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Is Opera a Sustainable Art Form?

Diane Ragsdale · Thursday, April 26th, 2012

This is an excerpt from Diane Ragsdale's recent keynote address at the Opera Europa Conference.
I recently came across a paper, *Paradoxes of Sustainability*, by a scholar named Alexey A. Voinov from the Institute for Ecological Economics. Here are four key points from Voinov's paper:

1. After examining the definitions of sustainability of many scholars, Voinov determined that all of the definitions had one thing in common: an assumption about "keeping something at a certain level" – that is, a resource, system, condition, or relationship. In other words, a goal of "avoiding decline."
2. Voinov says, however, (and here's where the first paradox comes in), that this kind of behavior—the sustaining of something at a certain level or state—seems to belie the fact that living systems tend to go through life cycles: growth, followed by conservation (or inertia), followed by release (obscurity or death), followed by renewal and new growth. This life cycle is what contributes to evolution in response to a changing environment.
3. Sustainability is, thus, an unnatural attempt to break this cycle and extend a certain stage of the life cycle and avoid decline. Whereas renewal is about development; sustainability is about preservation. The term sustainable development, thus, contains a paradox.
4. Furthermore, there is a hierarchy of systems; and here's where the second paradox comes in. Sustainability of a certain level of the hierarchy may impede sustainability of systems at a higher level that are potentially more important. For any 'supersystem' to evolve and renew its sub-systems or components must be set free to recombine.

So, what is Voinov talking about? Forest fires naturally occur and burn down portions of ecosystems so that the forest ecosystem as a whole can persist. If we begin to prevent forest fires we damage the forest ecosystem.
And so what, specifically, could this mean for the opera world and the question at hand? Well, if we agree with Voinov and think his ideas could apply to organizational systems and not just natural ones, it means that we should ask ourselves where we may be seeking the "unnatural perpetuation of what might otherwise die"? It means that we need to think very carefully about which level of our ecosystem we are seeking to sustain. So I want to return to the question at hand, which I find compelling, in large part because of the way it is phrased. Is opera a sustainable art form? It begs a question: What shall we permit to be a legitimate and sufficient form for the passing on of the opera genus?

- Does vinyl count? A CD? A digital download?
- What about a diehard opera lover who has an extensive collection of recordings, listens to opera

broadcasts on the radio throughout the day, and even sings it in the shower every morning?

- What if this diehard opera fan never purchases a ticket to see a production at his local professional grand opera house?
- What about an amateur opera company that performs in, say, churches, community centers, or senior centers?
- How about a children's chorus? Or 5th graders composing and performing puppet operas?What about independent artist collectives creating avant-garde and experimental works?
- Or smaller chamber companies?
- What about the Philadelphia Opera Company's Hallelujah Chorus Flash Mob performed at the department store Macy's, which has been downloaded more than 7.75 million times on YouTube?

Are these what we mean by sustaining opera as an art form? Or when we talk about wanting to achieve sustainability, are we really, pretty much exclusively talking about … well, your opera house? Or even better, all of your opera houses?

So then how do we feel about San Francisco Opera's broadcasts at the baseball park, one of which, evidently drew 32,000 people to see Aida (pictured, below)? Or The Metropolitan Opera broadcasts in movie theaters which continue to expand in reach and numbers (and as I understand it, earning higher revenues and profits) year after year?

On the one hand, we need the San Francisco Opera and the Metropolitan Opera to create those broadcasts. But, over time, one could also imagine that some people would start to go to the movie theater exclusively, and not to their local opera house. Perhaps there have even been moments when we have wondered at two in the morning, sweating in our pajamas, whether the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts in a movie theater might, in fact, eventually displace some opera companies somewhere?

Is opera a sustainable art form? It's a different question from 'Is opera a sustainable industry?' Or 'Are nonprofit opera houses sustainable?' Or even 'Is my opera company sustainable'?

When we say we need to try to find a way to make things "more sustainable," what are we talking about? Sustaining the reputations, salaries, and vacation packages for directors and other professional arts administrators that have them? Sustaining all historically leading institutions? Sustaining our buildings? Sustaining a canon of great works through the recording or ongoing performance of certain works? Sustaining very specific productions, or performance practices? Sustaining the capacity for artistic risk-taking? Sustaining a pool of talented artists who, perhaps, even have the resources to self-produce their works, independent of major institutions? Sustaining broad and deep community engagement with the opera? The "what" is really important.

One of the things that is most interesting to me about the conversations in the arts sector about sustainability is that the implicit goal seems to be preservation of the oldest and largest companies, and often their venues. While we seem to recognize that some deaths are inevitable, history and good sense tell us that the renewal in the sector should happen in the ongoing churn of small organizations.

That's natural.

As opposed to the collapse or 180-degree transformation of established, historically leading institutions, which we would find not only unnatural but probably truly alarming. Hence, one concludes, the strategy of the Dutch government and others. Sustain the large institutions and let the rest of the sector churn, which we presume leads to innovation, and not to the loss of innovation from the sector.

There is an assumption that the ‘supersystem’ we are trying to sustain and grow is the infrastructure of existing large, leading professional opera houses. But what if the ‘supersystem’ is the relevance of opera as an art form as demonstrated by its ongoing practice and enjoyment? That could mean that everything else (large, historically leading companies, smaller amateur companies, training programs, the recording industry, and on and on) is part of a sub-system and may need to evolve in order for opera as an art form to be sustained.

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