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One Ounce Opera's festival of micro-operas offers fresh musical stories



Maureen Broy Papovich, Julie Silva, and Robert LeBas performing "Remembering Landscape" by Marvin J. Carlton and Madeleine St. Romain in the 2017 Fresh Squeezed Ounce of Opera festival. Photo by Roy Moore/Control Images.

By **Dana Wen** March 15, 2019

For Julie Fiore, opera is so much more than hours-long epic tales of centuries past. The Austin-based soprano believes it's a powerful medium for telling any story.

"I think that it's maybe the most human of all of the art forms when it comes to getting a story across," she explains.

She points to the world of contemporary opera, which connects opera-loving audiences with topics that feel fresh and relevant. "I enjoy hearing stories that are so much more like (my own experience), exploring current topics or trends."

Seven years ago, Fiore banded together with a group of fellow singers to found One Ounce Opera, an opera company dedicated to exploring alternatives to the traditional opera house experience.

"We started by singing in bars," says Fiore, reflecting back on the company's early days. "The idea was to take operatic (repertoire) and bring it right to where people are going to be anyway."

The format was a hit. As One Ounce Opera's popularity grew, Fiore noticed an unexpected trend in her email inbox: She began receiving opera scores. What first began as a trickle — local composers sharing their new work — eventually grew to a steady stream of new operas from artists around the country.

"A lot of times, what they would send to me would be shorter works," explains Fiore. "As all these 'micro-operas' started to come into my inbox, I began to really enjoy the short format and all the variety. It seemed to make perfect sense to pick out a few and put them in a showcase together."

The outcome was the first Fresh Squeezed Ounce of Opera festival, in the spring of 2016. Fiore and the One Ounce Opera company selected five contemporary micro-operas for the program, each between ten and twenty minutes in length. In keeping with the group's penchant for alternative venues, the festival was held at the Museum of Human Achievement, a warehouse space adjacent to the Canopy arts complex in East Austin.



The Fresh Squeezed Ounce of Opera festival is performed in the Museum of Human Achievement, a warehouse arts space in East Austin. Photo by Jeanne Claire van Ryzin/Sightlines.

Fast forward to 2019: Fiore and her team are in the midst of rehearsals for the fourth Fresh Squeezed Ounce of Opera festival. The annual production is now One Ounce Opera's signature event.

It's a hit among the performers, too. Singers return to the One Ounce Opera company year after year. According to Fiore, many of the artists have participated since the organization's early days, when they would gather to sing arias in local pubs. And seven of the 14 cast members in this year's Fresh Squeezed Ounce of Opera production have been with One Ounce Opera since the very first show in 2012.

Fiore has managed to retain the scrappy, grassroots character of that inaugural Fresh Squeezed Ounce of Opera performance.

"We're still in a raw warehouse space in East Austin, we're still building (all the sets) from scratch, we're still creating the atmosphere of a community event where everyone is invited," says Fiore. "And we're still choosing works that are focused on topics that are current, or things that we're curious about as artists, or are just so cool we can't pass them up."

This year, Fiore chose four operas from a pool of 32 submissions. The selections run the gamut from comedy to drama, futuristic science fiction to ancient myth. Coincidentally, all feature women in central roles, each highlighting various aspects of the female experience.



"The Whole Truth" by composer Robert Paterson and [librettist Mark Campbell](#), delves into the inner world of a woman named Megan as she navigates relationships and interpersonal drama.

"It seems like she has a devil on her shoulder and that's the only one that she's listening to," hints Fiore.

As an opera based on a work of literature (it's based on [a short story by Stephen McCauley](#)), "The Whole Truth" utilizes casting to emphasize Megan's inner conflict. Two different female singers portray the central character, while a lone baritone plays the six men who revolve around Megan's life.

This isn't the first time one of Campbell's operas has come to Austin. His Pulitzer Prize-winning opera "[Silent Night](#)", a collaboration with composer Kevin Puts, was performed earlier this year by [Austin Opera](#).

A retelling of the Greek story of Eros and Psyche, "Sukey in the Dark" balances the seriousness of the protagonist, Sukey (Psyche) with the witty banter of her two sisters, Chloe and Zoe. Composer Thomas Whitman and librettist Nathalie Anderson intertwine emotional intensity and clever comedy in this modernization of ancient myth.

"The Cookies Call, A Tragic Tragedy" injects light-hearted vaudevillian fun into the program. Composer Peter Michael von der Nahmer and [librettist Emily Roller](#)'s comedic tale of a woman grappling with temptation provides many opportunities for melodrama and farce.

In "The Boy Who Wanted to be a Robot", Portuguese composer Pedro F. Finisterra and librettist Edward Einhorn transport the audience to a distant dystopian future on an Earth where few humans remain. When a little boy raised by robots meets his new teacher, a human woman, his perspective on the world is changed. Eventually, he must decide if he wants to remain a human or become a robot.

For this year's festival, Fiore has joined forces with stage director Linda Nenno, who is directing three of the operas on the program. ("The Boy Who Wanted to be a Robot" is directed by Alexandra Saulsbury.) A theater instructor at Texas State University, Nenno divides her spare time between projects in Austin, New York City, and Los Angeles. Although she has directed plays and musicals, this is Nenno's first experience directing opera. As a seasoned director who is an operatic newcomer, she brings both a depth of experience and a fresh perspective to the production.

"When Julie and I talked about me directing, I said to her, 'If you're interested in having the singers just stand around and sing, I'm not the director you want,'" chuckles Nenno. "I'm asking the singers to physically do a lot more than some of them have been doing in the past. But so far they seem really excited about it. They're very open to exploring in a way that will open them up as actors too."



Nenno's favorite moments are when acting, music, and song all blend to create a powerful experience for the viewer. She describes a scene in "The Whole Truth" when Megan's troubles reach a climactic point. "That moment (in the opera) is really exciting. I'm asking the singers to do some very physical (acting) there. They are so game and are really going for it. That's what opera can do, really give you that heightened emotion."

This year's Fresh Squeezed Ounce of Opera is part of a city-wide new opera marathon spanning five consecutive weekends in March and April. A collaboration between One Ounce Opera and partner organizations [Austin Opera](#) and [LOLA](#), the event shines a spotlight on innovation in the opera world and encourages audiences to explore contemporary work by living composers.

The marathon began with [LOLA's production of "Lardo Weeping"](#), an operatic portrait of a reclusive, idiosyncratic woman. The action continues with Fresh Squeezed Ounce of Opera festival in late March.

To culminate the five-week marathon, Austin Opera launches the new Opera ATX initiative in early April with a performance of Bill Morrison's "Soldier Songs." The multimedia one-vocalist opera incorporates video, theater, and rock-inspired musical themes, presenting an intimate view of war through the personal stories of veterans.

With so many opportunities to experience opera, Fiore is excited for local audiences to discover new works that feel meaningful and relevant.

"I really hope that the audience comes away with a feeling that a story was told," she says. "I hope that at least one of the (Fresh Squeezed Ounce of Opera) pieces changes the way that they think about opera, or what they think opera is capable of in terms of telling a story."

