

MOT's DiChiera pioneered 'color-blind' opera casting

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(Photo: John Grigaitis)

There was a time, not so long ago, when opera — like classical music in its day, or even productions of Shakespeare — was pretty much an all-white party.

But as American culture evolved from the 1960s on, color-blind casting began to penetrate high art and popular culture.

In the world of opera, Detroit was a pioneer in bringing black singers and composers into the mix from the early 1970s on, as well as championing works that touch on the African-American experience.

The experts credit one man: David DiChiera, founder and artistic director of the Michigan Opera Theatre.

“When I started MOT in 1971,” said DiChiera, who will step into an emeritus role at the end of this season, “I decided since this was a company based in Detroit, it needed to serve and represent the community we lived in.”

And so it did.

In 1975, when virtually all opera companies were still lily white, DiChiera gave Kathleen Battle — a promising young African-American soprano he found at a Cincinnati conservatory — her professional debut in the starring role of Rosina in “The Barber of Seville.”

Battle would go on to become one of the century's great light, lyric sopranos, with a long run at New York's Metropolitan Opera.

“And after Rosina,” DiChiera added, “I cast her in ‘The Magic Flute’ as Pamina.”

DiChiera won a reputation for nurturing young talent of all types, including black singers like Detroiters Maria Ewing, Leona Mitchell, and one of the great recent tenors, Vinson Cole.

“David was absolutely consistent,” said Nancy Malitz, classical music critic at The Detroit News in the 1980s and now co-editor of the websites [Chicago On the Aisle](http://chicagoontheaisle.com/) (<http://chicagoontheaisle.com/>) and [Classical Voice North America](http://classicalvoiceamerica.org/) (<http://classicalvoiceamerica.org/>).

“He did color-blind casting early, before it became the trend,” she said. “His whole thing was — is this going to be a great singer in the future?”

(DiChiera's interest in representing the Detroit area wasn't just limited to African-American subjects, however. He also staged Armenian and Polish operas.)

“Through David's glowing humanity, MOT has been one of the pioneers of inclusive and diverse casting in the United States,” said University of Michigan voice professor Scott Piper.

DiChiera, whom the Kresge Foundation named its Eminent Artist in 2013, did not limit himself to just putting a black face or two on stage.

In 1975, MOT staged “Porgy and Bess,” startling the opera world and fulfilling DiChiera's promise to mount productions that touched on the African-American experience.

“David booked ‘Porgy and Bess’ at a time when everyone had forgotten the work,” said Jon Finck, director of communications and public affairs at the San Francisco Opera, who worked with DiChiera decades ago.

“That was an extraordinary accomplishment,” he said, “taking work that had been put on the Broadway back burner, and hadn't been done by opera companies.”

DiChiera brought in great singers, Finck added, and galvanized the Detroit community to come out and support the production.

“You had people of all stripes attending,” Finck said. “It was remarkable — emotional and visceral beyond my wildest imagination. Nobody was doing that kind of work.”

In 1983, DiChiera resurrected Scott Joplin's long-forgotten ragtime opera, “Treemonisha.”

And in perhaps his biggest coup, DiChiera commissioned and staged the world premiere of “Margaret Garner” in 2005, drawn from Toni Morrison’s legendary novel, “Beloved.”

Even more impressive, Morrison, a Nobel Prize winner, wrote the libretto.

Reached while judging a voice competition in New York, the celebrated African-American tenor George Shirley applauded DiChiera’s commitment to the town that nurtured his company.

By mounting works like “Porgy” and “Margaret Garner,” Shirley said, “David allowed African Americans to see themselves represented on stage. Kudos to him for giving Detroiters the sense that this is their company.”

For his part, Finck points out that DiChiera’s commitment didn’t end at the footlights. He and his wife at the time, Karen, took opera right into the Detroit Public Schools.

“David was very conscious that there needed to be more classical music education in the black community,” he said, “and Karen was just as committed to that in training singers.”

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