

OPERA NEWS

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Second Act

Peggy Kriha Dye brings her opera-singing experience to her new role as an administrator.
By Fred Cohn



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THE FIERY SOPRANO IN THE TITLE ROLE of Lully's *Armide* at the 2012 Glimmerglass Festival was clearly born for the stage—a performer committed not just to her own excellence but to the endeavor of

opera as a whole. Six years later, at forty-nine, Peggy Kriha Dye is still very much making opera happen—but not as a singer. She's the general and artistic director of Opera Columbus, a company she has helped rescue from the brink of extinction.

"It's hard work," she says. "But it's the same skill set as preparing a role. You've got to work at it and take advantage of everything in front of you."

In 2011, when Dye first got involved with Opera Columbus, the company had been battered by a severe financial crisis, and its entire creative and administrative staff had been let go. Under the umbrella of the Columbus Association for the Performing Arts, it was now bringing in shows rather than producing them. Among its presentations was *Don Giovanni*, produced by Toronto's Opera Atelier, with Dye as Donna Elvira. (The Glimmerglass *Armide* was also an Opera Atelier coproduction.)

Columbus was already Dye's hometown—she had moved to Ohio with her then-husband, Matthew Dye, and their two children in 2006—so Marshall Pynkowski, Opera Atelier's cofounder, asked her to help assemble a local chorus. She subsequently got involved with Opera Columbus's education efforts and so impressed Bill Conner, CAPA's CEO, that he asked her to help rebuild the company. The timing was providential, since she was already weary of the demands of juggling a family life and an itinerant career. "This business, if you're a hundred percent into it—and I don't know how else you can do it—is exhausting," she says. "The memories I have are good. But there are periods of my life when I was so tired that I don't even remember what happened."



As the Countess in Opera Atelier's *Nozze di Figaro*, 2017, with Stephen Hegedus (Count Almaviva)
© Bruce Zinger/Opera Atelier

The prospect of moving into administration fired her imagination. "As a singer, you spend all your time promoting yourself, working on yourself—it's *yourself*, and that's your job," she says. "But now my work could be about the issues I'm passionate about. It was a no-brainer." Dye was named general manager in 2013 and artistic director in 2014, adding the title of general director in 2017.

Considering her near-messianic devotion to the art form, it's surprising to learn that Dye knew nothing about it as a girl growing up in Brainerd, Minnesota. An "adventurous" teenager, she discovered discipline and purpose in the school chorus. She entered nearby St. Cloud State University as a music-education

major. “I spent all my time in college drinking beer and listening to music and practicing,” she says. “But I knew no one who had a profession in music, so I never considered being a performer.” At the urging of a visiting teacher, baritone Hugh Givens, she auditioned for, and was accepted by, Chautauqua Opera’s young-artist program. There she met voice teacher Marlena Malas, who beckoned her to Manhattan School of Music. She got a full scholarship, but money was tight. “I slept on a couch at the end of it,” she says.

She eventually landed at the Juilliard Opera Center. “I was the definition of the underdog at Juilliard,” Dye says. “I really felt, ‘I’m in way over my head.’ I dealt with it, but I never got over it. I became very good at burying myself in my work.” She joined San Francisco Opera’s Merola program (where her classmates included Anna Netrebko), became an Adler fellow and went on to a busy professional career in the U.S. and abroad.

Considering how hard Dye worked to gain a foothold in opera, it seems natural that she has made fostering young talent a priority at Opera Columbus. The company has a formal arrangement with the Juilliard School’s advanced Artist Diploma in Opera Studies program, guaranteeing all members employment in future seasons.



Speaking at an Opera Columbus gala, 2017

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“What do you do with an artist on the cusp of a career?” Dye asks. “They’re terrified. Everybody needs a break, and I wanted to be the company that gave the break. I wasn’t going to have a young-artist program. Instead the company itself would become the young-artist program. We say, ‘We’ll take a chance on you. We believe in you.’”

Stephen Wadsworth, the director of the ADOS program, is the librettist for *The Flood*, an opera that will have its world premiere in Columbus this February. With music by Korine Fujiwara, it’s a treatment of the deluge that ravaged the city in 1913, and it marks Dye’s first commission, a move that she says makes her feel like she’s “putting on my big-girl pants.”

Last fall, she bid farewell to her singing career with a run as the Countess in Opera Atelier’s *Figaro*. It was a grand sentimental occasion, with an audience including people from all the phases of her life so far—

family members, graduate-school colleagues, members of Opera Columbus's board. But it was not a time for regrets. "Was it sad?" she asks. "Not for a moment. Do I miss singing? Not at all." ■