
Latino Americans in the Opera House - *Will they come?*

Making a case for cultural diversity in programming

I'm sometimes asked by performing arts organizations and funders what is the key to developing new audiences for opera or classical music, particularly those from the Latino community. Is it arts education programs? Is it providing free tickets to dress rehearsals? Do opera companies and orchestras need to advertise in Spanish media? All of these strategies are important, but they will not significantly change the audience demographic. Latino Americans, in great numbers, will not patronize these institutions until these institutions present works that reflect the **Latino American** cultural experience. While theater companies, museums and some orchestras have made strides in producing works by Latino Americans, opera companies unfortunately lag far behind.

Some opera companies would argue that they have reached out to the Latino community by producing works by central and south American composers; further, that these works speak to the global Latino community. While these works make important contributions to the operatic repertoire, do they draw from the life experiences of Latino Americans or recent Latino immigrants? Will these works serve as cultural bridges to the great European masters?

However, ask some Latino Americans who Selena or Cesar Chavez is and they will tell you. Ask them what is it to be a farm worker or to have witnessed the sacrifices their families made so that they could have a prosperous life in this country. These are their stories and these are the ones they will come to see. And after they have walked into the opera house for the first time and seen their lives portrayed on the main stage, they will hunger for more. They will willingly and with great enthusiasm, seek to re-experience the drama and magic of opera. The works of Mozart, Puccini, Verdi, Wagner, , and others will seem less foreign to them. We will have created for them a common language and a common experience that will transcend cultural boundaries. New audiences and new patrons will be developed to support commissions and productions. They will understand why we love this art form as much as we do. Most importantly, when we think about what an American opera is, it will more closely reflect the cultural diaspora of this great country.

Hector Armienta
Composer and Artistic Director