

Portland Opera's Opera a la Cart

Opera a la Cart is a mobile music venue inspired by Portland's food cart culture and designed to bring live opera performances directly into our community. A used box truck was purchased and renovated to feature a fold-out stage, allowing us to perform in public venues and spaces not typically known for opera. We presented free performances in public spaces in July and August 2016.

The cart makes opera approachable and interactive. Audience members can "order" songs from a chalkboard "menu", as they would order from a food cart. The repertoire includes well-loved classics from opera and musical theatre, such as "Quando M'En Vo", the Toreador song, "Some Enchanted Evening" and other recognizable pieces. Participating singers included main stage performers from current and past opera seasons, current members of our Resident Artist program and opera chorus, and other local talent.

The four main goals of Opera a la Cart were as follows:

1. Increase public awareness of Portland Opera and dispel perceived barriers to attendance
2. Heighten Portland Opera's commitment to engaging with neighborhoods and community-based activities
3. Generate mainstage ticket sales, especially to new patrons
4. Re-engage with prior patrons and stimulate future mainstage ticket sales

Debuting on July 2, 2016, Opera a la Cart presented 41 free public performances in city parks, neighborhood fairs and festivals, farmer's markets, wineries, and food cart pods, reaching an estimated 32,000 people throughout the Portland metro area and surrounding communities.

Overall, we were successful in achieving the four goals detailed above. Based on substantial audience feedback, we also feel the project broke down barriers and dispelled preconceived notions of what opera is and can be. The ability to see professional singers up-close in more intimate, informal settings proved to be very appealing to members of our community. The menu and the option to "order" a specific song has been a very popular feature for audiences, as it feels very personal to them and allows for interaction with singers. Songs and arias were selected for their familiarity and appeal. The cart itself is visually appealing and piques the interest of passersby.

We had a goal to reach beyond the interior of Portland and were successful in achieving that, with performances taking place in the towns of McMinnville, Hillsboro, Sherwood, Gresham, and in Vancouver, WA, as well as in all quadrants of Portland. For 2017, we anticipate repeat performances in some venues but will also look to expand our reach to other parts of the state.

Informally, we had a goal for 30% of performances to take place in or reach underserved communities. While we did reach members of underserved communities, we were unable to schedule 30% of performances in these communities. We contacted a number of

organizations serving these areas but did not receive many responses. For 2017, we have a clear idea of the locations we would like to reach in underserved areas, and our plan is to contact these organizations much earlier in the year to begin scheduling summer performances.

Opera a la Cart performances also inspired single ticket purchases, though these numbers were lower than anticipated. Still, we have been very encouraged that the program prompted patrons to purchase tickets and by the public reception of the program.

We tracked attendance at all performances, estimating in most cases due to the fluid, transitory nature of some events and locations. We estimate that approximately 30,000 adults and 1,500 youth (0-18 years) experienced Opera a la Cart at 41 performances between July 2 and August 20, 2016. For our purposes, we estimated attendance to include individuals who paused to listen to at least one song, not merely everyone in the general vicinity of the stage.

Direct feedback from audience members was a significant measure of success. We received a substantial amount of immediate, positive feedback, with audience members frequently remarking that they did not realize how much they enjoyed opera prior to this, that they recognized many of the songs being performed, and that the performance was a highlight of their visit that day to a particular park, street fair, farmer's market, or other venue. Some people reported that they were repeat attendees after seeing one performance.

We also tracked mainstage ticket purchases as a result from Opera a la Cart performances. 35 mainstage performance tickets were purchased using the coupon code distributed. While the number of people using the coupon code was modest, we were very encouraged that attending an Opera a la Cart performance had inspired people to purchase single tickets. We anticipate that this number will increase during our 2017 season.

Social media activity was another measure of progress. Via 15 Facebook posts, we made a substantial number of impressions, with many posters tagging friends to let them know about upcoming performances. For the second year of this project, we will look to encourage posting and hashtagging by Opera a la Cart attendees.

Opera a la Cart enabled us to establish or deepen ties with community organizations, local businesses, and members of local government, which will help us in our continuing work to reach members of our community. We anticipate repeat performances in certain locations for 2017. We also identified some additional community organizations that we plan to target with our outreach efforts in the coming year.

This project has enabled Portland Opera to expand our reach into the community. By eliminating the need for a performance venue (because we bring it with us), we can bring opera out into the community and places where people are already gathering, and we can

reach people who might not otherwise seek out opportunities to engage with art and music.

The immediacy and intimacy of the performances works to dispel stereotypes about opera and opera singers. The mobility of the vehicle and portable stage also offers great flexibility for adapting this program to fill a variety of roles. We have had an extremely positive, receptive response from audiences who experience Opera a la Cart, and we are very encouraged by the outreach possibilities it offers. We plan for this project to be an ongoing, permanent program offering for Portland Opera.

