Opera has joined the ranks of opera companies across the country that have really taken it upon themselves to bring more new work. And we've also done a number of musicals. So contemporary opera, traditional opera, musical theater and so forth.

Amanda Luberto [00:11:03] Like any institution that's been around for over half a century, there are bound to be some low points. I've been fortunate in my years of covering Arizona to talk with many established organizations, and each one of them has this same story, whether caused by World War Two or the recession or anything else. I asked Joe if the state was ever at risk of losing its opera company.

Joe Specter [00:11:29] Well, listen, I mean, we're living through a period of time right now, post-COVID, where the habits of people that have attended live theater, whether it's opera, musical theater, street theater, so forth, a lot of those folks and particularly older patrons there, their habits of change, they stay at home more. Some have stopped coming to performances altogether. Some come a little bit less. Or they pick one show here or there where they used to buy single tickets. So that time is largely upon us right at this very moment. And the moment now is different than, say, following the Great Recession, 2008, 2009, with the dot com bust recession that was in 2000 2001, because in those periods of time, even if people had economic disruption, they were still leaving their houses and doing things. And because we had this gap in time where a lot of people weren't. That really changed behavior in a way that was pretty profound. So that's created the moment we're in right now, which is making sure that we're really thinking about how we are connecting to future generation as fully as possible.

Amanda Luberto [00:13:00] The change in habits during the pandemic has impacted many art forms and performance spaces, including the movie theaters. Cinemas are screening more rereleases, like *The Wedding Singer* and *Return of the Jedi*, both of which are playing at Harkins this week. Movie theaters are battling the streaming era and are needing to get creative on how to get people through the door to buy a ticket. Which led me to ask, has opera made it to streaming?

Joe Specter [00:13:28] There is a lot of streamed opera. I don't think that streamed opera has become necessarily preferred product in terms of the whole business model. But the Metropolitan Opera has a program called the Met Live in HD, which is an international program. I believe the Met was in 54 different countries in movie theaters. So those would be live streams actually of operas from the Met stage to movie theaters around the world. And then there would be these great intermission features and things like that. So anywhere there is a regional opera company in United States, there's almost always movie theaters that are carrying the Met live in HD too. So what does that mean for regional opera? You know, can you effectively share an art form that involves sound and the live physical reaction to sound effectively as a stream product if it's not connected to a live performance as well? All questions. None of us really know. I haven't seen it, at least for regional opera companies, a viable business model where streaming is a revenue generator so much, but I think it's got a role to play. I just don't know what it is.

Amanda Luberto [00:14:35] Maybe one day you can watch an opera from the comfort of your couch. For now, you'll have to make your way to downtown Phoenix and Joe's challenge is figuring out how to get you to do that.

Joe Specter [00:14:46] I think we're really still trying to find that. At the end of the day, I think, you know, what's important is to communicate how enjoyable and wonderful the opportunity is, that these experiences that you can really have a viscerally wonderful, magical experience trying it for the first time, making it easy for people to try it, make it enticing for people to try it, and hopefully creating excitement for people to try it. Because once people are in, they try it for the first time, some number of people and it might be a minority number of people, but some number of people are going to find that there was a thing that they didn't know they loved, that they will now well for the rest of their lives. I think the biggest challenge that all these art forms has as a brand issue ballet, it doesn't sound like fun, simply isn't fun, offered it. These are fun. It's up to us to make that experience so magical and wonderful and awesome. But people have to come back.

Amanda Luberto [00:15:43] As Arizona grows, especially Phoenix and Tucson, so does the culture. Being in a place that isn't instantly thought of when it comes to the arts, to Joe is both a pro and a con.

Joe Specter [00:15:55] Well, I think the fact that we live in a place that has wonderful arts and culture, but where it's not, you know, there's not necessarily Vanguard or an established group of cultural guardians that are saying, you can do this, you can't do that. I think that gives us, as arts organizations, more freedom to program present exhibits or whatever the art form allows for in a way that is less tethered to some formula or some tried and true or traditional approach. I think we have more freedom. The downside of that is that people don't necessarily think of Arizona as an arts and culture mecca. We absolutely want to be less sneaky in this particular manner. Hopefully over a period of time we will do just as good a job communicating to people who live here or people visiting that

you're just as likely to have a wonderful experience on a golf course as you do at an opera performance.

Amanda Luberto [00:17:01] So depending on who you ask. Les Miserables is considered an opera because all of the dialog is sung. So if it counts, I'll take that one as my favorite. As for Joe.

Joe Specter [00:17:13] It's like asking which one of my daughters is my favorite. I plead the Fifth.

Amanda Luberto [00:17:25] Thank you so much for listening to this week's episode of Valley 101. This episode was written and produced by me, Amanda Luberto with Audio assistance by Kaely Monahan. Episode Oversight by Kathy Tulumello. Today's musical scoring came from Universal production music. Additional music came from la Capella Reial de Catalunya, the Royal Opera House, the Metropolitan Opera, Warner Brothers and Opera America. You can support Valley 101 by subscribing to us on your favorite podcasting app. Leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you happen to be listening to us. And if you like this episode, share it with a friend. Is there something about Arizona that you're curious about? Leave us your questions at Valley 101.azcentral dot com. You can follow us on social media at A-Z-C Podcasts Valley 101 is an Arizona Republic and azcentral.com production. I'm Amanda Luberto. Thank you again for listening and we'll see you next week.