

Detroit Opera



BIG QUESTIONS – SEASON ONE

Has America at 250 lived up to its promise?

Detroit Opera embarks on a season-long exploration of American identity as the nation celebrates the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Throughout that time, the musical-dramatic art form of opera has shaped, challenged, and expanded the definition of what it means to be American. In four inspiring and original productions, Detroit Opera's first BIG QUESTIONS season invites you to participate in a dialogue around the question: **Has AMERICA, at 250 lived up to its promise?**

Through the medium of opera, we will examine the enduring tensions and transformations that have defined the nation, as well as how the ideals set forth in the Declaration of Independence have echoed through the centuries. From the rugged pioneer spirit depicted in Puccini's masterpiece *Girl of the Golden West* to the dystopian fantasy of *The Handmaid's Tale*, we see how America has evolved—at times staying true to its promise of liberty, at others faltering under the weight of contradictions.

Through a powerful mix of historical, contemporary, and speculative storytelling, our BIG QUESTIONS season one will take you on an unforgettable journey into the heart of what it means to be American today. Join us for all four productions for the richest and most expansive conversation.

THE GIRL OF THE GOLDEN WEST (La fanciulla del West)

Music by Giacomo Puccini

Libretto by Guelfo Civinini and Carlo Zangarini

Based on a play by David Belasco

Directed by Richard Jones

Conducted by Roberto Kalb

SUN / SEP 28 / 2:30 PM

THU / OCT 02 / 7:30 PM

SAT / OCT 04 / 7:30 PM

***The Girl of the Golden West* sets the stage for examining whether the roots of America's promise were always intertwined with conquest, violence, and vigilante justice.**

Before opera became an American art form, it was up to the great Italian composer Giacomo Puccini to reflect the sound of the nation. Premiering in 1910 at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, *Fanciulla* was an immediate sensation and is still considered by some as the composer's greatest work. After creating *Madama Butterfly*, Puccini took another story from American playwright David Belasco to invoke a mythic world: a fantasy of the Gold Rush and the Wild West, teeming with romance, action, and the archetypal cowboy. Audiences will enjoy classic Puccini melodies and unforgettable characters.

Puccini composed *La fanciulla del West* as a musical love letter to America. Set in a mining camp during the California Gold Rush in 1849—yet featuring many of the beloved elements of classic Italian opera—it tells the story of Minnie, a virtuous saloon owner whose moral code is put to the test when she falls for Dick Johnson (a.k.a. Ramerrez), a bandit on the run from a relentless sheriff, Jack Rance, who's determined to have Minnie for himself.

This is a production of English National Opera and Santa Fe Opera.

HIGHWAYS AND VALLEYS – TWO AMERICAN LOVE STORIES

HIGHWAY 1, USA | DOWN IN THE VALLEY

SUN / DEC 07 / 2:30 PM

THU / DEC 11 / 7:30 PM

SAT / DEC 13 / 7:30 PM

***Highways and Valleys – Two American Love Stories* is a unique double bill combining voices often excluded from the operatic mainstream: the “dean of African American music,” William Grant Still, and the Jewish émigré Kurt Weill. From their marginalized positions in American society, both composers sought out the heart of American folk music and brought it into the world of opera.**

Highway 1, USA

Music by William Grant Still

Libretto by Verna Arvey

Directed by Kaneza Schaal

Conducted by Roberto Kalb

Composed in the 1940s, *Highway 1, USA* is a distinctly American story of ordinary people aspiring for the “American dream.” Still's work celebrates the Black experience in an engaging musical voice, portraying how African American culture is central to the sound of our national identity.

The kitchen of a modest house attached to a gas station is the unassuming setting of what *The New*

York Times hailed as a “one-act stunner” from William Grant Still. The home belongs to Bob and Mary, who run the filling station and support Bob’s younger brother, Nate. But each sees that support, and its limits, very differently, resulting in a harrowing event that throws into question the nature of family, responsibility, success, and the American Dream.

This production is by LA Opera.

Down in the Valley

Music by Kurt Weill

Libretto by Arnold Sundgaard

Directed by Kaneza Schaal

Conducted by Roberto Kalb

Weill’s “folk opera in one act” *Down in the Valley* was originally written for the radio at the same time Still was composing his reflection of Black life. Weaving together American folk songs and original choruses, Weill’s engagement with the music of his adopted homeland reflects the search for belonging among immigrant communities.

Down in the Valley weaves several traditional American songs into a tragic tale of love and loss. It begins and ends in a Birmingham jail cell on the eve of the execution of Brack—a teenage boy convicted of murdering the man who tried to take Jennie, Brack’s beloved, away from him. Told partly in flashback, this simple story of ill-fated romance and shattered innocence is as timeless as it is universal.

This is a production premiere.

THE HANDMAID’S TALE

Music by Poul Ruders

Libretto by Paul Bentley

Based on the novel by Margaret Atwood

Directed by TBA

Conducted by Marit Strindlund

SUN / MAR 01 / 2:30 PM

THU / MAR 05 / 7:30 PM

SAT / MAR 07 / 7:30 PM

***The Handmaid’s Tale* serves as a cautionary tale that forces reflection on whether America’s core values—freedom and separation of church and state—are at risk.**

“Once, my body belonged to me.” *The Handmaid’s Tale* provides a chilling look into an imagined future, where America’s fragile democracy collapses into religious tyranny. Echoing contemporary concerns about the overlap between government and religion, this fictional story is timelier than ever.

Within the frame of an academic conference held in the distant future, the opera depicts a contemporary America in the throes of a theocratic dictatorship where women have been stripped of all rights, including the right to bodily autonomy.

Before Margaret Atwood's beloved classic of speculative fiction became the source material of a popular TV series, Poul Ruders' gripping musical treatment brought the story to operatic stages around the world. It comes to Detroit in a fast-paced production you will not forget.

APARTMENT HOUSE 1776

Concept by John Cage

Directed by Yuval Sharon

FRI / MAY 15 / 7:30 PM

SAT / MAY 16 / 7:30 PM

SUN / MAY 17 / 2:30 PM

FRI / MAY 22 / 7:30 PM

SAT / MAY 23 / 7:30 PM

SUN / MAY 24 / 2:30 PM

This immersive opera performance reflects on Detroit's multiculturalism and encourages audiences to engage in joyous, participatory reflection—highlighting that America's most significant strength lies in its ability to reimagine and rebuild.

Conceived for the US bicentennial celebration of American independence in 1976, John Cage imagined a freeform musical tapestry, a “musicircus,” that reflects America's diversity and interdependence. Now, fifty years later, Detroit Opera presents a one-of-a-kind immersive experience realizing Cage's utopian vision of American cultural coexistence.

Apartment House 1776 uses the image of an “apartment house” – each room containing a unique story from a different cultural background, unified into one interconnected building – as an inspiring metaphor for the American experience. Simultaneous performances by multiple artists, all arranged by chance operations, creates a one-of-a-kind “mix” of sights and sounds. Vocalists representing different religious and cultural communities sing traditional songs, while the individual instrumentalists of the Detroit Opera Orchestra perform fragments of music from the time of the American Revolution. This only-in-Detroit event promises to be a kaleidoscopic aural experience like no other.

** There will be no assigned seating at these performances. Audiences are encouraged to walk through the immersive experience. This will be a production premiere.*