

OPERA NEWS

August 2013

Coda Opera Briefly

BY KYLE MACMILLAN

Thirty-two-year-old composer Jennifer Jolley believes the U.S. opera world's flagging ticket sales — overall attendance declined by approximately a third from 2002 to 2008 — are directly linked to its repertory choices. “I think the audience at large would really love opera,” says Jolley. “I think a lot of times they are turned off by grand opera — the two- or three-hour works that are not in English and that are a hundred or a couple hundred years old and deal with issues that they can't quite relate to.”

Rather than wring her hands, the assistant professor of music at Ohio Wesleyan University decided to do something about it. Certain that there is a new, younger opera audience out there that traditional opera companies have been unwilling or unable to tap, Jolley teamed last year with her friend and librettist, thirty-nine-year-old Kendall A, to found the North American New Opera Workshop, or NANOWorks for short. The high-tech-sounding nickname is clearly no coincidence. These two entrepreneurs intend this new hybrid opera company to be the arts equivalent of a technology incubator. It is based in Cincinnati, partly because Jolley and her collaborators live there and partly because of the rich pool of vocal talent there, due to the presence of the respected University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music.

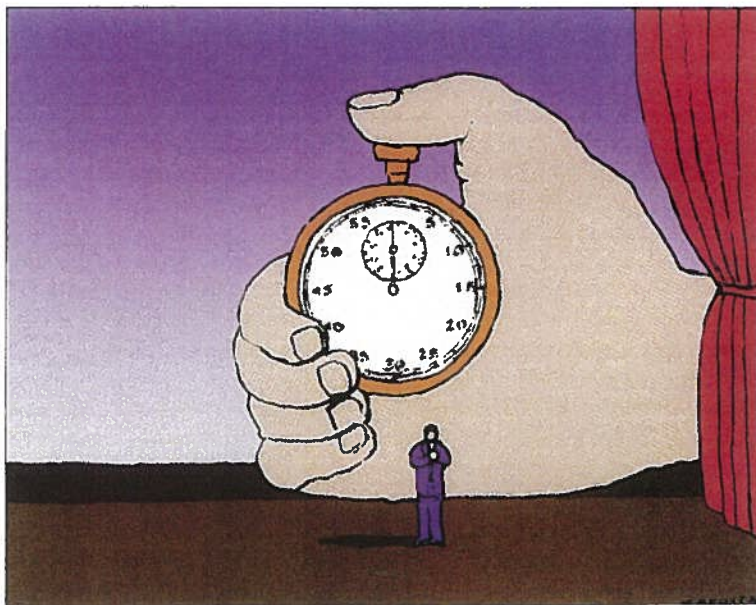
The mission of the organization is to commission, produce and promote new “nano” operas that are no more than thirty minutes in length and deal in some way with contemporary reality — or, put more simply, to create twenty-first-century operas for twenty-first-century audiences. “I would love to give them something that fits their attention span,” Jolley says, “gives them something that is more contemporary and still gives them something that is high art. I truly feel like it will revitalize the form and persuade people of my generation that opera is a cool thing and they should attend it.”

Small-scale chamber operas are hardly a new idea, but the idea of imposing a time limit on them — and focusing on them as an answer to people's ever-shortening attention spans in an increasingly fast-paced world — is. Also distinguishing these “nano” operas is their compact instrumentation, generally no larger than a piano quartet. Part of this, of course, is dictated by the company's budget constraints, but part of it is a desire to make opera more nimble and adaptable to just about any kind of setting. Similarly, operas about subjects “ripped from the headlines” have been done before: John Adams's *Nixon in China* set off a series of productions that were irreverently dubbed CNN Operas, and more recently there have been reality-based works such as composer Mark-Anthony Turnage's controversial operatic portrayal of *Playboy* model and television personality Anna Nicole Smith. But such creations remain more the exception than the norm. Some of the field's biggest hits in recent years have been based on well-established literary works — for instance, Jake Heggie's 2010 adaptation of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*.

What sets apart NANOWorks is its innovative melding of brevity and contemporaneity and its fun-spirited attitude to opera, as its lively website makes clear. It's too soon to tell

whether the premise behind NANOWorks is working. So far, the itinerant company has largely presented what Jolley calls a “teaser season,” just trying to get its name before the public. But there have been some encouraging signs. Jolley points to a private party in March at which the company performed her ten-minute opera *Krispy Cremes and Butter Queens*. She wrote the tongue-in-cheek work about celebrity chef Paula Deen in January 2012 as part of Atlanta Opera's 24-Hour Opera Project. When the partygoers realized they were about to become unwitting opera attendees, some were visibly apprehensive. “I felt like they ended up loving it, because it was really nothing that they were expecting,” Jolley says.

NANOWorks's first major presentation came in May, when it



presented two performances of a program of four operas, including the stage premiere of *A Game of Hearts*, by thirty-two-year-old Douglas Pew, which was commissioned and workshopped by Washington National Opera. In addition, the company presented the world premiere of Jolley's *The Bubble* during the Cincinnati Fringe Festival, which ran May 28 through June 8. The two-scene opera, written in what Jolley describes as deliberately schmaltzy, Tin Pan Alley style, is set in the mid-2000s, just before the burst of the real-estate bubble, when a college student, the Ditz, is lured into buying a house with no money down. The company plans to present a full season in 2013–14, and beyond that, Jolley hopes it can establish a financial security that will allow it to settle in a regular venue and pay its singers proper fees.

It's anyone's guess whether the NANOWorks model will ultimately succeed. But as the smart phone revolutionized the tech world, the next big thing in opera just might be something small. Nano-sized, in fact. □

KYLE MACMILLAN was the classical-music critic of the *Denver Post* for eleven years. He now lives and works in Chicago, where he freelances regularly for the *Sun-Times* and writes for an array of national publications.

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