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Wayne Brown photo by Scott Spellman

Detroit Opera President & CEO Wayne S. Brown to step down in 2024

Brown’s ten-year tenure transformed the company into the premier destination for progressive opera in America

Detroit, April 21, 2023—Detroit Opera President and CEO Wayne S. Brown has announced his intention to step down from his current position at the end of the 2023–24 season. During his tenure, Brown guided the company through the uncertainty of the Covid-19 pandemic, secured record-breaking financial grants and gifts, and, with the recruitment and hiring of Yuval Sharon—the occupant of the Gary L. Wasserman Artistic Director position—oversaw Detroit Opera's evolution from a strong regional company to the premier destination for progressive opera in America.

“It’s time,” says Brown. “This marks my fiftieth year in the business. For me, this is about the completion of a significant cycle: my professional career right after graduating from the University of Michigan began with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, and after several decades at symphony orchestras and the National Endowment for the Arts, Detroit called me back in 2014, when I became President and CEO of Michigan Opera Theatre, now Detroit Opera. My time at Detroit Opera has been particularly meaningful; since its founding, this company has always been defined by creativity and innovation, generated by

the city that embraces it. I'm pleased to observe that the forward-thinking, inclusive, risk-taking approach of Detroit Opera is becoming a model for other opera companies in the U.S. My time at Detroit Opera has been an opportunity to celebrate and embrace a more expanded view of what opera means today, and I cannot wait to see what the company has to offer in the years to come."

Early Years

Wayne S. Brown was named President and CEO of Detroit Opera—then known as Michigan Opera Theatre—in 2014, at which time the company's founder, Dr. David DiChiera, stepped down to the role of Artistic Director. Brown continued to work closely with DiChiera, who remained the company's artistic director until his 2017 retirement, and led signature productions such as Robert Xavier Rodriguez's *Frida* (a fully sold-out production staged throughout Metro Detroit to reach out to new audiences) and Mieczyslaw Weinberg and Alexander Medvedev's opera *The Passenger*, about the Holocaust.

With the appointment of Stephen Lord as Principal Conductor and interim Artistic Director, Brown maintained the company's momentum throughout the 2017–18 and 2018–19 seasons—the first without DiChiera since the company's founding—with productions that directly interacted with the Detroit community. Among these were Daniel Sonenberg and Daniel Nester's *The Summer King*, staged in May 2018 in a co-production with Pittsburgh Opera. *The Summer King* tells the story of Negro League baseball star Josh Gibson, whose premature death came just months before Jackie Robinson moved to the majors. The opera was accompanied by "Take Me Out to the Opera," a yearlong celebration of trail-blazing African American artists and athletes presented with community partners including the Detroit Tigers, the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, the Detroit Historical Society, the Detroit Public Library, the Josh Gibson Foundation, Rosedale Park Community House, and Hamtramck Stadium.

In spring 2018, Brown brought Ricky Ian Gordon's *27* to Detroit, in a new production directed by Jeffrey Buchman and featuring future Music Director Roberto Kalb conducting his own reduced orchestration of the score. Presented at Macomb Center for the Performing Arts, *27* featured a cast of rising singers from the company's Studio Artist program (since renamed the Resident Artist Program), including Briana Elyse Hunter as Gertrude Stein and Monica Dewey as Alice B. Toklas.

That same season, Brown brought the American Ballet Theatre to the Detroit Opera House for five nearly sold-out performances of *Romeo and Juliet*, featuring ballet stars Misty Copeland, Isabella Boylston, and Daniil Simkin, among others. Drawing support from the local community, these performances were presented in cooperation with University Musical Society and supported by the Community Foundation of Southeast Michigan.

Detroit Opera in the 2020s: New Artistic Leadership and a New Identity

Ahead of the 2020–21 season—the 50th since the company’s founding—Brown spearheaded efforts to chart a new course for Detroit Opera's next 50 years with a brand-new artistic team. Building on DiChiera’s vision for the company as a center for high-quality, accessible opera in the heart of Detroit, the company’s leadership team, led by Board Chair Ethan Davidson, recruited Yuval Sharon to become the Gary L. Wasserman Artistic Director of Detroit Opera.

Sharon’s tenure officially began with *Twilight: Gods*—an innovative and site-specific *Götterdämmerung* adaptation, staged in the Detroit Opera House Parking Center, which premiered in October 2020 to universal acclaim. *Twilight: Gods* signaled that Brown and Sharon were ready to take Detroit Opera’s programming to bold new places and curious new audiences.

Since then, Brown and Sharon—joined in the 2021–22 season by internationally renowned soprano Christine Goerke as Associate Artistic Director and in the 2022–23 season by Music Director Roberto Kalb—have worked together to transform Detroit Opera into the destination for progressive opera in the United States, creating an ambitious new standard for American opera that emphasizes community, accessibility, artistic risk-taking, and collaboration.

In 2022, the company changed its name from Michigan Opera Theatre to Detroit Opera, to honor the city it calls home and renew its commitment to the community that had supported it for 50 years. “I acknowledge and remain committed to David DiChiera’s dedication to this community, and I am thrilled that Yuval Sharon has affirmed that goal as reflected in part by the name change to Detroit Opera in 2022,” says Brown. “The kind of innovation that began many decades ago continues in full force today, and I could not be more proud of what this company has achieved.”

Among the many highlights from the current artistic team are three productions directed by Sharon himself, including a new 2021 staging of Ragnar Kjartansson's *Bliss*—a performance piece that replays three minutes of *The Marriage of Figaro* without pause for twelve hours—in the historic Michigan Building Theater. Sharon’s 2022 production of *La bohème*—the first in the Detroit Opera House since the pandemic—staged the four acts of Puccini’s opera in reverse order. Joining the cast was legendary tenor George Shirley, a Detroit native. In fall 2022, *The Valkyries*—a production of Act III of Wagner's *Die Walküre*, presented in a co-production with the Los Angeles Philharmonic—used virtual reality, filmmaking technology, and graphics engines more commonly used for video games to bring Wagner's proto-cinematic world to life by presenting two visions simultaneously: that of a fantastic virtual world, and a live behind-the-scenes look featuring human-scale actors singing against green screens.

Other recent highlights include the 2021 production of *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*, the first revival of Anthony Davis and Thulani Davis’s opera since its 1986 premiere. Directed by Robert O’Hara, conducted by Kazem Abdullah, and starring Detroit Opera 2021–22 Artist-in-Residence Davóne Tines, *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* was co-presented with Lyric Opera of Chicago, Opera Omaha, Seattle Opera, and The

Metropolitan Opera, where it will be staged next season. *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* was a major success with critics and audiences alike; three-quarters of single-ticket sales to the nearly-sold out run went to new audience members, with more than twice the usual amount going to residents of the city of Detroit, rather than its suburbs.

Oswaldo Golijov's *Ainadamar (Fountain of Tears)*, presented earlier this month, represented another major milestone for the company: its first international co-production, in collaboration with Opera Ventures, Scottish Opera, Welsh National Opera, and The Metropolitan Opera, where it will be staged in the 2024–25 season.

Record-Breaking Financial Success and an Improved Detroit Opera House

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Brown took the opportunity to usher in a new era for the Detroit Opera House. In addition to his artistic stewardship of the organization, Brown has maintained financial security for the company through an especially difficult era with major gifts and grants—achieved through a remarkable commitment by the Board of Directors, Trustees, and a talented and committed team of development professionals.

During Brown's tenure, Detroit Opera obtained significant funding from local and national sources. These include multi-year grants from the Mellon Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation, and William Davidson Foundation, plus ongoing support from Community Foundation of Southeast Michigan, the Fred A. & Barbara M. Erb Family Foundation, Edward C and Linda Dresner Levy Foundation, Ford Motor Company Fund, General Motors Corporation, Max M. & Marjorie S. Fisher Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, and OPERA America.

The combined strength of Brown's leadership, a committed Board of Directors led by its Chairman, Ethan Davidson, and the current artistic team has attracted numerous major gifts from foundations, corporations, and individuals totaling more than \$40 million over the past nine years, in addition to a \$5,000,000 single gift—the largest in company history—from the William Davidson Family Foundation that has supported Detroit Opera's facilities and programming. These major gifts have helped to finance numerous infrastructure updates, including a new elevator tower to improve accessibility throughout the Detroit Opera House, and to allow for greater programmatic risks and collaborations. Thanks to these investments in the company and the Detroit community, programming presented at the Detroit Opera House is more accessible, both physically and financially, than ever before.

About Wayne S. Brown

Wayne S. Brown has deep roots in Detroit, and the state of Michigan as a whole. He is a graduate of the University of Michigan, where he received his bachelor of music degree with a major in voice and a minor in business. Brown began his professional career with the

Detroit Symphony Orchestra, first as an Administrative Assistant, and subsequently as Assistant Manager, overseeing sales, community outreach, and the orchestra's first Upper Peninsula tour. In 1979, Brown was instrumental in bringing about the first Classical Roots Concert in Detroit, an initiative that is now being celebrated by several communities throughout the nation.

Beyond Michigan, Brown also has a long history of involvement with symphony orchestras in Springfield, Massachusetts and Louisville, Kentucky. He is the former Executive Director of the Springfield Symphony Orchestra and of The Louisville Orchestra, where he was responsible for launching and exceeding a \$10 million endowment campaign, establishing a significant regional touring program, and producing two international music festivals with composers and performers representing fourteen different countries.

A nearly 50-year veteran of the nonprofit industry, Brown was a founding member of the Magic in Music Advisory Committee for the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, has served on advisory boards for the Mellon and Ford Foundations, is former vice chairman of Opera America and the League of American Orchestras, and previously served as a member of the American Arts Alliance Board.

Prior to his historic tenure at Detroit Opera, from 1997 to 2014 Brown was Director of Music and Opera for the National Endowment for the Arts, where he managed NEA grants for music and opera projects and directed the NEA Opera Honors and NEA Jazz Masters Fellowships—the nation's highest honor in jazz. Prior to his affiliation with the NEA, Brown served as producer of music programs for the Cultural Olympiad in Atlanta, Georgia, where he managed music events associated with the 1996 Olympic Games. Brown is the 2021 recipient of the Community Foundation of Southeast Michigan's Mariam C. Noland Award for Executive Leadership.