

Michigan Opera Theatre lands 'genius' Yuval Sharon as artistic director

One of the world's most acclaimed and visionary opera directors is taking the creative reins of Michigan Opera Theatre

By Mark Stryker, Special to the Detroit Free Press

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that Illinois-born Yuval Sharon, 40, has signed a five-year contract as artistic director. His appointment ends a long and difficult four-year search for a permanent artistic leader to replace MOT's beloved late founder, David DiChiera.

Sharon is best-known for experimental, site-specific productions of 21st-century operas with a high-tech sheen, produced by his own Los Angeles company. Sharon (pronounced shuh-RONE) has also directed forward-looking productions in traditional idioms at prestigious European companies such as the Vienna State Opera and Bayreuth Festival in Germany. In 2017, he received a coveted MacArthur Foundation "genius grant" worth \$625,000.

Sharon's presence elevates MOT immediately to international relevance in the opera world and brings to Detroit the kind of innovative artistic leader unique among the city's cultural institutions. His hiring is a bold but risky choice for a company with a largely conservative artistic profile that has historically lived on razor-thin financial margins and struggled to forge a post-DiChiera identity.

Can a director who has risen to stardom as a disruptive outsider, unencumbered by the daily responsibilities and constraints of running a traditionally built opera company, continue to lead his 21st-century revolution from inside the belly of the beast?

"Absolutely," Sharon said in an interview in late August at Selden Standard in Midtown. "My hope for MOT is that it becomes the most progressive opera company in the country. There's a way to do that without it being gimmicky or trashy — if you have a total love and respect for the music and are just looking for new ways for it to resonate.



Michigan Opera Theatre director Yuval Sharon.

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Yuval Sharon, new Michigan Opera Theatre director

unfamiliar.”

Detroiters will get a fast look at [Sharon's](#) vivid imagination in October. On the job since Aug. 1, he inaugurates his local tenure with a radically reconceived chamber-music reduction of Richard Wagner's "Götterdämmerung" ("Twilight of the Gods") staged in MOT's parking garage and sung in English.

To accommodate COVID-19 safety protocols, audience members will remain in their cars and circle their way from the bottom of the garage to the top, parking to watch singers and musicians perform live on each level. The sound of the performers will be piped into the vehicles via FM radio.



Director Yuval Sharon works on a parking pattern for cars for his radically reconceived chamber-music reduction of Richard Wagner's "Götterdämmerung" ("Twilight of the Gods") staged in MOT's parking garage and sung in English.

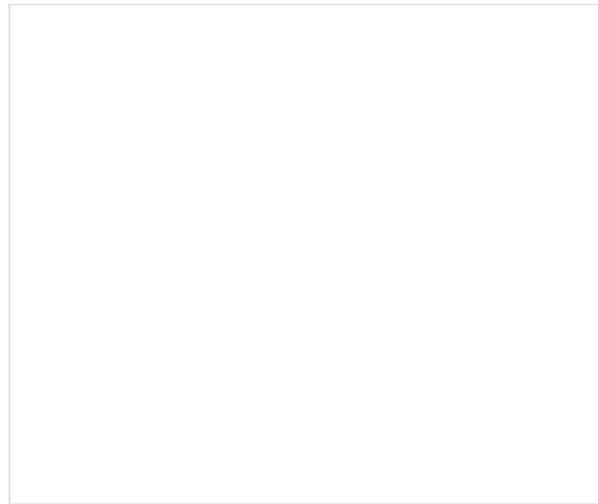
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reminder that Sharon’s first challenge is to help MOT cope with a world turned upside down by the novel coronavirus pandemic.

“COVID has in many ways created a blank slate for companies,” said Marc Scorca, president of Opera America, a national service organization. “Yuval is a trailblazer. He’ll figure it out. He is among the most dynamic thinkers, producers and stage directors in the world. The fact that MOT has embraced his creativity and he is embracing MOT is fantastic news for opera in Detroit and opera in America.”

Sharon’s decision to put down roots in Detroit will surprise many because of MOT’s middle-of-the-pack status. But Sharon said the company had vast potential — big enough to marshal significant ambition and resources, but nimble enough to, say, mount a production in eight weeks in a garage. Unlike most opera companies, MOT also owns its own theater, as well as an adjacent seven-story parking center. Crucially, Sharon heard a unified chorus from MOT leaders that the company was eager for change.

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Perhaps the biggest draw of all was the gritty charisma of Detroit.

“This city has seen such highs and lows and such difficult times, and yet the people who have been here and persevered have kept the city feeling so soulful and so deep,” Sharon said. “That’s the community I want to be creating work for. Let’s see what opera could look and feel like here in ways it doesn’t anywhere else in the country.”

Sharon — who has never held a full-time leadership position with a mainstream opera company — becomes just the second artistic director in MOT’s nearly 50-year history. He

stopgap measure.

MOT's courtship of Sharon began last spring. Board member Gary Wasserman, owner of Wasserman Projects gallery in Eastern Market and a longtime friend of Sharon, first raised the idea with the director in a conversation. Then MOT president Wayne Brown, who has known Sharon for some 13 years, picked up the baton. Fate intervened too. Sharon began a long-planned sabbatical in April to recharge and work on a book about directing. The quiet time allowed him to think deeply about the opportunity in Detroit. A deal was struck in July.



Wayne Brown of the Michigan Opera Theatre welcomes guests to the 20th-annual black-tie gala fundraiser, BravoBRAVO! at the Michigan Opera Theatre June 7, 2019.

CHRISTOPHER M. BJORNBERG, SPECIAL TO THE FREE PRESS

“I look at the pandemic as the intermission before we launch our second act,” Brown said. “We have to start anew to broaden our reach and impact. It’s about sustainability and adaptability and serving the community. Yuval will help us imagine new work, as well as look at the masterworks through a fresh lens. He gives us a unified vision.”

justice theme. Expanding digital initiatives and other activities will dot the calendar, and MOT hopes to return to a full slate of opera and dance in the opera house in fall 2021.

As artistic director, Sharon oversees repertoire, singers, conductors, directors, and other production essentials, working closely with Brown and other MOT leaders. The company will continue to use a consultant to plan dance seasons, but Sharon promised better integration among all of MOT's artistic programs.

In addition to his MOT duties Sharon will remain artistic director of his production company, [The Industry](#), which he founded in 2010. However, the Los Angeles company's administrative structure is changing to reduce his responsibilities. He is also curtailing projects in Europe and America. He envisions living six months in Detroit and six months in Los Angeles but remains ready to spend more time here as needed.

MOT declined to disclose Sharon's salary. American opera companies structure leadership roles in so many different ways that discerning apples-to-apples salary comparisons from tax documents is difficult. However, Internal Revenue Service (IRS) forms show DiChiera's base compensation was about \$200,000 in most years leading up to his 2017 retirement, and artistic leaders at peer opera companies in Minneapolis, Sarasota, and St. Louis earn anywhere between \$140,000 to \$400,000.

Given how hot a property Sharon is in the opera world, his financial package at MOT is likely in the neighborhood of at least \$300,000, within the industry standard. Brown said that MOT would not have been able to afford Sharon if Wasserman had not stepped forward with a substantial annual gift to help cover the cost as long as Sharon remains at MOT. He'll hold the title of Gary L. Wasserman Artistic Director.

Adaptations for modern concerns

On a blisteringly hot afternoon in August, Sharon stood in the MOT parking center and directed traffic. He is medium built, fit, with brown hair in a boyish cut and penetrating blue eyes. He wore a light blue polo shirt, tan khakis, and a yellow mask with a chicken on it. He radiated focused energy and good cheer.

"The first tech rehearsal is always like you made the biggest mistake ever," he said, grinning. "But the second rehearsal is like a miracle occurred."

automobiles, calls it “car-eography.” Ten cars driven by MOT staff made their way like a family of ducks from level to level.



A detail of the plan for new MOT director Yuval Sharon's chamber-music reduction of Richard Wagner's “Götterdämmerung” (“Twilight of the Gods”) staged in MOT’s parking...

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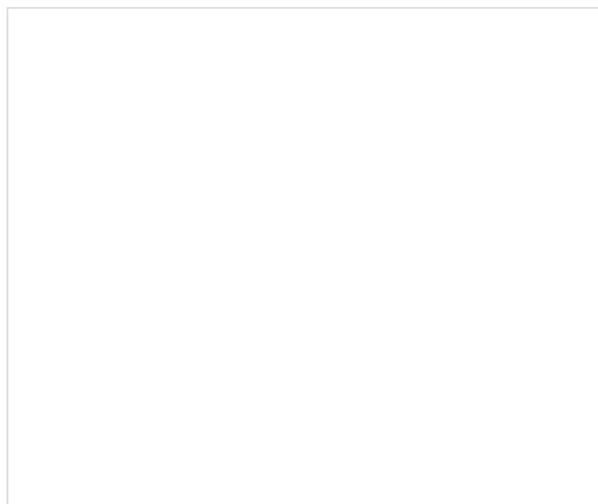
Sharon and his creative team waved them into varied parking formations depending upon where the singers and musicians would perform. The big question was whether viewers could see the action from their cars. It soon became clear the flock would have to be culled to eight cars to ensure quality sight lines. “We learned what we needed to know,” Sharon said.

Twelve cycles of eight cars will make the journey for a total of 96 cars per performance. (The performers will repeat their scenes 12 times.) The show will also be broadcast free of charge on the side of the opera house in the manner of a drive-in movie, so a socially distanced audience will be able to experience it.

You can't aim higher than the finale of Wagner's mythology laden, four-opera "Ring Cycle."

"We're going to realize the opera in a way that's true to the spirit of the piece," he said. "It's fundamentally about a powerful woman who brings down an order that no longer serves humanity or even itself, because the Gods system is so corrupt. It is looking for release, so that something new and fresh can emerge. What an amazing story for right now."

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To ground the opera within Detroit culture, Sharon is working with local poet Marsha Music, who functions as narrator. She'll prerecord a spoken prologue and other text and recite her own poetry live in the performance. Her words will link Detroit history to the opera's mythical world. In another hometown touch: Brünnhilde's chariot in her famous Immolation scene will be the celebrated 10 millionth Mustang to come off the line, courtesy of Ford Motor Co.

The chamber music reduction of the score is by Ed Windels, a New York composer-arranger. Details are still being finalized to secure a Chicago-based musician to coach singers and oversee the performances.

Artistic director joins at pivotal time

Sharon begins his MOT tenure at a focal point in company history. Next year marks MOT's 50th anniversary and 25th year in the Detroit Opera House. Last year, Ethan Davidson became only the fourth board chair in company. Davidson, 50, heads the grants committee of the \$1.3 billion William Davidson Foundation — named for his late father — and represents a new generation of Detroit philanthropy.



Founder and artistic director of the Michigan Opera Theatre, David DiChiera, 82, stands up as members of the crowd give him an ovation during a...

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Meanwhile, MOT has been in an artistic holding pattern as it transitions to life after DiChiera, who died in 2018. The company has not ignored contemporary works — Kevin Puts’ “Silent Night,” Daniel Sonenberg’s “The Summer King,” Ricky Ian Gordon’s “The Grapes of Wrath” were produced in recent seasons — but they have all been traditional in music, form, and staging. As a group, they lack the urgency and complexion of contemporary life.

Productions of core repertoire have too often felt stale. Ticket sales have stagnated, and it has become unclear what, exactly, the company stands for artistically.

Then came the pandemic, throwing arts organizations nationwide into crisis. MOT canceled its spring events. Federal stimulus dollars totaling \$1.3 million and subscribers willing to convert ticket purchases into gifts allowed the company to avoid layoffs through June and balance its \$16 million budget for 2020. MOT has since instituted temporary layoffs, reduced



Yuval Sharon is planning a five-opera season with freshly conceived productions from the opera repertoire like "Rigoletto." In 2017, the Michigan Opera Theatre staged "Rigoletto"...

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Sharon is keeping specific plans for subsequent seasons close to the vest, but he did offer a general summary of what a typical five-opera season might look like when MOT returns to the opera house. It will not be business as usual:

- One freshly conceived production of what he calls the inherited repertoire — think “La Boheme,” “Rigoletto,” “Carmen,” etc.
- One standard repertory work delivered in more experimental fashion.
- One revival of an existing production from MOT’s repertory.
- One contemporary or new opera. Without making promises, Sharon offered three late 20th- and early 21st-century works that he loves as examples: “X, The Life and Times of Malcolm X,” by the Pulitzer Prize-winning African American composer Anthony Davis;

Detroit.

- One site-specific work outside the opera house taking advantage of Detroit’s urban landscape that pulsates with possibilities.

Sharon will direct at least one opera a year, and he promised that guest directors and conductors will reflect greater diversity in terms of race and gender than in the past. DiChiera long ago established MOT as an industry leader in employing African American singers. Sharon will also pursue collaborations with distinctively Detroit artists and has already met with techno innovator Derrick May.



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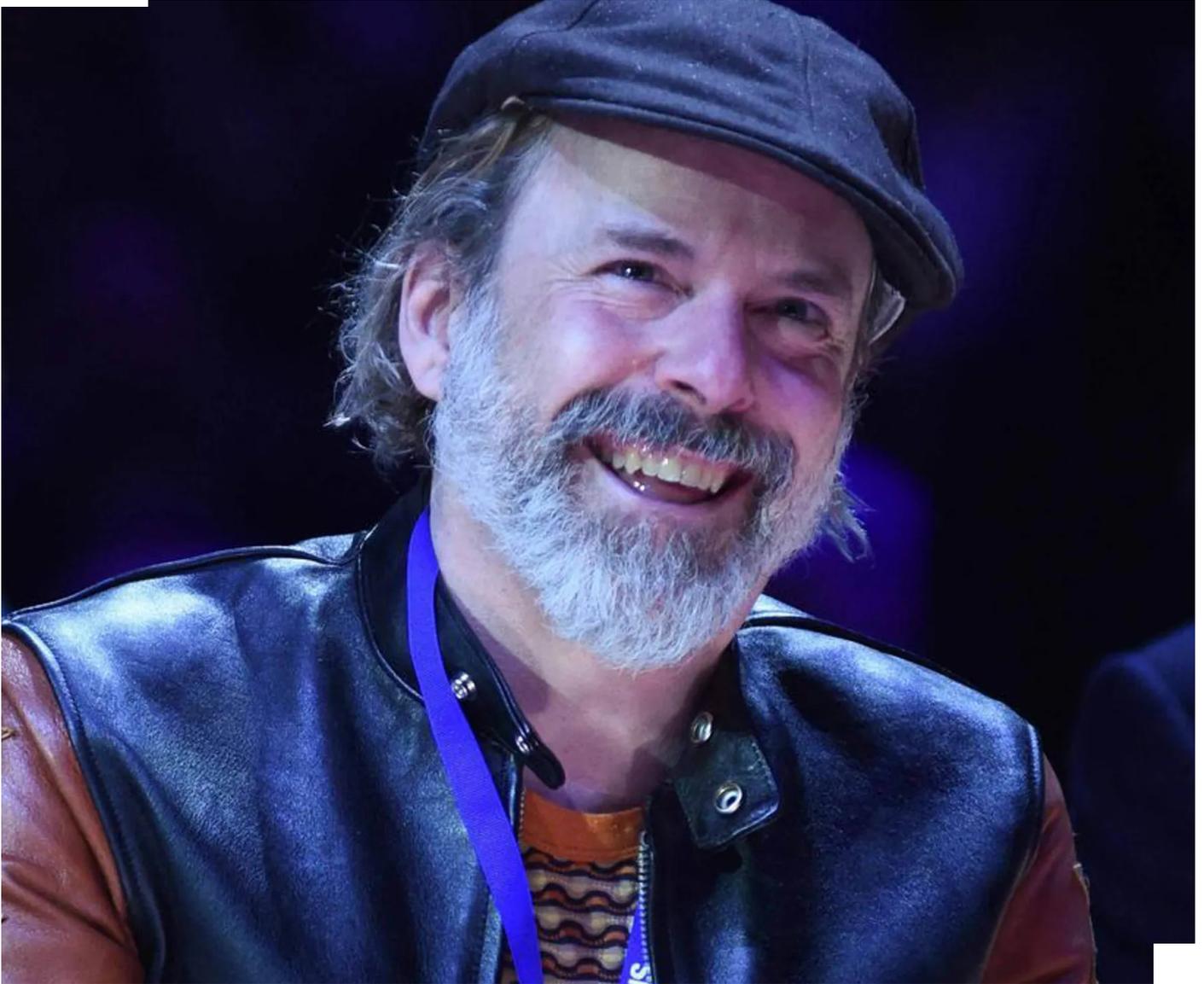
Daring innovations wrapped up nicely

minored in dramatic arts at the University of California at Berkeley. He worked as an assistant on some opera productions in Europe in the early 2000s, before landing at New York City Opera in 2003, eventually heading a program that nurtured contemporary opera.

He moved to Los Angeles in 2010. The Industry's 2013 commission "Invisible Cities," composed by Christopher Cerrone, was a headline-grabbing hit. Sharon staged it at Union Station among unsuspecting commuters, with audience members outfitted with wireless headphones. "Hopsotch" (2015) upped the ante. Sharon put audience members in limousines. Scenes unfolded inside and outside the vehicles as they explored the city, visiting rooftops, parking lots, a historic downtown building and more. Six composers, including Ellen Reid and Andrew Norman, and six librettists collaborated on the score, but Sharon was the auteur.

On a more traditional front, Sharon was the first American director to lead a production at Wagner's home theater, Bayreuth, where Sharon gave "Lohengrin" a subtle, feminist twist in 2018; instead of the compassionate Elsa dying at the end as in the text, Sharon allows her to live. He was also artist-in-residence at the Los Angeles Philharmonic from 2016-19.

Sharon pushes the envelope, but he is not an ideologue, he rejects the deliberate shock tactics that often define so-called "director's opera" in Europe. He is also a nice guy, which makes a difference working with skeptical singers, donors, and myriad other necessary allies. "The fact that he is so human, so relatable, serves him well, because it's easy to get on his side," said Mark Williams, chief artistic officer at the Cleveland Orchestra, where Sharon has expanded the possibilities for opera in concert.



Ethan Davidson became only the fourth board chair in Michigan Opera Theatre company.

TIM FULLER, TIM FULLER USA TODAY SPORTS

MOT founder David DiChiera famously combined the charm of a puppy with the determination of a bloodhound when it came to realizing his dreams of building an opera company from scratch in Detroit and galvanizing the community to build a \$70 million opera house. DiChiera had a gift for not only convincing others to support his vision but also make them feel as if the whole thing was their idea. MOT's board chair Ethan Davidson said Sharon has similar qualities.

“You have to be a salesman in the best sense,” Davidson said.

way Sharon might reconceive a Mozart masterpiece for our own day, reinvent MOT's artistic profile — while honoring the essence of its founder's soul. That will not be easy.

"I'm ready to roll up my sleeves," Sharon said. "I'm in it for the work."

Mark Stryker is a freelance writer and former arts reporter for the Detroit Free Press (1995-2016). Since leaving the Free Press, Stryker has done consulting work for various clients including Michigan Opera Theatre. He has also written two books, "[Jazz From Detroit](#)" and "Destiny: One Hundred Years of Music, Magic, and Community at Orchestra Hall in Detroit."

"Twilight: Gods"

Presented by Michigan Opera Theatre

A reduction of Wagner's "Götterdämmerung" performed in MOT's parking center, 1426 Broadway

- Oct. 17, 18, 20. Afternoon performances but entry times staggered.
- Tickets on sale at noon today (Wednesday Sept. 9): \$79 per car.

There are also plans for free broadcasts on the side of the Detroit Opera House. Details to be announced.

Information about entry times at www.MichiganOpera.org. 313-237-7464

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