

Opera in a dive bar proves to be a perfect pairing at Seattle's Blue Moon tavern | Art Outings

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[Gemma Alexander](#)

and

[Tantri Wija](#)

Welcome back to Art Outings — an occasional [series](#) in which writers for The Seattle Times try out local cultural happenings paired with drinks and snacks/food. In this installment, Seattle Times Pacific NW Magazine columnist and writer [Tantri Wija](#) and arts writer [Gemma Alexander](#) celebrate the 85th anniversary of storied Seattle dive Blue Moon tavern with an evening (on April 23) of Opera on Tap. And no, Opera on Tap is not a drink — it really is classical opera performed in a bar. The next Opera on Tap event is at Hale's Ales on May 22.

The setting

Tantri: The Blue Moon is a genuine, old-school, nonhipster dive, with 85 years of grooves dug into the wooden tables like the craggy, tattooed skin of an old sailor, and walls and shelves covered in band posters, patrons' stickers and dusty tchotchkes. There's a stage at the back and a row of benches so heavy and gnarled they look like "Pirates of the Caribbean" props, and a pool table (covered for this performance) that sits unapologetically in the middle of the prime seating area. It's great.

Gemma: It really is. Real dive bars are an [endangered](#) species but the Blue Moon is legit old Seattle, home to artists and leftists

since 1934. It's been threatened by progress a couple of times — developers were after the building back in the '80s and around 2006, the city attorney tried to make their liquor license contingent on the owner signing a “good neighbor agreement.” But they've made zero concessions to the city's gentrification. I never went to the Blue Moon before Opera on Tap, and honestly, I think my misspent youth was misspent in the wrong dive bars.



The storied Blue Moon tavern, home to artists and leftists for decades, celebrates its 85th anniversary this year. (Dean Rutz / The Seattle Times)

The drinks

Gemma: Ironic cans of PBR are available if you must, but \$7 pints support a rotating selection of local breweries. They've got standbys like Georgetown Brewing Company's Manny's Pale Ale and Pike Brewing Company's XXXXX Stout — and a few I'd never heard of before. I got one of those, the Landwink IPA from Triplehorn Brewing Company in Woodinville. A lot of PNW IPAs are hop-dominated, but this one was pretty well balanced. I would happily drink it again. There was a full bar, too — or at least a basic bar. We saw the bartender mixing drinks.

Tantri: We also heard him mixing drinks, and crushing beer cans, and all the other bar stuff, very loudly, during all the singing. Which actually added to the whole experience rather than otherwise — I kind of felt like I was in an opera tavern scene instead of just watching one. I had an Old Seattle Lager from Maritime Pacific Brewing — an upmarket version of a humble Bud with a few more hops and a cleaner finish.



Beer and peanuts (they let you throw the peanut shells on the floor!) at the Blue Moon. (Dean Rutz / The Seattle Times)

The snacks

Gemma: Peanuts! Really, they just had peanuts. I think they had pretzels, too, but on Tuesdays the peanuts are free and I feel like that's important. If you're really hungry, they welcome you to order out for delivery. The delivery address is posted above the bar. So really, you can have anything you want to eat at Blue Moon.

Tantri: They also let you throw the peanut shells on the floor (we didn't know that until the bartender, taking pity on the newbies, actually came over to our table and swiped them onto the floor for us) which made us feel like the literal peanut gallery. That, paired with opera, was glorious, like being allowed to color on the walls during a dinner party. I would love to try it with pizza sometime, or fish and chips.

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The opera

Gemma: I wish we could claim it as a local idea but the Opera on Tap concept was [imported from New York](#). There's [a Seattle branch](#) and the members fulfill their dual mission of introducing opera to new audiences and creating performance opportunities for younger, less well-known singers by performing classic arias at a different bar every month. It's a little like open-mic night for opera singers.



Melissa Plagemann, Marcus Shelton and Ksenia Popova of Opera on Tap perform at the Blue Moon. (Dean Rutz / The Seattle Times)

Tantri: Yeah, given the format, I was a bit surprised at how good they all were, particularly Marcus Shelton, who performed a couple of what he described as “pasta sauce ad” Italian chestnuts — [“La donna è mobile”](#) and [“Questa o quella”](#) from “Rigoletto” — served with a pile of eyebrow acting and buffo-style emotional voice-wringing that, paired with his butter-smooth tenor voice, shaved head and handlebar mustache, made me feel like I was watching a bar scene in “The Godfather, Part II.”



Marcus Shelton takes a bow after performing at the Blue Moon tavern, and recognizes accompanist Rhonda Kline. At left is Kimberly Giordano. (Dean Rutz / The Seattle Times)

Gemma: I think I need to watch “The Godfather, Part II” again. Since this iteration of Opera on Tap was a birthday party of sorts for the Blue Moon, I was betting we would hear “Happy Birthday” and we did. Opera on Tap set lists have a theme every month and this

one was arias set at parties or in crowds. Tantri kept waiting for "[Libiamo](#)" from "La Traviata" — the ultimate party song. They finally delivered it at the end. Like a rock band, they saved the biggest hit for the finale.

Tantri: The show also had a vaudevillian/cabaret vibe, with jokes and explanations between the singing, which was great, although the explanation bits could have been tighter and a little more grown-up — I like getting a quick rundown of the context of the song, but it sounded like they were explaining it to kids. And there were no kids. Because we were in a bar.



Opera on Tap member Ksenia Popova makes use of the Blue Moon's limited stage to bring opera to life. (Dean Rutz / The Seattle Times)

Gemma: That vaudeville vibe was fun, too, in the way that even though they were only singing the arias on a bare stage, they still played the scenes rather than just singing like they were in a recital. When baritone Charles Robert Stephens and mezzo-soprano Elizabeth Galafa sang "[Là ci darem la mano](#)" from "Don Giovanni," you really got just how creepy and predatory the character of Don Giovanni is. The contrast between Galafa's innocent Zerlina and her sultry Carmen in the "[Habanera](#)" was a great illustration of how much acting is involved, even in the middle of the singing.

The overall opera-in-a-bar experience

Gemma: People can get really precious about opera, so it's easy to ignore how trashy it is. But opera is quite at home in a place where they sweep the peanut shells off the table onto the floor. And it's hard to beat a \$5 cover charge.

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Tantri: So much opera is all about prostitutes falling for slumming princes and angry lovers and drunken brawls — big emotions in rough places. Some of those songs felt more appropriate at the Blue Moon than they do in the rarefied air of an opera hall. The single accompanying keyboardist on a synthesizer and the occasional funny prop (yes, there were Viking horns), contrasted with the high-quality singing, made the whole thing click.



Kristin Vogel performs during Opera on Tap's appearance at the Blue Moon on April 23. (Dean Rutz / The Seattle Times)

Opera on Tap: Performances generally monthly at venues around town. Next performance is 7:30 p.m. May 22; Hale's Ales, 4301 Leary Way N.W., Seattle; \$5-\$15 suggested donation; [facebook.com/OperaOnTapSeattle](https://www.facebook.com/OperaOnTapSeattle)

Blue Moon: The Blue Moon tavern books live bands (not opera) on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays; hosts open mic on Wednesdays and Sundays; the Andy Coe Band plays most Mondays; and when there is no Opera on Tap, free pool on Tuesdays. Open 4 p.m.-2 a.m. weeknights, 2 p.m.-2 a.m. weekends; cover charge varies; 712 N.E. 45th St., Seattle; 206-675-9116, bluemoonseattle.wordpress.com

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