

**RAHUL PRASAD:** And we're back. I hope you've enjoyed the talks so far and had a chance to interact with them on our live Q+A on Instagram. If not, you can find us at @TEDxUofW.

Up next, you're going to hear from two speakers whose focus could not be more different. One, opera, the other, climate change.

The first, Christina Scheppelmann, is the general director of the Seattle Opera.

A longtime champion of young artists, Christina has led masterclasses, lectured at artist training programs, and judged vocal competitions around the world. She was also previously awarded the rank of Commendatore in the Order of the Star of Solidarity by the Italian government for promoting opera and Italian culture. Please welcome Christina Scheppelmann.

### **'THE POWER OF OPERA' – CHRISTINA SCHEPPELMANN**

**CHRISTINA SCHEPPELMANN:** When I say the word "opera" what comes to mind? Oprah Winfrey? No, no, op-per-ra. Opera...

And what are you thinking right now? You are thinking preconceived ideas, right? You are probably thinking: Do I really need to see dusty scenery and a lady singing?

Have you actually been?

It might have been true once: dusty, static, no acting... but things change with time. All things do and so does opera which has been around and very alive for 400+ years.

I will tell you a few things about opera that will make you at least curious!

You probably don't even realize how many times you've actually heard opera in television, paste and cheese commercials, and movies, for example movie posters: The Fifth Element, Pretty Woman, Match Point, Mission Impossible Rogue Nation, Philadelphia, Up!

I grew up in Hamburg, Germany, speaking both Spanish and German. I grew up within 2 cultures, at a time when that was very, very unusual in Germany, but I loved being a little different!

At about the age of 13 I started singing in the children's chorus of the Hamburg opera and sang in a few operas, we rehearsed at the opera, performed there, tasted the magic and the complexity – this was before I had even seen an opera from the audience's seat. Imagine yourself at age 16 entering a unknown, intriguing place as I did then:

Being backstage in a theatre was and is truly magical and mysterious... the scent of old wooden stage floors, costumes, the heat of hundreds of lighting instruments flooding the stage, so many people populating the backstage area with a clear purpose, singers in colorful lights, the powerful singing—even though I had no idea at the time what they were singing about, I didn't care because it didn't matter, the music was seducing it its own way. The setting was fascinatingly surreal I was completely hypnotized.

So, I decided to go and see an opera from the auditorium to see if the magic also worked from the other side. The first opera I saw was Don Carlo, by Verdi, a big opera about the Crown prince of Spain and his hopeless love. It is set in dark times of 16th century Spain when the church was all controlling, the king obeyed the cross, and the inquisition claimed to obey God...

I stood in line for a few hours to get one of the "student tickets", left-over tickets on the day of the performance sold to students for about 10 dollars. I got one and ran to my seat and found myself in the orchestra section center -- the 5th row!

Everybody settled in, the noise subsided, lights dimmed down, the conductor entered, and then there was silence.....I was nervous and impatient as the curtain slowly rose to the music and gave way to an impressively large stage, impressive scenery and costumes, about 75 musicians, 70 choristers and soloists....

3 hours flew by. The experience was exhilarating. So much passion and emotion and impressive music.

I wanted to go back again and see more, I wanted to know more about the history, the historical context of the story and the music, I wanted to know what play the opera was based on and who the composer was. After that first performance at the Hamburg opera house I started going to see opera about 3 times a week!

I went on to see opera in countless places across Europe as a teenager. I went by train to Verona, Paris, Vienna, Munich, Berlin and many more cities often on

my own or with my opera friends, but always on my own money. My parents never stopped me, but they made me work for it.

With these incredible experiences and adventure, I saw my world suddenly, and immensely, expanded.

Opera houses or large multi-purpose theatres and are typically in the center of a city, easily reachable for all audiences and within the most interesting part of a city.

In European countries opera houses were historically an integral part of the society, attended by all types of people, not just by a high society.

Many popular melodies from operas came from the streets, they were the pop songs of their time and opera singers achieved cult status in the 18th, 19th century and 20th century.

Let me tell you when and where it started: Operas have been written since 1593, when a group of young musicians and artists decided to tell Greek drama through music and song in a small theatre in Florence.

That was about 100 years AFTER Columbus reached the Americas, public banks and scotch whiskey were created. So, opera has been around for over 400 years, engaging and enthusing audiences all this time, which makes it in a way actually still a young artform compared to prose theatre, paintings or sculptures and literature.

Like those other artforms opera has changed with time. Its mythological themes have been replaced by contemporary stories, the musical style has evolved as much as its artists, creators, and audiences. The world surrounding opera has changed.

On the other hand, the basic concept of a theatre has remained the same over centuries. There is an auditorium/hall, a pit for the orchestra, and a stage. That basic concept is more than 2000 years old ever since the Greeks wrote and performed their plays in amphitheatres - like in Epidaurus - that still exist today and are still being used!

Of course, the looks, the buildings, and the technology have changed, but so far one thing has NEVER changed:

Singers, chorus, and orchestras sing and play without any amplification!

Yes, you heard correctly: Singers perform in theatres of 500 to 3000 seats or even in outdoor Greek and roman amphitheatres that hold 4000 to 15,000 people... all without amplification.

Operas written today are still written for unamplified singing and playing... except for electronic sound effects. Instruments and voices can indeed fill a large hall without, as long as, of course, the audience is listening and watching. Natural sound fills a space as big as a basketball arena easily.

The right vocal technique is all it takes for the singers and classical instruments to project and resonate their voices and sounds.

Breath support and using the cranial cavities and upper chest as resonance spaces do the trick. It is similar to a violin or guitar that has its sound resonate within its instrument's body. Sound waves need just a little space to swing and sound.

The thrill of the pure human voice is exhilarating, special and unique, it is the oldest and most versatile instrument of humanity, capable of countless expressions. When telling us a story it can make us cry, smile, excite us. It appeals to our shared humanity, our range of emotions that are universal.

When words fail, we can sing and by doing so shake up emotions in a much stronger way than words ever could or will, it brings people together. Music and emotions have no borders, no limits.

And if this is not yet convincing take this: today we also have supertitles, so you can follow the text and the story as you listen and watch the performance, but the music alone will tell what to feel.

Opera and Performing Arts are a large business, a large economic factor within City and State. During this pandemic period, the arts were forced to stop live performing, stopped to employ the many people we need to function. So, we have offered many online events as well as educational courses for young and adults, but that is NOT the same.

To put on a single production, it takes many professionals from all walks of life, from the tailor and carpenter to the singer and conductor! During one single performance there are about 250 people working on such a performance, it is huge teamwork and needs to be as perfectly coordinated as a perfect swiss watch. It happens to be also the business with one of the highest percent of on time service/product delivery:

We give a date and time for a performance and the curtain rises always as scheduled unlike for example flight and train departures. We are a business for all and from all, a business that entertains, expands horizons, educates, and employs many, many people from within a community and way beyond borders.

It is a bit of magic to see it all come together and a fabulous satisfaction that makes my heart race when the curtain comes down on a successful performance and the audience is on its feet.

Enjoy the suspense of disbelief and let yourself be abducted to a different world by music and voice as much as humanity has surrendered to stories, voice, and music for thousands of years.

I love what I do. I love how opera connects people and brings us together. I love that it inspires creativity and art, teaching us about the world and ourselves.

There is no other business I'd rather be working and living in, it allows me to live in a big world full of great surprises.

Thank you.