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How operatic powerhouse DiChiera helped lift downtown Detroit

David Lyman, Special to the Detroit Free Press Published 10:06 p.m. ET May 18, 2017 | Updated 11:20 a.m. ET May 19, 2017



(Photo: Romain Blanquart, Detroit Free Press)

It began with a piano that was exiled to the family garage.

It was there, behind the small family home in 1945 Los Angeles, where 10-year-old David DiChiera officially began his musical career. The piano was, says DiChiera, “a piece of junk. But it worked.”

Friday, 72 years after laying claim to that battered upright piano, DiChiera will be celebrated by hundreds of friends, music aficionados and civic leaders who will converge on the Detroit Opera House to salute his leadership of Michigan Opera Theatre, the company he founded in 1971. He’s stepping down July 1 as the organization’s artistic director.

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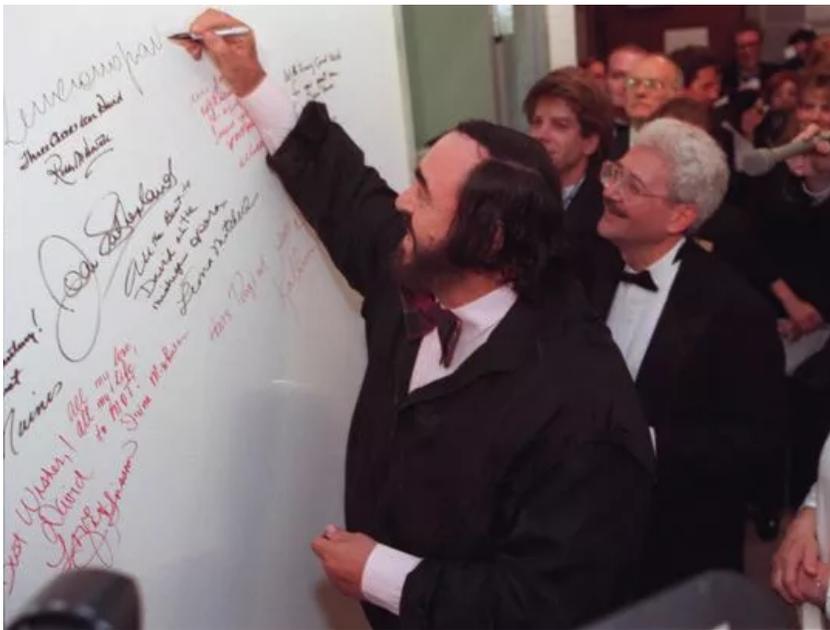
By any measure, it’s likely to be every bit as spectacular as the gala opening of the Detroit Opera House in 1996. There will be tributes galore, a handful of speeches and rousing performances by operatic and ballet superstars — all making for an appropriate exit for a man who has devoted his entire adult life to music and to Detroit.

But DiChiera wants one thing to be clear. He may be ready to give up the day-to-day artistic leadership of his beloved opera company, but he’s unwilling to call it “retirement.”

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In 1996, opera superstar Luciano Pavarotti signed the wall at the new Detroit Opera House as DiChiera looked on. (Photo: Richard Lee, Detroit Free Press)

“It’s been a good 46 years,” says DiChiera, known affectionately as “Dr. D.” to almost everyone who meets him. “I’ll miss being in the middle of everything that goes on in a big artistic operation like MOT. But the good side of this is that it will give me time to indulge all the other kinds of creativity I love so much.”

He’s eager to commit himself to composing music with more regularity instead of squeezing it in between productions. He has a CD coming out soon. And as soon as his production of “Cyrano” closes Sunday at the Detroit Opera House, he has another opera he wants to work on.

“I want to write a book, too, about the evolution of this opera company,” he says. “How it grew up in the middle of the evolution of Detroit. In many ways, they go hand in hand.”

Putting down roots

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“Hand in hand” is a modest description. There are those who think DiChiera single-handedly jump-started the rebirth of downtown Detroit.

Photos: David DiChiera, Michigan Opera Theatre Founder

“These days, we all embrace the resurgence of the downtown,” says Matt Simoncini, president and CEO of Lear Corp. “But David committed himself to downtown Detroit when there were few prospects of success there. No one had the vision to see what could be except David. That’s really what we’re honoring: the man who understood that Detroit had a future.”

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It’s hard for most of us to remember what Detroit was like in 1962, when DiChiera arrived to take a position in the music department at the tiny, two-building institution that would grow into Oakland University. There were those who thought the stylish young man from Los Angeles who had just completed a Fulbright fellowship in Italy was a short-timer. There is no way, they assumed, that a fledgling school in the farthest suburbs of a Midwestern city could sustain his interest for long.



David DiChiera in 1965, just three years after he arrived in metro Detroit. (Photo: Detroit Free Press file photo)

Within a year, though, DiChiera took over the leadership of Overture to Opera, a part of the Detroit Grand Opera Association. Overture to Opera's lecture-demonstrations were intended as a primer to prepare audience members for upcoming productions of the Metropolitan Opera Company, which visited Detroit every year.

Inevitably, DiChiera was the host of these sessions. The mini-productions proved enormously popular. And soon, his easy demeanor and willingness to make the complexities of opera more approachable earned him a huge following.

Within a decade, it became apparent to DiChiera that opera lovers in metro Detroit had a musical appetite that extended far beyond the one week a year that the Met afforded them.

In addition, it wasn't in DiChiera's demeanor to be anyone's opening act, not even the vaunted Metropolitan Opera. So in 1970, Overture to Opera staged its first full-length production, "The Barber of Seville."

The following year, DiChiera left Oakland University to become artistic director of Detroit Music Hall, now known as the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts. And once he was there, Overture to Opera — it wouldn't become Michigan Opera Theatre until 1973 — staged its first season of productions.

"Everyone thought we were crazy," says longtime friend Betty Brooks, who was on the board at Music Hall. 1971 was just four years after the Detroit riot, and the city's reputation was in tatters. Many people living in the suburbs wanted nothing to do with it. "But David didn't worry much about the past. He saw what the building could be. And he wanted everyone — even people who lived in the city — to be a part of it."

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DiChiera at Music Hall in 1975. (Photo: Detroit Free Press file photo)

Before long, the Music Hall was hosting jazz concerts and dance performances, including the likes of Dance Theatre of Harlem, as well as the occasional opera.

By the time the Met abandoned its national touring in 1985, DiChiera and MOT had already become a staple of the metro Detroit cultural scene. Staging four to six major productions a year, MOT soon outgrew Music Hall and regularly performed at the Fisher Theatre, and, in time, the Masonic Temple Theatre.



David DiChiera, center, with choreographer Eugene Loring, left, and composer Aaron Copland in 1978, the year MOT staged Copland's opera "The Tender Land." (Photo: Michigan Opera Theatre)

There were bumps along the way. There were productions that stumbled. But mostly, DiChiera was able to build the company's reputation as one that was able to mount the grandest of grand operas and willing to take chances on little-known works like the world premiere of an adaptation of Henry James' "Washington Square" or the rarely heard "Treemonisha," by Scott Joplin. And thanks to a heavy touring schedule, the company was well-known throughout the state.

A vision comes to life

DiChiera, however, wanted more. He had his opera company. And he had his audiences. Now he wanted them to have a permanent home.

The answer, it turned out, was just 750 feet west of Music Hall. Built in 1922 as a movie palace, the Broadway Capitol Theatre seated 3,500 people, but it had been empty since a 1985 fire and was in a state of disrepair. Standing inside the vast building, one could look up and see the sky.

Others saw the theater as just another abandoned architectural hulk, but DiChiera saw something very different.

Once again, people thought he was kidding himself. If he wanted a home for his opera company, why not head to Oakland County? There was more money there. And a good portion of his audience lived there.

DiChiera was adamant, however: The Detroit Opera House had to be in Detroit.

"Even after our success at the Music Hall, people kept telling me that nobody goes downtown," says DiChiera. "But downtown is where things belong. That's how you build a community."

To him, it was a simple formula. Retail giants have known it for decades, especially stores like Ikea and Costco and Cabela's. You build near the geographic center of the audience you want to attract. And if you do the right things there — carry the right products, for example, or stage the right shows — people will find their way to you.

"I've done so many things people told me I shouldn't or couldn't do," says DiChiera. "What they didn't understand is when they say that, it makes me more determined."

Despite the Broadway Capitol's crumbling walls and graffiti, he saw the makings of a grand opera house.

"David is a visionary," says Dennis Archer, who served as Detroit mayor from 1994 to 2001. "He was able to walk into a shell of a building and envision it as something else entirely. And because he had the ability to cause those of us without the same talented sight to see what he saw, he was able to motivate everybody to work with him to make sure that vision became a reality."

It wasn't an easy job, and it wasn't inexpensive. In time, the total cost of turning the shell of a building into the Detroit Opera House would end up being \$74 million. Not that the building was completed when it opened on April 21, 1996, mind you. That would take another decade.

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DiChiera in the lobby of the Opera House in July 1995 as it underwent renovation. (Photo: John Collier, Detroit Free Press)

“Logically, there was nothing about this project that could work,” says Al Lucarelli, a longtime board member who was initially very skeptical about the prospect of opening the Opera House. “You’ve got to remember that I first met David soon after I moved to Detroit from Atlanta. I had lived in a place with a thriving downtown. But in downtown Detroit, there was nothing of consequence.”

Yes, there was the Fox Theatre. And farther uptown, there were the homes of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and the Detroit Institute of Arts. But they were long-established institutions. DiChiera was talking about was something completely new, an upstart.

“I didn’t even know this guy (DiChiera),” says Lucarelli. “But by the time we finished breakfast, he had me hooked. I was in.”

It’s the sort of scenario you hear over and over again when people recall their first encounters with DiChiera. They use words like “passion” and “sincerity” and “vision.”

“He’s a guy you trust,” says Lucarelli. “There’s something about him that you trust him even before you know him well enough to know how trustworthy he is. I can’t really tell you what it is. But he has it. And that’s why that Opera House is there.”

'A lovely human being'

Bit by bit, the Detroit Opera House grew into the grand vision that DiChiera and his board had for it. Some of the growth was physical, as it purchased and renovated the Opera House Garage and opened the Ford Center for Arts and Learning. It took several years to complete all the elaborate decorative trim on the building’s interior.



Dichiera, center, with Leah Partridge (Roxanne) and director Bernard Uzan just before the 2007 world premiere of his opera "Cyrano." (Photo: John Grigaitis)

Just as much of the growth was taking place on the stage. There were productions that garnered national and even international attention:

- In 1999, pop and opera recording star Andrea Bocelli made his North American operatic debut in "Werther." It was touted as the first-ever webcast of a full-length opera.
- In 1999, MOT presented the Three Tenors — Placido Domingo, Jose Carreras and Luciano Pavarotti — at Tiger Stadium.
- In 2001, Pavarotti appeared in a concert version of "Aida."
- In 2002 and 2003, Russia's two great ballet companies, the Bolshoi and the Kirov (now the Mariinsky), made appearances here.
- In 2005, MOT produced the world premiere of "Margaret Garner," starring Denyce Graves.
- In 2007, DiChiera's "Cyrano" had its world premiere.
- In 2014, MOT began the Opera of Our Time initiative to produce contemporary operas. The first production was "A View From the Bridge," William Bolcom's opera adaptation of Arthur Miller's play.

"Working with David has always been such a joyful experience," says Graves, who is one of the featured performers at Friday's performance. "He is so approachable and so kind and open. And I'll tell you, that isn't always the case with artistic directors and general managers."

It was Graves who approached DiChiera about producing Richard Danielpour's "Margaret Garner." The opera has a libretto by Toni Morrison based on her acclaimed 1987 novel "Beloved," about the heartbreaking and horrifying experiences of a real-life runaway slave.

"He told me he had been looking for a piece that addressed some aspect of the African-American experience," says Graves. "When he heard it, he was completely committed to making it happen. That sort of response is so rare. And because of how much he is revered in this business, his involvement legitimized the project. People want to work with him and follow him. I can't say it enough: He is a lovely human being."



David DiChiera chats with Denyce Graves during a rehearsal for "Margaret Garner," which MOT staged in 2005. (Photo: Amy Leang, Detroit Free Press)

Friday's festivities have been tempered a bit by the news that DiChiera was [diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in early April](#) ([/story/entertainment/music/2017/04/13/mot-david-dichiera-pancreatic-cancer-opear/100433350/](#)). He has been undergoing treatment ever since. Neither DiChiera nor MOT have detailed the specifics of DiChiera's condition or how advanced the cancer may be.

But as is so often the case with DiChiera, he is optimistic about the outcome. In the letter he wrote to his board about his illness, he noted that "I fully intend to be at the May celebration. I don't want that gala to be turned into a memorial."

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